CHAPTER EIGHT

THE WORKS OF MISSIONARIES
LIÉTARD, VIAL, AND SAVINA

As far as the ethnography of highland Southeast Asia goes, here we have a remarkable trio. Paul Vial (1855–1917) arrived in Asia in 1881, Alfred Liétard (1872–1912) 15 years later in 1896, and François Marie Savina (1876–1941) another 5 years after again, in 1901. The three MEP missionaries were therefore simultaneously posted in the Southeast Asian massif between 1906, when Savina received his first assignment in highland Tonkin, and 1912 when Liétard passed away. It is certain that the three knew of each other, and Liétard and Vial met on numerous occasions, having been posted for a few years in neighbouring missions among the Lo-lo in the Yun-nan vicariate. In all likelihood, the three men knew also of each other’s work and writings. Vial, the elder, started a long series of publications in *Les Missions Catholiques* in 1888, read by all MEP colleagues; Liétard got his first piece published in that same medium in 1903; and Savina published his Tay dictionary, his first opus, in 1910 in Hanoi. It is the aim of this chapter to trace the scholarly connections between these authors and examine their work critically.

**Alfred Liétard and Paul Vial among the Lo-lo**

At the periphery of Upper Tonkin in the Mainland Southeast Asian massif, lies the southwestern Chinese province of Yunnan, where millions of representatives of the same or closely related highland societies as in northern French Indochina dwell. Following an ancient missionary establishment in neighbouring Sichuan, Yunnan, which was made a vicariate in 1696 but only obtained its administrative autonomy in 1843, saw Catholic missions being set up by the *Société des Missions étrangères de Paris* throughout the 19th century. By the early 1870s, Latourette reported that there were 8,000 Catholic converts in Yunnan supported by an undetermined portion of the 78 European missionaries that the MEP sponsored in China as a whole. MEP historian Adrien Launay stated with more precision that by 1889, the “Yun-nan” vicariate had
one bishop, 25 missionaries, 7 indigenous priests, 53 churches or chapels, one seminary, 60 schools or orphanages, and 10,221 converts.¹

By the turn of the 20th century Alfred Liétard and Paul Vial were prolific producers of ethnography among the MEP in Yunnan. Both interested in the Lo-lo tribes, the majority indigenous population there, their work was closely related. Yet, it remained intellectually distinct.

Alfred Liétard’s scientific works were all published between 1909 and 1913. He first released a few articles on Lo-lo languages in academic journals, followed by the piece on the Min-kia and La-ma-jen in Anthropos we examined briefly in the previous chapter. In terms of his more substantial pieces of work, there were two: his Essai de dictionnaire Lolo-Français reproduisant le dialecte parlé par la tribu des ‘A-Hi’. Suivi d’un vocabulaire François-Lo-lo (A-Hi) [Tentative Lolo-French dictionary reproducing the dialect spoken by the ‘A-Hi’ tribe, followed by a French-Lo-lo lexicon] published in 1912, and his major ethnography, Au Yun-nan: Les Lo-lo p’o. Une tribu des aborigènes de la Chine méridionale [In Yunnan: the Lo-Lo-p’o. An aboriginal tribe in southern China] published in 1913.²

Liétard’s Essai de dictionnaire Lolo-Français is a slightly edited compilation of his earlier language articles published in the BEFEO (Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient) and T’oung Pao between 1909 and 1912. The book is wrapped around a 97-page core, a Lo-lo-French dictionary, while the rest touches on details of the grammar and syntax of the Lo-lo A-Hi language. Throughout the book, little transpires on the author’s methods and intentions other than it being an obvious attempt to help future missionaries to work better among the Lo-lo. One can also perceive evidence of a long proximity with Lo-lo speakers embedded in numerous comments, remarks, and precisions given on particular
