CHAPTER NINE

RIVALRY, AVOIDANCE, AND SCIENTIFIC LONGING

In his analysis of the work of Recollect missionary Chrestien Le Clercq who was active in the French colony of Canada in the late 17th century, Serge Trudel reflected on the topic of ethnographic discourse:

> Narration is subject to two main functions: that of the speaker organizing his narrative (management function, fonction de régie) and that of the participant (testifying or attestation function, fonction testimoniale ou d’attestation), either by testifying on what he has himself seen or heard on location where the event or the anecdote he recalls occurred (testifying function), or by attesting, as reader, the reality of the documents he used to authenticate the event or the anecdote he has reported (attestation function).

Such understandings of ethnographic narration also applies to the missionary authors we have met in this book. There is little doubt that a more or less conscious form of participation was their dominant method of fieldwork. However, in organizing their narratives, writers from the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris posted in highland Southeast Asia took quite different paths from each other. I propose to categorise these paths on the basis of the intention of the authors and the type of vehicle through which they elected to disseminate their prose.

The first category brings together writers with no particular ethnological intention. Encompassing the vast majority of missionary authors in the field, a typical representative of this category is Léon-Marie Girod, whom we followed in Chapter 6, who wrote on his voyages through Upper Tonkin in the late 19th century. We saw that Girod was a path breaker in the upper region and the accounts of his journeys on the frontier were met with great popularity back in France. While his prose reached his audience through regular quotes in the yearly Comptes-rendus from his vicariate, it was mainly through popular missionary journals such as Les Missions Catholiques that he expressed himself. A mobile author rarely stationed in the same location for very long, Girod’s stories

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took the shape of linear, uncritical narratives of his peregrinations. As such, they were above all light in content, lively, entertaining, and held comparatively little material of an ethnographic nature.

The second category bands together the writers who showed clear signs of harbouring at least some ethnological intentions, but who did not see fit to go much beyond what was actually useful to the better performance of their ministry. This group is significantly smaller than the previous one, this time encompassing missionaries who were in long and regular contact with local populations, who mastered the vernacular language(s), and for whom the best performance of their apostolic work depended on their knowledge of the prospective converts’ culture(s). Typical representatives of this category are Antoine Bourlet in Laos, Aloys Schotter in Guizhou, and Paul Vial in Yunnan [see Chapter 7]. All have openly stated in their publications that studying the ‘natives’ and their history, religion, and culture was an integral part of missionary work. This was one duty without which competent proselytising was not going to release all the fruit it had the potential to yield. Contrary to their more numerous colleagues in the first category, these authors, deliberately or not, welcomed Father Wilhelm Schmidt’s invitation to organise their observations in a structured way and make them available through publications to colleagues and other learned readers. In the cases of Bourlet, Vial, and Schotter, the outlets for their prose still included the *Comptes-rendus* and the usual popular missionary journals, but they strategically targeted more scholarly outlets such as *Anthropos* and the occasional book published by their mission’s printing house.

To the third category belong writers with an open, explicit scientific intention underpinning their publication projects. Considerably much smaller than the two previous ones, this category is suitably represented in this book by two exceptional authors, Alfred Liétard in Yunnan and François Savina in Upper Tonkin, whose work we considered in Chapters 7 and 8. Both gave not more than a passing thought to the utilitarian dimension of their texts, that is, the fact that they should be of practical value to their colleagues in Christ; indeed, Savina in particular showed a total disinterest in such an objective, which led his critics to voice their dissatisfaction. Instead, both men openly claimed a methodical, non-utilitarian ideal aimed at better understanding the highlanders they worked with. To a degree, both shunned the *Comptes-rendus* and popular missionary journals and targeted instead publications aimed at scholarly audiences. The fact that Liétard’s *Au Yün-nan* was published as a book by *Anthropos Bibliothek* constitutes in itself a level of