
Antagonism between scholars and missionaries is nothing new, but in his 'Incidental’ Ethnographers Michaud explores how this distrust of the 19th and early 20th century missionaries to Southeast Asia and Yunnan by the academic community might be rethought to the furtherance of understanding of the peoples who inhabited this part of the world at that time.

Concentrating on the members of the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP) Michaud determined that most were the sons, usually the eldest, of peasant parents, who were sent to minor seminaries to gain merit for the family, so they had one less mouth to feed, or sometimes simply because the boy lacked interest in agricultural work. Those who adapted to the religious and academic life remained to become friars, who taught in primary schools, while others were sent to the MEP’s major seminary and were eventually ordained. At these seminaries curricular topics were stringently controlled with students not permitted to read ethnographies of ‘savages,’ Darwin’s work, or non-religious travel accounts of the parts of the world where they would later serve.

Despite such narrow education, some of the men who were sent to northern Indo-China and Yunnan became students of the peoples they encountered. Michaud compares these men to those who in an earlier century worked among the “natives” of New France (Canada), concluding that almost nothing was remembered from that work and so those early experiences were of no help to later missionaries.

Of those who served in Southeast Asia and Yunnan, Michaud concentrates on Alfred Lietard and Paul Vial who worked among the Lolo in Yunnan and Francois Marie Savina who lived among and wrote about the Miao, whom he declared “were not any more savage than me” (p. 167).

Lietard arrived in Asia in 1896 and devoted his life to producing scholarly articles on various aspects of Lolo life, including a Lolo-French dictionary. Perhaps his most notable work was Au Yun-nan, 280 pages, in which he tried to collect all the published works about the Lolo and then describe them in terms of tribes, customs, languages, etc. The work earned for him a place as an officer of the French Academy.

Vial was best known for establishing a model village for the minority Sani peoples of Yunnan on land he purchased from a Chinese landlord, with funds from his patroness, a rich French countess. Vial wanted to free the minority people from oppression by the Han Chinese, but he succeeded in placing himself in the position of landlord. Such was a common practice among MEP priests, according to Michaud, and Vial maintained his community for some 30 years. In 1883 Vial accompanied the British envoy Archibald Colquhoun on a six-month long trip into upper Burma, earning Vial a reprimand from his bishop for being absent from his post, but probably also saving his life for his colleague was murdered while he was gone by anti-French violence brought on in reaction to French military intervention in the Tonkin region.

Savina is perhaps the strangest of the MEP priests Michaud writes about. Very little is known of Savina personally, but Michaud has managed to determine that for two rather long periods of time Savina left the MEP, at least informally. From 1918 to 1921 he worked with the French military in Laos and from 1925 to 1929 he served with a diplomatic mission on Hainan island, China.

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A skilled polyglot Savina was posted by the MEP to work among the montagnards in the uplands of northern Indo-China shortly after his arrival in Asia in 1901, but his name and his work assignment are curiously absent from MEP reports of the region for many years, the first time from 1902 to 1906. Michaud suspects either Savina was doing something the MEP authorities did not want publicly known or that he was engaged in administrative tasks at MEP headquarters near Hanoi.

From 1912 to 1918 Savina again disappears from the MEP records. Michaud speculates that he was engaged in military intelligence or some other task the folk at home might not have agreed was the work of a missionary. Yet Michaud also thinks it was likely that in these years Savina has simply left the work of the MEP and chose to reside with the Miao who became the object of his well-known monograph. Michaud notes that the MEP did not dismiss men from their society, unless they agreed to leave. It is clear that on several occasions Savina left the church’s presbyteries and went to live among the Miao. On several occasions superiors within the church did not want him in their districts, an indication, as Michaud notes, that Savina “did not take his religious promises… seriously.”

In 1924 Savina published both his *Histoire des Miao*, 304 pages, and *Dictionnaire Étymologique Français-Nung-Chinois*, 528 pages. These were followed in 1926 by the 245-page *Dictionnaire Français-Man*, feats that Michaud notes would be remarkable in the age of computers, but were all the more amazing for being produced with little or no clerical help in remote parts of Indo-China.

In 1925 the Government General of Indochina decided to undertake a linguistic and ethnographic survey of the Chinese island of Hainan with the patronage of the École Française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO), and the cooperation of the Chinese government. Savina was employed to accompany the group and for four years traveled about the island on what a member of the EFEO described as a “military expedition.” His work was so noteworthy that he was named an associate member of the prestigious EFEO, a rare honor for a priest.

Savina made only one return trip to Europe in 1933, and when he returned to Asia he bypassed Indo-China and went directly to Hong Kong, which Michaud finds unusual. In Hong Kong Savina labored for five years over his 2500-page work, *Guide linguistique de l’Indochine*. He then returned to Vietnam and died at age 65 in 1941 in Hanoi where he had first arrived in Asia 40 years earlier.

Michaud has done a commendable job in reconstructing the lives of the MEP priests in Indo-China and Yunnan. Based primarily on English and French sources he has done a magnificent job of drawing attention to the contributions of these early missionaries and persuasively arguing that missionary accounts should not be ignored by ethnographers for those missionaries who lived among tribal groups often had the deepest understanding of their civilizations of any outsiders. Anyone who seeks to reconstruct the career of single folk in the mission field has a serious task ahead as no letters to family or friends are likely to survive. Yet Michaud has managed to tease out details of these men’s lives from what survives in the archives of the MEP and other groups to whom they wrote in France. He also includes not only pictures of the missionaries, but some wonderful ones of the tribal peoples among whom they worked as well as a group of maps of the region.

Some years ago an anthropologist who was interested in fabrics produced by tribal peoples of Indo-China and Hainan, on which I was working, asked me what I knew about the topic.