My interest in Vietnam, which started in 1995 when I first set foot in Hanoi, was based on my previous research on highland minority peoples in northern Thailand where I had conducted my PhD fieldwork in the early 1990s. Minorities, not majorities, were thus my main concern. My doctorate completed and feeling somewhat disappointed with the relatively small number of highlanders in Thailand – combined with a disproportionately large crowd of anthropologists scrutinizing them – I began hunting for a new location to pursue my research interests. After some exploration in Laos and Yunnan, I elected North Vietnam as that much desired location.

But I never meant to write this book. In fact, my routine field of investigation had been Hmong economy and adaptation to modernity (or what many refer to as Globalization). After a short time, I became acutely aware of the fact that in this case exists a rich pool of French language colonial archives available to researchers interested in the former French Indochina. Large segments of these archives were sleeping unused since the day they were penned, their potential still waiting to be fully appreciated. Social anthropology being not only a science of the present but also one that considers populations dynamically, in their historical continuity, getting suddenly access to glimpses from the past, in this case recorded through the eyes of Western observers, became a new quest in its own right.

So I resolved to take one step back from field research and dive in the dusty universe of old documents to unearth what could shed light on today’s northern các dân tộc thiểu số of Vietnam.

This book is the result of this investigation. A partial result that is, as Western colonial authors who wrote descriptive essays on highland minorities in the north were
numerous: travelers, administrators, merchants, military officers, and Catholic missionaries. This book focuses on the latter, perhaps the most interesting category of observers due to a series of factors such as their mastery of local languages and the length of their stay in Tonkin’s highlands.

The book’s argument

A book has thus resulted from this research connecting the fields of social anthropology and missiology. It presents a body of colonial ethnographic writing on highland societies in northern Vietnam and southern Yunnan. The colonial writers I chose to scrutinize were a handful of Catholic priests dispatched to the mountain vicariates established in the 1890s, all belonging to the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris, the main French missionary society in Tonkin (besides Spanish Dominicans active in the eastern portion).

In processing the French archives into a book, my purpose was twofold. From the very start of its planning stages it was to introduce an non-French speaking audience to a particular body of ethnographic literature produced by Catholic missionaries in French Indochina. From this initial and relatively modest aim, I also wanted to pursue a complementary, more critical objective, that is to weigh up these ethnographic writings by assessing the context of their creation and the methods by which they were produced so that we can discuss their potential validity today. Indeed, merely presenting these early works would hardly be satisfactory as a scholarly undertaking. Additional questions have to be addressed: What is colonial ethnography? Who performed it? In what frame? What methods did the early ‘researchers’ use? How did all these questions materialise in highland French Indochina?

The texts explored over nine chapters have largely been left unaddressed by anthropologists and historians alike. Why? Because the place (on the margins of colonial Indochina), the peoples (mountain minorities), and the texts (material penned by incidental ‘amateurs’) all pertain to a subsidiary universe that, some would argue, was and remains of little historical, political, economic, and intellectual consequence. It is true that practically all of the men who take the front stage in the book have remained minor historical characters, and that the fruit of their intellectual work, had it known the good fortune to be published, was not judged worthy of much interest by the specialists of the era. If I chose to devote a few years of my life to them, clearly, it is because I challenge that label of inconsequentiality, as do a growing number of historians, linguists, and anthropologists today.

Inside the book

French missionaries sent to the highlands of French Indochina at the turn of the 20th century by the Société des Missions étrangères de Paris had a definite profile. They were recruited from the countryside and, most of the time, from within peasant families.
After their schooling in seminaries, their level of education was noteworthy given their humble origin, but significantly less sophisticated than that of the elite class in France. They were all unmarried men aspiring to convert the pagans for the greatness of the Church and of God – and should martyrdom come their way, so be it. To that end they were prepared to leave France to the colonies and never return.

Crucially, they knew nothing of, and had no power over the choice of, their possible assignment. Decisions concerning despatching the MEP work force were made behind closed doors. Such was the case of the 5 missionaries I focus on in the book. These men are Antoine Bourlet and François-Marie Savina in Tonkin, Alfred Liétard and Paul Vial both posted in Yunnan, and Aloys Schotter in Guizhou. All learned of their destination one month before boarding the ship to Indochina and had no preparation whatsoever regarding the societies they were sent. Presumably, it was believed that a few decades of residence in their new homes would be enough for them to develop the skills needed to work efficiently.

Much has been said about the active and sometimes damaging role of missionary societies in the take over of colonial Indochina. During colonisation, many Catholic missionaries played a long-term spearhead role in the colonial venture. They took roots in remote settings for decades on end, setting themselves up in a prime position for gathering intelligence on little accessible locations, and infiltrating coveted regions and societies, although many proved less cooperative than expected. In the process, and that is what interests me most, they also learned the natives’ customs and languages and diffused them through various journals, while acting as cultural as well as political interpreters, often advocates for the ‘natives’ in their difficult transactions with the authorities. In fact, in Upper-Tonkin and in Yunnan, their attitude towards their protégés revealed a remarkable political sensibility. While it is undeniable that these Christian messengers worked from inside and in general harmony with the colonial system, it is equally true that many followed in the footsteps of early natives’ advocates such as Bartolomeo de Las Casas in the Americas, denouncing the exploitation of the ‘natives’ by feudal foes and the colonial system.

Indeed, in preparing this book, I have encountered open condemnation from a number of missionaries of the exploitation of the ‘natives.’ François Savina in Upper-Tonkin, Aloys Schotter in Guizhou, and Paul Vial in Yunnan being amongst the most vehement of them. For instance, in 1908, Schotter wrote about the Miao, his protégés: "The Miao, like the bushes, cover the rocks of Kouy-tcheou. The Y-jen, such as a mighty trunk, shoot the ramifications of their crowded villages into the fertile plains. The
Chinese, like parasite mistletoe, sneak in everywhere, suck, and exploit the aboriginal populations, pretending to govern."

As thinking individuals, missionaries were agents, they could not be reduced to being uncritical pawns, passive instruments of an arrangement bent on civilizing the ‘savages’ and generating profit for the colonists, its elite, and the metropole. Holding a definite share of power, even if moving within an otherwise rigid system (the Church and the colonial state of course, but also on a personal level, their rural origins, their restricted education, their condition as single men, and so on), they could also envisage the situation from their particular viewpoints and pursue their own agenda. Savina in particular used all his energy to remain part of his missionary society while taking a distance from apostolic work and, in its place, engaging in scholarly pursuits more in tune with his personal desires and his beliefs on the role he could and should play regarding the highlanders. Others, like Vial working among the Gni’pa (Lolo), used his position to set up, within the borders of his mission, a model society reproducing Western societal ideals and educating the 'natives'. He wished to provide them with the economic skills needed to survive those fast times and to resist assimilation. Alfred Liétard and Aloys Schotter both explicitly stated that their actions among their converts were at least in part directed at supporting the latter’s efforts to maintain their cultures in the face of the Chinese economic, political, and cultural hegemony. Like many amongst the best of missionary ethnographers, they were driven, in van Beek’s words, by a "profound empathy for 'their population'."

For each of these men, their true 'mission' had roots that went beyond the missionary ideology they adhered to. It was the product of a combination of opportunities including family background and early childhood experience. One could assess that these men, because of who they were, not just because of who they had turned into as priests and colonists, were subversive. They used what was left of their liberty to try to counteract excessive exploitation, support the underdog, and delay assimilation as much as possible. Being priests, that is, advocates of peace, not many tools were left to them to accomplish this. Observing, learning, understanding, and crucially, publishing became the means for some of them. Going public with their observations and opinions, sometimes against the wishes of their bishops and colleagues, was their personal form of sedition.

Their efforts, as futile as they might appear a century later, especially in the face of the overall unconstructive impacts colonisation and christianisation may have had on local populations, were not misplaced. Recent experience in North America involving
indigenous minorities there shows that missionary ethnography can profitably be revisited by the heirs of the subjects themselves. Highland ethnic groups forced to navigate the treacherous waters of globalization, ever more exposed to the siren song of the liberal market economy with its glittering promises, find in these early monographs a dog-eared portrait of themselves which, if not always true, remains decipherable and genuine. As Margaret Swain very sensibly wrote in the conclusion of her analysis of the work and legacy of Paul Vial in Yunnan: in the face of great adversity, “missionary Orientalism in Southwest China was a factor in ethnogenesis among peripheral groups.”

Past the incessant disorder of wars and revolutions that shook Vietnam for so long, colonial missionary texts today have become unique and priceless glimpses into the earlier embodiments of numerous minority cultures that have themselves substantially changed since, or, for some, have lost the memory of their past. My hope is that this book constitutes only a first step to stimulate colleagues in a number of fields to dig deeper into the rich and original textual legacy of the authors brought to light here. It may well become, in the future, a decisive factor in the cultural endurance of Vietnam’s highland minorities.