

**From “Voluntary” to “truly Voluntary” Associations:
The Structure of the Chinese Community in French Polynesia,
1865-2005**

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Abstract

This article presents a historical overview of the Chinese community in French Polynesia, from its initial structuring into associations at the end of the 19th century until the restructuring that occurred at the end of the 20th century. The use of a combination of models brings into relief the correlation between class differentiation and the relative importance of sharing the same surname and ties of affinity. The analysis highlights the link between the community's internal structure and the mode of organization of Chinese associations in the guise of real estate holdings. Until recently, leadership was entrusted to a limited number of wealthy merchants and their families who were shareholders in these holdings. The termination of this system in the 1990s was linked to the change in the mode of membership to the associations and to the wider Chinese community. The shift from compulsory membership to voluntary membership is evident with the emergence of new types of associations aimed at preserving Chinese cultural identity in French Polynesia, but it is also true in the case of clan associations. The way in which modes of affiliation to the associations changed over time reveals a correlative change in the way Chinese identity is expressed today.