CHAPTER ONE
THE MINNAN REGION OF FUJIAN:
HISTORY AND SOCIETY

Introduction

Manila, the capital of the Philippines, is a cosmopolitan, bustling megalopolis. As Metropolitan Manila, it is home to over 10 million residents (circa 2008), and attracts multitudes of people near and far searching for economic and other opportunities. Big local and international corporations set up their head offices in Manila’s financial centers such as Makati and Ortigas Center. Among those who participate in its economy are Filipinos of Chinese ethnic background, whose businesses range from banks with billions of pesos in assets and equity to food chains and large department stores. In another section of greater Manila not far from Binondo, Manila’s “Chinatown,” a big enclosed flea market called “168” attracts thousands of buyers from all over the country, especially during the holiday season, looking for bargain wares and goods, many of which are imported from China. The owners of many of these stalls are recent migrants from China. For centuries, the Chinese in the Philippines have played an important role in the Philippine economy, infusing the country with their capital, labor, knowledge, and skills.

Where do most of the Chinese in Manila trace their ancestors’ origin? What factors brought their ancestors to the country? In order to answer these questions it is necessary to go back in time and examine the conditions in the Minnan region of southeastern Fujian province. As we will see, Minnan in the middle to the latter part of the nineteenth century was home to a population of people with a long history of maritime trade and cultural interaction with peoples from Southeast Asia, including the Philippines (cf. Liu 1964, 64–6, 228–36).

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1 Greater or Metropolitan Manila, which encompasses twelve cities and five municipalities, counts 14 million people (circa 2008).
Most of the Chinese in the Philippines today trace their origins to Fujian (福建) province in China. The province’s original inhabitants were members of the “seven Min tribes” that lived in the area during the Zhou dynasty (1111–255 BCE). During the Tang Dynasty, political instability forced many living in the northern part of China to flee to the southern provinces of China, including Fujian (JJHQZ 1994, 25). Over time, the earlier inhabitants were displaced or outnumbered by people of Han ethnicity, making Fujian’s population today predominantly Han Chinese (fig. 1).²

Tracing the ethnic and regional background of most Chinese in the Philippines shows that most of them come, in particular, from the southeastern part of Fujian, the region known as Minnan (閩南). The word “Min” (閩) stands for the abbreviated name of Fujian.

² The largest ethnic minority group consists of She tribesmen (Shemin), who inhabit the mountainous regions of the northern Fujian. Hakka (Kejia), a Han branch with its own distinct identity, live in the southwestern parts of Fujian. Hui’an, also a Han branch with unique culture and fashion, populate Fujian’s southeast coastline in Hui’an County. The archaeological findings indicate that the original inhabitants in Fujian were Austronesians who made their living by fishing.