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## Edgar Wickberg, 1927–2008

Clark Alejandrino

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# Obituary



## Edgar Wickberg 1927–2008

In early November 2008, word came that Edgar Wickberg had passed away on 29 October of the same year. My thoughts immediately went back five years ago to 2 October 2003. I had just finished an undergraduate degree in history the year before and published my thesis about Chinese exclusion during the American period of Philippine history in monograph form. I received an e-mail that day from Professor Wickberg and I could hardly believe that such an eminent scholar of the Chinese diaspora would deign to write to a young and inexperienced amateur. I expected the harshest of criticisms about my work but instead found encouraging comments, suggestions for further inquiry, and an appreciative veteran of the field who felt he benefited from reading my work.

The various obituaries about Professor Wickberg only confirmed his humanity and the impact of his work on countless overseas Chinese, particularly in Canada where he was professor of history at the University of British Columbia from 1969 to 1992. His deep empathy and understanding for the overseas Chinese stemmed from his commitment to scholarship and years of research and publication of path-breaking works in the field.

Professor Wickberg's training was in modern Chinese history, but eventually he wrote his dissertation on the Chinese in the Philippines during the last half century of Spanish rule. This dissertation eventually produced the book—first published by Yale University Press in 1965 and reprinted by the Ateneo de Manila University Press in 2000—that is still the classic and definitive account of the place of the Chinese in the changing economy and society of late nineteenth-century Philippines. Simply but aptly titled *The Chinese in Philippine Life 1850–1898*, his book was a contribution not only to the field of overseas Chinese studies but also a pioneering work on the hitherto underresearched time period and field of nineteenth-century economic and social history of the Philippines. It is only fitting that *Chinese in Philippine Life* remains a fixture in the bibliographies of later works on the nineteenth-century Philippines.

This book and an article, “The Chinese Mestizo in Philippine History,” which appeared in the *Journal of Southeast Asian History* in 1964, also continue to inspire research and interest in mestizo identity, its fluidity, contradictions, and the challenges it faced in the crucial transition between the Spanish and American period. A new generation of scholars of Philippine-Chinese history, Richard Chu and Andrew Wilson, has consciously framed a research agenda in light of Professor Wickberg's work. Chu examines the involvement by Chinese and Chinese mestizos in non-Chinese affairs. Wilson follows China's efforts at reclaiming the Chinese in the Philippines and the lure of ambition as possible areas in which Chinese and Chinese mestizos could locate their identity.

There is no doubt that future agenda for research will continue to find their seeds in the writings of Professor Wickberg. Indeed, in my own teaching, I prefer to assign Professor Wickberg's article as reading material in undergraduate and graduate classes, despite the presence of newer studies, for its continued ability to stimulate new ways of thinking about old historical problems.

Finally, Professor Wickberg was a comparativist whose experience in studying the Chinese in the Philippines helped him open and establish the field of Chinese-Canadian history in Canadian higher education. *From China to Canada*, a book he edited and coauthored in 1982, remains the standard text for the subject. He was the founding president of the Chinese Canadian Historical Society of British Columbia and led efforts to collect and preserve materials relevant to the study of the Chinese in Canada. The

Historical Society founded the Edgar Wickberg Scholarship in 2006 to honor his lifelong commitment to studying the history of the Chinese in Canada.

His comparison of the experience of the Chinese in North America and the Chinese in Southeast Asia inspired the research that resulted in my monograph, which compares the exclusion acts implemented in the United States during the late nineteenth century and that which was imposed on the Philippines in 1902.

As late as 2007, in the *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, Professor Wickberg was introducing the concept of “global cities” and the Internet as a frame for understanding Chineseness in present times. Although the discussion in the article centered on the global city of Vancouver, the influence of his background with the Chinese in the Philippines is clearly evident. There is no doubt that this article will engender more innovative studies and nuanced comparisons of the various experiences of the Chinese and other immigrant peoples all over the world.

Edgar Wickberg gave back to the Chinese their place in Philippine life and restored their many voices to the symphony of Philippine history. He did the same for the Chinese in Canada and, in doing so, has found his place in the lives of the people he studied and came to know and understand.

I am thankful to have once been a recipient of his kindness. As a final note to Professor Wickberg's inspiring life and his dedication to the overseas Chinese, his explicit request was that after his death donations were to be made to the Wickberg Scholarship in lieu of flowers.

**Clark Alejandrino**

Chinese Studies Program and History Department  
Ateneo de Manila University  
<calejandrino@ateneo.edu>