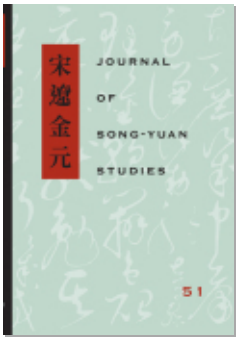
Remembering Thomas T. Allsen (1940–2019): Medieval Eurasia Reimagined



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Remembering Thomas T. Allsen (1940–2019)

Medieval Eurasia Reimagined

The passing of Tom Allsen in February of 2019 provides an opportunity for medieval Eurasianists and Mongolists across the globe to review and celebrate their debt to this practitioner of comparative Eurasian history. Allsen's scholarly work constituted a profound paradigm shift that liberated the study of the Mongol Empire from its confines in philology and the sedentary-nomad binary opposition, and set it on an innovative new path. His rare ability to use sources in the major languages of the empire—Chinese, Persian, Russian—allowed him to look at the empire in its full Eurasian context and highlight the Mongols' indigenous norms and their composite imperial culture. Adopting the larger Eurasian perspective led him to pursue a series of comparative cultural studies that opened up new vistas on the political, socio-economic, and military history of the empire. His monographic studies and numerous articles and book chapters remain essential references and valued teaching tools (see the extensive bibliography that accompanies this remembrance). If the Mongols today are known not only as destroyers of cultures but also as the champions of cross-cultural contacts across Eurasia, this is first and foremost due to Allsen's scholarly enterprise.

Tom Allsen's extensive body of research rests on the sturdy edifice of five path-breaking books: *Mongol Imperialism, The Policies of the Grand Qan Möngke in China, Russia and the Islamic Lands, 1251–1259* (1987); *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire, A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles* (1997); *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (2001); *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History* (2006); and *The Steppe and the Sea, Pearls in the Mongol Empire* (2019). Five trim volumes—*The Royal Hunt*, at ca. 400 pages including the index, was more than twice as long as the other four—worth their weight in gold brocade or pearls to scholars of the era. A posthumous monograph on alcohol in the Mongol Empire may be forthcoming.[1] The topics trace a

1. Allsen had worked on the topic of alcohol in Eurasia for more than a decade. A few articles

trajectory that reweaves the inextricably linked concerns of politics, economics, and material culture: theory and practice; sedentary and nomadic realms; humans and animals; the global and the local; the Eurasian steppes and the southern seas. It is now hard to imagine Mongol studies before Tom, prompting one senior scholar to remark, "I was fortunate to work on the Mongol world in what I now call the Age of Allsen."[2]

Many features of Tom Allsen's scholarship incite admiration; we are not alone in finding his spare style and modest presentation of bold hypotheses quite bracing. Free of jargon and fond of arresting examples, Allsen's arguments unfold in clear and purposeful fashion, even when the evidence to support some of his contentions is hypothesized rather than at hand: pose a question, investigate all varieties of data, and draw what now seem as entirely logical, but were then often novel, conclusions. Even the most complex topics emerged as clear, germane, and accessible to a general reader. Browsing through the bibliography of Allsen's later books, besides a rewarding education on its own, shows how widely and deeply this scholar read in the social sciences and how imaginatively he culled the literary record for evidence. A perfect model for students writing research papers at all levels.

Stepping back to imagine the larger geospatial and temporal context of his subject, Allsen transcended conceptual and evidentiary barriers to pose new questions and draw connections in unlikely places. The value of such imaginings far exceeded the limitations of the data. While earlier scholars such as Paul Pelliot and John Andrew Boyle performed essential services in unpacking thorny linguistic issues and translating key sources, Allsen took the next necessary step of looking at the Mongol Empire and Eurasia from the perspective of the qan's court and its concerns, not through the eyes of outsiders, antiquarians, or conquered populations. He treated the Mongols like intelligent human beings, pursuing goals as rational to them as any group of like-minded people.

This transformative approach began with *Mongol Imperialism* (based on his Ph.D. dissertation), which reoriented attention from philology to history,

from this study already appeared. See Thomas T. Allsen, "Ögodei and Alcohol," *Mongolian Studies*, vol.29 (2007): 3–12; "The Qipchaqs, an Alcohol History, 900–12400" in *Central Eurasia in the Middle Ages: Studies in Honour of Peter B. Golden* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2016), 11–22; "Notes on Alcohol in Pre-Russian Siberia," *Sino-Platonic Papers*, 277 (2018): 1–29. He also left a nearly completed manuscript of a monograph about millet (from which alcohol was produced in China).

2. Beatrice Manz, Tufts University, personal communication, Feb. 16, 2021.

to the internal institutional logic of the Mongolian Empire. Allsen's book was one of the first (if not the first) to "view the world from the Mongol court, and not the court from the conquered world."[3] While Grand Qan Möngke may have been less innovative in his policies of resource mobilization, or successful in implementing them across Eurasia, than the author presents, the comparative analysis of scattered information from numerous sources that Allsen brought to the task established a high standard for aspiring students of the Mongol Empire.

Allsen's next three monographs focused on the material culture of the Mongols and Eurasian rulers across millennia as a way to analyze the processes and mechanisms of intercultural contact and exchange. Turning from Pax Mongolica as "facilitating" trade and cultural exchange along the "Silk Road," Allsen demonstrated how the Mongols and earlier nomad courts acted as deliberate and thoughtful agents in the pursuit of their own cultural and political agendas, rerouting trade routes, prioritizing certain commodities over others, taking what (and whom) they valued in sedentary societies and discarding the rest. Mongol political will and cultural priorities, in other words, shaped what happened in socio-economic and cultural exchange; it did not arise from any innate desires of people at opposite ends of Eurasia to take advantage of Mongol postal stations and learn about each other's ways, but from the qan's need of "a second (or third) opinion." Marco Polo plays a very minor role in this scenario, a pawn of a much larger system designed and run by other players like Bolad Aqa (Pūlād *chīngsānk*) and Rashīd al-Dīn.

Commodity and Exchange laid the groundwork for this argument, with beautiful gold brocade textiles as the object of Mongol desires (one only laments the absence of colored illustrations in this volume). But intricately brocaded tent hangings and lushly pearled robes were not simply bling for newly sophisticated Mongol elites; they were strategic commodities, as important as bows and arrows. The production and gifting of textiles served crucial political and communicative functions: of designating and asserting hierarchy and status, of reward or punishment, of cementing loyalties and affirming corporate identities, of "fashioning chains of clientage that lay at the heart of Mongol princely politics," and of defining standards of proper conduct and loyalty.[4] The mere choice of textile as a Mongol-related topic was a tremendous innovation in the late 1990s. Allsen uses the same sources

3. Christopher P. Atwood, University of Pennsylvania, personal communication, April 18, 2021.
4. Thomas T. Allsen, "Robing in the Mongolian Empire," in *Robes and Honor: The Medieval*

others have read and reread before him, but his sharp eye and analytical mind identified similarities and cultural phenomena that had not been noticed beforehand and wove them into a compelling book that turned the Mongols from a medieval UPS (his expression) into actors who determined the direction, volume and content of Eurasian trade.

The production of textiles provides an excellent example of how Mongol priorities dictated the relocation of vast numbers of peoples from their native places to other centers of Mongol operations. The dispersal and movements of diverse peoples across Eurasia became a characteristic feature of Mongol policy, not a haphazard effect of conquest. Submission to the Mongols might open up new (if usually involuntary) job opportunities for people of skilled trades but lower social status in their native homelands. The consequences of population dispersal of this magnitude were not limited to the movement of peoples, but also commodities, techniques, networks, and ideas. Allsen analyzes these movements in the context of comparative Eurasian history and debates over globalization.[5]

Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia, the logical sequel to *Commodity and Exchange*, has been widely considered the most important volume in Mongolian studies published over the last several decades. The book explores seven arenas of cultural exchange between China and Iran (historiography, geography and cartography, agriculture, cuisine, medicine, astronomy, and printing), all related to two exceptional cultural brokers, the Persian vizier and historian Rashīd al-Dīn (d. 1318) and the Mongol versatile courtier Bolad Aqa (Cheng-hsiang, d. 1313), and assesses the (uneven) impact of that traffic. In the final twenty pages, Allsen presents his theoretical model for analyzing cultural interaction and exchange. This latter section revolutionized the way many of us think, write, and teach about cultural "influence" in any context. Allsen posited a mechanism in which the Mongols were active "agents," who defined the "filters" through which exchange occurred. But they were not the first, nor the last; and their filters were not unique: "Further, the ability to attract or forcibly acquire raw materials, finished goods, or talented people

World of Investiture, ed. S. Gordon (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2001), 307. The article develops this analysis in a succinct and compelling fashion.

5. "Ever Closer Encounters: The Appropriation of Culture and the Apportionment of People in the Mongol Empire" encapsulates this discussion. Also see "Population Movements in Mongol Eurasia," in *Nomads as Agents of Cultural Change: The Mongols and Their Eurasian Predecessors* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 119–51.

from great distances enhances a kingly reputation and augments authority because what is distant is mysterious and what is mysterious in traditional societies always contains spiritual power. . . . The antiquity and longevity of this notion is quite impressive: it was a common feature of the political culture of Eurasia for at least 2,000 years."[6] For Allsen, measuring the impact of interaction poses different questions: "Demonstration or display should not, however, be equated with exchange and borrowing. Not all opportunities were exploited; in some cases, moreover, they were firmly rejected."[7] Allsen's studies of cultural exchange across Eurasia were augmented by a series of articles in the first decade of the twenty-first century dealing with the exchange of military technology, linguistic knowledge, technicians, entertainers, and related topics.[8]

The Royal Hunt (2006) followed the two previous volumes, and greatly enlarged the geographical and temporal frame. Allsen's lens likewise refocused on human-animal relations in order to explore the deep historical and cultural context, the *long durée*, for that most characteristic and profoundly important activity of Mongol courts—hunting. The choice of subject is utterly appropriate, yet also inspired, and Allsen's coverage and detail are breathtaking. He argues that as humans became less reliant on wild animals for food, the political significance of hunting increased as resource mobilization, spectacle of consumption, and "theater of power."[9] Among the resources commanding the author's attention are the animal partners and their trainers and keepers. The royal hunt has an ancient lineage in Egypt, Mesopotamia, India and China, with its core territory lying in Iran, North India and Turkestan, normally considered to be peripheral to traditionally designated "core" regions. Yet it is precisely in such peripheries that Allsen finds innovation emerging. In time, through the "dynamics of peer polity interactions," the hunting

6. *Culture and Conquest*, 201–2.

7. *Culture and Conquest*, 194.

8. See Thomas T. Allsen, "The Circulation of Military Technology in the Mongolian Empire," in *Warfare in Inner Asian History (500–1800)* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 265–93; Peter Benjamin Golden, Thomas T. Allsen and Halasi-Kun Tibor, *The King's Dictionary: The Rasulid Hexaglot* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); Thomas T. Allsen, "Command Performances: Entertainers in the Mongolian Empire," *Russian History/Histoire Russe*, 28 (2001): 41–45; and Thomas T. Allsen, *Technician Transfers in the Mongolian Empire* (Bloomington: Dept. of Central Eurasian Studies, Indiana University, 2002) among others.

9. Jerry H. Bentley, "*The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History* by Thomas T. Allsen," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, 17.3 (2007): 350.

traditions arising in this core among political elites "became homogenous," and developed "international standards and styles" across Eurasia which persisted up to the nineteenth century.[10]

Allsen's last book returns to the Mongol context and performs similar work, but through a lens trained upon pearls and their significance to Mongol elites. Pearls were the natural companion to gold, as both were redolent of princely majesty. The logic governing the pursuit, exchange, and display of pearls, in all their variety, unfolds in rich detail in just barely 166 pages. In concluding, Allsen observes that acquisition and trade of the lustrous gem wove together, for the first time, a nomadic steppe empire with the southern maritime world. In that sense, this book is a sequel to *Culture and Conquest* and *Commodity and Exchange*. While the Mongols' experience with the sea is usually associated with failures—the failure to conquer Japan or Java—Allsen paints a very different picture, reminding us that conquest was never the ultimate goal. Commerce was. Enjoying the good life was.

With the Mongols as an entry point, Tom Allsen dedicated his research career to uncovering and analyzing pre-Columbian manifestations of cultural interactions that created early "internationalizations" or "globalizations" across Eurasia. At the same time, he demonstrated that taking the Mongol court as a center rather than, say, a European or Chinese port city, one learns that all human histories are governed by coherent and comparable systems of internal logic which develop in interaction with others. Allsen unearthed the nomadic culture that culminated in the Mongol Empire and examined it on the same level with the better-known Chinese, Islamic or Russian cultures, thereby expanding our understanding of the various forms of human existence. One sees more, and more clearly, when trying to see from another's perspective, because it forces one to abandon the constraints of one's own point of view.

Allsen's educational path is similarly illuminating: after a short stint in the U.S. Army, he earned a B.A. in History from Portland State University in 1962.[11] At Portland State, he entered into a lifelong friendship with Basil Dmytryshyn (1925–2020), Professor of Russian history. Allsen then earned an M.A. in Russian Studies from the University of Washington in 1964, completing an M.A. thesis on the Baron Roman Von Ungern-Sternberg, the anti-Communist warlord in early 20th century Mongolia, under Professor

10. *The Royal Hunt*, 272, 11.

11. Bruce D. Craig, "Thomas T. Allsen (1940–2019)," online at https://doi.org/10.6082/hsf2-6w61 *Mamlūk* Studies Review.

Donald Treadgold. Tom's early childhood friend Bruce Craig attributes his fascination with the Mongols to his high school reading of the popular books of Harold Lamb, whose *Genghis Khan: Emperor of All Men* (1927) inspired a whole generation of future Mongolists.[12] After Seattle, Allsen moved to Syracuse University, working (translating Russian sources) and studying with Lawrence Krader, an anthropologist specializing in Central Asian nomads. Allsen left Syracuse for the Peace Corps and served as a volunteer in Iran, his introduction to the Persian language. From the Peace Corps he returned to the University of Oregon for an M.L.S. in Librarianship in 1969. There he met his future wife, Lucille Etheridge. He then spent a year at the University of Alaska, working as the Russian bibliographer, followed by two years at the University of Minnesota as an archivist. He started taking evening classes in Chinese and Arabic, and eventually entered the Ph.D. program in Comparative Asian History fulltime. After earning his Ph.D. in 1979, he taught for one year at Western Kentucky University (1979–1980), and then moved to the History Department of Trenton State College (1980–2002), now The College of New Jersey, where he attained the rank of Professor.

At Trenton State Allsen taught a wide array of courses, thereby broadening his scholarly horizons; he also mined the nearby libraries of Princeton and the Institute for Advanced Study where his wife Lucille worked. Opting to retire early, he moved to Eugene, Oregon, in order to devote himself fulltime to research, a career choice for which our envy is overwhelmed by gratitude. His unusual career is a proof that sometimes the most original minds rise from the academic periphery, not from the well-trodden paths of Ivy League institutions. Allsen was a man who moved around, developed many skills, and carved out a productive home in the Mongol Empire from which he observed its larger world. The qans would have rewarded him richly as a meritorious subject.

An admirable feature of Tom Allsen's work is that he never pointed out or claimed to correct others' flaws or errors, even when presenting conclusions that clearly contradicted earlier findings. Perhaps this was partly because his own ideas were often so novel. Allsen always remained a modest man, despite his growing eminence in the field. While he was unable to train graduate students, he was always open and encouraging to younger scholars.

12. Those of us old enough to have enjoyed Harold Lamb's popular biographies of *Genghis Khan* and *Tamerlane: The Earth Shaker* (1929) as schoolkids may be gratified to learn that Lamb won a Guggenheim award in 1929, according to Wikipedia.

Ever generous with his time and erudition, he served as a mentor to many of us who were undertaking their first steps in the study of the Mongols, or returning to the subject, as acknowledged in the scores of mentions he received in various Mongol- or Eurasian-related books and articles. Allsen was a wonderful reader—sharp, eloquent, supportive, and with a dry sense of humor. He brought people together. He also sustained a life-time fruitful scholarly dialogue with his close friends Peter Golden of Rutgers and Anatoly Khazanov of Wisconsin-Madison. In 2015, Peter Golden edited a special issue of *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi*, a journal on whose editorial board Allsen had served for years, to celebrate his 75th birthday. Another commemorative volume is also forthcoming. Several books published after Tom Allsen's death were already dedicated to him,[13] as will be the forthcoming *Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire*, which includes two posthumous articles ("Mongol Ideology" and "Siberia and the Mongols").

Allsen did not travel much (owing, he claimed, to his height and the cramped accommodations on airplanes), which made his appearance at conferences a celebratory event. Beatrice Manz relates the following anecdote shared with her by another renowned historian of the Mongols, David Morgan (1945–2019; 2019 was a year of great loss to the field). Morgan "had been in some conference gathering in which the speaker said that the most eminent historian of the Mongols was in the room. David felt he could not let that go, and looked all around, then said, 'I don't see Tom Allsen anywhere here.'"[14]

This remembrance is dedicated to Lucille Allsen, whose companionship and support (typing and word-processing, among other services) in many ways brought Tom's genius to fruition.

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13. For example, *New Approaches to Ilkhanid History*, ed. Timothy May, Bayarsaikhan Dashdandong and Christopher P. Atwood (Leiden: Brill, 2021); *Along the Silk Roads in Mongol Eurasia: Generals, Merchants, Intellectuals*, ed. Michal Biran, Jonathan Brack and Francesca Fiaschetti (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020); David Robinson's *Ming China and its Allies: Imperial Rule in Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

14. Beatrice Manz, personal communication, Feb. 16, 2021.

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Note: This bibliography does not include all of the many book reviews Allsen published.

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