

BOOK REVIEW

**Towards a Global Narrative of Medieval Exchange:
Review of Thomas Allsen. *The Steppe and the Sea: Pearls in the
Mongol Empire*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019**

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Pearls have transfixed human imaginations and tugged at desires since antiquity. Lustrous, reflective, and even transparent, these optical qualities have commanded human fascination by virtue of the crystalline structure's ability to scatter light within itself. Altered optics, too, are at the core of Thomas Allsen's *The Steppe and the Sea: Pearls in the Mongol Empire*. In this study, he seeks to use the global circulation of pearls during the Mongol period (1206-1368) to expand perspectives on the patterns of global material circulation, the place of luxury goods in the Mongol political economy, and finally on the debate between continuity and exceptionalism of the Chinggisid imperium.

Allsen's study, much like his previous works on the Eurasian royal hunt and textile circulations, is succinct without sacrificing density of detail, depth of argument, or narrative flow. The book is further an astounding accumulation of primary source material in Arabic, Armenian, Chinese, Mongolian, and Persian with secondary material in nearly every major European language, with particular attention to Russian historiography. These documentary spires are buttressed by archaeological and anthropological studies. It is an evidentiary standard that is staggering. The book is divided into two parts: the first addresses the cultural and commercial background of pearls in Eurasia, which outlines aspects of continuity in production, accumulation, and use of this key positional good. The second part looks more broadly at circulations of pearls with particular attention to the roles of merchants and markets in the interconnectivity of the global north and south.

Allsen weds the material, cultural and political history of the Mongol Empire in his emphasis on pearls as the *sine qua non* positional good in Eurasia during Mongol expansion. He asks the reader to question whether pearls drove Mongol imperialism as much as they were necessary for expansion to take place. This focus is both a continuation of the pan-Eurasian perspective and its material cultural exchange that has been a hallmark of Allsen's research. However, it is also an acknowledgment of a trend in the historiography of Qing China (1644-1911), exemplified by Jonathan Schlesinger, that has refocused attention on the material cultures, particularly of Inner Asia. This trend undergirded imperial practice and the creation of notions of "nature."

In contrast, Mongol expansion narratives posit *tengrism* as the core of imperial ideology: rooted in indigenous Mongol shamanism, *teng'ri* or Heaven/God bequeaths the Earth, and the mandate to rule to Chinggis Qaghan.¹ This approach has often led to a chicken-before-the-egg debate on whether an innate need for positional goods extracted from neighboring sedentary societies was the key motivating factor for expansion. Such an approach would render ideology as a *post-facto* rationalization for empire.² However, Allsen's look at the role of pearls as a positional good in the expansion of the Mongol empire avoids this pitfall by arguing that ideology and material culture were co-generative. Political culture, material objects, and the imperial enterprise are deeply entangled. Pearls are the physical manifestations of political capital used to create and sustain political hierarchies (50-60). He links this motivation with the Mongol invasion of the Song Empire and strategies to secure maritime routes, which were vital in supplying large quantities of pearls (134-141). However, his discussion on a consumer culture inherited from Liao and Jin societies leaves open the question to what degree steppe imperial practice stems from this received material culture centered on pearls (61-68).

The significant contribution of his present work, and indeed a departure from his previous studies, emphasizes the Mongol period as

1 Reuven Amitai-Preiss, "Mongol Imperial Ideology and the Ilkhanid War against the Mamluks" in *The Mongol Empire and its Legacy* ed. Reuven Amitai-Preiss (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

2 Thomas Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2010).

a watershed in the “southernization”³ of material and cultural exchange in Eurasia. Previous studies of Eurasian exchange are almost exclusively oriented along an East-West axis. Thirteenth-century exchange tends to focus on the continental routes best exemplified by Marco Polo and William of Rubruck’s travelogues. When this continental trade was interrupted and fragmented by internecine strife among competing Chinggisid qanates, maritime routes were enhanced along a similar axis from China to the Middle East via India.⁴ Allsen insightfully points out that such a pattern is directionally counterintuitive: these E-W circulations are simultaneously enmeshed with North-South vectors. One cannot go from Quanzhou to Malacca, a common trade route often thought of as E-W exchange, without making significant latitudinal headway – a difference of nearly 23° of latitude, whereas around 16° of longitude are crossed. Here he combines David Christian’s reorientation of trans-Eurasian exchange on an N-S axis coterminous with trans-ecological migrations of agro-pastoral peoples with Lynda Shaffer’s emphasis on the “dispersal of cultural traits” from the Indian Ocean littoral northward (6). This emphasis on “southernization” allows for a more geographically textured, nimble approach to global mobility that sheds oversimplified N-S or E-W axes.

Pearls in the Golden Horde serve as the first case of this in the book. Allsen has assembled a host of documentary and archaeological evidence to show how Indian and Persian Gulf pearls were harvested, manufactured into positional goods in Egypt and Persia, and ultimately consumed in the Golden Horde centered in the Russian steppe, e.g., pearled robes in investiture. The late fifteenth-century Muscovite successor state then inherited this material cultural matrix, demonstrated by the famed pearl-studded crown of Monomakh⁵ and linguistic adoption of Mongol pearl nomenclature (e.g., *zhemchug*) (77-85). Cycles of serial bestowal and booty acquisition further embedded these

3 The “southerization” thesis developed by Lynda Shaffer holds that a spread of cultural traits from the Indian Ocean littoral northward occurred from 5th to 15th centuries. This was inclusive of both maritime and subtropical products and their associated technologies. Lynda Shaffer, “Southernization.” *Journal of World History* 5 (1994): 1-21.

4 Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

5 A fourteenth century jewel-encrusted filigree skullcap worn by Russian sovereigns as a symbol of their rulership.

objects and their attendant material cultures in the southernization process.

This movement of objects and material culture north outlines Allsen's second significant reorientation: an emphasis on the simultaneity of entwined continental and maritime routes. Tansen Sen and John Chaffee both have worked extensively on the lasting importance of maritime trade and connections in the Mongol world. Nevertheless, as experts in southern maritime circulations, the organic connections of maritime trade with corresponding continental patterns are not readily linked.⁶ Moreover, a common historiographical trope is a chronological division between maritime and continental route usage. During the unified Mongol Empire (1206-1259CE), continental routes predominated, while post-Qubilai (1260-1368CE) maritime routes dominated on account of the inter-*qanate* rivalries and war. Allsen ventures to redress this periodization by arguing that the case of pearls distinctly shows that commercial land and sea routes were entwined and operational to some degree for the entirety of the Mongol period (124-141). Simultaneity also meant the adaptability of land and sea routing to warfare, piracy, and other disruptions as part of commerce's larger *modus operandi* (150-152). The steppe branch of the Silk Road, for instance, included waterborne connections on the Mediterranean, Volga, Caspian, and Black Seas. Though directionality remained consistent, roads and sea lanes were multiple and not necessarily permanent built features. Caravans and even postal routes could thus avoid zones of conflict by choosing the safest combination of both.

The third and, perhaps for Mongolists, most impactful historiographic intervention is Allsen's take on the question of continuity versus exceptionalism in the Mongol imperium. Though perhaps not as explicit in his disappointingly brief concluding notes, Allsen argues for a *via media*: Mongols in their participation in a Eurasian culture of positional goods, combined with their co-option of production networks, regional political elites, and merchant-dominated commercial avenues, were undoubtedly active heirs of an established Eurasian praxis. Yet, within this continuity, there are unique amalgams and departures. Pearls as socio-political status markers were not new, but the Mongol assumption of white pearls as generators of *su*, meaning imperial good fortune, in their rulership ideology is unprecedented (75). Preceding

6 John Chaffee, *The Muslim Merchants of Premodern China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade: The Realignment of India-China Relations 600-1400* (Lanham: Rowen and Littlefield, 2016).

in part from this, the scale of their resource extraction and accumulation as evinced by pearls is equally peerless (23-33). Yet, Allsen goes a step further. The Mongols privileged “Indian-Buddhist and Muslim merchants skilled in cross-cultural commerce,” groups with networks that long pre-dated their rise. The successful fusion of these groups’ material and communication networks across land and sea allowed a dynamic global trade to flourish (168). Thus, even the unique aspects of Mongol rule built on a foundation of Eurasian material culture and the merchant networks developed therein.

Despite the obvious strengths of the study, the praxis of maritime and continental simultaneity is left obscure. Admittedly, Allsen shows this connection in certain instances. For one, the timing of caravans in Il-qanate Persia was synchronized with the arrival of cargo ships from the Indian Ocean trade (125). Further details are also provided for how Qubilai and his successors unsuccessfully attempted to co-opt maritime regimes in the Indian Ocean littoral and place Muslim merchants in overseer roles in order to link maritime and continental routes within their jurisdiction (134-141). However, this raises the question about the exceptionality of pearls as the premiere positional good. One wonders if all commodities carried the same weight and influence or simultaneously crisscrossed continental and maritime routes like pearls. Celadon, for instance, is excellent evidence of how ballast in the medieval period could develop into a global trade good. However, where its weight is an asset in maritime circulations, it served as a distinct disadvantage in continental ones.⁷ Further troubling, Allsen eludes more significant, more comprehensive explanations of these inter-webbed circuits and the other goods (and people!) merchants transported, preferring to leave this task to future scholars. Presumably, his intention was, like his work on textiles, to alter historiographical trajectories, not to provide definitive studies like Peter Jackson’s hefty monograph on the Mongol Empire in the Islamic world.⁸

A further but mild disappointment is the study’s failure to engage with the idea of globalization during the medieval period. Peter Stearns and others have argued that a global world was forming or did form under

7 Robert Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

8 Thomas Allsen, *Commodity and Exchange in Mongol Eurasia: A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Peter Jackson, *The Mongols and the Islamic World: From Conquest to Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

the Mongols.⁹ Nancy Steinhardt has also advanced the idea that a world of regional diversities existed in the medieval period, and certainly by the time of the Mongols.¹⁰ Valerie Hansen in *The Year 1000* has positioned the onset of globalization well before the Mongols in the 500-1000CE period rather than the late medieval period. Frustratingly, Allsen remains silent on this issue in the book, more concerned with Eurasian circulations during the Mongol Empire and their socio-cultural underpinnings than their relation to globalization. However, the argument for deep and long continuities does imply that if globalization can be evidenced by pearls and the culture of positional goods, then there is undoubtedly merit to Hansen's date and even Benjamin Craig's implied argument for a much earlier onset of 100BCE-250CE.¹¹

Ultimately, these minor shortcomings pale compared to the immense value Allsen's study has for both the history of the Mongol Empire and the field of Eurasian studies as a whole. Understanding the agency of positional goods in the practice of empire is certainly new to the Mongol Empire's history. The integration of multiple vectors and "southernization" in Eurasia during this period is equally unprecedented. Therein, it invigorates current calls to fully and constructively integrate the global south in global historical narratives. This work will undoubtedly remain of great importance far into the future and provide a new and dynamic vector in the study of the Mongols and their role in a global world.

9 Peter Stearns, *Globalization in World History* (London: Routledge, 2019).

10 Naomi Standen, "Colouring Outside the Lines: Methods for a Global History of Eastern Eurasia 600-1350," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 29, (2019): 27-63.

11 Benjamin Craig, *Empires of Ancient Eurasia: The First Silk Roads Era, 100BCE-250CE* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Valerie Hansen, *The Year 1000: When Explorers Connected the World – and Globalization Began* (New York: Scribner, 2020).