
Allsen, Thomas T. *The Steppe and the Sea: Pearls in the Mongol Empire*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2019. 231 pp. (ISBN-13: 978-0812251173)

Thomas T. Allsen's book *The Steppe and the Sea: Pearls in the Mongol Empire*, part of the Encounters with Asia series published by the University of Pennsylvania Press and edited by Victor Mair, takes the pearl as a means to analyze the trans-Eurasian exchange networks commonly known as the Silk Roads during the Mongol Empire. The first part of the book deals with pearls in relation to the political and cultural elements internal to the workings of the Mongol Empire in two broad stages: first during the expansionist period (1206-1260) and then during the period of protracted conflict and negotiation between the Yuan Dynasty, the Il-Qan State, the Chaghadaï Qanate, and the Golden Horde (1260-1370). Here, Professor Allsen compares and contrasts the use of pearls in the political economy of the constituent regions of the larger empire. The second part of the book looks at pearls during the Mongol Empire more broadly and covers the external influence and longer term ramifications the

Mongolian interest in pearls had in Eurasia. Specifically, Allsen points to the process of "southernization" and the need to pay closer attention to the importance of the north-south axis in light of the general focus in scholarly work on East-West relationships. Thus, in the main, pearls are a lens through which to see the relationship between Mongolian specifically, but Eurasian generally, overland and seaborne trade. Allsen argues that the impact and advocacy of sea trade and of seaways by the Mongols has hitherto been underappreciated.

The first chapter is about the natural and cultural properties of pearls: where they come from, how nature produces them, and their human uses. Allsen lucidly delves into a variety of natural considerations such as colors, shapes and sizes, along with cultural indicators such as value, utility, and symbolism. He aptly combines the general with cogent details, for example that *Pinctada radiata* or *Pinctada maxima* oyster species from prime growing regions such as Sri Lanka or Bahrain historically produced the most coveted pearls. In providing all of this, Allsen goes on to show how the Mongols understood and absorbed this long standing information and set of standards. This dovetails nicely with chapter two, which discusses how pearls are harvested and prepared for market, covering topics which include extraction, sorting, and valuation. According to Allsen, the Mongols were effective at moving skilled pearl craftsmen, particularly borers and stringers, to various centers in the empire such as Hormuz, and that this practice occurred widely with important economic and cultural results.

Chapters three and four outline the accumulation and storage of pearls during the Mongol Empire. The primary methods of acquisition were plunder, tribute, taxes, and trade. Allsen uses Rashid al-Din's *History of India* as a reliable source to single out the primacy of the Indian Ocean in the pearl trade and to highlight the Mongols, oceanic knowhow. This quest for pearls led to increased magnitudes throughout the empire, which naturally

created concerns about the storage and administration (or lack thereof) of these treasures. Nevertheless, Allsen argues that pearls may have been more prevalent than references suggest due to linguistic ambiguities, and based on some examples provided, exchanges or stores of pearls could be counted in the millions. This led to clear logistical dilemmas for which the Mongol leaders increasingly relied upon foreign specialists who, although bringing much needed expertise, were prone to lax administration and corruption.

For chapters five and six, Allsen turns to a brief cultural history of the display, distribution, and consumption of pearls during the Mongol Empire. The Mongols, due to their nomadic background, had a proclivity for jewelry, especially earrings and necklaces, for display on the head or upper body. Examples include Yuan pearl-bedecked headgear used to display wealth and rank along with pearled clothing and robes. Additionally, Mongol rulers routinely exchanged and distributed symbolically valuable pearl encrusted belts, badges, and insignia. Pearls in various forms functioned as gifts to individuals, groups, or states, such as bestowals upon guests at galas to show power over subordinates. Ultimately, pearls were a form a political currency and a tool in Mongolian statecraft. Preferences for positional goods, competitive gift giving, and conspicuous displays of wealth and status, Allsen contends, were essential to Mongol court politics. Thus, the Mongol rulers, elite, and even some commoners were avid consumers of foreign luxuries with far reaching consequences.

Allsen rounds out part one in chapters seven and eight with a look at pearls in Mongol identity politics and at the continuity of such symbolism during the wane of the empire. Mongol leaders believed pearls promoted virility and fertility, and pearl imagery features prominently in their creation myths. White was a highly charged color for Mongol rulers that symbolized good fortune, which could be spread with the possession and distribution of lustrous pearls. With the 14th century disintegration of the Mongol Empire, such valuations continued into the Ming Dynasty, among the Temurids of Central Asia, and in Moscovite Russia after the Golden Horde. Again, Allsen reasserts the “southernization” thesis, mediated by the Mongol Empire, which created massive concentrations and dispersals of prestige goods including pearls from the southern seas.

Chapter nine begins part two of the work and shifts to an analysis of the larger impact of transcontinental commerce and cultural standards on local tastes and local economies. To this end, Allsen examines long term fluctuations in the value of pearls and other gems, considering the influential Indian practice of exaggeration for magnificence. Tempered by limited data on the “real” prices of pearls, Allsen views the Mongol Empire and beyond as a mixed system of exchange where trade, per se, only fulfilled a partial role. How myths and marketing coupled with substitutes and counterfeits for pearls played a role in this market is presented in chapters ten and eleven. Merchants augmented their sales tactics with myths and elaborate stories about pearls and other exotic prestige goods. Lore of health, good

fortune, and magical properties helped pearls gain a stronger hold upon potential customers, including the Mongols. These claims proved to be very durable and versatile leading to marketing strategies that traveled across time and space and imprinted their values upon disparate peoples. This helps explain not only the far reaching demand for certain prestige goods, but also, Allsen proposes, the rampant production of substitute and counterfeit items. Such production inspired developments in alchemy, industry, and technology with distant economic reach. Taking porcelain and textiles as examples, Allsen further argues that the dissemination and emulation of foreign models in turn stimulated new consumption and production patterns.

Ending with chapters twelve, thirteen, and fourteen, Allsen returns to the crucial point sustained throughout the book, namely the relationship between the steppe and the sea. He draws attention to early penetrations into the steppe of southern products and tastes, such as Mediterranean coral and of course pearls, that affected the preferences of nomadic people. This led to knowledgeable and direct Mongol interaction with the sea through sustained southern incursions and probing. Allsen shows that coordinated sea and land routes evolved together and tries to analyze the balance of trade between the two methods over time and under variable circumstances. Ultimately, he challenges the assumption that nomadic warfare led to a decline in overland trade and thus seaborne trade inevitably grew. A survey of missions conducted throughout the Mongol Empire suggests an alternative Siberian route that proved safer and faster at times, which leads Allsen to argue for a more flexible view of routes along the Silk Roads. It is clear, however, that the Mongol Empire exercised an undeniably strong influence upon seaborne trade, and he reiterates the Mongol instrumentality in its flourishing. A concluding survey of sea interests during the Yuan, Il-Qan, and Golden Horde periods considers environmental variations and relations with local populations, including widespread collaborations with merchant classes. In closing, Allsen firmly states that the Mongol leaders in various incarnations were business friendly, consumer driven, and most importantly, sea oriented.

Overall, *The Steppe and the Sea* provides a subtle, wide ranging analysis and departs from totalizing histories of the Silk Roads in favor of a nuanced study using a single luxury good, pearls, to illuminate complex relationships covering vast spans of time and space. It is a thoroughly researched work that intricately strings together diverse threads and ties them nicely together like pearls on a necklace. Viewing Mongol interactions with the southern seas using pearls as a fulcrum sheds much needed light upon the total system of communication, exchange, and diplomacy during the Mongol Empire in Eurasia. For a relatively short book, there is a remarkable range and richness in the text.

While Allsen tries admirably to stay on course, due to the fragmentary nature of the sources, the text at times strays from its center of gravity, which hinders readability and referencing. Additionally, the author should be commended for the succinctness and vigor of his research, but in certain instances the reader is left with certain unanswered questions. For example, throughout the text, people are referred to with clear ethnic or religious distinctions or even with thorough personages, such as the Venetian traders in the Yuan Court. In several instances, however, a category of important and influential people in the Mongol Empire, the Muslim traders, are only referred to quite vaguely with blanket terms. Finally, although the author clearly enumerates the civil-war-like nature of the conflicting factions within the Mongol Empire, he at other times glosses over the entire empire using the standard concept of the Mongol Peace.

These minor criticisms notwithstanding, the work is an engaging resource that this writer is happy to have on his bookshelf. This work will surely appeal to scholars of the Mongol Empire and greater Eurasia for its unique approach. Additionally, scholars in various fields will find the political, economic, and cultural implications of the work engaging and useful. The book can be enjoyably read cover to cover but individual chapters, or clusters thereof, should appeal to specialists in their respective disciplines.

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