

BRUCE D. CRAIG

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Thomas T. Allsen (1940–2019)

Thomas T. Allsen died February 18, 2019, two days past his 79th birthday.

I met Tom Allsen on the first day of school in Mrs. Tibbits' fourth grade class in 1948. I was new to the school and he became my first new friend. Our friendship encompassed many shared life experiences: grade school, high school, a stint in the U.S. Army, and our undergraduate years at Portland State University. His route to becoming a scholar was long and circuitous. He graduated from Portland State in 1962 with a degree in history. As an undergraduate he developed relationships with two professors who served as inspiration and role models for the rest of his life, Morris Kirby Webb, who taught him East Asian and Russian history, and encouraged him to learn the Russian language, and Basel Dmytryshyn, a Russian history specialist.

He spent the next two years at the University of Washington where he earned an M.A. in Russian history, writing a thesis under the supervision of Donald Treadgold on Baron Von Ungern, who had led a detachment of Mongol irregulars in an attempt to end Chinese occupation of Mongolia. I have no doubt that his choice of topic was influenced by his early fascination with the Mongols which was the result of his having read Harold Lamb's two popular books on the Mongols in high school. The following year he studied Central Asian nomadic groups with the anthropologist Lawrence Krader, who also employed him to summarize Russian scholarship on the topic, at Syracuse University.

The next year found him as a Peace Corps volunteer in Iran, which first introduced him to the Persian language. After his Peace Corps service he made a detour into librarianship, earning an M.L.S. degree at the University of Oregon. At this time he also met Lucille Etheridge, who later became his wife. He then spent a year at the University of Alaska as a Russian bibliographer and another two years as an archivist at the University of Minnesota. When he arrived in Minnesota he began taking night classes in Chinese and Arabic. The polyglot nature of his later published scholarship is all the more impressive when it is known that he entered college never having studied a foreign language.

During his first two years in Minnesota he became acquainted with two young historians, Edward Farmer and Romeyn Taylor, both of whom were specialists in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) of China, and were protégés of Francis Cleves of Harvard and Herrle Creel of the University of Chicago, respectively. After two years of library work he resigned his position and enrolled in Minnesota's Ph.D.



©2019 by Bruce D. Craig.

DOI: [10.6082/hsf2-6w61](https://doi.org/10.6082/hsf2-6w61). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/hsf2-6w61>)

DOI of Vol. XXII: [10.6082/sc8t-2k77](https://doi.org/10.6082/sc8t-2k77). See <https://doi.org/10.6082/9vb3-wt15> to download the full volume or individual articles. This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY). See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/msr.html> for more information about copyright and open access.

program in Comparative Asian History. He received his Ph.D. in 1979, producing a dissertation “Politics of Mongol Imperialism: Centralization and Resource Mobilization in the Reign of the Grand Qan Möngke,” which later became his first book, *Mongol Imperialism: The Politics of the Grand Qan Möngke in China, Russia and the Islamic Lands* (1987).

He spent the academic year 1979–80 as an Assistant Professor at the University of Western Kentucky and moved the following year to Trenton State College, which later became the College of New Jersey, where he remained for the rest of his teaching career. He retired in 2002 at the age of 62 and returned to Oregon, taking up residence next to the University of Oregon campus in Eugene.

During his teaching career he produced a large body of scholarship comprised of public lectures delivered all over the world, articles and chapters in collective works, and including three books: the afore-mentioned *Mongol Imperialism* (1987), *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire: A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles* (1997), and *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (2001). After his “retirement” he produced two more: *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History* (2006) and *The Steppe and the Sea: Pearls in Mongol History* (2019). His passing means we will not see the book that had consumed his thoughts for more than a quarter century, a work which would describe, trace, and analyze the phenomenon of bouts of alcoholic consumption as they became aspects of royal court ceremonial from East Asia to the Islamic world under the Mongols and Mamluks. His wife, Lucille, has informed me that he left another nearly finished manuscript dealing with the grain millet, which presumably grew out of his research on alcohol. He did write several articles on this topic and his CV lists five lectures on various aspects of it. He also created and taught a course on the topic, which I was told by one of his former students was immensely popular with undergraduates.

I must remark that, while he was a popular undergraduate lecturer, it is a shame that he was not at a university where he mentored graduate students. In spite of that he was a great resource and inspiration to scores of young scholars. He lectured widely in the U.S., Europe, and Asia and always came away from these experiences with the names and email addresses of youthful aspirants and established scholars with whom he maintained a lively correspondence. He was generous with his time and knowledge to a fault. This is borne out by the scores of acknowledgements he received in the published works of others.

