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In Celebration of the Barbour Scholars

A Brief History of Asian Studies at the University of Michigan

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It is an honor to be invited to speak to this august gathering on this important occasion. As you know, the University of Michigan is celebrating two centennials this year, or to be more precise, one bicentennial and one centennial. The bicentennial is of the University of Michigan itself, founded in 1817, when a group of settlers in what was called the Northwest Territory crafted a vision of public education in what, for them, was a frontier. In many ways, the notion of the frontier, of crossing boundaries, of charting the uncharted, of seeking to know the unknown, has been part of the University of Michigan's tradition since its founding.

It has a long history of innovative scholarship, built on a foundation of populism and a commitment to the public good. In 1955, Jonas Salk announced, in this very building, the discovery of the polio vaccine. In 1960, John F. Kennedy announced the Peace Corps on the steps of the Michigan Union. In 1964, Lyndon Johnson announced the Great Society in his commencement speech at Michigan Stadium. Michigan has a long history of social action. Watching Ken Burns' documentary on the Vietnam War, I was reminded of the role of University of Michigan students in drafting the Port Huron Statement in 1962, so early in that conflict. But we are here today not to celebrate a bicentennial but a centennial, the centennial of a remarkable group of women called the Barbour Scholars. To understand their importance, we must consider some history.

The late nineteenth century was a period of all manner of "world expositions" in the United States, often meant to celebrate this or that centennial. The most famous of these was the World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893, meant to celebrate, one year late, the four hundredth anniversary of what was then referred to as the "discovery of America" by Christopher Columbus. The exposition included the so-called White City of Beaux Arts buildings, designed by some of the leading architects of the day. One of the few structures to survive today is the Art Institute of Chicago on Michigan Avenue. The 1893 Chicago Exposition is remembered especially by scholars of religious studies for the "World's Parliament of Religions," where delegates from around the world came to represent their traditions, including such famous figures as the Hindu teacher Swami Vivekananda, the Sinhalese Buddhist activist Anagarika Dharmapala, and the Zen master, and teacher of D.T. Suzuki, Shaku Sōen. The Chinese representative did not have to travel far to attend. He was Pung Kwang Yu, part of the Chinese legation in Washington. There to represent Confucianism, he did not celebrate religion, explaining in the speech he delivered to the Parliament that, "Every attempt to propagate religious doctrines in China has always given rise to the spreading of falsehoods and errors, and finally resulted in resistance to legitimate authority and in bringing dire calamities to the country." He criticized Buddhism, which, he said, had so many scriptures that it would cause an ox to sweat if they were loaded on its back. Although he praised the teachings of Jesus, he offered a lengthy condemnation of foreign missionaries, who encouraged their followers—people who came from "the lowest element of Chinese society"—to neglect their parents.

At the end of his speech, he offered a request to the delegates of the Parliament: "As I am a delegate to the Religious Congresses, I cannot but feel that all religious people are my friends. I have a favor to ask of all the religious people of America, and that is that they will treat,

hereafter, all my countrymen just as they have treated me. I shall be a hundred times more grateful to them for the kind treatment of my countrymen than of myself. I am sure that the Americans in China receive just such considerate treatment from the cultured people of China as I have received from you. The majority of my countrymen in this country are honest and law-abiding. Christ teaches us that it is not enough to love one's brethren only. I am sure that all religious people will not think this request too extravagant." He did not give a name to the issue to which he alluded and he likely did not need to. He received a standing ovation.

Nine years earlier, there had been another of these world expositions, not remembered anymore, this one in the city of New Orleans. It was called the World Cotton Centennial, meant to celebrate the first recorded shipment of cotton from the United States to England in 1784. The fact that that cotton was almost certainly picked by slaves, and slavery had been abolished after a bloody Civil War that had ended in 1865 did not seem to deter the celebration. There were displays from some two dozen foreign countries, mostly from Central and South America. However, there was a display sent from China, considered to be among the most impressive, with mannequins dressed in a wide range of cotton garments, representing many members of Chinese society, including prisoners. There was a catalogue in Chinese and English and a yellow pagoda. An inscription on a screen in a pagoda read, "As from far beyond the clouds in spring, the moon with liquid effulgence shines, so the luster of a proper observance of what is right is reflected upon our country and our literature, causing both to flourish."

The University of Michigan has one of the most extensive museums of anthropology in the United States. Like so many museums, much of the collection is kept in an offsite storage facility. Three years ago, the chief curator and I were going through the Asian collections as we were preparing an exhibition of Buddhist art. As we went through case after case and drawer

after drawer, I asked her to unlock a tall metal cabinet, the size of an armoire. When she opened the door, it was stuffed from top to bottom with cotton clothes. Some detective work in the university archives revealed that when the World Cotton Centennial in New Orleans closed in 1885, the organizers contacted the Chinese legation in Washington asking for an address to which to return the cotton garments. They were told to send them to James Angell, President of the University of Michigan.

James Burrill Angell came from a prominent Rhode Island family that traced its roots back to the British aristocracy. He was educated at Brown University, where he was eventually offered a faculty position as either chairman of the Department of Civil Engineering or chairman of the Department of Modern Languages. He chose the latter, later resigning to become editor of the *Providence Journal*, the state's leading newspaper, with strong abolitionist leanings. After the Civil War, he became President of the University of Vermont. He was appointed President of the University of Michigan in 1871 and would serve until 1909, making him the longest serving and most important president in its history.

In 1880, he was asked by President Rutherford B. Hayes to take a leave of absence from the University to lead a delegation to China to negotiate with the Qing government on the question of Chinese immigration to the United States. Angell provides a lengthy and fascinating description of his work in China in his autobiography, noting that when he met with Secretary of State William Evarts prior to his departure, the Secretary spoken admiringly about China, saying, "Perhaps we had better not despise a government which for thirty centuries has ruled a nation now numbering three hundred millions, while we have only fifty millions, and they run us." Before accepting the request to head the delegation, Angell wrote to the Secretary of State saying that he would not accept the post if its purpose was the "direct and formal prohibition of Chinese

immigration." Assured that it was not, he was named by the Senate as "Minister and Chairman of the commission for revising treaties with China." Angell recounts his time in China in detail, always describing his Chinese colleagues with the utmost respect. To the amazement of the European and Japanese diplomats in Beijing, over the course of just forty-eight days, Angell was able to negotiate an agreement with Qing officials that continued to allow for Chinese to emigrate to the United States but in numbers to which both nations agreed. The treaty was signed on November 17, 1880. He remained in China as Minister for another year, eventually returning to Ann Arbor in late February 1882. Less than three months after his return, President Chester A. Arthur signed the Chinese Exclusion Act, barring all immigration of Chinese laborers to the United States, rescinding the treaty that Angell had negotiated just two years earlier.

President Angell's interest in China continued throughout the years of his presidency. For example, after the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion, he argued that the Boxer Indemnity, the huge fine imposed by the European powers on China for the losses that they suffered, should be returned to China as a fund to promote education.

I mention James Angell to indicate the University of Michigan's long connection to Asia and to suggest that the University's attitude toward Asia, or at least the attitude of its most famous president, was both more sophisticated and more enlightened than that of many public figures of the day. James Angell would die in 1916, one year before the date we celebrate today. However, there is a second reason to mention him this morning. One of the members of the University of Michigan's Board of Regents at the time of Angell's retirement was Levi Lewis Barbour.

To understand the importance, and the vision, of Levi Barbour's gift, let us take a few minutes to recall what was happening in the world in 1917. Europe was in the third year of the

bloodiest war in its history, with German U-boats making unrestricted attacks on all ships in the Atlantic, sending innocent civilians to watery graves. The United States would enter the war that year; the songs “Over There” and “You’re in the Army Now” were composed in 1917. French troops mutinied after suffering massive casualties in the trenches on the Western Front. In Arabia, Bedouins under the command of T.E. Lawrence captured Aqaba. Gertrud Zelle, the Dutch dancer whose stage name, Mata Hari, evoked a Hindu goddess, was executed as a German spy. In Russia, the Tsar was overthrown in what would be known to history at the October Revolution. Britain issued the Balfour Declaration, recommending that a permanent homeland be established for the Jewish people in Palestine. In America, race riots in East St. Louis left thirty-nine dead and hundreds wounded. A typhus epidemic began in Russia that would eventually claim three million lives worldwide. T.S. Eliot published “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” The National Hockey League was founded.

You note that in this catalogue of world events, apart from the execution of a German spy with a Hindu stage name, I have not mentioned women, and I have not mentioned Asia. In the United Kingdom, women would not receive the right to vote until the next year, 1918, and then, only for women over thirty years of age who kept a household. In the United States, the Nineteenth Amendment would not be passed until 1920.

In compiling these various facts, I consulted one of those books that provides the major events of each year in world history, this one covering, according to its title, everything from prehistory to the present in thirty different categories, including political events, science, medicine, religion, crime, music, and agriculture. This particular volume, published in 1992, devotes six tiny print pages to 1917. Asia is not mentioned once. 1917 was admittedly a consequential year for Europe and America. But it was for Asia as well.

In 1917, India was still three decades away from independence from British rule. That year, Gandhi led his first *satyagraha* or "upholding the truth," in the Champaran district of Bihar State, where tenant farmers had been forced to grow indigo when German indigo could not be purchased because of the war. This led to widespread resentment among the farmers and even famine. Gandhi was arrested for organizing a strike, only released when hundreds of thousands protested outside the jail.

In 1917, Turkey was still the center of the Ottoman Empire, which had entered the war as part of the Quadruple Alliance, composed of Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire. With the entry of the United States into the war that year, the Ottoman Empire declared war on the US in 1917. The defeat of the Ottomans in 1918 would lead first to the dissolution of their empire and soon to the founding of the Republic of Turkey in 1922.

In China, the Qing Dynasty had fallen and the Republic of China had been founded in 1911 with Sun Yat-sen elected president. However, loyalty to the emperor persisted. In 1917, there occurred what is known as the Manchu Restoration. On July 1, with Republican leaders distracted by debates about whether China should enter the Great War on the side of the Allies, troops under the command of General Zhang Xun entered Beijing, took control of the Forbidden City, and restored the eleven-year-old Emperor Puyi to the throne. His reign was brief. When Republican troops massed to retake the Forbidden City, General Zhang and his troops surrendered on July 12.

In Japan, the Taisho Emperor was in the fifth year of his reign, his neurological problems preventing him from appearing in public. Japan had entered the war on the side of the Allies, taking the opportunity, with the agreement of the British, to seize German territories in China and the Pacific. Japanese troops helped the British put down a mutiny of Indian soldiers in

Singapore and sent naval vessels to protect Malta. The United States and Japan had been at odds over control of China and the Pacific but put their differences aside for the moment to sign the Lansing-Ishii Agreement in 1917.

By 1917, Japan had established firm control over Korea, which had become a Japanese protectorate in 1905; Japan formally annexed Korea in 1910, an action that Britain and the US did not oppose. This first phase of Japan's colonial rule is commonly known in Korea as the "dark period." The rising tension would erupt two years later in the nationwide anticolonial uprising known as the March First Independence Movement. In 1917, Kim Chong-suk, who would go on to achieve deification as the Revolutionary Mother in North Korea as the wife of Kim Il-sung, the mother of Kim Chong-il, and the grandmother of Kim Jong-un, was born in a small village at the northeastern edge of the Korean peninsula. Also in 1917, Vladimir Lenin asked Alexandra Kim, a Korean born in Siberia, to organize resistance against counter-revolutionaries. The next year, she and other Korean patriots would form the Korean People's Socialist Party. Korea would remain under Japanese colonial rule until the surrender on the deck of the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay in 1945.

In 1917, Britain and Japan were not the only colonial powers in Asia. The Philippines had been under US control since 1898 when, after the Battle of Manila Bay, Spain ceded the huge island nation to the US in exchange for twenty million dollars. The story of the University of Michigan's legacy in the Philippines is a story for another time. We can only note that a number of Michigan alumni and faculty played a significant role, some praiseworthy, some not, in the administration of what was essentially America's Southeast Asian colony. 1917 saw the passage of Act 2711, otherwise known as the Act Amending the Administrative Code, which established the provinces of the Philippines, largely as they are known today.

As I noted, in 1909, James Angell stepped down as President of the University of Michigan. He had tried to do so in 1905, but the Regents refused to accept his resignation. Among the Regents at the time of President Angell's retirement was Levi Lewis Barbour.

He was born in Monroe, Michigan in 1840. Attending the University of Michigan during the Civil War, he received his B.A. from the Literary College (now called the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts) in 1863 and his law degree in 1865, opening a law office in Detroit. Throughout his legal career, he worked for penal reform, identifying the links between poverty and crime, arguing for the education of prisoners, and advocating indeterminate sentencing that would allow prisoners to return to society when they were ready rather than when their sentences ended. He was also a strong supporter of women's education, providing funds for the Women's Gymnasium and the Betsy Barbour Dormitory on campus.

Levi Barbour traveled extensively in Europe with his wife, Harriet Hooper of Ann Arbor, until her health prevented her from doing so. He visited Asia in 1913 at the encouragement of James Angell. Levi Barbour was 73 years old at the time. He traveled widely, visiting Singapore, Shanghai, Beijing, Manchuria, and Tokyo, meeting various Michigan alumni along the way. In China, he met two 1896 graduates of the Medical School—Shi Meiyu (who was called Mary Stone in Michigan) Kang Cheng (who was called Ida Kahn)—who were providing much needed medical services to their country in the first years of the Republic of China. In Japan, he met 1901 Medical School graduate Tomo Inouye. The next year, he brought two Japanese women to Ann Arbor to attend the University, Kameo Sadakata and Mutsu Kikuchi, inviting them to live in his home. In 1917, he gave a gift of $50,000 to the University to establish what was called the Barbour Scholarship for Oriental Women, believing that women "should have every facility for education and every right and privilege to exert their influence to the fullest extent." He wrote to

Harry Burns Hutchins, who succeeded James Angell as President, “The idea of the Oriental girls’ scholarship is to bring girls from the Orient, give them an Occidental education and let them take back whatever they find good and assimilate the blessings among the people from which they come.” By the time of Levi Barbour’s death in 1925, fifty-seven women from India, China, and Japan had received Barbour scholarships. In 2017, that number, including women from across Asia and Middle East, has grown to over seven hundred.

We should not think, however, that the Barbour Scholarships, as important as they are, constitute the extent of Asia’s importance to the University of Michigan. The first Japanese student to attend the University of Michigan enrolled in 1879. The first Asian language to be taught at the University of Michigan was Sanskrit, offered in 1891 in what was called the Department of Oriental Languages Including Biblical Languages. Formal instruction in Chinese and Japanese language began in the summer of 1936, despite the presence of Chinese and Japanese students on campus since the nineteenth century. In 1937 these languages became part of the regular offerings of the Department of Oriental Languages and Literatures.

Levi Barbour had written in 1917, “If a thousand Japanese girls could be educated in the United States to be physicians and teachers and returned to Japan to ply their work, we certainly never would have any war with Japan . . . and I think the same is true of other Oriental countries.” But a thousand Japanese girls were not educated in the United States, and in December 1941, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States declared war on Japan, the homeland of the first Barbour Scholars to come to Ann Arbor.

From 1942 to 1946, the University of Michigan hosted the US Army Japanese Language School to train wartime translators; photographs from that time show the lawn in front of Angell Hall filled with young men in uniform. In 1948, the Department of Oriental Languages and

Literatures split into the Department of Near Eastern Studies and the Department of Far Eastern Languages and Literatures. As the name suggests, this was a traditional "Lang and Lit" department, consisting of four faculty: one language teacher and one literature professor each for Chinese and Japanese. This department, with the infelicitous acronym of FELL, would persist until 1986, when the absorption of faculty from the Department of Linguistics resulted in the creation of the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures. Today the department is home to fifty-two scholars of literature, history, religion, anthropology, and visual culture, working on regions of South, East, and Southeast Asia. It offers instruction in twelve languages.

Over the years, Michigan faculty have played leading roles, not only in Asian Studies but in US relations with Asia. One thinks, for example, of the legendary Chinese language teacher Harriet Mills who passed away last year. Born to missionary parents, she exemplified the way in which tumultuous events in the Pacific and the civil war in China shaped and reshaped the personal lives and academic careers of so many in her generation. She was born in Tokyo before her family moved to China, where she attended American schools in Nanjing and Shanghai before attending and receiving her bachelor's degree from Wellesley in 1941. She was a Fulbright scholar in Beijing in the first years following the establishment of the PRC. When she attempted to leave China with the outbreak of the Korean War, she was arrested and charged with espionage in 1951. More than four years later, Professor Mills was diagnosed with tuberculosis, released from prison, and walked across the Lo Wu Bridge from Guangdong to Hong Kong's New Territories. Over the years, she recounted those events with a total lack of rancor or remorse, indeed praising the changes that Mao had brought to China, attributing her perfect Chinese to the years she spent in prison.

Michigan faculty played key roles in the years following the so-called "reopening" of China, when political relations between the governments of the PRC and the US in the 1970s had a critical effect on the research, teaching, and public service commitments of our faculty. Several Michigan faculty held high-level positions in US administrations during periods of critical engagement with the PRC.

When we look back at the history of Asian Studies at the University of Michigan, we note that two major shifts have occurred in the American academy during the last century. At its inception, Asian Studies in the United States largely followed the European model. Asia was part of the "East," the exotic Orient where the major religions of the world were born, their scriptures holding clues to archaic mysteries and ancient wisdoms deemed lost to the modern, industrialized, and materialistic "West." In order to study it, one needed to be versed in translation and exegesis. The resulting emphasis on philology and literature, as Edward Said made clear in *Orientalism*, was connected in turn to a key feature of European colonial thought: the consigning of the Orient's glory to the distant past.

The disaggregation of this ancient Orient into the geopolitical units of the Near East and the Far East came after the Second World War, as the United States emerged as a Cold War superpower. The Near East was the old East—the domain of British interest—but the Far East was the new East of American interest. The language of the recent enemy, Japanese, would become one of foci of an Asian Studies that would remain strategically important to American interests.

What would come to be called "Area Studies" was born precisely at this juncture. In 1947, Robert Hall, a geographer at the University of Michigan and one-time director of operations of the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA, produced a lengthy

pamphlet for the Social Science Research Council that would lay the foundation for modern Asian Studies in the United States. It was entitled *Area Studies: With Special Reference to Their Implications for Research in the Social Sciences*. In it, Hall made a case for a "total approach" to all areas of the world as mandatory to "total peace," which was but "a direct counterpart to total war." Although remaining subordinate to traditional disciplines in scholarly identity, the new model of scholarship would draw on the power of emerging social science methodologies to survey and process quantities of data hitherto unimaginable, in order to synthesize and integrate empirical knowledge of the globe into discrete units called "areas." If Orientalism had been a way of shaping Asia as an object of knowledge suited to the needs of European colonial powers, Area Studies would provide the infrastructure for Asian Studies in the Cold War era for American political, military, and economic interests.

Robert Hall was elected president of the Association for Asian Studies in 1951. When the Asia Foundation was established in 1954 (with CIA support), to promote democracy, the rule of law, and economic development in Asia, Hall became its Japan representative. Then, in 1958, in the wake of Sputnik, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). The act was divided into ten sections or "titles." Although much of the funding it provided was directed toward the sciences, Title VI provided funding for foreign language and "area studies," as Hall had conceived it. Eventually, the University of Michigan would come to have more Title VI area centers than any other institution in the nation. Several of these would evolve into the five Asia centers today, for China, Japan, Korea, South Asia, Southeast Asia.

As I mentioned earlier, in 1960, the University of Michigan was the site of yet another landmark event in the history of Asian Studies when presidential candidate John F. Kennedy addressed five thousand students on the steps of the Michigan Union, exhorting them to go out

into the world and help people in developing countries. The Peace Corps was created the following year by the newly elected president. One unintended consequence of the Peace Corps program was the injection of fresh blood as well as critical perspectives into Area Studies, with many prominent scholars, today emeritus faculty, tracing their interest in Asia back to their Peace Corps days.

Given this history, it is hardly surprising that Area Studies found itself in crisis after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The anachronism of designations like Far East became obvious as the recognition spread that the areas of Area Studies could no longer encompass the forces reconfiguring the globe. In response to the perceived crisis, the Ford Foundation announced in 1997 an initiative to spend $25 million in supporting thirty institutions to "revitalize Area Studies."

With concepts like "glocalization" on the one hand, and Cultural Studies categories of "the everyday" and "the popular" on the other, the critique of Area Studies informed much innovative scholarship at the turn of the millennium. And yet, Asian Studies in the American academy is still largely institutionalized as Area Studies. This is not merely due to institutional inertia. Though the Berlin Wall has fallen, the Thirty-Eighth Parallel still divides North and South Korea; the Cold War has not ended in Asia. Title VI programs have been cut, but Urdu, Indonesian, Korean, and Chinese have been reclassified as "critical languages" by the State Department.

Prior to the mid-twentieth century, the study of Asia in the American academy generally inherited the traditions of nineteenth-century European Orientalism, emphasizing philology, literature, and history. At the dawn of the Cold War, Area Studies emerged as the dominant

paradigm, remaining strongly in place until the fall of the Soviet Union, fading in importance in the decades that have followed, with an infusion of funds for Middle Eastern Studies after 9/11.

Much has changed in the field of Asian Studies since the breakup of the Soviet bloc. Yet few concerted attempts have been made to think creatively about these changes and to propose new models for the study of Asia in the American academy. We note for example, that under the Area Studies model, the disciplines of political science and economics hold pride of place, with the humanities mere handmaidens. History is studied to understand the present; foreign language is studied to enable communication.

What would it mean to approach the nations of Asia neither as the Orient nor as a geopolitically strategic area of special American interest? What role can the Humanities play in advancing the understanding of Asia, and what critical resources can the Humanities of the new millennium marshal toward that endeavor, beyond the limits of philology and the social sciences? These are questions for another day.

Let me close by returning to Levi Barbour and his scholars. We no longer refer to Asian women as Oriental girls and we recognize, one hundred years later, the sometimes patronizing tone of much of the language used to describe the early recipients of the Barbour scholarships. Yet, when we look beyond the language and think back to the year 1917, where insidious alliances and industrialized weapons conspired to produce such a quality of savagery and such a quantity of slaughter to require that a new term, “world war,” be coined for the first time in the long history of human carnage, when much of Asia was choked by the yoke of colonialism, when bloody revolution was ever in the air, there is something remarkable about a seventy-seven year old attorney from Detroit, Michigan, deciding to try to do something to benefit the women of Asia. He not only decided to do something, but he did something. Evidence of his

achievement is that fact that we, together with the seven hundred Barbour scholars, living and dead, have gathered in body and in spirit to celebrate the power of human aspiration.