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Pieterskerk address: Opening Asian Library
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Asia and the Making of the Modern World

Your Majesty; distinguished guests and colleagues; ladies and gentlemen.

It is an enormous honour and privilege to be here today to celebrate with you. Leiden is one of the world's great universities, with proud achievements across the sciences and humanities going back more than four hundred years.

It is a moment of particular happiness not only to be here in Leiden Asia Year but to mark the opening of the Asian Library. I am sure that you will agree that this magnificent new facility is a fitting home for one of the world's great collections of scholarly materials. It is one of the rare cases where quantity and quality align.

Home to more than five million books, and one million e-books, the collection takes up 30km of shelving space. Its range is exceptional and unparalleled, ranging from thousand-year old Sanskrit texts written in Nepali script to the autobiographical manuscript of the Javanese prince Diponegoro that is so important that has been recognised by UNESCO as one of the world's great treasures.

The collection is up to date and relevant, containing materials that enable scholars to better understand the changing role played by women leaders in East Asia in recent decades and even a digital database of North Korean propaganda posters.

In some ways, of course, the riches found in Leiden's Asian Library can come as no surprise, for the scholars of this university have long enjoyed a reputation for looking beyond their immediate surroundings.

Joseph Scaliger was one of the earliest – and most famous – to do so. Scaliger was a remarkable polymath who was determined to understand the whole world, and not simply his own corner of it.

He learned Arabic, Hebrew & Coptic to go with his Greek, Latin & modern European languages, recognising that being able to read the literature of scholars from other parts of the world was not just important, but essential. For Scaliger, history could not be understood without studying great civilisations such as the Egyptians and the Jews, the Persians and the Babylonians.

Scaliger's expertise and the originality of his thought brought him to the attention of the university authorities in Leiden in the very first years after the foundation of this great university by William, Prince of Orange in 1575. The scholars of Leiden were determined to bring Scaliger to the Netherlands so he could share his knowledge.

Joseph Scaliger's arrival at Leiden in the 1590s was not only significant because it demonstrates the commitment that the University of Leiden has always taken to having an open mind, and to maintaining a wide, global perspective when looking at the past and the present.

His arrival also marked the start of the Asian Library too, for on Scaliger's death in 1609 he left all his 'books in foreign tongues' to the university library, marking the start of the Asian collection and the start of the Asian Library.

It is a great honour therefore to be standing here today as Scaliger Visiting Professor, following in the footsteps of one of the world's greatest scholars and one of Leiden's most famous sons. Although I should note that there is one difference: when the university invited Joseph Scaliger to Leiden, they also made him a promise – that they did not make me. Scaliger was told that if he came to Leiden, he would never have to give a lecture. But here I am anyway.

It is a particular pleasure for me to be here today, not only following in the footsteps of a great scholar, but also because as Professor of Global History at Oxford, I

represent a city and a university with close links to Leiden. After all, the city of Oxford is twinned with this lovely university city.

But Oxford also owes another debt, for the impression left on Thomas Bodley, who lived in The Hague as representative of Queen Elizabeth I, was important too. Bodley was a frequent visitor to Leiden. He was impressed by the ‘great forwardness of learning’ that he encountered everywhere amongst the Dutch people, one of the reasons he was inspired to found a new library at Oxford – the fabulous Bodleian that bears his name – which, coincidentally contains an important number of books that once belonged to Joseph Justus Scaliger. History does not repeat itself, Mark Twain is supposed to have said; but it sure does rhyme.

The opening of the Asian Library today is a cause for great celebration. Libraries do not just preserve and conserve materials to do with the past. They are also places where new research is done, where new works are created. Future generations of scholars – the next in the line of Scaligers – will read and reflect in this new space. These windows will be the ones through which students filled with despair stare when in search of inspiration. The meeting space will be where ideas are tossed around, sometimes thrown away but also refined, reshaped and improved.

We live in a world that is changing. At home and abroad, we see rising levels of dissent and breakdown; we see migration, refugee crisis and famine as fundamental problems affecting all humanity; we can see the effects of environmental damage and the devastating effects of climate change. We can see the dangers of intolerant, competing ideologies, the spectre of military confrontation and the rising threat of instability.

History can teach important lessons about the costs of fracture, the effects of confrontation, the consequences of division. But there is much we can learn from understanding collaboration and co-operation in the past, from looking at how our ancestors were sometimes able to not just trade with each other, but also learn, borrow, imitate and improve.

In this respect, we in Europe have much to learn to the east. For millennia, networks of roads and sea-lanes joined village to village, town to town and city to city, linking regions together and weaving continents together. These networks have been known as ‘the Silk Roads’ for the last 150 years. They did not carry textiles only, though fabrics were extremely important in short and long distance exchange.

Other goods and commodities were also important along the Silk Roads – such as spices and ceramics, but also livestock – most notably horses. But human exchange is not just about products. Language, fashion and ideas are also brought by traders and travellers, as are ideas about religion, about technology – and news about other peoples, places and cultures.

Romans alive two thousand years ago were well-informed about India and even about China, although some were annoyed that rich women in Rome wanted to wear figure-hugging silks and textiles that came from the east. Interest of course ran in both directions, with embassies setting off from China to learn about Central and South East Asia, and also to gather information about the Red Sea, Gulf and Mediterranean.

Sometimes information brought back was not exactly accurate. In what might today be called fake news, reports circulated in China a thousand years ago that melons in Spain sometimes grew to a size of 2m and could feed twenty men; that was no more correct than reports written around the same time in Europe that there were people living in Asia whose huge ears could wrap around them at night to keep them warm – and could flap to take them away from strangers they did not want to talk to. (Those might be quite useful at a drinks party!)

Studying the Silk Roads helps us better understand global history, for it was along these Silk Roads that empires rose and fell. It was to try to gain access to the trade of Asia that Christopher Columbus set out in 1492 across the Atlantic, taking with him letters of greeting for the Great Khan who ruled in the east. Columbus took with him specialists who spoke Hebrew, Chaldean and Arabic (Joseph Scaliger might have been one of them, had he lived a few decades earlier).

Instead of finding Asia, he came across the Americas, whose wealth turned Spain into the richest country in Europe – and created problems for the Dutch, not least here in Leiden. To build up resources against the Spanish, the Dutch too set out on their own voyages, this time not of discovery, but following the footsteps – or rather the navigational routes – that were pioneered by the Portuguese to round the tip of Southern Africa and reach the markets of the Gulf, India and beyond.

For the Dutch, the rewards of establishing, maintaining and improving connections across Asia were both immediate and immense. The return of the fleet that set out in 1597 returned the following year, carrying cargoes that produced profits of 400% for investors.

The creation of the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC) in 1602 was part of a deliberate process to maximise returns and to build a platform that eventually produced an empire of its own, reaching into India, what is now Sri Lanka and deep into South East Asia and Indonesia. Increased exchange brought a golden age to the Netherlands, a time of extraordinary innovation and brilliance across art, ceramics and textiles – a time when one amazed English visitor noted that even farmers were keen collectors of paintings and admired their art collections.

It was a time when city planners in Amsterdam, Haarlem and Leiden harnessed the latest scholarship to reclaim land from the sea, to build canals with sophisticated controls and magnificent new houses along them for increasingly wealthy patrons.

We think today of globalisation as something new – something that is uniquely challenging in the world of the 21st century. But the fates and fortunes of Europe and Asia, together with the other continents, have always been closely linked.

And this makes the Asian Library at Leiden so vital in the 21st century. We all know from our own relationships at home and at work that mutual understanding and communication are the basis on which friendship and happiness are built. And as we all know from home and from work, that is sometimes easier said than done. Being able to understand each other's point of view takes time; it takes patience; and it takes

work too. As Joseph Scaliger put it, when talking about religion: division and enmity come from one source: ignorance.

Here in Europe, we can be sometimes be rather comfortable assessing our own history as though we live in a bubble, as though other nations, regions and people only play the role of supporting actors to the main story of human civilisation.

Yet 1000 years ago, long before Leiden was founded, the great scholars of the world were not based in Europe at all – but in Bukhara; in Samarkand; in Baghdad. Five hundred years ago, the king of the Songhay Empire in Africa was so keen to be surrounded by intellectuals that books were more expensive than anything else sold at the time, while being a scholar was not just the most highly regarded but also the best paid profession in entire realm (I assume this is also the case in Leiden?)

We often think of universities as places where advances are made in the sciences, and this is certainly the case – we can look to the Museum Boorhaeve just next door for testimony to this. But the humanities, literature and history are essential too to understand the world of the past and present. And it is possible to make dramatic advances in the way this is done – again, something that is evidenced by the many outstanding historians and scholars from the university who are present today.

One comes from the way in which we understand the hundred years before the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. This is usually looked as a period of enormous transformation in the history of Europe – a time industrialisation and social change (for men); an era of political consolidation, with the unification of Germany and Italy, and from 1871, prosperity and peace which were lost when Europe went to war in 1914.

Yet, while rivalries bubbled in Europe, they boiled elsewhere. Although historians tend to focus on the merry-go-round of dealing between rulers and politicians in Europe, the seeds for the war were sown in Asia. Intense rivalry between empires terrified of losing position, influence and power, prompted decisions that were reckless and ultimately proved catastrophic.

To give just one example, and perhaps giving a clue into some more modern themes, in Britain, it was believed that Europe was an irrelevant sideshow. What mattered was Asia. Europe was a menacing place, said Benjamin Disraeli, the new Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1866. Britain should stay out of European affairs, he said in one speech, 'The truth', he announced is that 'England has outgrown the continent of Europe'. Rather, he went on, it is 'the metropolis of a great maritime Empire, extending to the boundaries of the farthest oceans.' This was only right, he said, for after all, 'England is really more an Asiatic than a European power.'

This was not just wishful thinking, for the British did indeed have very extensive interests in Asia, especially in the Indian sub-continent, but also in the Gulf and in China. Protecting commercial interests was considered vital to the future of the British Empire – and far more important than building alliances in Europe.

The problems began not on the eve of the First World War – in the July crisis as historians often call it – but almost exactly hundred years earlier. Although Napoleon reached Moscow in 1812, his withdrawal marked the start of a century of change in Russia. Horizons, ambitions and objectives changed as successive Tsars found their empire grew, on average, by 55km². Per day.

This dramatic expansion soon brought Russia ever closer to British interests across Asia, sparking what has memorably been called The Great Game – an elaborate version of Cat and Mouse, where spies set out to try to gain influence amongst power brokers in Central Asia and to position their masters ahead of those of their rivals.

It did often did not end well, with some early protagonists arrested and beheaded in town squares as punishment for their attempted interference and manipulation by local rulers. Then there were the whispers and rumours that found their way back to London and St Petersburg, serving to raise suspicions and inflame passions.

When Russia moved naval vessels back to the Black Sea in 1870 after being banned from doing so, some newspapers in London cried out that never had such open and daring defiance ever been uttered in the whole of history. Even Queen Victoria

thought this was too much, sending a telegram to her Foreign Minister urging newspaper editors to calm down and stop urging war.

Nevertheless, tensions continued to brew. The British began to draw up contingency plans in anticipation and expectation of a Russian invasion of India. Real concern gripped administrators about the Russian ability to send hundreds of thousands of men into attack positions, while the British could neither do the same – nor fund an effective defence. Effort went into propping up those whom the British felt were important, such as the Shah of Persia, who was lent staggering amounts of money by London and granted high honours by the British monarch in an attempt to win and keep his goodwill.

In the Foreign Office, considerable thought went into finding long-term ways of diverting Russia's attention from the heart of the world at a time when the tsars' frontiers kept rolling ever further across Central Asia, towards the Gulf, towards India and towards China. Britain's buffer from Russia, noted one leading diplomat at the turn of the 20th century, had been reduced to the 'thinness of a wafer.'

By this time, a new strategy was beginning to take place: to divert Russian attention away from Asia and towards Europe. The best way to do this, in London's eyes, was to sacrifice relations with Berlin and if necessary, to play up the threat posed by Germany and the Kaiser. It was a matter of the utmost urgency, wrote the Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, in 1905, that Russia should be assessing its position in Europe – and not in Asia.

The crystallising of alliances in the decade before the outbreak of the worst war that the world had ever seen had at its heart an Asian contact. European powers had done well from their colonisation of most of the world: in 1914, a quarter of the world's population owed their loyalty to the British King alone. Protecting these gains was not just part of an idealised past, but part of the present and future.

As officials scurried back and forth in the weeks following the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in 1914, some realised what was at stake. What mattered most was what happened in St Petersburg. As the Tsar gave the order for troops to mobilise – as a

sign of defiance – the British had to make a decision: if they did not support Russia, wrote the British ambassador, the empire was lost. If we are not prepared to make ‘small sacrifices’, wrote the British ambassador to Constantinople, ‘our very existence as an empire will be at stake.’

Asia had made Europe. And Europe’s concept of what mattered in the east and of what the price was that was worth paying to retain its position in Asia was directly linked to the killing fields of Flanders, the horrors of the Somme, and to the catastrophic consequences of what happened as the war progressed and then finally ended.

Exactly a hundred years ago: Revolution broke out, followed by the spread of violence and famine on an almost unimaginable scale. A new map of the Middle East was created that has such a bearing on problems we see today. A scramble for oil followed in Iran and the Gulf that results in the persistent and unsolved question of whether it is better to support autocrats with little regard for democracy, or to push for change that then struggles to materialise.

Understanding the past does not help prepare for the future. But looking at history helps identify different ways to assess the world around us.

Those who will study in the Asian Library today and in the years and decades to come will have access to some of the most important and valuable materials ever collected on earth. They reveal worlds that once seemed new, unfamiliar and strange. They show how our ancestors tried to make sense of things that they had never seen or experienced before – like the flora and fauna of the island of Ambon in Indonesia, or Dutch map-making of the islands of Japan, produced at a time when such charts were all but unknown.

Your Majesty, it is a great honour that you are here today to open the Asian Library. As part of a family that has a long connection with Leiden University, I should thank you on behalf of the community of scholars for being here. Your interest and support for this institution means a great deal to all of us in the Pieterskerk this morning.

I have no doubt that the Asian Library will produce many more outstanding men and women who will consult the materials held within it in a way that will continue to reshape the field of studies relating to the continent of Asia (that is home to over half the world's population) and its role in the global past, present and future.

This is a very proud day for Leiden University. It is a great honour to address you in this historic location.

Thank you.