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Since joining MSU in 2003, Chai has established an internationally recognized research program in Natural Language Processing and Artificial Intelligence. Her lab conducts innovative research addressing how context, whether linguistics, visual or situational affects language use and how to model context computationally for natural language processing and language-based human-agent communication.

Her work lies at the intersection of language, vision and robotics, which together have significant implications in developing the next generation of cognitive robots that can communicate with humans naturally through language.

Chai has established herself as a distinguished scholar in her research community and has received multiple awards for her work, including the best paper award at the Association for Computational Linguistics in 2010, the most competitive conference in her field. In addition to giving numerous invited lectures at academic conferences, universities and research labs, Chai has participated in various forums and workshops aimed at developing the
roadmaps for future research directions among scientific communities and funding agencies. She has successfully obtained research grants from many federal agencies, including the National Science Foundation, the Office of Naval Research and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.

Chai's commitment to teaching and education has only deepened since her move from IBM Research to MSU. In addition to classroom teaching, Chai has supported and supervised more than twenty undergraduate students in her lab, half of whom have continued to further their STEM education in graduate school. Chai has supervised nine Ph.D. students, each of whom has continued to develop strong research credentials upon graduation. A role model for women students and young professionals in the computing field, Chai delivered the keynote address at the Michigan Celebration of Women in Computing, inspiring more than 300 women at the conference to continue in the computing field.

Chai has embraced several leadership roles in serving the broader research community. She serves on the editorial board for Computational Linguistics, one of the most prestigious journals in her field. She was elected to the scientific advisory board member for the Special Interest Group on Discourse and Dialogue for the ACL and the International Speech Communication Association. Over the past five years, Chai has served as the program co-chair for three major conferences in NLP and AI.

MSU's 10 newest honorees bring the number of faculty honored since the award was established in 1952 to 551. These and other recipients of all-university awards were recognized at Wharton Center's Pasant Theatre. Colleagues, friends and family shared the event with the awardees. The William J. Beal Outstanding Faculty Awards are supported by the Office of University Development.

William James Beal (March 11, 1833 – May 12, 1924) was an American botanist, who was professor of botany (1871-1910) and curator of the museum (1882-1903) at the Michigan Agricultural College (MAC), now MSU. He was a pioneer in the development of hybrid corn and the founder of MSU's renowned W. J. Beal Botanical Garden.