

Daniel Asia of the University of Arizona was invested as a member of the American Academy of Sciences and Letters in 2024.

In [this video](#), Academy Executive Director Greg Forster interviews Dr. Asia about the danger of prioritizing politics over beauty in the creation of art, the origins of the university in knowledge traditions that were wider and deeper than mere technical expertise or political ideology, and the importance of educating the souls as well as the minds of students.

Greg Forster, American Academy of Sciences and Letters

I'm Greg Forster with the American Academy of Sciences and Letters, and today I'm interviewing Academy member Dan Asia, who has just gone to emeritus status recently at the University of Arizona, where he's taught for a very long time. He is also the president of Polyhymnia. Dan, thank you so much for being with us.

Daniel Asia, University of Arizona

A pleasure.

Forster

What would you say are one or two challenges that you see to maintaining high intellectual standards in your field?

Asia

My field, for those who don't know me, is music, composition, contemporary classical music more generally. I'm known as a composer, conductor, educator and, for the last 15 years or so, writer. But I'm also engaged more broadly in the field of the arts. The arts, as I'm sure our listeners will know, are not particularly strong right now. There have been periods in our history, perhaps the Rococo period would be the best example, between the Baroque and the Classical periods, when wonderful music was written, wonderful art created, but perhaps not at the height of either the previous period or the period that followed. Why is this? The appearance of genius is mercurial, and you don't know when it's going to happen or where it's going to happen. Having said that, we know some of the conditions for it. That includes support for it, either by aristocrats or by merchants or mercantilists. It can also be in totalitarian regimes and capitalist societies, because genius is not held back by any sort of economic restraints.

Let me speak specifically about the problems here in the United States, and I'll see if I then have a chance to broaden it to other countries. The arts have been completely politicized in our country. That didn't work particularly well for the Soviet Union or for the Soviet Bloc, Shostakovich and a few other minor composers aside. The problem with the politicization of the arts is that art should be first and foremost about beauty. If we can assume that goodness, truth and beauty are important characteristics in the world, then beauty is one of that triumvirate. We have a problem when beauty is demoted in the service of politics, and politics becomes more important. Occasionally, agitprop can produce something of interest, again, because the person who produces it is a genius. But it's rare. When politics overrides aesthetic values, it usually means that aesthetic values are therefore decreased, and that's a problem. This has happened in the visual arts. It's happened in the musical arts. It's happened probably in dance as well. That has to do with aesthetic matters in my area, the arts generally.

The problem with politics is that it drives people out. In other words, if you hold meetings at the beginning of a production, and everybody's supposed to give their pronouns, and everybody knows that if you are not a left political person, you will probably not get a job or you'll be derided, then we're back to the blacklisting during the McCarthy age. Those on the left seem to think that since they hold the upper hand, and their ideology is, of course, the truth, it's okay. Not only okay, it is to be welcomed. This is a major problem for us in music. If you decide that you should only be playing music or presenting artwork by Blacks, Latinas, gays, lesbians, and those under 35 – when in the past we derided ageism and any form of discrimination only wishing to raise aesthetic value – then you have a problem. You will drive people from the theaters, you will drive them from the museums, and you will drive them from the concert halls, because they will realize that what they're listening to and seeing is drivel. Unfortunately, we are now in the age of drivel. You'll excuse me.

Most of our audiences don't know the difference. That's a problem for us. The lack of arts education in our schools for the last 40 years has given us an audience of know-nothings. They have no idea what artistic content is. They have no real sense of what an emotional response should be to great music or to great art, because they haven't experienced it. Like a religious experience, if you've never had one, you don't know what it's supposed to be. If you've never seen great art and been able to respond to it, it's hard to know what that experience is and how to develop it. That, unfortunately, requires education, just as elevation of our souls and our intellect in any intellectual art form does.

Forster

It's similar to other areas. If you don't learn math when you're in school, you *can* learn it later, but you probably won't.

Asia

It is unlikely. We had a period in the fifties and sixties that the great now deceased critic Terry Teachout called the “middle-brow period.” You may have heard that term. What does it describe? People actually wanted to better themselves. They went to concerts. They bought records. They read the Great Books. They participated in study sessions. We've now become an entertainment culture where we move from basketball to football, to women's basketball, to baseball, to betting online, to games. The idea of working to improve ourselves intellectually, and I include the arts in that, doesn't seem to be something that we prize in our culture.

Forster

On the bookshelf behind me, I still have the two-and-a-half feet or more of Harvard Classics, which my grandfather bought for my mother when she was a baby from a door-to-door salesman. My grandfather sat in his living room with my mother as a baby on his knees. The salesman talked to him about how he would want to have the Great Books in his home if he was going to raise a child. I've still got them here. But that aspirational culture does seem to have collapsed.

This brings me to my next question. What do you think the mission of the university ought to be? And why is it important?

Asia

The universities historically have had various missions. We can start with those in Germany and then in this country, where they were primarily religious institutions to teach those who were going to become pastors. They were certainly educating the soul. Or their mission was to educate the soul and to produce people of wisdom or on the road to wisdom. After World War II, they became part of the military-industrial complex, which wasn't a leftist term, by the way. Dwight Eisenhower said, look, I ran the army. He said, I know the dangers of these large institutions, and they can overwhelm a democracy. So, universities then took on a scientific aspect funded by the government. We're dealing with this question right now. They became scientific institutions primarily, which overtook what had been a humanistic enterprise, by and large. Don't forget, the sciences came out of philosophy, so they were part of a desire to understand the world better.

I just want to backtrack so that people understand. With the quadrivium and the trivium, the most important things were rhetoric and music. The ability to speak, the ability to argue cogently, the ability to transcend ourselves through the beauty of music, and art only then followed in music's footsteps. Music was the art of the spheres. It's what connected us to our souls and to God and to the universe. I digress just slightly.

What happened after World War II? Universities essentially were taken over by the sciences, because that's where all the money came from. The humanities were at least somewhat on an equal footing. The social sciences came in. That terminology is suspect. Is there really such a thing as "social science"? The social scientists would like us to think that in the same way that economists would like to call economics a science. What's the term for it? Is it the dirty science or the provisional science?

Forster

"Dismal" is the traditional term.

Asia

The dismal science, but a science. And students would come. Why did they come to the university? They came because they were qualified, which is to say they had succeeded at a high level in their high schools, and they were ready to undertake high-level studies at the very beginning of their college careers in all areas of study, which were rather prescribed, by the way. In other words, there were no such things as gender studies, as African American studies, as women's studies. You had English, history, philosophy, economics. They came to the university because they were ready to undertake high-level studies in what I will call serious fields of study, musicology, et cetera. Students did serious studying, were expected to study 20 hours, 30 hours a week. That was their job.

Now students come to the university unprepared. Most of them have to take remedial work. They're not capable of thinking logically. They're not capable of writing. They can take courses in home economics, in essence. They can take courses in gen ed, like the history of hallucinogenics, rather than history 1, history 2, social science 1, economics 1, et cetera, which have real content. They can skate through, on the taxpayers' benevolence, essentially learning very little.

I haven't focused on one other thing. Universities at that time were generally equally divided between those on the left and those on the right, or probably more balanced toward moderate liberals and those

on the right. Universities in the last 60 years, since the 1960s, have been taken over by the radicals that Roger Kimball talks about in his book, *Tenured Radicals*. They have instituted courses in a philosophy of critical race theory and Marxism, which has created our new elite class in their thirties and forties who are fundamentally anti-American and now anti-Semitic, as was shown to us after the outbreaks of anti-Semitism across the United States after October 7. Now our intellectual elite seems to think that terrorists are wonderful and that America at its heart is now fundamentally an evil country, which is to be traduced.

Universities need to get back to their mission. They need to reduce their bureaucratic staff, which has taken over, which has caused prices to rise so that most people come out of universities now with over \$100,000 in debt. That never occurred before 25 years ago. It should be rolled back completely, and three-quarters of our administrators should be fired. As Secretary of Education McMahan stated, university presidents need to regain their positions of stature, not just as bureaucrats and not just as fundraisers, but as fundamentally in charge of an educational institution. A business it is, but its business is education and it's producing a product that is not appropriate for this country. They better take care of it.

Forster

Now that you have emeritus status, you can call for three-quarters of the administrative staff to be fired. It's dangerous.

Asia

I was calling for this long before because we couldn't hire faculty, but we've increased the number of people in our administration.

Forster

I believe it. Allan Bloom once said the modern university can split the atom, compile dictionaries of dead languages, and survey hundreds of millions of people and find out what they think, but it cannot design a coherent program of undergraduate education. For the reasons you've mentioned, massive subsidies for research have been at best a double-edged sword. They have reoriented the incentives, and that's why we're working on holding up something that has to do with both citizenship and the soul.

Let me ask you, since we're already talking about my last question, how the public at large understands the mission of the university. In what ways do you think the public at large has a good understanding of the mission of the university? In what ways does it not?

Asia

I'm going to reformulate the question just a tad if you don't mind. I think the question that might be better to ask is, what does the public think is actually *happening* in the university according to what they *think* the mission of a university is? I'm not one who's particularly in favor of mission statements, because they're usually bland, bowdlerized nonsense. We'll do good for the world. We'll do good for the city, the state, the country and the global community. I don't know what a global community is, though. You'd have to describe that to me, but every university says that now, or that they're working at a global level. I'd like to know what the University of Arizona is doing in South Africa, in the Sudan, in Yemen.

Are they involved with the Houthis and trying to stop the Houthis from shooting missiles at Israel? I'd love to know how many are involved in that global problem.

Here's the problem. Most of our electorate, most of our concerned citizens, up until COVID, in regard to K-12, and then up until October 7, in regard to curriculum and philosophy and anti-Semitism at our universities, were completely unaware of what had happened to our institutions of education. The universities have been very good at that. K-12 teachers have been very good at that, which is to say our students have been indoctrinated at every level from K through 16. Our citizenry doesn't understand it. They are now waking up to it. They realize the impact that these ideologies that were being taught have had on our society. You are seeing that now being played out in our politics, whether it's in the demonstrations against federal buildings in Portland, whether it's the possibility of the first democratic socialist – why don't we just call him socialist? – mayor of New York. Why is this happening? It's because of indoctrination, and it's because nobody has been taught history for the last 40 years, and they don't really know about the history of communism in the Soviet Union. They certainly have never heard of Pol Pot in Cambodia. They probably think that Chairman Mao was just a sweet old man who didn't murder 60 million people.

Forster

And if they did know about those things, they probably would not be equipped to make the connections to things that are happening now.

Asia

Correct. They would not be able to understand that ideas, when executed in various realms of human activity, actually bear a certain kind of fruit, and that there are tradeoffs. You want a socialist society? Then you will not have freedom. You will have less freedom. Now, they've never studied the notions of freedom. They've never really studied the Declaration of Independence. They've never really looked at the *Federalist Papers*. I can assure you, this is a generation of ignoramuses who don't know anything. Our forefathers, when they set up the country, said, this needs to be an engaged, literate, intellectual citizenry. That was part of the understanding. Which is why Benjamin Franklin famously said, yes, you have a republic, now can you keep it? Well, we're coming up against that question right now in our own time because we're dealing with an electorate that is ignorant, anti-intellectual and antireligious, but not just antireligious. They're essentially antimoral. They don't know what morality is, and they have no sense of themselves as human beings with a soul. You can't really use that word in academia, "soul." You'd be laughed at. We, of course, do in our class. In education, we need to go back to the beginning of universities, which were places to educate the soul and to teach our young that they are part of a long-standing civilization. Even though science only started 150 years ago, guess what? There was great wisdom in other areas, philosophy and a religion that tells us about who we are as human beings. And this is as important to us as any scientific understanding that we can relate to our students.

Polyhymnia, the organization of which I'm president, which began as the Center for American Culture and Ideas at the University of Arizona, does a number of things. It promotes the notion that the high arts are the fine arts, which means visual art, dance, music. The traditions of those in the case of music are 2,000 years old. For visual art, probably 30,000 years old. Dance is the newest, back to Louis Couture in the 1600s. Fair enough. That might be important for our students rather than learning about Taylor Swift

or the Beatles. There's something more important about Bach and Beethoven. I don't care if they like it or not right now, or if they like Goya or if they like Rembrandt. They need to know it. Why? As I told my students, 60 percent of you aren't going to get this. Twenty percent of you are going to get it. The other 20 percent aren't going to show up for class so you're going to flunk. For the 60 percent of you who don't get it or only get a little bit of it, I hope that in 20 years, you go to a museum or a concert and say, that's what that jerk, Asia, was trying to teach me 25 years ago. Education isn't for its time. This four years is for a student's entire life.

Forster

I used to say Aristotle doesn't really begin to speak to people until they're 30. But recently, I've been thinking I need to revise that upward because people are maturing later. Eventually, Aristotle will begin to speak to you. Plato tells us that what Socrates was talking to people about was their souls. That, in many ways, is the root of our traditions in the university.

Dan, thank you so much for being with us. We really appreciate you taking the time.