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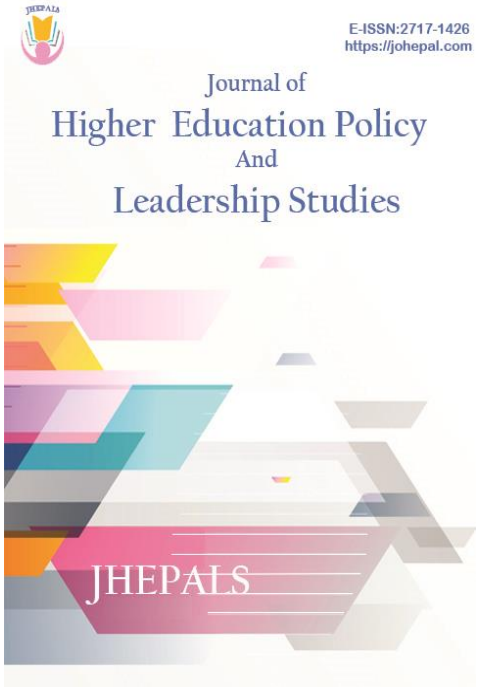

International Leadership: Personal Reflections on Higher Education -- Interview with Prof. Jun Li

Jun Li

Faculty of Education, Western University, London, Ontario, CANADA
&
President, The Chinese Society for Education, CHINA

Email: jun.li@uwo.ca
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4443-4551

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International Leadership: Personal Reflections on Higher Education -- Interview with Prof. Jun Li

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Jun Li *

Dr. Jun Li is a Senator of the University of Western Ontario (UWO) in Canada, Chair and Professor of Academic and Research Cluster of Critical Policy, Equity and Leadership Studies at UWO Faculty of Education. He taught at Beijing Normal University, East China Normal University, the University of Toronto, Education University of Hong Kong (Formerly the Hong Kong Institute of Education), Chinese University of Hong Kong, and University of Hong Kong. He is a recent Laureate of the Mingyuan Education Prize for his outstanding contribution to the overseas Chinese Studies on Education, and serves or served as a chief-editor, guest editor or reviewer of many international journals, including *Comparative Education Review*, *Springer Nature*. As the first Chinese President of the Comparative and International Education Society in its 70 years and a leading overseas Chinese figure with global leadership and impact, Dr. Li promotes Chinese Studies on Education as an emerging, transdisciplinary field and an international narrative by co-founding with global colleagues the Chinese Society for Education. Prof. Li holds two PhDs – one in Chinese History of Education (ECNU, 1992) and another in International Education Policy (UMCP, 2006), with academic interests in improvement in higher education, international and comparative education, educational policy and leadership, teacher education, educational history and culture, etc. He has published over a hundred academic journal papers, books and book chapters including "Goodbye to Reform: Improving Education for a More Equitable World" by *Comparative Education Review* (2026). His new authored book *Educational Improvement Science: The Art of the Improving Organization* is forthcoming.

https://www.edu.uwo.ca/about/faculty-profiles/jun-li/index.html
http://chinesesocietyforeducation.space/us.htm

Keywords: International Leadership; Higher Education; Equity; Multi-Perspective Approach; Educational Improvement Science

*Corresponding author's email: jun.li@uwo.ca

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Interview

Interviews with internationally acclaimed figures within the domain of higher education policy and leadership provides us with fresh insights gained from many years of working experience, knowledge, and research. Prof. Jun Li is globally renowned for his in-depth knowledge and expertise within the realm of Critical Policy, Equity and Leadership Studies. JHEPALS is honored to publish an interview with Prof. Li as the ARC Chair and Professor of Comparative and International Education at Western University, Past President of Comparative and International Education Society (CIES), and Founding President of Chinese Society for Education.

Question #1

With numerous leadership experiences within the realm of higher education; what are Prof. Jun Li's recommendations for the success of HE Leadership and Academic Governance worldwide (in US, UK, ASIA, Middle East, MENA Region, Africa)?

Answer:

Although there are no universal successful models of higher education leadership and academic governance worldwide, there are right models fitting in various systems, whether they are African, Anglo-Saxon, East Asian, or Latin American. In the context of North America academic freedom and institutional autonomy are key, while intellectual freedom and institutional self-mastery are authentically applicable in centralized systems. With this notion, I'd suggest: 1) exploring successful models suitable and localized for individual systems; 2) encouraging alternative models for try-outs in various contexts; and 3) opening up to equity, inclusion and diversity with uniqueness.

Question #2

Three key concepts of Critical Policy, Equity and Leadership Studies describe your academic position as a Professor at the Faculty of Education, Western University, CANADA. How do these three concepts contribute to solving current changes of HE and success of the HE in the short- and long-term?

Answer:

These are key concepts in the field of education in Canada and globally. Policies are often conceptualized as instruments for political interests, resources redistributions, normative values, or symbolic moves. In the times after the global pandemic and the wave of artificial superintelligence human beings are facing unprecedented challenges than ever before. For example, how can we respond timely to the disastrous consequences of industrialization over the past several centuries? How can we address squarely the deepening unequal reality of education in the context of radically escalated capitalism and rapidly advanced

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technologies in the 21st century? There are more critical concerns – especially around equity locally and globally – for us to look for workable theories and practices in education. They may be short-term or long-term concerns for higher education development. Among them is to nurture leadership vision and capabilities to bring critical changes in higher learning, teaching and schooling.

Question #3

How do you see the changes/ challenges/ strengths & weaknesses of HE since you began your career in the early 1990s up to now? What have you learned and what are your advice for HE leadership teams?

Answer:

Higher education is highly contextualized and situational alongside changing times, and the tasks of leaders over time and in various contexts cast different challenges to higher education leaders. In old times personal charisma was highly valued for meeting challenges of higher education institutions. However, more recent moves in the field of higher education demand more democratic, transparent, communicative, and equitable values and structures for higher education leaders who must be visionary, adaptive and distributive.

Question #4

What are the learnings from 2 PhDs during your academic career? One in Education History (ECNU, 1992) and the other in International Education Policy (UMCP, 2006)? The researchers/ academic staff you met during your studies and the professional development journey you've experienced?

Answer:

The two programs provided unique perspectives and foundations for me to exam higher education. The first one was in the field of educational history, which helped me with solid historical methodologies and macro-historic views on humanities and educational development. The second one focused on international education policy that empowered me with empirical inquiries in educational realities on a global scale. They were complementary and have made my views more balanced on higher education leadership in unique ways. Two articles by me, i.e., “World-class higher education and the emerging Chinese model of the university” (Prospects, 2012) and “Autonomy, governance and the Chinese University 3.0: A Zhong-Yong Model from comparative, cultural and contemporary perspectives” (China Quarterly, 2021), are perfect examples.

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Interview

Question #5

Hopefully, your research (articles/ books) are of great interest to global audiences. You've also extensively published textbooks which are taught at the (post)graduate levels! We'd be honored and delighted to see what the contributions of the following are to the HE community:

Answer:

Quest for World-Class Teacher Education? A Multiperspectival Study on the Chinese Model of Policy Implementation (Springer, 2016): This volume offers the unique Multiperspectival Approach of theoretical lenses on policy implementation with a case of higher education institutions for teachers in China. It also conceptualizes a Chinese model of teacher education, which is inherited from the Chinese tradition of learning, teaching and schooling over thousand years.

Portraits of 21st Century Chinese Universities: In the Move to Mass Higher Education (Springer/CERC, 2011): This collaborative book overviews the latest portrait on higher education development and transformation in China with 12 representative cases which are detailed in terms of institutional visions and missions, restructuring strategies, roles of faculty and students, etc. More importantly, it looks into how these higher education institutions in China have contributed to the global community.

International Status Anxiety and Higher Education: Soviet Legacy in China and Russia (Springer/CERC, 2018): This edited book covers a comprehensive, historic and latest review on higher education institutions in China, Russia and the former Soviet Union, with a critical perspective on the Soviet legacy of global competition and status anxiety in international higher education.

Measuring up in Higher Education: How University Rankings and League Tables are Re-shaping Knowledge Production in the Global Era (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021): This book examines the quality assessment movement in academic scholarship, as globalization prompts a search for global measures of university services and output, and provides a strong, evidence-based contribution to major debates in contemporary higher education reforms and the measurement of academic output.

Educational Improvement Science: The Art of the Improving Organization: This article pioneers three new concepts in the field of education: Students, educators, and educational administrators as improvers; classes and schools as improving organizations; and building of professional improvement communities. With them, the article advocates the studies of educational improvement as a transdisciplinary field for educational endeavors at all levels, scales, and types, including those that fall into the sector of higher education.

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Question #6

As the President of Chinese Society for Education and global HE leader: How do you see the current status of Chinese HEIs in terms of global partnership, Quality Assurance and Accreditation, and their contributions to the success of China National Strategy?

Answer:

The Chinese model of the university has the political tradition over two thousand years, which made higher education institutions a state arm with built-in missions of national and societal service. The institutional self-mastery and intellectual freedom allow these Chinese universities uniquely position themselves as global partners serving various local policy drives and strategies based on the pursuit of higher quality for higher learning, teaching and schooling. It has much to contribute not only to the global sector of higher education but to cultural exchange and civilizational dialogue among various systems in the world.

And finally,

Question #7

We've learned that Prof. Li believes in a philosophy that humans are born close to one another but diverge through learning (The Analects of Confucius, 17.2). How has this philosophy contributed to your life, academic, and professional career since your early journey as a student up to now as a globally renowned HE leader and policymaker?

Answer:

The Confucian philosophy "humans are born close to one another but diverge through learning" defines my academic identity and professional career as a lifelong and sustainable leader and scholar. It has motivated me from the very beginning of my student life and learning of education to explore every stage of my research and leadership about learning in particular and education broadly. It is the starting point of education as otherwise there is no sense of learning, education, and leadership, if we have no faith in equitable unfolding of human potential for every learner, every educator, and every leader.

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