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## China's Role in Arctic Conferences

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Since obtaining its Observer status in the Arctic Council in 2013 and following the publication of Beijing's 2018 White Paper on Arctic Policy, China's role in the Arctic has been political. In previous work, we have proposed the existence of a China-Arctic epistemic community of sorts as there is a relatively small number of scholars who have published extensively on the topic.<sup>1</sup> These scholars explore shipping, the role of the Arctic for China's energy security, the security implications of China in the Arctic in a competitive world, and other cooperative or conflictual readings. The findings of this research project take the next step, exploring three research questions: 1) how is China discussed at key Arctic conferences, 2) is there an overlap between individuals writing about China's role in the Arctic and talking about it at key Arctic conferences, and if not, 3) who is talking about China?

Understanding how China is discussed at conferences including the Arctic Circle Assembly (and their respective fora), Arctic Frontiers, the High North Dialogue, and the Chinese-Nordic Arctic Research Cooperation Symposia helps bring nuance to understanding: 1) whether this previously identified epistemic community also exists in how discourse on China is created at conferences; 2) if there are gaps in who speaks about China's role in the Arctic; and 3) the extent to which discourse matches up with general trends on China's behavior in the region.

My key findings are threefold. First, the type of themes that surround panels that handle China in some capacity follow international trends on Chinese-Arctic discourse. Early conferences are rather limited in how China is portrayed in the Arctic, emphasizing economic and commercial ties but discourse expands to many different themes – particularly that of cooperation - reaching its height in 2019. After a pause likely linked to the coronavirus pandemic, cooperative themes continue to be prevalent, but they are matched with an increased wariness about the strategic implications of China's role in the region. Second, the previously identified top 55 producers of

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<sup>1</sup> Gricius, Gabriella, Nicholas Glesby, Ruting Guo, and Whitney Lackenbauer. Academic Research on China's Arctic Interests in English, 2006-2021: Preliminary Quantitative Analysis. NAADSN. 25 July 2023. <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/23jul-Gricius-Policy-Primer-Academic-Research-China-Arctic-Interests.pdf>

written content are not purely China experts. Most of these individuals talk at conferences about a range of issues, China being only one of many. Third, when exploring those who actually consistently talk about China's role in the Arctic at these conferences, the list of top 55 speakers was different from those who write about China. Many individuals came from key Chinese universities and Chinese-based Arctic institutes – suggesting that discourse around China's role in the Arctic is reserved for those in key positions at relevant Chinese Arctic institutes such as CNARC and the Polar Research Institute of China (PRIC), along with key universities such as the Tongji University.

## Methods

To better understand how China was discussed at Arctic conferences and what individuals were discussing China's role in the Arctic, I began by drawing upon Beate Steinveg's 2023 book *Arctic Governance Through Conferencing* and her broader work studying Arctic conferences over time<sup>2</sup> to see which conferences might incorporate the role of China. The research questions coming into this analysis were: 1) how is China discussed at key Arctic conferences; 2) who is talking about China at these conferences; and 3) are the same people writing the most about China the same individuals speaking on China?

Four conferences were chosen for analysis ranging from 2007 to 2023. The Arctic Circle Assembly, as well as the many Arctic Circle Forums and Arctic Frontiers, were natural choices given their centrality in the Arctic conferencing circuit. There were 10 Arctic Circle Assembly programs ranging from 2013 to 2023, and 12 Arctic Circle Forums (Alaska, Greenland, Quebec, Scotland, Singapore, Washington, the Faroe Islands, Korea, Greenland, China, Abu Dhabi, and Japan). Obtaining records from the Arctic Frontiers programs was difficult given the changing sponsorship of the conference over time. That being said, I was able to collect 14 programs from 2007-2015, 2017, and 2020-2023. In tandem to these two central conferences, I also looked at the seven High North Dialogue conference agendas (2016-2023) and eight Chinese Nordic Arctic Research Cooperation Symposium agendas (2011-2023). In total, I coded 484 number of panels out of the 51 agendas under analysis. Of those panels, 119 had to do explicitly with China.

Once the agendas were acquired, I engaged in a close reading of the programs for keywords that encompassed issues relating to China in the Arctic (including China, Chinese, Asia, Sino, Beijing, and Shanghai) both to look for language in the names of panels or papers but also in the affiliation of participants. This initial stage was primarily to gather a list of panels that either: 1) directly had to do with China, or 2) had a participant that was speaking on China's role in the Arctic. In tandem with gathering information on the panels, I was also interested in seeing whether the previously identified top 55 producers of knowledge on China's role in the Arctic were also talking about

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<sup>2</sup> Steinveg, Beate. 2021. Exponential Growth and New Agendas – a Comprehensive Review of the Arctic Conference Sphere. *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 12: 134-160.

China at these conferences. To find these individuals, I searched for their names in all agendas, taking care to note whether these people were talking about China when they spoke or another topic altogether. Third, I specifically looked for which individuals were talking about China. Which people on panels that specifically covered China, how often did they appear, and were they the same individuals previously identified?

## Empirical Analysis

The first stage of this research encompassed looking at how many panels dealt with China's role in the Arctic across the dataset. I was interested in understanding what types of themes were associated with China across time. Using a thematic analysis, I coded each panel inductively through broad topics such as "shipping" or "climate change" using the language either in the panel title itself or in specific presentations that were included in the conference program. After coding for these themes, I searched for commonalities over the years to see how the themes changed and whether common themes could be identified. One challenge methodologically here was that some plenaries or sessions only had a title such as "China's role in the Arctic" while others had specific presentation titles – making consistent coding difficult.

In Arctic conferences convened from 2011-2013, most topics dealt with energy issues such as energy resources, shipping, oil and gas, as well as broad topics surrounding governance. Across 2014-2019, there was enlargement of topics to cover different types of issues including bilateral ties with Iceland as a key partner, Nordic-Chinese cooperation, science and public diplomacy including the Polar Silk Road, as well as cooperation on research, economic, and development issues. These topics also included more geopolitical and China-relevant topics as well including geopolitics, the role of great powers, and China's Arctic identity. This expansion of topics mirror's China's own interest in the region, originally beginning in a limited capacity that primarily emphasized economic and research interests such as Arctic and Antarctic expeditions in the early 1990s, the construction of research stations on both Svalbard and in Iceland, as well as China's observer status in the Arctic Council as of 2013.<sup>3</sup> China's 2018 publication of its White Paper in which it names itself a near-Arctic state and seeks to "understand, protect, develop, and participate in the governance of the Arctic" implies a much larger role – clear in how China's discourse is presented in 2018 and 2019. Part of the reason for the significantly longer list of topics in 2019 is not only the increase of China's presence at the primary Arctic Circle Assembly but also the Arctic Circle Assembly Forum that took place in China in 2019 – thus giving China a much broader platform through which to market itself as an Arctic player.

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<sup>3</sup> Kopra, Sanna. 2020. China and its Arctic Trajectories: The Arctic Institute's China series. *The Arctic Institute* 17 March 2020. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/china-arctic-trajectories-the-arctic-institute-china-series-2020/>

Phase 1			Phase 2					
2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Energy Resource Shipping	Shipping Climate Oil & Gas Governance	Shipping Oil & Gas Governance	Trade Bilateral Ties Iceland Nordic- Chinese Cooperation Climate Change Governance	Science Cooperation Iceland Public Diplomacy Governance	Science Cooperation Iceland Shipping Climate Energy Oil & Gas	Belt and Road Engagement China- Nordic Cooperation Tourism Third Pole China's Arctic Policy	Belt and Road Polar Silk Road Geopolitics Development Great Powers, Public diplomacy Third Pole Research Cooperation Climate China's role in the Arctic Sino-Russia relationship	Polar Silk Road, Research cooperation Economic cooperation Environment Third Pole Public diplomacy Shipping Oil & Gas Energy Development Cooperation Fishing Polar Code Geopolitics Governance Sustainable Development Education Culture Nature, Ecology Green Energy Engagement Tourism Diplomacy Climate China's Arctic Identity

Table 1: How is China thematically represented in panels from 2011-2019

I note from 2020 onwards a shrinking of topic breadth, which is not surprising given China's coronavirus isolationism. Conference panels still covered key issues such as great power competition, climate change, geopolitics, shipping, and research cooperation. China-specific issues in the Arctic were also still on the agenda including China's Arctic identity, the role of the Polar Silk Road, and Chinese influence. As of late 2023, it appears that more cooperative framings are being used around science diplomacy, Nordic-Chinese cooperation, and dialogue, but they are mediated through a continued focus on Chinese strategic presence in the Arctic. Again, this pattern of how China discourse appears in these key Arctic conferences mirrors China's own framing. For example, a cooperative framing is found in every year, whether dealing with research cooperation, economic cooperation, or intra-Asia cooperation. This is closely linked to China's win-win narrative that appears widely in written pieces on China.<sup>4</sup> However, this cooperative framing since 2020 is also linked with the acknowledgement that there are strategic and security aspects of China's role in the Arctic that need to be addressed.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Gricius, Gabriella, Nicholas Glesby, Ruting Guo, and Whitney Lackenbauer. Academic Research on China's Arctic Interests in English, 2006-2021: Preliminary Quantitative Analysis. NAADSN. 25 July 2023. <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/23jul-Gricius-Policy-Primer-Academic-Research-China-Arctic-Interests.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Lackenbauer, Whitney P. Adam Lajeunesse, and Ryan Dean. Why China is Not a peer Competitor in the Arctic.

2020	2021	2022	2023
Great Power Competition Climate Change Cooperation Geopolitics Shipping Research cooperation	Science cooperation Research Polar Silk Road China’s Arctic Identity	Climate governance Cooperation Governance Shipping Fishing Emissions Influence Polar Silk Road Iceland-China Engagement	Influence Strategic Presence Science Cooperation Nordic Cooperation Research Cooperation Intra-Asia Cooperation 10 Year Reflection Indigenous Issues Dialogue

Table 2: How is China represented in panels on the Arctic from 2020-2023

### *Connecting a Written Epistemic Community to a Conference Community*

The second research question built on our previous research specifically looking at the epistemic community of scholars studying China’s role in the Arctic. Were the same individuals we identified also clear in this dataset and on the conference circuit, and were they also discussing China’s role in the Arctic? If not, then what were they talking about? Answering this question involved identifying each instance in which a member of our top 55 list appeared in this dataset, and then assessing whether and if China was involved in their presentation. Across the whole dataset, there were 284 panels in which these individuals were involved, however only 244 were fully coded thematically because many panels not having a substantive theme. When possible, each individual’s presentation was coded for a particular theme inductively such as “tourism” or “education.” In some cases, more than one theme was utilized if a paper topic or panel topic encompassed many different issues. Further, some panels did not have specific paper presentations but rather only had a broad panel, and in that case, that theme was applied to each participant on that panel.

The major finding was that while some of the top 55 individuals who write about China do talk about China in some instances, their expertise is spread amongst many different topics and China is only one of many themes that they present on (including science diplomacy, governance, climate change, and security in the Arctic). As one might expect from this disparate group of scholars, individuals interests shift over time and there is variation from year to year.

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*Journal of Indo Pacific Affairs* (2022) [https://media.defense.gov/2022/Sep/28/2003087089/-1/-1/1/07%20LACKENBAUER\\_FEATURE.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2022/Sep/28/2003087089/-1/-1/1/07%20LACKENBAUER_FEATURE.PDF)



	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Arctic Circle Assembly	-	-	0	22	5	5	19	18	7	0	13	15	13
Arctic Circle Fora	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	29	25	-	-	0	30
CNARC	-	-	18	27	0	18	24	20	19	-	-	40	-
Arctic Frontiers	0	0	14	0	14	0	18	0	0	0	0	13	0
High North Dialogue						0		100	-	0	-	50	0

Table 3: How many times does China’s role in the Arctic come up for the top 55 producers of content by percentage  
 Note\*\* China’s role in Arctic was not brought up in the previous Arctic Frontiers (2007-2010)

At the Arctic Circle, there is not one year in which the top 55 talk about China’s role in the Arctic in more than 20% of all themes that they discuss. The highest amount is in 2018, where 18% of themes referenced China. This low amount is not surprising given that the Arctic Circle Assembly has vastly grown in size, meaning that scholars have lots of opportunities to talk about different issues, senior scholars like Lassi Heininen moderate a vast number of panels, and people’s interests change over time. Interestingly, when turning to the Arctic Circle fora, China’s role in the Arctic comes up much more often: 29% in fora located in the Faroe Islands and Korea, and 25% in the forum held in China. Arctic Frontiers had little engagement with China’s role in the Arctic, with very few panels dealing with China at all. At the High North Dialogue, very few panels had to do with China, but in two years – 2018 and 2022 – Iselin Stensdal and Øystein Tunsjø did speak about China’s role in the Arctic, representing the only two members from our top 55 list to appear (and thus giving them disproportionately high percentages).

The most interesting conference was the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center (CNARC) Symposia in which China’s role in the Arctic is unsurprisingly common. While the percentage of times that China’s role in the Arctic is mentioned by anyone in the top 55 producers of written content is not dissimilar from other conferences, the number of types of topics is particularly interesting. Across most of CNARC’s symposia, the number of topics is vast for a relatively small conference. For example, 11 different themes are referenced in 2013, 12 in 2019, and 13 are used in both 2015 and 2016. The diversity of topics suggests that CNARC is positioning itself as a conference where China’s role in the Arctic intersects with an increasing number of different topics – supporting China’s legitimacy claim in the Arctic.

### Who is talking about China’s role in the Arctic?

After determining that most of the top 55 producers of written content on China’s role in the Arctic were *not* also talking about China as Arctic conferences, I was interested to understand who was talking about China. Determining this involved cleaning the name data across the full list of panels

about China in the Arctic, isolating the names and counting how many times they appeared over the whole dataset. The list of individuals, interestingly, was quite different from our original findings. While there were some commonalities, the distribution was quite different in key ways.

First, we found that 53 individuals who spoke more than once across our conference dataset had written at least one piece that appeared in the publications – indicating that there is certainly a loose community of individuals who both speak at conferences and write publications about China. However, out of the top 55 producers of written content originally identified, only 16 of them were reflected in our list of speakers who spoke at more than one conference. Further, only 14 of that 16 were reflected in the top 55 of speakers. This implies that there is some degree of consistency between those who both write and talk on China’s role in the Arctic.

Name	Number of Speaking Appearances	Number of Publications Identified
Yang Jian	22	13
Arild Moe	13	8
Egill Nielsson	12	5
Rasmus Bertelsen	12	16
Lassi Heininen	9	32
Iselin Stensdal	9	7
Timo Koivurova	8	19
Marc Lanteigne	10	28
Long Zhao	6	5
Liisa Kauppila	6	5
Mia Bennett	5	11
Su Ping	5	6
Li Zhenfu	4	6

Table 4: Overlap of top 14 speakers and writers

Second, and that being said, there were other individuals who spoke about China’s role in the Arctic that do not appear heavily in our previously identified dataset of publications on China’s role in the region. For example, Yang Huigen (28 appearances), Gao Feng (21), Thorsteinn Gunnarsson (12), Olafur Grimsson (12), Guo Peiqing (9), Deng Beixi (9), Liping Xia (9), Kjell Stokvik (8), and Pei Zhang (7) wrote two or fewer publications across the 2007-2021 period. It may be that many of these individuals do not publish in English.

Yang Huigen is the current director of the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center (CNARC) and has been the director general of the Polar Research Institute of China (PRIC), the vice president of IASC, and the chief scientist for some Chinese National Arctic & Antarctic Expeditions. Thus, he often appears at conferences as a representative of China and presents its Arctic policy. Similarly, China’s Special Envoy for the Arctic, Gao Feng, appears often across the panels as a representative of the Chinese government. Both Feng and Huigen are clear representatives of Beijing’s Arctic

agenda and that both are the most common speakers by far in the dataset suggests that there is some degree of consistency that China may wish to convey across its long history of involvement in Arctic conferencing. That the top two speakers are also official representatives also implies that not just anyone in China can talk about their country's interests in the Arctic.

Other individuals also speak relatively often about China. Thorsteinn Gunnarsson is the former Head of Division of RANNIS, the Icelandic Center for Research, which has a close relationship with the Polar Research Institute of China. Peiqing Guo is a professor at the Ocean University of China with an emphasis on polar politics and law and ocean politics broadly. Deng Beixi is an Associate Professor at the Polar Research Institute of China and the Deputy Director of the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center and focuses on China's polar strategy and Arctic shipping. Liping Xia is the Dean and Professor at the Tongji University in Shanghai with an emphasis on Asian security and China's foreign policy. Kjell Stokvik is the Managing Director of the Centre for High North Logistics. Pei Zhang is the Deputy Director of the Center for Marine and Polar Studies and Executive Director of the Department of Research Management at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS). He has previously also been the Deputy Director of the SIIS. All of these individuals with the exception of Kjell Stokvik have either a close institutional relationship with a Chinese university – suggesting again that the discourse around China in the Arctic is reserved for a select few that speak often at conferences.

Former Icelandic president Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson is a particularly interesting case given that he appears twelve times across the conference agendas in polls that have to do with China's role in the Arctic. In most of these panels, he is either the chair or moderator. This may imply that he has an interest in expanding the Arctic Circle Assembly to Asian countries such as China – or at least to all global countries that are geographically outside the Arctic.<sup>6</sup> For Grímsson, including actors like China in the Arctic Circle Assemblies and Fora is about helping such actors become constructive partners in the Arctic.<sup>7</sup>

## Implications

The analysis of this period shows that while there are some linkages between who is writing about China's role in the Arctic and who is speaking about it at conferences, there are clearly gaps between these commentators, at least in English. Individuals who are discussing China at conferences tend to come from well-connected Chinese institutes dealing with the Arctic as well as Chinese foreign policy writ large. A more nuanced picture of how China discourse appears at Arctic conferences suggests that China legitimates who can speak for it at these conferences and prefers continuity and consistency rather than a broader swath of expert commentators.

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<sup>6</sup> Steinveg 2023 p. 38, 43

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 131



Further, our originally identified community of China-Arctic scholars writing on the subject is inconsistent in participating in the conferencing sphere. This may indicate that some scholars who are prolific in their Arctic writing have China as one of many interests and should not be characterized as a primarily China-Arctic specialists. Finally, this research suggests that the waxing and waning of themes connected to China’s role in the Arctic can yield insights into how the general science-policy-business nexus community was thinking and conceptualizing China’s actions within the broader scope of Arctic behaviour.

## Appendix: List of 55 Top Speakers

Yang Huigen	28
Yang Jian	22
Gao Feng	21
Arild Moe	13
Egill Nielsson	12
Thorsteinn Gunnarsson	11
Rasmus Bertelsen	12
Olafur Grimsson	12
Guo Peiqing	9
Deng Beixi	9
Lassi Heininen	9
Iselin Stensdal	9
Liping Xia	9
Timo Koivurova	8
Marc Lanteigne	10
Kjell Stokvik	8
Zhang Pei	7
Cheng Xiao	7
Anders Oskal	7
Zhao Long	6
Henry Tillman	6
Yao Tandong	6
Liisa Kauppila	6
Halldor Johannsson	6
Sanna Kopra	6
Valur Ingrinmundarson	6
Mia Bennett	5

Jiayu Bai	5
Sun Kai	5
Su Ping	5
Yubao Qiu	5
Daginnur Sveinbjornsson	5
Gorild Heggelund	5
Feng Chen	5
Katarina Gardfelt	5
Uffe Jakobsen	5
Baozhi Cheng	5
Zou Leilei	5
Julia Guifang	4
Cai Meijiang	4
Jan-Gunnar Winther	4
Bjorn Gunnarsson	4
Gudbjorg Rikey Hauksdottir	4
Yue Wang	4
Li Zhenfu	4
Nalan Koc	4
Steingrimur Jonsson	4
Zhang Xia	4
Qin Weijia	4
Peter Skold	4
Danhong Chen	4
Natsuhiko Otsuka	3
Li Yuansheng	3
Gao Jie	3