Chinese Tourism in the Nordic Arctic – Opportunities beyond the Economic

Abstract

Chinese presence in the Nordic Arctic is increasing and will continue to increase in the coming years. Whereas many large-scale initiatives such as mining projects, trade deals, or political alliances have yet to materialise, tourism encounters between Chinese visitors and Nordic Arctic communities are already happening. We use tourism as a lens and bring together perspectives and empirical examples from various disciplines, including international relations, international political economy, tourism studies, education and sustainable development studies, with the aim of broadening the existing knowledge on China - Nordic Arctic relations and encounters. We argue that these tourism encounters not only offer challenges and economic opportunity, but also opportunities that go beyond economic gain, including: Community involvement, use of existing informal skills, development of formal skills and human capital. Additionally, we argue that Chinese tourism to the Nordic Arctic creates incentives to acquire global skills and knowledge necessary to ensure effective self-representation and benefits in an increasingly Asian-centred global economy. Finally, we find that Chinese tourism to the Nordic Arctic may offer a view into the future, as challenges associated with Chinese tourism in the Arctic North may be an indication of what is to come when potential mining projects, trade deals or political alliances start to materialise.

Keywords

Nordic Arctic, China, Opportunity, Learning, Globalization

Introduction

The global shift of power from West to East means that Asian powers are concerned with and present in the Northern European territories of the Arctic (henceforth 'Nordic Arctic') like never before (e.g. Hong 2014; Chen 2012). This increasing presence has led to discussions about its pros and cons (e.g. Martyn-Hemphill 2018; Sørensen 2018; Bennett 2018; Lasserre, Huang, and Alexeeva 2017). It is worth noting that Chinese engagement is drawing more attention than Japanese, Singaporean or South Korean, which reflects political differences between China and the West, including the Nordic Arctic. The discussions of China - Nordic Arctic relations are often centred on predictions about potential large-scale mining projects, trade deals and political alliances. It turns out, however, that most of these predictions have not yet materialised (e.g. Zeuthen and Raftopoulos 2018; Breum and Chemnitz 2013). This means that encounters between communities of the Nordic Arctic and their future collaborators, investors or partners in China are still rare, yet often met with suspicion (Breum and Chemnitz 2013; Higgins 2014; 2013).

There is no doubt that Chinese presence in the Nordic Arctic will increase further in the coming years. China's growing role in the Nordic Arctic is evident in the sources already cited and in China's recently released Arctic strategy white paper (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2018). This increased involvement reflects the return of Asia to its historical relative share of more than half the world economy by 2050 (Asian Development Bank 2011). Because of this, Nordic Arctic communities will have to educate themselves to engage with this new presence in their region, while Chinese actors with interests in the Nordic Arctic correspondingly will have to develop their understanding of this unique part of the world and the communities that inhabit it (Bertelsen and Graczyk 2016).

In this paper, we suggest that unlike many of the promised large-scale initiatives, tourism represents an avenue where engagement between Chinese actors and Nordic Arctic communities are already happening. The potential challenges of tourism development in the Nordic Arctic have already received attention in the literature (e.g. Ireland 2003; Maher 2007; Müller and Pettersson 2001; Saarinen 2003; Fay and Karlsdóttir 2011), and the discourse around tourism as a driver for development tend to focus on potential monetary gains. Because of this, we turn our focus away from the challenges, towards the learning opportunities in such encounters that go beyond monetary gains.

Method

We use tourism as a lens to broaden the existing knowledge on the relation China – Nordic Arctic relations. We do so by taking a multi-disciplinary approach where we bring together and discuss perspectives and empirical examples from various disciplines, including international political science, international political economy, tourism studies, education and sustainable development studies. We first explain and discuss how Chinese tourism to the Nordic Arctic is embedded in international political and economic systems. We then discuss the challenges and opportunities that occur or may occur in current encounters between Chinese tourists and Nordic Arctic hosts. Finally, we discuss the implications and learning opportunities of Chinese tourism in the Nordic Arctic that go beyond the economic. These discussions are based on two primary data sources: First, a content-based literature review of studies within the disciplines mentioned that have dealt with topics that relate to China outbound tourism, the Nordic Arctic and the relations between them. Second, historical and contemporary empirical examples that relate to the international political and economic embeddedness, current state and opportunities of China – Nordic Arctic relations.

Chinese Tourism in the Nordic Arctic embedded in the International Political and Economic Systems

It is tempting, but misleading to believe that the Nordic Arctic only recently has become integrated in the international political and economic system and that it has mainly been so because of climate change. The region has been integrated in and shaped by international political and economic systems for centuries. Northern Norway and the North Atlantic fisheries have been a part of the European food system since medieval times, feeding Catholic Europe especially during fasting (Heininen and Southcott 2010). Northern Sweden holds some of Europe's richest and highest-grade iron-ore deposits, which were the basis of the North-Swedish socio-technical mega-system established around 1900 of mining, rail, energy, settlement and defence reaching to the North-Norwegian port of Narvik. British/French-German competition over control of these strategic iron-ore resources led to German attack on and occupation of Norway (and Denmark as stepping-stone) on 9 April 1940 (Hansson 1998).

Today, the Nordic Arctic remains an integral part of the international political and economic system and many important changes in the region are best understood as reflections of changes at the international system level. A dominant change in the international political and economic system, which also shape the Nordic Arctic, is the power transition from the West to the East (Smith 2010). The West has dominated the world for centuries with one Western great power being taken over or challenged by the next. For the first time, the rising challenging power is non-Western, China (Nye Jr 2011). This broad shift in economic, political, scientific and military relative power from the West to Asia reflects the return of Asia to its historical share of the world economy, where Asia represented more than half of global economic activity into the 1800s, but was reduced to less than 20% after the Second World War. According to the Asian Development Bank, Asia now represents about 34% of global economic activity and will represent more than 50% by 2050 (Asian Development Bank 2011). The great economic expansion in Asia led to further engagements with outside actors across the world, including those in the Nordic Arctic.

The investments made by a new rising power are often met with great suspicion by the old powers. That was the case of Imperial Germany before World War One, see for example the Berlin-Baghdad-Bahn railway project (McMeekin 2010) and have also been the case for Chinese engagements in the Nordic Arctic. An example of this is Greenland, which, as overseas self-governing entity of the Kingdom of Denmark, has been on a declared path to ever increasing independence for decades. Around 2013, there was strong optimism in Greenland about future independence financed by large-scale mining projects, such as the Isua iron-ore deposit, which was expected to entail Chinese investment and workers. The prospect of Greenlandic independence based on Chinese mining investments and the presence of thousands of Chinese miners in Greenland caused very high levels of controversy and distrust in Denmark and beyond (Breum and Chemnitz 2013; Higgins 2014; 2013). Such controversies have so far hindered the development of this and similar projects in the Nordic Arctic.

An expression of the economic rise of Asia and China in particular is that Chinese individuals and families have the resources to travel as tourists, also to the Nordic Arctic, where tourism from China plays an increasingly important role (Yoo 2017; Meesak 2018; COTRI 2017; Bennett 2018). Large scale investments in tourism have not avoided controversies. The most prevalent examples of such controversy are the interest in buying land in the Nordic Arctic from Chinese real estate billionaire HUANG Nubo. In 2011, Huang, who had personal connection to Iceland, wanted to buy 300km2 land in Northeast Iceland at Grímsstaðir á Fjöllum to develop a tourist resort, which caused very high levels of national and international controversy (BBC News 2011). Huang eventually withdrew his interest in light of repeated Icelandic government delays in settling the possibility of this outside European Economic Area land-investment. In 2014, Huang caused controversy when he bought a 100 hectares of land in Lyngen, north of Tromsø, for tourism development purposes (Lindblad 2014). At the same time, there was speculation of his interest in land for tourism development in Svalbard,

which caused even greater controversy and was finally hindered by the Norwegian government (Pettersen 2014). While tourism to the Nordic Arctic also present challenges and controversies, especially in cases of land grabbing like the ones mentioned, it seems that tourism as an economic activity so far is largely accepted by communities in the Nordic Arctic (Hall and Saarinen 2010; Fay and Karlsdóttir 2011). Perhaps because of its potential to involve local communities instead of excluding them.

Another reason for this could be that the relatively new and rising demand for tourism in China is also answered by an increasing demand in Nordic Arctic regions for ways to diversify their economies. Nordic Arctic societies are generally natural resource-based economies. Local and indigenous communities and peoples have depended on harvesting local flora and fauna. Industrialization in the Nordic Arctic has generally meant industrialization of fisheries, forestry, mining, hydroelectrical power, oil and gas extraction (Larsen and Huskey, 2015). Natural resource-based economies face a range of social, economic and environmental sustainability challenges, whether the management of renewable or non-renewable resources or social, cultural and environmental degradation. These sustainability challenges from natural resource-based economies are strong motivations for diversifying Arctic economies (ReSDA n.d.), not least through tourism (Hall and Saarinen 2010).

Thus, when we observe the Nordic Arctic in the current globalized economy, shaped by the rise of China, we see much talk of Chinese *potential* investment in Icelandic, Greenlandic, North-Norwegian land and natural resources, which causes much suspicion. However, such investments have materialized to a very little extent (Zeuthen and Raftopoulos 2018). In contrast, Chinese tourism in the Nordic Arctic is developing rapidly. Chinese tourists visiting the Nordic Arctic therefore presents a more direct opportunity for Nordic Arctic local communities, indigenous peoples, economic actors and others to learn about the place of the Nordic Arctic in this increasingly Asian-centred global

economy, than elusive mining projects that may or may not materialize. Equally, Chinese tourists and tourism operators have the opportunities to build experience and knowledge about the Nordic Arctic. Combined, actors on both sides have the opportunity to understand and learn from one another. In fact, we will argue that better knowledge and understanding on both sides is a precondition for equitable and sustainable integration and adaptation of the Nordic Arctic to current and future global economic developments, marked by the rise of Asia and China in particular.

Macro and Micro Encounters

As we have alluded to above, Chinese tourism in the Nordic Arctic is embedded in and reflective of global processes. Nordic Arctic communities, both local and indigenous peoples live in a structure-agency relationship with the global political, economic, social, cultural, security, technological and environmental systems and forces that affect them (Wendt 1987). Historically, Nordic Arctic local communities and to a larger extent indigenous peoples have had little or no voice and therefore little say or impact on these forces, but these forces have been – sometimes painfully – familiar, unlike the current power transition from West to East. Increasingly, it is recognised that Nordic Arctic local communities and indigenous peoples, as well as outsiders should aim for an informed Nordic Arctic local-global encounter, respecting the democratic and other rights of Nordic Arctic local communities and indigenous peoples. A high level of mutual and shared knowledge between the Nordic Arctic and the global side in this encounter is required for such an informed and democratic encounter (Bertelsen and Graczyk 2016a). The encounters between Chinese tourists and Nordic Arctic local communities and indigenous peoples hold the perils and promises of these global processes.

China - Nordic Arctic tourism relations are likely to lead to interest and understanding between Chinese and Nordic Arctic actors. Greenland is an example of this, as the premier, Kim Kielsen, has expressed public interest in investments from China, as a move to reduce its reliance on Danish

subsidies. Kielsen also sees tourism as a part of this. According to *The Economist*, he gave an impassioned pitch about the natural wonders of Greenland and their attractiveness to tourists, at a delegation in China in October 2018 (*The Economist* 2018). Here it seems that tourism is viewed both as an economic opportunity, but also as a way to build relations between Nordic Arctic and Chinese states. This also goes the other way. In the recently released Chinese white paper "China's Arctic Policy" tourism is included as an important aspect. "Arctic tourism is an emerging industry, and China is a source of tourists to the Arctic. China supports and encourages its enterprises to cooperate with Arctic States in developing tourism in the region" (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2018). The importance of relations between Chinese tourists and local communities is explicitly recognised in the white paper:

"China takes part in the development and utilization of Arctic resources on the condition of respecting the traditions and cultures of the Arctic residents including the indigenous peoples, preserving their unique lifestyles and values, and respecting the efforts made by the Arctic States to empower the local citizens, foster their social and economic progress, and improve education and medical services, so that the Arctic residents, including the indigenous peoples, will truly benefit from the development of Arctic resources." (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2018).

There is no doubt that the motivations behind these examples are geopolitically and economically motivated, but they also allude to the fact that tourism plays an important role, not only in geopolitical and economic relations, but as a way to bridge counterparts that may otherwise be distant.

Chinese Tourism in the Nordic Arctic

Tourism has for a long time been regarded as an important driver of (socio-) economic development in the Nordic Arctic, either in the absence of or as a supplement or alternative to resource extraction (Hall and Saarinen 2010). This is for example the case in Greenland, where tourism is proposed as

one of its three economic pillars, along with fishing and mining and considered as a lever for the nations' future development (Bjørst and Ren 2015). More recently, Nordic Arctic tourism has also caught the attention of governments who see tourism development as part of broader political strategies (ibid). Traditionally tourism to Nordic Arctic areas has been considered as being in the "discovery stage", characterised by a small number of relatively unobtrusive visitors seeking unspoiled destinations (Fay and Karlsdóttir 2011). Based on previous research (Besculides et al. 2002; Komppula 2006; Mason and Cheyne 2000), Fay and Karlsdóttir (2011) have argued that the social impact of tourism at this stage has been minor and, perhaps because of that, resident attitudes have been mainly positive towards tourism. Recently tourism to Arctic regions have increased drastically, especially in the Nordic Arctic. This is due to improvements to infrastructure, melting sea ice resulting in increased accessibility, as well as a growing interest in tourist destinations that offer extraordinary experiences. Researchers have pointed out that there is a lack of available data about tourism in the Arctic, and that the data that exist differs from destination to destination thus offering little comparability (Fay and Karlsdóttir 2011; Huijbens and Lamers 2017; Maher 2017). Despite this, the same researchers agree that the data that is available show a general increase for all Arctic regions. Since the Nordic Arctic include the most visited Arctic regions, it can be assumed that these numbers reflect tourism to the Nordic Arctic as well. Various sources indicate that this increase is also present for Chinese tourism to the Arctic. Some recent examples include: Ctrip's release of its first Chinese Polar Travel Report in 2017, which showed a 400% rise in Chinese tourists that travel to see the Northern Lights from 2016 to 2017 (Yoo 2017). The rise of Chinese tourism to Nordic Arctic destinations outpaced the general rise in Chinese outbound tourism in 2017 (Meesak 2018). Chinese travel giant Fliggy (previously Alitrip, owned by Alibaba) established partnerships with destinations in Finnish Lapland in 2016 (COTRI 2017). The number of Chinese tourists to Rovaniemi in Finnish Lapland doubled between 2015 and 2017 and now make up 10% of arrivals (Bennett 2018).

This rise in tourism offers both opportunities and challenges. Cruise tourism, which is a common travel mode for tourists visiting the Nordic Arctic, is an example of this. An advantage of cruise tourism for Arctic destinations is that accommodation, waste management, catering etc. are taken care of on the vessel. This means locals can focus their efforts on crafts, providing local food, cultural tours or other aspects where they are competent. If this were not the case, it would be difficult for peripheral destinations to provide for such big groups of tourists. On the other hand, this type of tourism also come with challenges. There is risk of leakage of tourism revenues, where local communities derive little income from such tourism, which is instead collected by the cruise ship operators. In addition, the large influx of tourists into small communities, during a brief season, in some cases mean that inhabitants feel invaded, feel that others benefit more from tourism than they do or feel that the disadvantages outweigh the advantages. Fay and Karlsdóttir (2011) note how such "tension between tourism providing opportunities for community development while simultaneously disrupting cultural and community cohesion and environmental quality is well documented (Bohdanowicz and Zientara 2008; Buzinde et al. 2010; Colt, Dugan, and Fay 2007; Dwyer and Forsyth 1998; Gössling and Michael Hall 2008; Hung and Petrick 2010; Ireland 2003; Jackiewicz 2005; Kneafsey 2001; Maher 2007; Müller and Pettersson 2001; Ryan 2002; Saarinen 2003)". The potential for such tensions may be heightened if the visiting tourists come from backgrounds that are vastly different from those of the local communities. This is the case for Chinese tourists travelling to the Nordic Arctic. These travelers do not only come from cultural backgrounds that are vastly different from the host communities they visit, but also often from big cities as opposed to the smaller communities of the Nordic Arctic and sometimes from very affluent backgrounds, since trips to some parts of the Nordic Arctic tend to be relatively costly (Yoo 2017; Hancock 2017). The potential for tensions is heightened further by ongoing debates about China's political, territorial and business presence in the Nordic Arctic.

On the other hand, it can be argued that the right kind of tourism, if properly managed, has the potential to involve, be strengthened by and strengthen local communities, rather than excluding them. Knowledge and understanding between hosts and guests are paramount for tourism to be developed in this direction. In the particular case of Chinese tourism to the Nordic Arctic, this offers incentives for Nordic Arctic communities to further their understanding of Chinese culture and social systems.

Learning Globalisation through Tourism

As set out above, the Nordic Arctic has been and remains deeply embedded in and shaped by political, economic, social, cultural, security, technological and environmental systems with profound impact on Nordic Arctic local communities and indigenous peoples. This embeddedness remains the case and is crucial for understanding the effects of climate change, globalization and power transition from West to East on the Nordic Arctic. Nordic Arctic local communities and indigenous peoples need formal and informal skills as well as knowledge to understand the effect of global-level processes on their communities and environments. Such skills and knowledge are the basis for democratic societies, for effective self-representation and for ensuring local benefits in and from these processes. Small Nordic Arctic local communities and indigenous peoples have historically met – in asymmetrical and colonial relationships – much larger outside governmental-, corporate-, military-, scientific- and civil society-actors, but which were familiar. These larger outside actors have historically been Western, including Europe, North-America and Russia (including the USSR). With globalisation and power transition, these outside actors will increasingly be from Chinese megasocieties. This new embeddedness in a shifting world from West to East is very unfamiliar for Arctic indigenous and local communities

Today, to even out these asymmetries and to operate with new Chinese counterparts, Nordic Arctic local communities and indigenous peoples require global-level skills, often in social sciences and humanities fields such as politics, law, economics, finance, languages, history, culture, etc. Such skills and knowledge are very different from the emphasis so far on building human capital on local and indigenous social, cultural, linguistic and environmental matters and to secure staff for public services in education, government, health, and related areas (Hirshberg and Petrov, 2015).

Education, training, professional experience for Northerners, local and indigenous, must to a much larger extent address global social, human, environmental, technological questions and emphasise brain circulation between Nordic Arctic communities and outside, and increasingly so with Asia and China in particular. One important and interesting high-level example of such capacity building was Singapore's offer of Master's scholarships to Arctic indigenous youth in public policy or law at the National University of Singapore, one of Asia's leading universities. Another example is the annual Korea Arctic Academy summer course organized by the Korea Maritime Institute in Busan, which invites Arctic indigenous and local students and introduces them to Korean scholarship, policy and business concerning especially Arctic shipping and shipbuilding. In terms of research, the corner-stone of Sino-Nordic Arctic research cooperation is the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center (CNARC) founded in 2013. CNARC is a virtual center housed at the Polar Research Institute of China in Shanghai and brings together now nine member institutions from all Nordic countries and eight Chinese member institutions. The most advanced bilateral Sino-Nordic Arctic research initiative is the China-Iceland Arctic Observatory Kárhóll in Northeast Iceland between the Polar Research Institute of China and RANNÍS, which original area of research was aurora space physics (Bertelsen 2016b). On different levels, such initiatives contribute to strengthen Nordic Arctic capacity building and development of human capital on global and Asian-centred Arctic connections. However, such initiatives naturally reach few individuals, who are also among the best educated and most resourceful

in their Arctic communities. It is central that such activities are supported by other activities that reach much further into Nordic Arctic communities and also strengthen and bring forward the value of informal skills. Here tourism offers a significant potential.

Human Capital Formation through Chinese - Nordic Arctic Tourism

As previously explained, Nordic Arctic societies are usually natural resource-based economies, affected by the social, cultural and environmental sustainability challenges that such economies tend to face (Larsen and Huskey 2015). Nordic Arctic societies are also often characterized by low levels of formal human capital, that is, low formal educational attainment levels (Hirshberg and Petrov 2015). It is important concerning the human capital of Nordic Arctic societies to distinguish between formal and informal skills. The formal skill level of Arctic societies is often relatively low, even for the highly developed Nordic Arctic states (DK, FI, IS, NO, SE). However, surviving, operating, fishing, travelling, harvesting, hunting, etc., in very challenging Arctic environments and climates require a high level of informal skills, which are not well captured by notions of formal skill levels or human capital (Greenland Perspective 2016). Nordic Arctic societies are usually small and remote, which put great burdens on Nordic Arctic citizens and communities in fields of education, health, social services, etc. Nordic Arctic citizens have limited educational offers and are obliged to travel far for education, which is both personally and economically challenging. Services such as health, education, government are often challenged by short-term outside work-force with little local cultural, environmental, linguistic and social understanding and experience (Hirshberg and Petrov 2015).

At the same time, Nordic Arctic societies are highly dependent on building their human capital for achieving more socially, economically and environmentally sustainable use of their natural resources (Hirshberg and Petrov 2015). Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Greenland are three Nordic North Atlantic societies, that share a constitutional history as former or current North Atlantic overseas

dependencies of the Kingdom of Denmark. Iceland and the Faroe Islands have very advanced human capital based on quality local education in local language and culture combined with efficient brain circulation, where Icelanders and Faroese pursue education or professional experience abroad and return in large numbers. This strong human capital has allowed Iceland and the Faroe Islands to develop high-value domestic sectors in fisheries, hydropower, geothermal power, offshore oil and gas exploration (Bertelsen, Justinussen, and Smiths 2015).

In contrast, Greenland has large problems with human capital, where the Greenlandic population has – for a Nordic society – very low levels of formal skills or educational attainment (Ren and Chimirri 2018). This much weaker human capital makes it much harder for Greenland to ensure the benefits from its natural resources. Greenland is highly dependent on outside help, especially Danish, human capital in government, health, education and business. This Danish human capital is often recent graduates with little professional experience and with no or very little previous relevant Greenlandic cultural, environmental, linguistic or social experience. This Danish human capital also stays short term in Greenland mainly seeking experience for a regular job back in Denmark (Greenland Perspective 2016; Bertelsen, Justinussen, and Smiths 2015). Greenland is therefore in all sectors, also tourism, highly dependent on raising its formal skill levels through raising the quality of its domestic educational sector from kindergarten to university and with much higher levels of completion and progression, especially for boys and young men. Greenland must also strengthen its brain circulation with Greenlanders completing outside education and professional experience and returning to Greenland. While Greenland may be the extreme case, similar issues are present in most of the other remote areas of the Nordic Arctic.

The Arctic-Chinese encounter between Chinese tourists and Nordic Arctic local communities and indigenous peoples demands human capital in Nordic Arctic societies, but also holds possibilities for human capital formation. Chinese tourism in the Nordic Arctic offers an opportunity for Nordic Arctic

societies to build both formal and informal global skills in a less capital-intensive and less disruptive area of economic activity than the potential large-scale natural resources exploitation and infrastructure projects, which receives much polemical attention. Chinese tourism in the Nordic Arctic allows locals to build knowledge and skills about global economic, political, social, linguistic and cultural questions and developments and to put these skills into work in their local economies. Coinciding with this, such tourism encounters offer avenues for use and strengthening of existing informal skills such as hunting, handicrafts etc. because such activities are often valued by tourists.

Conclusion

In this paper, we use perspectives and empirical examples from various disciplines including international politics, political economy, tourism studies, education and sustainable development studies to offer a multi-disciplinary perspective on the challenges faced by Nordic Arctic communities, as well as the ways in which Chinese tourism to the Nordic Arctic may help alleviate those challenges, aside from mere economic gain. Specifically, we found that Chinese tourism to the Nordic Arctic: (1) Unlike other economic activities such as mining, offers ways to involve local communities instead of excluding them. (2) Offers ways to make use of existing informal skills, to develop formal skills and human capital, as well as to create further demand for human capital. (3) Offers an incentive for local communities (not only for elites admitted to special education programmes) to learn about the place of the Nordic Arctic in an increasingly Asian-centred global economy, as well as an incentive to acquire global skills and knowledge necessary to ensure effective self-representation and local benefits. (4) Offers a view into the future, as challenges associated with encounters between Chinese guests and Nordic hosts, as well as in the development of tourism infrastructure may be an indication of what is to come when more of the potential mining projects, trade deals or political alliances start to materialise.

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