

**China's Role in the Arctic: Observing and Being Observed.** Nong Hong. 2020. New York, NY: Routledge. xiii + 218 p, hardcover. ISBN 9780367278694. USD 99.00.

Over the past few decades, China has markedly expanded its presence in the Arctic and involvement in Arctic affairs. Concurrently, a litany of individuals—from state officials to academics to media commentators—have persistently pondered what this means for the Far North. At issue are China's Arctic aims and how it will go about securing them. Nong Hong provides her take on these matters in her recent book: *China's Role in the Arctic: Observing and Being Observed*. China-and-the-Arctic discourse is, however, a complex phenomenon. A constructive review of Hong's monograph therefore requires some context before engaging the text itself.

While few deny that China has legitimate legal rights and national interests in the Arctic, many worry that the country's authoritarian leadership, aversion to multilateralism, and increasing bellicosity, among other qualities, could be damaging additions to northern affairs. By fixating on accumulating influence and resources and leveraging its considerable economic might to single out and bring others to heel, China might destabilise Arctic geopolitics and subvert established governance regimes. Alternatively, others believe that China understands that it is best served by peaceably pursuing its rights and interests and that the country's active participation in regional institutions could lead to their improvement. Moreover, China is regarded by some as a crucial source of investment; its expanding Arctic activities could elevate northern development.

Seeking to counter alarmist accounts and bolster more optimistic ones, China crafted a preferred view of its Arctic endeavors and disseminates it through official and unofficial channels. The central instrument in this regard is an official white paper titled "China's Arctic Policy," published in 2018. In it, China focuses heavily on "cooperation"—deploying the term 45 times in a roughly 10-page document—and pays particular attention to scientific research, economic opportunities, and respect for international law. But despite its clear attempt to assuage fears, China candidly asserts its legal rights under the Law of the Sea and implicitly challenges existing regional institutions that privilege Arctic states (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States) and groups representing Arctic indigenous peoples (Nielsson & Magnússon, 2019). This tactful messaging is circulated via state authorities and government- and party-linked individuals and organisations.

For her part, Hong is the Executive Director of the Institute for China-America Studies (ICAS), which operates under the aegis of the National Institute for South China Sea Studies (NISCSS). The NISCSS, in turn, is a major research center affiliated with China's Foreign Ministry and State Oceanic Administration dedicated to promoting the country's territorial claims in the South China Sea.

In *China's Role in the Arctic*, Hong examines China's Arctic interests, how China is attempting to realise its Arctic goals, and how China and Arctic states might peacefully and broadly beneficially manage China's increasing regional involvement. She does this in workmanlike fashion across seven chapters devoted to various aspects of China's Arctic engagement: its Arctic white paper, interactions with relevant international institutions, relationships with regional stakeholders, Arctic shipping endeavors, northern resource development activities, Arctic scientific research, and approach to international cooperation in the Far North.

Hong sees China's Arctic pursuits as primarily motivated by economic and national security concerns. Specifically, China seeks a share of the Arctic's vast and relatively untapped natural resources and to take advantage of northern sea lanes opening due to global warming. These opportunities, in addition to their potential bare economic benefits, could also serve an important national security purpose by lessening China's reliance on more southerly raw materials and trade routes that are relatively vulnerable to interdiction in the event of political tensions.

To effectuate its ambitions, Hong describes China concertedly engaging Arctic states bilaterally. She presents Russia and Nordic countries as being relatively receptive to partnerships and Canada and the US as being more reticent (though Hong claims the North American states would benefit from Chinese investment in their Arctic regions). She further states that China "strives to uphold the international legal framework, as it applies to the Arctic," and "seeks to assert its legitimate rights and interests within the legal framework"—this framework largely consists of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (p. 32). In so

doing, China seems to eschew meaningful involvement with the Arctic Council—the main regional forum where China’s influence is expressly subordinated to that of the Arctic states and organisations representing Arctic indigenous peoples—and endeavors to cultivate alternative channels and frameworks for interaction. In fact, Hong lists “establishing a new Arctic international order” as one of “the major challenges and opportunities faced by China” (p. 182).


In order to best manage China’s growing Arctic presence, Hong consistently recommends that China and Arctic states conduct dialogues and pursue projects of mutual interest and benefit. She claims that economic development and scientific research are the chief areas in which such projects manifest. Essentially, Hong posits bilateral, transactional relationships whereby Arctic states gain investment and research support while China gains access to resources and knowhow. She appears to hope that these associations can counterbalance disagreements in other areas—for example, human rights and the stature of non-Arctic states in Arctic governance—so that China can peaceably integrate with the Arctic community. Nevertheless, Hong ends on a pessimistic note, remarking that “the Arctic has no way to staying [*sic*] fully isolated from the competition and tensions that have arisen in other parts of the world,” particularly US-China tensions (p. 210).

*China’s Role in the Arctic* is exceptional in its comprehensive presentation of China’s Arctic activities across sectors. Of special note is Hong’s meticulous recounting of Chinese Arctic research from the beginning of the twentieth century to today (pp. 166–78). She also provides helpful overviews of the legal and political environments in which key China–Arctic state interactions occur.

There are, however, instances of Hong not engaging relevant scholarship. For example, in the context of assessing relations between Arctic indigenous groups and non-Arctic states (China in particular), Hong laments that discussion of such relations “is missing” (p. 79). She then proceeds to substantially rely on a 2015 blog post by Scott Harrison for her analysis (Harrison, 2015). While the literature on this subject is nascent, Hong neglects pertinent writings—particularly that of Dalee Sambo Dorrough (2019)—which speak directly to Arctic indigenous peoples’ concerns regarding China. Hong also overlooks a substantial body of work on the interests and political situations of Arctic indigenous groups that might inform her appraisal. Resultantly, a subsection claiming to address “both why and how China engages [Arctic] indigenous people” falls short of these goals (p. 80).

*China’s Role in the Arctic* also suffers broader limitations. First, Hong does not speak to some of the most obvious issues with

China’s Arctic approach. For example, though China professes fealty to UNCLOS in the Arctic, it militantly pursues maritime claims in the South China Sea that apparently flout international law. Treatment of this dichotomy would have been welcome. Second, Hong is, at times, overly laudatory of Chinese leadership and policies, which detracts from her analysis. At one point, she remarks that “since China’s chairman Xi Jinping took office in 2012, China has presented the world with a series of *spectacular* initiatives for multilateral cooperation” (p. 15 (emphasis added)). And third, Hong largely takes China’s 2018 Arctic white paper at face value and often uncritically cites the document as an authoritative account of China’s Arctic posture. The white paper is certainly important in terms of potential policy, but it is also a vehicle of political messaging that should be shrewdly assessed. The aforementioned limitations make a particular exchange in a 2016 interview Hong conducted with Foreign Policy relevant to potential readers, in which “Hong described the practice of deliberately manipulating or withholding information to avoid offending Beijing” (Fish, 2016).

In sum, *China’s Role in the Arctic* can certainly provide a great deal of value to those studying China and Arctic politics. It should, however, be engaged astutely. (Andreas Kuersten , Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA ([andreas.kuersten@georgetown.edu](mailto:andreas.kuersten@georgetown.edu)))

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