Northern lights to neon lights: Kirkenes to transform into polar Chinatown

DOI reference: 10.1080/13673882.2018.00001029

By Mia M. Bennett, The University of Hong Kong

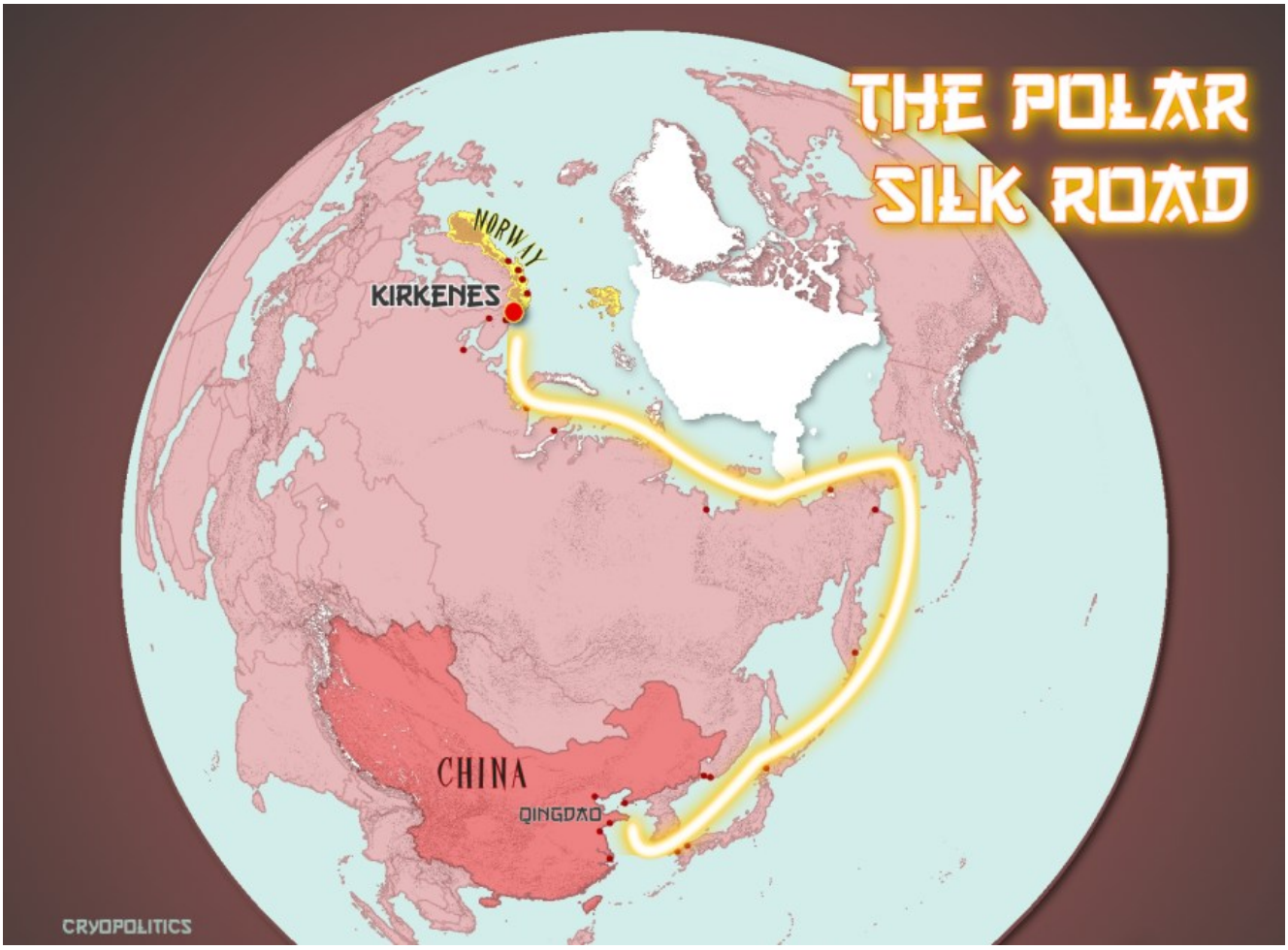
In this article, Mia Bennett explores the emerging socio-economic, cultural and political geography of the 'Polar Silk road through the lens of the Norwegian town of Kirkenes. This article was first published on Mia's own blog – Cryopolitics

Sitting on the rocky coastline of the slate gray Barents Sea, the hilly city of Kirkenes, Norway is located at a literal crossroads between east and west. Russia is only 20 minutes away by car, while Finland lies 40 minutes south. Kirkenes' location on the fault line between two civilizations often at odds has led it to fall repeatedly into the cross-hairs of war. But the city is also an unlikely melting pot where on street signs, the backwards R ("Я") of the Cyrillic alphabet sits comfortably astride the A with a party hat ("Å") of the Norwegian language, as

one friend likes to call it. Come February 2019, Chinese characters will also be adorning local street signs. For the Barents Spektakel, a wintertime arts and culture festival held annually in Kirkenes since 2005 with upwards of 10,000 attendees, “lightboxes, signs and some quickly learnt Chinese phrases will make up the new streetscape, giving Kirkenes a new face and welcoming the future as the most important city on the Polar Silk Road,” according to the official website.

In February 2019, street signs in Kirkenes will temporarily go from bilingual to trilingual. Photo: Cryopolitics rendition.

This year, the festival theme is “The World’s Northernmost Chinatown.” Michael Miller, who oversees media and public relations for the Norwegian collective behind the festival, affirmed that it was an “obvious choice.” Speaking by phone from Kirkenes, he explained, “With China’s White Paper about the Arctic and their Belt and Road Initiative, and by de facto their Polar Silk Road, Kirkenes is kind of placed along that route. And the development of Kirkenes and being a Chinatown, or being heavily influenced and invested in by China, it’s a very real possibility.”



Recognizing China's arrival in the Arctic, and specifically along the Polar Silk Road, in February 2019, the city of Kirkenes, Norway will host the Barents Spektakel with the theme, "The World's Northernmost Chinatown." *Illustration: Cryopolitics.*

Helle Siljeholm, Artistic Director for the festival's 2019 edition, elaborated on the deliberate choice of the "Chinatown" concept, which neatly captures an east-meets-west feel while conveying a creative buzz. "Most Chinatowns that I've been to have been hot spots for cultural invention and artists," she described. Since the theme is also easy to understand, Siljeholm believes, "This will be a way to bring hopefully as many people as possible – locals, regionals, and internationals – into discussions about our potential future." Emphasizing the plural, she stressed, "And there are many futures."

A global history

The rise of China is clearly affecting Kirkenes. Yet this is not the first time the city of 3,500 has found itself at the epicenter of global transformations despite lying at the edge of the European continent. This past June, on a cold and blustery day, I

listened to Rune Rafaelsen, the outspoken Mayor of the Sør-Varanger municipality in which Kirkenes is located, run through the history of the complex borders in the place in which he was born and raised. In 1814, after Norway and Denmark lost the war against Sweden, the two countries entered into a personal union with their victorious neighbour. A final treaty demarcating the border was signed in 1826. “In Oslo at that time, which was called Kristiania, they didn’t know a thing,” Rafaelsen quipped. “And they still don’t.”

Throughout the long eighteenth century, international events reverberated across this corner of the North. During the Crimean War (1851-1853), fears that Russia would seize Sør-Varanger motivated Sweden to cease its alliance with Russia and instead take sides with England and France. “Big politics plays a role up here and has consequences on other places,” Rafaelsen reminded in an illustration of how global events can and do impact peripheries like the Arctic.

After the Soviet collapse, rather than be a pawn in yet another geopolitical great game, the city leveraged its strategic location to facilitate international diplomacy. In 1993, the International Barents Secretariat(IBS) was launched by the foreign ministers of four countries interested in establishing the so-called Barents Euro-Arctic Council: Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Russia.

Rune Rafaelsen, Mayor of Sør-Varanger, addresses the Calotte Academy at the IBS in June 2018.

Speaking at the IBS offices, Rafelsen described the treaty that established the secretariat as "one of the most advanced political coups." He underscored the luck involved with its timing, noting that the treaty "would not have been possible half a year before or half a year after." With a twinkle in his eyes, the Mayor elaborated, "[Former Russian President Boris] Yeltsin said, 'Go to Kirkenes and let the region develop.' He had this vision and it was signed. And even the EU signed the Treaty by mistake."

Mistake or not, given the complexity of the borders in the Barents region, promoting peace and cooperation is vital. Similar to how the Arctic Council functions at a higher level, the IBS maintains an open dialogue between countries by avoiding discussion of issues that are too hot to handle, namely security. Russian-born Roman Gokkoev, executive officer of IBS, described, "Cooperation excludes all matters of security and defense, which makes it possible to continue." He added, "On both sides of the region, they really value this window for dialogue between Europe and Russia." Maintaining cooperation in the Barents Sea has been especially important as conflagrations have erupted once again on the Crimean Peninsula.

The International Barents Secretariat in Kirkenes, Norway.

Events like Barents Spektakel bring yet another dimension to a city Siljeholm called “maybe the most geopolitical spot we have in Norway.” The artistic director described, “I think that the festival has very much helped to bring about a very different understanding, for example of the possible collaborations between Norway and Russia. The festival has helped to put Kirkenes and what is going on here on the map in a very different way.”

China comes to Kirkenes

Whereas northern Norway has dealt with the effects of European wars before, pressures are now rising from more distant origins: the Middle and Far East. First there was the refugee crisis in 2016, when migrants fleeing war in Syria and other parts of the Middle East were coming over the border from Russia on bicycle. This mode of transport provided a seemingly simple solution to overcoming the prohibition against foot traffic on the Russia-Norway border. Authorities moved quickly to close this loophole, however, shutting out refugees.

A second change to be reckoned with, and a potentially more impactful one, is China’s economic ascendance. Since the refugee crisis, Chinese investment in the area around Kirkenes has grown significantly. It has mostly taken the form of tourism centered around the city’s surrounding winter wonderland, replete with glittering green aurora and sparkling white snow. Rafaelsen, the Mayor, observed, “Four years ago, most of the hotels were closed at Christmas, but now it’s hard to get a room.” He attributed the increase in bookings to tourists from Asia, especially China.

On that cloudy summer day illuminated by the flat light of the polar sun, he suggested that during next year’s Barents Spektakel, “We will turn Kirkenes into Chinatown because there are ten or more enterprises that are working daily with China here.” Months later, it’s clear he was not joking.

The world’s northernmost Chinatown

Graphic design for Barents Spektakel. Courtesy Pikene på Broen AS

Reflecting the sea-change that has occurred in the Arctic in a short amount of time, the "Polar Chinatown" theme for the upcoming Barents Spektakel is a far cry from that of the first-ever event in 2005, when "Indigenous Peoples, National States, and Borders" took top billing. As recently as 1991, the Soviet Union's Northern Sea Route was closed to foreign shipping. Today, given the passage's increasingly oriental orientation, it's becoming common to refer to it as the Polar Silk Road. Kirkenes has played a key role in that transformation from the beginning: the first vessel ever allowed to sail between two foreign ports via Russia's Arctic shipping passage departed from its port, carrying 100,000 tons of iron ore from the local Bjørnevatn mine to Qingdao, China in September 2010.

Miller, the festival's Media Relations Manager, explained that the event's aim is to invite people to sample hot topics in the Barents region from a range of outlooks. He noted, "The beauty of using artists and artwork and cultural events to talk about these events is that it introduces a whole lot of perspectives into the discussion. I guess the overall goal is to create a meeting place and have that discussion with people who are experts, academics, artists, and politicians, but also people who live in this area – that's super important to us." A strong volunteer contingent comes every year across the border from Russia, for instance, fostering cross-border ties during an otherwise tense time.

Speaking more directly about Barents Spektakel's eastern theme for 2019, Miller

added,

> *"Specifically with Chinatown, it's to get people to think about the future of Kirkenes or the Barents region as well. There's a lot of uncertainty with the investments and with the interest.*
>
> *Some people are very skeptical and not sure what it means for Kirkenes to suddenly be on the Polar Silk Road.*
>
> *But at the same time, there are local politicians and businessmen who are very excited about Chinese investment in the North. So I guess there's these two points of view and we just want to have a discussion about what is the reality: what should we look forward to, what should we be cautious of, and things like that."*

At stake in the debate, he underscored, is not just the ownership of resources or even ownership of the Barents regions, but the identity of the North, too.

Historically, the county of Finnmark in which Kirkenes is situated has been an open and welcoming place, according to Miller. At the same time, as with any small community, he highlighted, "There's always a fear of being swallowed up by a larger investor, and that doesn't have to necessarily be Chinese investment. There is a history of resources being pulled out of the North by European investors and Norwegian investors, so it's not specifically a Chinese problem. It's something the North has kind of dealt with for most of its history. In fact, that's one of the questions this theme will look at: Is this new investment and new partnership any different? Is it worse or better than what the North has experienced in the past?"

While the Barents Spektakel program is still under development, the organizers are hoping to bring in Chinese artists and have as much Chinese influence in the festival as possible. Already, the participation of Chinese visual artist Lin Wang, who splits her time between Norway and her home country, is confirmed, as is that of Xia Jia, an award-winning female science fiction author from the ancient Chinese Silk Road city of Xi'an.

Some of the festival's oriental feel will even come from local stakeholders, who Miller said are excited for an event he claims "really does transform the town."

He explained, “The businesses here have been very curious and supportive of what we’re doing. The shop names will be translated into Chinese and we are making signage to give a feel of Chinatown.” Light boxes, special signs, and hotel names, too, will all be rendered in the language’s distinctive logograms. A Chinese resident of Kirkenes working as an advisor to the festival is helping with translation and cultural touches. In addition, a local Norwegian chef who lives part of the year in China and speaks Chinese will help curate a pop-up Chinese food event.

During our phone call, I mentioned the vivid neon street lighting where I live in Hong Kong, a streetscape Miller joked is his goal to recreate. “Obviously, we can’t have the intensity or the chaos of a proper Chinatown, but we can get this feeling that Kirkenes has its own brand of Chinatown,” he suggested. In this tidy, windswept city, it might also be hard to duplicate the grime and din of alleyways choked by the aromas of dried seafood, ginseng, and sesame oil, but it won’t hurt to try.

Enter Bladerunner: Neon lights on a rainy night in Hong Kong. Mia Bennett

If all of this seems like a parallel universe, that's because it is. Siljeholm noted, "It's a little bit David Lynch," referencing the film director celebrated for his surreal, unsettling style. "It's between reality and fiction all the time because the investments are coming and the changes are there," she continued.

If the Chinese Dream is only just arriving in Kirkenes, the Chinese reality actually has longer roots. "You know, Kirkenes has traditionally had a bond to China via the workers' movement, via communism, and via Russia. So there's a cultural bond in the north more than the south," Siljeholm said, drawing a distinction with Oslo, the city that the mayor jested earlier doesn't "know a thing" about northern on-goings. Kirkenes' eastern linkage is getting a "boost-up" in the modern version, Siljeholm determined, one that involves "science, economy, politics, all of that – and of course culture."

Consequently, an art festival like Barents Spektakel makes for a useful platform to explore and interrogate these changes. The Oslo-based art director remarked, "As an artist, you are also always looking at the structures of society, so here you are questioning the Norwegian structures and contexts and politics, as well as the Chinese."

China: in Norway to stay

Barents Spektakel will give Wong Kar-wai vibes to Kirkenes for just five days, but there is long-term potential for Chinese impact, too. Earlier this year, the Mayor brought a visiting delegation to a local factory producing special lights for industry and airplanes. "When you go into a new Airbus, you must know: these are produced in Kirkenes and in Murmansk," he pointed out. The Chinese are potentially interested in using lights from this factory in food-producing greenhouses. (Think of them as long-term light boxes slightly different than the ones that will decorate Kirkenes' streets for the Barents Spektakel).

This industrial interest connects with another surprising area of Chinese attention in the Arctic: agriculture. For a country that has 20 percent of the world's population but only 10 percent of its arable land, learning about the skills and techniques that have been developed in what is one of the world's most forbidding frontiers for farming may prove illuminating. In the last week of May, Rafaelsen kicked off a Norwegian-Russian-Chinese research seminar focused on developing

Arctic agriculture and production.

More conventional resources like oil and gas, which are being slowly but surely developed in the Barents Sea, are attracting Chinese interest as well. Despite the high cost of doing business in Norway as opposed to Russia, which is still suffering from a financial crisis and a weak ruble, Rafaelsen claimed, "The Chinese prefer to set up headquarters in Kirkenes than Murmansk because it's more effective and can even be cheaper." Describing the growth of Chinese investment in the area, he explained, "More and more, Chinese are working for Gazprom and Novatek, doing lots of seismic shooting in the Barents Sea, and using Kirkenes as a harbor. So this is very important that we now have a Chinese presence. And everything is linked to the Northern Sea Route."

Given Rafaelsen's excitement about Chinese investment, I asked whether locals had any misgivings. He shrugged off such sentiments. "We want the Chinese to do business with local Norwegian companies," the Mayor brusquely answered.

Kirkenes: connecting the Northern Sea Route with the Arctic Railway – with Asia's help

In previous years, Kirkenes' ice-free harbor close to the Northern Sea Route formed the crux of the city's efforts to transform itself into an Arctic hub. Yet rather than set its sights solely across the water, the port town is now looking south over the tundra too. Rafaelsen explained the idea behind the so-called Arctic Railway, which would link northern Norway to northern Finland and the Baltics. "We have made a small report about how can we manage to realize the railway from Kirkenes through Helsinki and a tunnel under the Baltic Sea to Tallinn," he offered.

Building this infrastructure, however, would be "impossible without cooperation from China, Japan, South Korea, and so on," Rafaelsen admitted. In his view, China should be eager to invest. He pointed out the importance of an alternative to the Suez Canal for China, a country for which 85 percent of all exports and imports are transported by ship. Instead, Rafaelsen said, "If you can go through the Northern Sea Route, that will be a big game-changer."

In September 2010, the aforementioned bulk carrier delivering iron ore from Kirkenes to China made the voyage in just 18 days. The same delivery would have taken 40 days via the Suez Canal. The time to travel the Northern Sea Route continues to get quicker as climate change accelerates. Rafaelsen, ever the booster, excitedly described, "It's enormous if you use the Northern Sea Route. It's money-saving, it's more environmental, and you are using less fuel. And, there's no pirates there, so it's a very safe way to transport. So this is what we are working on."

He then launched into some lofty statistics that would not look out of place in a glossy brochure about the Arctic's future, predicting a minimum of ten trains travelling south from Kirkenes every day, each with a length of 750 meters, all possible thanks to a fjord that's naturally shaped for harboring big ships. Already, vessels up to 400,000 tons have docked here, he claimed. *(I was unable to find further confirmation of this, but if it is true, then the Port of Kirkenes would be able to accommodate the largest ships in the world, so-called Chinamax vessels that are too big to fit through even the Panama or Suez Canal).*

More soberly, Rafaelsen, when asked about the environmental impact of developments such as the Arctic Railway, conceded,

> *"All industrial activities have a shadow. This is the most destroyed area of Norway. If you look at the mine, it's open-pit mine. No place has taken out so much stone. It's a huge mountain you have built up."*

Sydvaranger Gruve's iron ore at Bjørnevatn, near Kirkenes, Norway. Photo: Mia Bennett, June 2018.

The tailings and toxins do not seem to have dissuaded the Norwegians – and the Finns, for that matter – from planning to build an Arctic Railway across the tundra. Nor, for that matter, has it stopped the Norwegians from extracting Arctic oil, which the government and multinational corporations continue to push forward. Rafaelsen, ever the industrial optimist, described, "There are no examples of how oil has destroyed fishing, but there are examples of how fish farming has destroyed fjords."

Transport isn't the only thing in Kirkenes' future. The town has a remarkably diversified economy for an Arctic settlement. Ship repair, offshore industrial and services, and iron ore mining are traditionally the town's largest sectors. The nearby Bjørnevatn iron ore mine, however, was shut down after 90 years of operation in 2006, only to reopen again briefly from 2009-2015, the period during which the landmark shipment was made to China. The second time the mine closed, 400 of its workers found themselves out of a job one month before Christmas.

Now, the hope is that China's massive appetite for iron ore will stimulate the reopening of production. This has already happened in other iron-rich areas like

Quebec, where an entirely new multi-user dock was built at the Port of Sept-Îles to accommodate the 400,000-ton Chinamax vessels. In the past 15 years, China's growing demand for the mineral critical for steel production drove a mind-boggling 94% of the increase in the global iron ore trade.

Rafaelsen offered, "I think the future for us is in mines, tourism, and trading with Russia." He also spoke of the recreational opportunities in Finnmark, which boasts "three hundred lakes, fishing, and hunting." Kirkenes, then, could be a place where nature enthusiasts and industrialists unite. During a visit to the open-pit iron mine, our guide claimed that environmental regulations were so strict that it was possible to go fishing or hunting just a few hundred meters away from the extraction site without any problems.

Even as local and regional opportunities remain important, Kirkenes is expanding its gaze far beyond the city limits. For starters, Russia has always been just next door. At one point, Rafaelsen joked, "In Norwegian history, Kirkenes is kind of a Russian town in Norway."

Yet if this winter's Barents Spektakel is any kind of prediction, Kirkenes will soon become a kind of Chinese town in Norway. Just what exactly it means to be the world's northernmost Chinatown both now and in the future will be explored through sci-fi panels, cross-cultural artistic experiences, and pop-up Chinese food during the February festival. As the Polar Silk Road makes waves in northern Norway, Siljeholm, the artistic director, intimated, "We are making the undercurrents a little more visible."

Next stop: the Middle Kingdom. Photo: Cryopolitics rendition.

About the author

Mia M. Bennett is an assistant professor in the Department of Geography and School of Modern Languages and Cultures (China Studies Programme) at the University of Hong Kong. Her research examines the geopolitics of infrastructure development in the Arctic and areas within China's Belt and Road Initiative through fieldwork and remote sensing. She is founder and editor of the Cryopolitics blog and regularly freelances for publications such as The Maritime Executive.