



**Closing speech  
by  
the President of Iceland  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson  
at  
the Second China-Iceland Arctic Symposium  
University of Iceland  
17 August 2012**

*The speech was delivered without notes.  
This is a transcript of the recording.*

Your Excellencies  
Distinguished scientists  
Ladies and gentlemen

Let me begin by thanking the leadership of China and the Polar Institute and the State Authorities for making the journey of Xuelong to Iceland possible, but above all to have allowed us here this morning to witness what is truly a historic event in the world of global science.

I think all of us have today reflected on how remarkable it is that our scientific communities have come together in this way so we can comprehend and understand more profoundly what we are doing to Mother Earth and the risks the future holds.

Some years ago it was often said in Western circles that in dealing with the threats of climate change, China was the unknown factor. Many people stated that the biggest stumbling block in international action, coordination and policies in dealing with the threat of irreversible climate change was the lack of interest and action from China.

What we have seen here today are remarkable presentations by a young generation of Chinese scientists, challenging those views of the Western World.

So let me here today thank the President of China, Hu Jintao, and Premier Wen Jiabao for their leadership in this effort. Without their

support and their positive reaction to our invitation, Xuelong would not be in Reykjavík harbour today and we would not have had this extraordinary scientific gathering.

There is also a wider message in the support of the President and the Prime Minister of China for this effort. It signals not only the willingness of China to engage in international cooperation of this kind, but also to lay scientific foundations for global policy-making in the years to come. Without strong scientific foundations we, the nations of the Earth, will not be able to come together to create the necessary effective policies and results. To that extent the support by President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao for the journey of Xuelong to Iceland and this scientific cooperation is a wider signal that should be witnessed and observed and responded to, not just by us here in Iceland, but by everyone who is concerned about the future of Mother Earth.

When I travel to Alaska next week to participate in the Alaska Imperative Conference, where many scientists and leaders from the United States and elsewhere will come together to talk about how Alaska reflects the future of the Arctic, the first part of my story will be to describe the visit of Xuelong to Iceland and to describe the impressions from the discussions here this morning.

For more than a decade, I have been privileged to participate in international cooperation and dialogue on climate change. But this morning I heard for the first time strong statements of how what is happening in the Arctic has a profound influence on the climate in China, on the possibility for sustainable development in China, on the future of more than a billion people.

That is something which I am sure we in the Arctic have not taken to our heart, that what is happening in our neighbourhood will have a profound effect on the prosperity and the future and the welfare of the people of China and thereby on a large proportion of mankind.

Here we have witnessed presentations by an extraordinary young generation of Chinese scientists. It is a little worrying for us in Iceland to note the age difference between the Icelandic scientists speaking here today and the Chinese scientists. This should encourage us to bring the young Icelandic scientific community more effectively into this cooperation.

All this is an encouragement to strengthen our cooperation, not only of the eight Arctic countries but also those like China and others who are interested in the Arctic, especially when we see the scientific evidence of

how our neighbourhood and its fate is affecting the life and the future of people in China.

Last year at this University, I was privileged to host another gathering, the Third Pole Environmental Workshop. The leaders of the Tibetan Plateau Research Institute concerning themselves primarily with the Himalayan region came to Iceland to discuss with Icelandic glaciologists and other scientists and colleagues from the United States and Europe as well as India, Pakistan, Nepal and other Himalayan countries what is happening to the glaciers in the Himalayas.

At that gathering we concentrated on the notion that we all live in an ice-dependent world; whether it is the ice in the Arctic or Antarctica or the ice in the Himalayan region. For us in Iceland to be now actively engaged in a wide-ranging scientific cooperation with China on both the Arctic and the Himalayan region is not only a manifestation of the scientific achievement over the last fifty years or so, by this University and many Icelandic research institutes, but also holds a great promise for the young generation of Icelandic scientists. They can at the same time be strongly rooted in their scientific endeavours here in Iceland and participate in what I consider one of the most important scientific cooperation projects in the world.

As the study of the ice has indicated, and the study of the oceans, we only have a few decades until we might reach the tipping point of no return. That is a frightening thought. It is absolutely necessary that all nations, small and large, come together in this effort and create comprehensive policy commitments based on the scientific evidence.

This threat has been illuminated by science and research. That is why the journey from China to Iceland, your arrival in my country yesterday and this meeting here today and what will happen in the coming days, is of global historic importance. As I will tell other leaders and other nations: We in Europe and our friends in the United States no longer have any excuse for not becoming more active and determined on this issue when China is showing the scientific leadership by bringing the Xuelong across the north-eastern passage and then back through the North Pole.

Although it is not the topic of this morning, it has been the excuse put forward by many in both Europe and in the United States that there was no need for action because China wasn't really on board. What we have seen here today is an extraordinary manifestation of the Chinese arrival in the global scientific community dedicated to research on our ice-dependent world.

One of the figures put on the screen was that the coastline of China could move 400 kilometres inland if the ice keeps on melting. I was privileged to go to Antarctica earlier this year, with a delegation instigated by Al Gore, and including many of the world foremost scientists. It was one of the most revealing journeys I have ever taken. Antarctica is, as many of you know, the size of the United States and Mexico put together. Greenland is about a half the size of Europe. We sometimes think in Iceland that Greenland is like the Faroe Islands, one of our small neighbours! We forget that this mass of ice is half the size of Europe.

By spending a week or so in Antarctica one begins to realize that if this huge ice mass, the size of the United States and Mexico put together, with a thickness of one or two kilometres of glaciers in most parts, starts to melt, then the prospect of rising sea levels of one or two or three meters begins to be real. That could in fact happen within the lifetime of my grandchildren's children.

It is only about four decades since we knew of the existence of the conveyor belt that Wally Broecker brought to the attention of the world. I was privileged to invite him to Iceland some years ago and he gave an impressive lecture in this very hall. It was not until my father was about seven or eight years old that the first human beings arrived in Antarctica. Still, mankind knows more about the Moon than we know about the oceans. That is a fact. The research on the oceans has been so limited but the race to the Moon was so extensive that we now have a greater knowledge of the Moon than we have of the Earth's oceans.

The fact that Antarctica was only relatively recently visited by human beings, the fact that Wally Broecker, who discovered the conveyor belt, is still alive and working in New York City, and the fact that we still have to catch up with the Moon with respect to the ocean, should be a reminder to us all that we are dealing with the climate of Mother Earth almost like stumbling in darkness. That is why we should be careful in our undertakings and our actions. The only light that is being brought into this darkness is brought there by the scientific community, by international scientific cooperation and it is both an honour and a privilege for my small nation to be able to cooperate in this way with the largest nation on earth, China.

I want to take this opportunity here today to thank not only the President and the Premier of China, but also Vice-President Xi, and the leaders of the Polar Institute and the other State bodies, for their friendship and their cooperation. We have high hopes for its success. We

think it can hold great promises, not just for us, or this University, or the young scientific community in my country, but also for the entire world.

If Iceland and China start cooperating effectively in this way, as we have seen this morning, there is no longer any excuse for other nations not to join us in this cooperation. In that sense, strong cooperation between China and Iceland on the ice-dependent world, the Arctic and the Himalayas, could be a wake-up call for everybody else; a wake-up call which is urgently needed because we only have a few decades until it will be too late.

So, my friends, I thank you all for making the long journey to my country. My wife and I will be honoured to welcome the Chinese scientists and the crew of Xuelong to our Residence, Bessastadir later today. We are looking forward to coming aboard the icebreaker but above all we see this as an indication that there is still hope for all of us, the people of Planet Earth so our children and grandchildren will not be able to blame us for having destroyed the environment.

With these words I thank all those who have brought this together. I thank the Icelandic Authorities, the Ministry, the research institutions and the others for bringing all of us together. I thank my friend the Ambassador for his cooperation, but above all I thank those members of the Polar Institute for having kept the promise they gave me on my visit to Shanghai two years ago: that they would indeed be happy to see the Xuelong in Iceland. And now she is here; the proof that Chinese scientists keep their word!