

Atypical Moves along the Road: A historical survey on climate change and farmers' northwesterly migration from central China

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Abstract

A common Chinese proverb—"A peacock flies southeast"—could describe the normative idea of the southeasterly spread of agriculturalists as a trend in historical China. Indeed, northwest China was the least attractive place to agriculturalists because of much harsher climatic conditions. Along with the progression of farming technology and introduction of high-yielding crop varieties in the past, the historical zone of sedentary agriculturalists generally expanded from the north towards the south of China. Previous research on the historical northwesterly movements of Chinese farmers has relied on isolated case studies and suggested a variety of causes. The impression of northwesterly migration as somehow atypical or counterintuitive is based on a generalized picture, rather than a careful evaluation of the narrative history of each case or any individual migrant. The present study is the first attempt to bridge geographical and historical methodologies considering the influences of climate change to supplement current ideas about Chinese migration. The present study surveyed 195 individual cases of northwesterly migration of agriculturalists from central China and along Silk Road Region from 200BC to 1400AD, comparing historical records of these migration cases to extensive paleoclimate data. We found statistical evidence that the northwesterly movements of farmers increased when climate was drier. The historical records were consulted to explain this seemingly atypical pattern. We conclude that the agriculturalists' northwesterly migration increased during dry periods mainly as a response to the southward invasion of northern nomads, which was also a result of increased aridity. These conclusions add to the growing literature that indicates climate change as a central driver in intergroup conflict, having geopolitical implications. Forward-looking strategies relating to trade and immigration in the region, including the One Belt and One Road Initiative, ought to consider the shrinkage of rainfall under the potential threats of global warming. Increased aridity may have sizeable effects on political, social, or economic structures far from north-central China.

Biography

Qing Pei is currently working as Assistant Professor in Department of Social Sciences, Education University of Hong Kong. He used to work as the fellow in the Cambridge University, UK; the Swiss National Science Foundation Fellow at the University of Zurich, Switzerland; and the Post-doctoral Fellow in the University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong. His research interests mainly encompass environmental and historical geography, environmental humanities, quantitative history, and social responses to climate change. His research has been mainly conducted to cover the long-term temporal (centennial to millennia) and large spatial scale (Europe, China and North Hemisphere). So far, his work has been supported with grants from Research Grants Council of Hong Kong and PAGES (Past Global Changes).