

Abstract for the 2019 interdisciplinary conference in Jena

Tracing the dispersal route of millet agriculture to the Russian Far East

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Millet cultivation took place early in Northeast China (7650 cal BP in the case of the Xinglonggou site), one center for origin of millet agriculture. By contrast, it did not appear on the Korean Peninsula until ca. 5500 BP; nor did it land on the southern Russian Far East until ca. 5000 BP. The lag in millet cultivation between Northeast China and its surrounding regions suggests possible routes for the dispersal of millet across Northeast Asia.

So far the earliest millet remains in the Russian Far East are dated to 4800—4600 BP and associated with sites located in southern Primorye, which borders on eastern Heilongjiang of Northeast China on its east. It is widely accepted that millet farming as not independently developed in the Russian Far East and that millet farming was introduced from Northeast China.

If millet farming originally came from Northeast China, then, questions arise: who brought it to the southern Primorye of the Russian Far East and through which possible routes? These are interesting questions that have been little explored. And to find answers to them, one must carefully examine archaeological materials that are currently available and, more importantly, incorporate multiple lines of evidence—evidence from other disciplines as well, such as genetic studies and historical comparative linguistics.

This paper emphasizes on a cultural reconstruction of lifeways in Northeast China and southern Primorye of the Russian Far East some 8000 to 4000 years ago. It intends to demonstrate interactions and relations between the two regions through a comparative perspective and on the basis of archaeological, genetic, and linguistic evidence. Specifically, it tries to explore the possible inland route for millet dispersal, from the Liao River valley to eastern Heilongjiang/southern Primorye.

The paper will examine a number of sites—in the Liao River valley and eastern Heilongjiang/southern Primorye, as well as those in between—and compares their associated material remains. It is proposed that the contact between the Liao River valley and eastern Heilongjiang between 8000 to 4000 BP can be substantiated by archaeological evidence, genetic, and linguistic evidence.

Dr. Li has examined archaeological evidence from the China side, and his research discloses important information: 8000—7800 BP, millet farming was first practiced at Xinglongwa culture sites in the West Liao River valley of Northeast China. 6500—6000 BP, millet farming spread south (Weijiawopu); in the meanwhile or shortly after, it spread to the periphery of West Liao River valley in the north/northeast (Yuanbaogou at 6140 BP, Haminmangha at 5500—5000 BP, Houtaomuga at 6800—5500 BP). 5000—4000 BP, millet farming was dispersed into the present-day Heilongjiang (to the north at Angangxi-Tengjiagang by 4800 BP; to the east at Yabuli and Yinggeling at 5000—4000 and 5500—4500 BP, respectively). Given the fact that (so far) the earliest millets in southern Primorye are dated to 4800—4600 BP (or no earlier than 5000 BP), millets in southern Primorye were likely to be introduced from eastern Heilongjiang (or surrounding regions). In other words, an inland route—that is, millet farming was first dispersed beyond the Liao River valley, then moving towards the northern and eastern parts of Northeast China, and finally arrived in southern Primorye via eastern Heilongjiang—seems not unlikely.

Dr. Sergusheva will examine a number of sites in southern Primorye, which are dated roughly between 8000 and 4000 BP. She will pay close attention to sites geographically close to eastern Heilongjiang of Northeast China, and focus on household artefactual assemblages from the investigated sites. It is hoped that Dr. Sergusheva's research could add comparable information to what have been understood about Neolithic populations and their ways of lives in southern Primorye.

Dr. Ning will present an overview of human genetic history on both sides—eastern Heilongjiang and southern Primorye. He will pay attention to regional and local human genetic relationships, which can be very informative for understanding the nature (for example, cultural diffusion vs. population migration) of human interactions between eastern Heilongjiang and southern Primorye. His research will make use of published data (from the West Liao River valley and the Boisman culture sites) and his own data (i.e. Houtaomuga, Erdaojingzi, and Haminmangha).

Dr. Robbeets will examine the etymologies reconstructable for Northeast China and the Russian Far East. If the inland route indeed existed, etymologies for valley, mountain, woods etc. will be expected to be present in proto-Transeurasian, while maritime/coastal vocabulary is absent in proto-Transeurasian.

Our paper aims to integrate archaeological, genetic, and linguistic evidence, in the hope of shedding light on (1) the dispersal of millet farming to the Russian Far East; (2) the possible routes and timing that the dispersal of millet farming followed; and (3) the history and nature of human interactions between Northeast China and the southern Russian Far East; and finally (4) the origin of millet farming in southern Primorye.