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Multi-proxy dating the ‘Millennium Eruption’ of Changbaishan to late 946 CE

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Abstract

Ranking among the largest volcanic eruptions of the Common Era (CE), the ‘Millennium Eruption’ of Changbaishan produced a widely-dispersed tephra layer (known as the B-Tm ash), which represents an important tie point for palaeoenvironmental studies in East Asia. Hitherto, there has been no consensus on its age, with estimates spanning at least the tenth century CE. Here, we identify the cosmogenic radiocarbon signal of 775 CE in a subfossil larch engulfed and killed by pyroclastic currents emplaced during the initial rhyolitic phase of the explosive eruption. Combined with glaciochemical evidence from Greenland, this enables us to date the eruption to late 946 CE. This secure date rules out the possibility that the Millennium Eruption contributed to the collapse of the Bohai Kingdom (Manchuria/Korea) in 926 CE, as has previously been hypothesised. Further, despite the magnitude of the eruption, we do not see a consequent cooling signal in tree-ring-based reconstructions of Northern Hemisphere summer temperatures. A tightly-constrained date for the Millennium Eruption improves the prospect for further investigations of historical sources that may shed light on the eruption’s impacts, and enhances the value of the B-Tm ash as a chronostratigraphic marker.

1. Introduction

The ‘Millennium Eruption’ of Changbaishan volcano (also known as Mt. Paektu and Baegdusan), is so-called because it has been thought to have occurred approximately 1000 CE. The volcano is located on the border between China and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (Fig. 1a and b). The Millennium Eruption disgorged an estimated 24 km³ of dense magma (Horn and Schmincke, 2000), mostly as rhyolitic (comendite) tephra but with a subordinate quantity of trachyte. Stratigraphic relationships demonstrate clearly that the rhyolitic magma was erupted before the trachytic magma. Based on pumice clast size distributions, Horn and Schmincke estimated that the eruption column easily passed the tropopause. The tephra fallout associated with the rhyolitic

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stage of the eruption extends across northeast China (Sun et al., 2015), the far-east costal region of Russia (Andreeva et al., 2011) and the Korean peninsula. It is found in deep-sea sediment cores from the Japan Sea (Machida and Arai, 1983), as well as in lacustrine and peat sedimentary archives from Japan (e.g., Hughes et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2016; McLean et al., 2016, Fig. 1c). Known as the Baegdusan-Tomakomai ash (B-Tm layer), it represents a key stratigraphic marker in palaeoenvironmental and archaeological contexts (Chen et al., 2016). Millennium Eruption tephra have also been identified in a high-resolution ice core (NEEM-2011-S1) from northern Greenland (Sun et al., 2014a). Despite substantial efforts to date the paroxysm, mostly using radiocarbon techniques, the resulting estimates span at least the tenth century CE (Fig. 2; Sun et al., 2014b). Attempts to date the eruption have also prompted searches of mediaeval texts for reports suggestive of volcanic phenomena (Hayakawa and Koyama, 1998).

Among more recent attempts to date the Millennium Eruption are two works based on wiggle-matched radiocarbon ages of trees (Pinus and Larix) that were engulfed (alive) by pyroclastic density currents during the eruption (Xu et al., 2013; Yin et al., 2012), and another based on Greenland ice core stratigraphy (Sun et al., 2014a). These studies pointed to an eruption date sometime in the period between the 920s and 950s CE.

We set out here to calculate an accurate date of the Millennium Eruption by making new radiocarbon measurements of the same subfossil larch stem from China, for which previous wiggle-matching (Xu et al., 2013) yielded a model age of 940–952 CE (2σ) for the outermost ring before bark (waldkante). Since the tree was 264 years old when killed by the eruption, we reasoned that it was alive in 775 CE, the year of an ephemeral burst of cosmogenic radiation. The signature of this event has been recognized in annually-resolved 14C measurements made for trees from Japan (Miyake et al., 2012), Europe (Büntgen et al., 2014), and New Zealand (Güttler et al., 2015), as well as in 10Be abundance in ice cores from Greenland and Antarctica (Sigl et al., 2015). We hypothesized that locating this absolute time marker would enable simple annual increment counting to date the last ring formed by our tree before it was killed by the Millennium Eruption. A secure date for the Millennium Eruption would permit us to investigate the magnitude and extent of any climate response using Northern Hemisphere summer temperature proxies.

2. Materials and methods

The studied subfossil trunk (Fig. 3) belongs to a mature Larix, which would have had an estimated crown height of 20 m. The deposits containing the tree are located at Xiaoshasha on the northwest flank of Changbaishan volcano, about 24 km from the summit caldera (Fig. 1a). These deposits are of rhyolitic composition belonging to the first phase of the Millennium Eruption — the glass

Fig. 1. Contextual information for the Millennium Eruption. (A) Location of the volcano and the tree sampling site (labelled 'Sample Point', 42°05.67’N, 127°47.87’E). (B) Photograph of the summit caldera and lake, taken from the Chinese side of the volcano. (C) Isopach map for the B-Tm layer (after Machida and Arai, 1983), showing sites in Japan discussed in the text.
Fig. 2. Selected radiocarbon (blue symbols) and varve-based (yellow symbols) age estimates for the Millennium Eruption (1: Sun et al., 2015; 2: Xu et al., 2013; 3: Yin et al., 2012; 4: Kamte et al., 2010; 5: Yatsuzuka et al., 2010; 6: Nakamura et al., 2007; 7: Machida and Okumura, 2007; 8: Horn and Schmincke, 2000; 9: Fukusawa et al., 1998). The red-dotted line indicates the year 946 CE calculated in our analysis. Two-sigma uncertainties on model ages are shown by whiskers. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

Fig. 3. Context for the sampled Larix stem. (A) Stratigraphic section showing location of tree. (B) The tree in situ at the sampling location; the deposits encasing it correspond to the part of the stratigraphy highlighted by the dashed box labelled ‘B’ in the schematic section to the left. (C) a close-up view of the tree. (D) Cross-section of sampled trunk (approximately 0.35 m radius) showing selected ring numbers.
chemistry matches very closely that reported for both proximal and distal samples (Table 1). The tree stem, of which a 3 m length was recovered, has a diameter of 0.73 m, and is severed from the roots. It was found aligned in the direction of flow of the pyroclastic density currents, as indicated by sedimentary structures in the pumiceous deposits, and consistent with the local slope. The bark is partially charred, pointing to the high temperature of the pyroclastic currents that engulfed the tree. This combination of observations strongly suggests that the tree was killed as a result of being exposed to the pyroclastic currents associated with the initial rhyolitic stage of the Millennium Eruption.

Rings were counted inwards from the waldkante. Growth is fairly complacent, and average ring width is approximately 2 mm. Based on previously published radiocarbon-ages and a reported $^{14}$C outlier (Xu et al., 2013), we made new sequential $^{14}$C analyses of rings between tree age 168 and 177, hoping to identify the 775 CE cosmogenic signal and thereby date (to the year) the preserved annual growth increments of the subfossil larch.

Holocellulose was isolated from each individual growth ring (Nemec et al., 2010), and converted to graphite for high-precision radiocarbon measurements on the compact MICADAS radiocarbon facility at ETH Zurich (Synal et al., 2007). Samples were washed at near neutral pH between each step. Graphitization was carried out using the ‘AGE’ system (Wacker et al., 2010a), employing pre-cleaned iron as a catalyst. The subsequent $^{14}$C measurements were made with a MICADAS tandem accelerator (Wacker et al., 2010b). We compared our data with a high-temporal resolution calibration curve based on published dendrochronologically-dated, annually-resolved tree-ring measurements from Japan and Europe around the 775 CE event.

We also investigated high-resolution ice-core data for the NEEM-2011-S1 ice core from northern Greenland (located at 77.45°N and 51.06°W; Jensen et al., 2014). This is the same core in which Millennium Eruption tephra (both rhyolitic and trachytic compositions) were identified (Sun et al., 2014a). To supplement available data for non-sea-salt sulphur (nssS), non-sea-salt calcium (nssCa) and chlorine (Cl) concentrations, determined by inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry and using continuous flow analysis (Sigl et al., 2013), we carried out a replicate analysis on a parallel ice-core section. The original data coverage between 247.20 and 248.90 m depth (circa 939–947 CE) was 91% (Sigl et al., 2013; Sun et al., 2014a) but we achieved 96% with our replicate analysis, enabling better identification of annual layers. The largest remaining data gap is 10 cm (corresponding to <6 months), and three years before the Millennium Eruption signature. This was associated with an internal fracture that was removed prior to continuous flow analysis just in case it had been contaminated with core drilling fluid. Annual layer thickness from circa 939 to 947 CE is 0.205 ± 0.026 m per year compared with 0.205 ± 0.025 m per year for the interval circa 900–999 CE. The seasonal and annual cycles are best resolved in nssCa (winter/spring maximum) and Cl concentrations (winter maximum).

Lastly, we generated reconstructions of Northern Hemisphere (NH) summer temperature anomalies (NH1, NH2) using a recent compilation of 14 tree-ring width (TRW) and 16 maximum late-wood density (MXD) site chronologies spanning the past 1500 years (Stoffel et al., 2015; Guillet et al., in press). MXD time-series exhibit less biological memory at interannual scale when compared with TRW data (Frank et al., 2007), and are therefore better suited to identification of the abrupt and relatively ephemeral effects of volcanic eruptions on NH summertime temperatures (Esper et al., 2015; Schneider et al., 2015).

NH1 is based on a linear model using principal component analysis to calibrate 30 regional tree-ring (TRW and MXD) clusters against a mean of instrumental June-July-August (JJA) 40–90°N land only temperatures (1805–1976) (BEST; http://berkeleyearth.org/data/). The calibration and validation process was repeated 1000 times using a bootstrap method so as to assess the robustness of the reconstruction. To account for the decreased number of neotropics back in time, a nested approach was used to maximize reconstruction length and to evaluate uncertainties. The final reconstruction was developed by splicing all of the nested time series ($n = 32$). The mean and variance of each nested reconstruction had been adjusted to the best replicated nest (1775–1976). Calibration and validation statistics ($R^2 = 0.25–0.51$, $r^2 = 0.19–0.45$, Reduction of Error (RE) = 0.20–0.47, coefficient of efficiency (ce) = 0.18–0.45) confirm the reliability of the reconstruction (Stoffel et al., 2015).

NH2 accounts for the spatial variability of volcanic cooling and is based on a two-step procedure. First, linear regression analysis was used in each cluster to calibrate the cluster series to JJA gridded-temperature anomalies (with respect to 1961–1990) from the Climatic Research Unit (CRU) and BEST data sets. For each cluster, we kept either the CRU or BEST reconstruction, depending on the significance level of the verification (RE, ce) statistics. Seven reconstructions failing classical calibration and verification tests were excluded from the final NH2 reconstruction. Averaging was performed to composite 23 cluster reconstructions into the NH2 chronology.

### 3. Results and discussion

Table 2 reports the results of the radiocarbon analysis. From a significant step-function in the radiocarbon age sequence, we

| Glass composition for samples of distal pyroclastic density current deposits that entomb the subfossil larch at Xiaoshaha, compared with other samples of Millennium Eruption rhyolite (comendite). |  |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **SiO₂** | 73.4 ± 0.99 | 74.8 ± 0.27 | 73.7 ± 2.4 | 74.6 ± 1.8 | 74.7 ± 0.45 |
| **TiO₂** | 0.24 ± 0.02 | 0.20 ± 0.04 | 0.24 ± 0.07 | 0.23 ± 0.07 | 0.22 ± 0.03 |
| **Al₂O₃** | 11.3 ± 0.6 | 10.6 ± 0.18 | 11.2 ± 1.5 | 10.5 ± 1.1 | 10.6 ± 0.5 |
| **FeO** | 4.29 ± 0.11 | 4.05 ± 0.09 | 4.09 ± 0.21 | 4.07 ± 0.17 | 4.1 ± 0.25 |
| **MnO** | 0.09 ± 0.01 | 0.08 ± 0.05 | – | – | 0.045 ± 0.020 |
| **MgO** | 0.021 ± 0.009 | 0.02 ± 0.02 | – | – | 0.024 ± 0.011 |
| **CaO** | 0.33 ± 0.11 | 0.26 ± 0.04 | 0.37 ± 0.26 | 0.26 ± 0.23 | 0.29 ± 0.09 |
| **Na₂O** | 5.29 ± 0.34 | 5.32 ± 0.34 | 5.34 ± 0.32 | 5.36 ± 0.15 | 5.0 ± 0.5 |
| **K₂O** | 4.66 ± 0.14 | 4.52 ± 0.10 | 4.49 ± 0.31 | 4.43 ± 0.34 | 4.53 ± 0.26 |
| **Cl** | 0.41 ± 0.04 | – | 0.47 ± 0.11 | 0.48 ± 0.08 | 0.46 ± 0.02 |
| **n** | 13 | 10 | 21 | 30 | 4 |
determined that ring 172 was formed in 775 CE (Fig. 4; ring identified in Fig. 3). This dates the waldkante to 946 CE. The presence of latewood in the waldkante indicates that the eruption occurred either towards the very end of the growing season in autumn that year or during the subsequent winter dormancy. Shifting the calibration curve by one year to date the waldkante to 947 CE offers the next-best fit from a statistical perspective but increases the $\chi^2$ substantially from 10.6 to 38.3, indicating a highly unlikely fit (95% limit: $\chi^2 = 19.1$). Our date reveals that the estimation by Xu et al. (2013) was the most accurate of the many prior attempts to date the Millennium Eruption.

Examination of the sub-annual resolution chlorine (Cl), non-sea salt calcium (nssCa) and non-sea salt sulphur (nssS) stratigraphy for the subfossil larch. Table 2 examines the time interval between eruption and sulphate aerosol deposition over northern Greenland is 1–2 months. This narrows the Millennium Eruption time window to the last 2 or 3 months of 946 CE. A later eruption, in mid- or late winter, is unlikely, since a strengthened polar vortex would have delayed volcanic aerosol deposition over the Arctic until spring, such that the nssS peak would have lagged behind the Cl peak.

Our dating of the Millennium Eruption corroborates the finding of Sigl et al. (2015) that the Greenland Ice Core Chronology 2005 (GICC05) timescale is six years adrift in this period. Such a discrepancy had already been suggested based on the timing of volcanic markers in tree rings and ice cores (Baillie, 2008). The shift is not only of significance when assessing the climate forcing (determined from tree-ring chronologies) of volcanic eruptions (identified in ice core records; e.g., Anchukaitis et al., 2012), but also when examining associations between volcanic forcing, climate change and historical events (e.g., Oppenheimer, 2011, 2015; Büntgen et al., 2014, 2016).

We next assess the climate response of the Millennium Eruption using the two tree ring-based reconstructions (Fig. 6). We find no significant cooling in 947 CE that could be attributed to the effects of the Millennium Eruption, neither in NH1 (~0.4°C, rank 133) nor in NH2 (~0.31, rank 253). This muted temperature response appears consistent with the modest sulphur abundance colocated with the Millennium Eruption tephra layer in the NEEM-2011-S1 ice core (Fig. 5), consistent with other Greenland ice cores (Zielinski, 1995; Sigl et al., 2015) and the sulphur yield estimated by Horn and Schmincke (2000) from petrological data. Based on volatile abundances in crystal-hosted melt inclusions in Millennium Eruption tephra, lacovino et al. (2016) argued that the eruption could have released up to 45 Tg of sulphur to the atmosphere. Such a high yield (five times the sulphur released by the 1991 eruption of Mount Pinatubo) appears at odds with the testimony of ice cores and tree rings. We note that the figure calculated by lacovino et al. (2016) represents an upper estimate of the sulphur output. If the true sulphur yield approached such a high value, then the discrepancy with the ice core and tree ring records is curious.

### Table 2
Radiocarbon measurements for the subfossil larch.

| Ring # | Lab reference | $^{13}C$ | Radiocarbon age (yr) | $\delta^{18}C$ (%) |
|--------|---------------|---------|----------------------|------------------|
| 168    | ETH-60227     | 0.8640  | ± 0.0019             | 1174 ± 18        |
| 169    | ETH-60228     | 0.8665  | ± 0.0020             | 1151 ± 18        |
| 170    | ETH-60229     | 0.8675  | ± 0.0020             | 1142 ± 18        |
| 171    | ETH-60230     | 0.8640  | ± 0.0014             | 1175 ± 13        |
| 172    | ETH-60231     | 0.8653  | ± 0.0021             | 1162 ± 19        |
| 173    | ETH-60232     | 0.8538  | ± 0.0014             | 1270 ± 13        |
| 174    | ETH-60233     | 0.8512  | ± 0.0020             | 1294 ± 19        |
| 175    | ETH-60234     | 0.8491  | ± 0.0020             | 1314 ± 19        |
| 176    | ETH-60235     | 0.8508  | ± 0.0020             | 1296 ± 19        |
| 177    | ETH-60236     | 0.8484  | ± 0.0019             | 1321 ± 18        |
provided by its presence in the sediment sequence from Lake Sui-getsu, which is just 100 km north from Nara (McLean et al., 2016). Significantly, the composition of this ash is rhyolitic, and its glass composition matches closely that of the tephra that engulfed our tree sample (as well as that of proximal samples of Millennium Eruption deposits and of the shards extracted from the NEEM-2001-S1 ice core; Table 1). These correspondences point to a common, widely-dispersed deposit associated with the paroxysmal, ignimbrite-forming eruption. Considering the scale of umbrella clouds associated with large explosive eruptions, it is unsurprising that tephra could have dispersed over such a wide region. For comparison, the umbrella cloud for the smaller eruption of Pinatubo in 1991 reached more than 1000 km across (Holasek et al., 1996). While Japan has many active volcanoes, Nara lies several hundred kilometres from the nearest local sources. This report of ash fallout is, therefore, likely to represent a rare event. Ash sourced from Changbaishan could reach Japan within a day, transported by typical lower stratospheric airflow.

4. Conclusions and final remarks

We date the Millennium Eruption of Changbaishan volcano (also known as Mount Paektu and Tianchi volcano) to late 946 CE using the 775 CE cosmogenic event as an exact time marker in a tree killed by the eruption, combined with inspection of high-resolution glaciochemical data for the NEEM ice core (Greenland). Observations recorded in two historical sources could be interpreted as signs of the eruption (sounds of the explosions and ashfall). Testimony of ash fallout in Nara, Japan, on 3 November 946, might pinpoint the Millennium Eruption’s main phase within a day. But we should be cautious in regarding these reports as certain manifestations of the eruption — they are too ambiguous for that.

State-of-the-art tree ring-based Northern Hemisphere summer temperatures reconstructions reveal, at most, a muted response to the Millennium Eruption, notwithstanding the magnitude of the event. The apparently weak cooling effect and the limited sulphur attributable to the Millennium Eruption recorded in the NEEM-2011-S1 ice core from Greenland appear to contradict petrological arguments for a very substantial sulphur release to the atmosphere (Iacovino et al., 2016). Further investigation will be required to reconcile these findings.

Our work demonstrates the remarkable potential of utilising abrupt cosmogenic signatures found in tree-rings for the precise dating of volcanic events. By securing the age of the widespread B-Tm layer, its use for stratigraphic purposes is enhanced and high-resolution timescales can be recalibrated (Nanayama et al., 2003). Previously, ages of 937±8 and 929 CE have been estimated for the
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