Responses to the comments from referees

Dear editor,

We have received the comments on our manuscript entitled "Soil organic carbon in the Sanjiang Plain of China: storage, distribution and controlling factors" (bgd-11-14765-2014). We are very grateful for having the opportunity to revise our paper. We like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments and advices, which have improved the quality of this manuscript. We have tried our best to address these comments. Our responses to the reviewer's comments are attached. We hope you would be satisfied with the revised manuscript.

If you have any questions about this paper, please feel free to contact us.

1 Responses to the comments from Prof. Ding

Comment 1: "This paper reported the storage of SOC in the Sanjiang Plain of Northeast China by averaging the data of 419 soil profiles. This study should be interesting for some readers. What I concern is how authors evaluate the influence of fertilization on SOC. In the section of Materials and methods, authors did not show detailed information. I guess that authors just compare the data of SOC with the application rate of fertilizer on the county scale. This may miss lead because the history of cropland also significantly affected the level of SOC. How authors excluded such effects?"

Response: We thank the reviewer for this comment. Generally, fertilization increases the SOC storage by enhancing the carbon input from plant productivity and crop biomass (Ren et al., 2012, Zhao et al., 2013). But, increasing fertilization may have a negative net effect on carbon sequestration because organic carbon mineralization neutralizes the carbon input (Russell et al., 2005). Influences of fertilization on SOC are complicated, and can be related to the history of cropland, vegetation types, as well as soil types and texture. As mentioned by this reviewer, we just compared the data of SOC with the application rate of fertilizer at the county scale in our manuscript. Following the suggestion by this reviewer, we have described the method for comparing the fertilization amount with SOC at the county scale in section 2.7 (Statistical analysis). In addition, new sentences have been added to describe this comparison for the 23 counties in the revised manuscript.

Comment 2: "English grammar is poor and English native speaker should be invited to improve the text. Also please write in concise sentences."

Response: Thanks for this suggestion. We have called for an English language editing service from Elsevier WebShop. The revised manuscript has been improved in English grammar, punctuation and diction.

Comment 3: "In the section of Abstract, authors should give some data to support the findings."

Response: We agree this positive advice. We have added major data in the section of Abstract to support the findings.

Comment 4: "P14767, L9,"to be 70.31 Pg C (1 Pg = 10^{15} g)". This value is too low, please cite data from GCB paper (Xie et al., 2007)."

Response: Thanks for this comment. The SOC storage value for China reported in Xie et al. (2007) has been cited.

Comment 5: "P14767, L20-23, add references".

Response: We thank this positive advice. A reference has been added in the revised manuscript to support this sentence.

Comment 6: "P14773, L5, "for the three depths (30, 60, and 100 cm) were". These are wrong, should be 0-30, 0-60, 0-100 cm."

Response: We thank the reviewer for this comment. We have replaced "30, 60, and 100 cm" with "0-30, 0-60, 0-100 cm" in the revised manuscript.

Comment 7: "P14772, L5,"The SOC content at a given depth is calculated from the soil organic matter in individual layers and by use of the Bemmelen index (0.58). T_i is the thickness of the i_{th} soil layer." I cannot understand this sentence because authors measure the SOC rather than SOM. So authors do not need first converse "SOC" into "SOM" and then converse "SOM" into "SOC". Please delete it."

Response: Thanks for the positive advice. We have deleted the sentence "The SOC content at a … the Bemmelen index (0.58)" in the revised manuscript.

Comment 8: "P14775, L12-15, this paragraph should be moved to the section of Discussion."

Response: Thanks for this kind suggestion. These sentences have been moved to the section of Discussion (section 4.5) in the revised manuscript.

Comment 9: "P14776, L5-, these sentences are necessary here?"

Response: We agree. This sentence has been deleted.

Comment 10: "P14781, L7-9, please discuss about the influence of fertilizer on SOC more detailedly."

Response: Thanks for the constructive comment. The influence of fertilizer on SOC has been discussed more detailedly in the revised manuscript.

2 Responses to the comments from anonymous referee #1

Overview of comment: "The MS deals with an interesting issue for soil organic carbon change at the Sanjiang Plain of China. I think this article has the potential to be an interesting addition to the literature. But still needs improve huge."

Response: We appreciate the endorsement and detailed comments from anonymous referee #1. The manuscript was carefully revised based on these comments, which are addressed below:

Comment 1: "I think most readers do not know the site of "Sanjiang Plain". I suggest you added some sentences to explain of it in introduction. For example, the Sanjiang Plain includes the Amur River (also known as the Heilong, or literally, "Black Dragon" or River), Songhua and Ussuri (also known as the Wusuli) rivers and covers 23 counties in Heilongjiang Province, China encompassing about 109,000 km^2. The area has extensive wetlands (Wang et al. 2003).

(1) Wang A., Zhang S., and Zhang B. A study on the change of spatial pattern of wetland in the Sanjiang Plain. Acta Ecologica Sinica 2003, 23(2): 237-243."

Response: Thanks for this positive comment. New sentences have been added to describe the Sanjiang Plain. In addition, a reference is cited.

Comment 2: "Land SOC change is a global environmental problem with important political and socioeconomic ramifications. These ramifications result from complex combinations of several factors, including natural factors such as ecological and climatic variations, and anthropogenic factors such as human activities and restoration policies that lead to changes in vegetation cover (Cao et al., 2011, 2014). Given these complexities, finding solutions that are both equitable and ecologically effective is even more challenging (Wang et al. 2011)". I believe your topic is interest. However, you should make the readers to know the significance of your research. Please download the follow references and improve your introduction and discussion."

(2) Shixiong Cao, Hua Ma, Wenping Yuan, Xin Wang. Interaction of ecological and social factors affects vegetation recovery in China. Biological Conservation 2014, DOI:

10.1016/j.biocon.2014.10.009.

(3) Shixiong Cao, Tao Tian, Li Chen, Xiaobin Dong, Xinxiao Yu, Guosheng Wang. Damage caused to the environment by reffforestation policy in arid and semi-arid areas of China. Ambio 2010, 39(4), 279-283.

(4) YafengWang, Shixiong Cao. Carbon Sequestration may have Negative Impacts on Ecosystem Health. Environmental Science and Technology 2011, 45, 1759-1760.

(5) Shixiong Cao, Ge Sun, Zhiqiang Zhang, Liding Chen, Qi Feng, Bojie Fu, Steve McNulty, David Shankman, Jianwu Tang, Yanhui Wang, Xiaohua Wei. Greening China Naturally. Ambio 2011, 40, 828–831.

(6) Shixiong Cao. Impact of China's large-scale ecological restoration program on the environment and society: achievements, problems, synthesis, and applications. Critical Reviews in Environmental Science and Technology 2011, 41, 317–335.

(7) Lixin Guan, Ge Sun, Shixiong Cao. China's bureaucracy hinders environmental recovery. Ambio 2011, 40, 96–99.

(8) Shixiong Cao. Socioeconomic road in ecological restoration in China. Environmental Science and technology, 2010, 44(14), 5328–5329.

Response: We agree and thank this comment. We read each paper recommended by this referee, and three of them are cited. Additional sentences have been added to highlight the significance of our research and some sentences are rephrased to strengthen the introduction and discussion.

Comment 3: In my opinion, the discussion structure should different from results section and focus on the mechanism (the relation between your data and why you find different result from others'). Therefore, there are some work wait you do again. And some policy suggestion seems should be given.

Response: Thanks for this kind suggestion. The Discussion section has been revised to focus more on the mechanism. In addition, some policy suggestions have been given, such as more efforts are needed to protect wetlands and effective agricultural managements should be practiced to reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases.

3 Responses to the comments from anonymous referee #2

Overview of comment: "This study presented in this paper has a great significance for quantifying the SOC storage and density over the major food production region, the Sanjiang Plain in China. On the whole, the paper was written well. However, its value of practicability is far beyond its creativity in study methods, so some necessary minor revision is needed for further publication."

Response: We appreciate the endorsement and detailed comments from anonymous referee #2. We have tried our best to address these comments. Our responses are as follows.

3.1 Comments for Data and methods

3.1.1 "Subsection 2.2, Page14769, Line 21-24: Some detailed information on HJ satellite imagery used in this study should be listed, and one classification accuracy (error matrix) should be added. Alternatively, adding a reference about the data source here is also acceptable.

Response: Thanks for this positive advice. A paper describing the data source of HJ satellite imagery and land cover has been cited in the revised manuscript.

3.1.2 Page14769-70, Line 26-27: Same as above, add the data source information of soil data.

Response: We agree. A reference about the source information of soil data has been cited in the revised manuscript

3.1.3 Subsection 2.3. When were the soil samples collected? Which year?

Response: Thanks for this comment. The soil investigation mentioned in this paper was carried out in 2012, which has been pointed out in the revised manuscript.

3.1.4 Subsection 2.5. Is the unit "kg hm^{-2}" correct? It should be "Kg ha^{-1}", right?

Response: We thank referee for this comment. The unit "kg hm^{-2}" in subsection 2.5 has been replaced with "kg ha^{-1}".

3.1.5 Subsection 2.6. Page14772, Line 5: After the phrase "Bemmelen index (0.58)", one reference should be added.

Response: Thanks for this positive advice. Following the previous comment from Prof. Ding (bgd-11-C6414), this sentence including "Bemmelen index (0.58)" has been deleted. Therefore, the corresponding reference is deleted here.

3.2 Comments for Results

3.2.1 "Page14774, Line 15: After the phrase "clay content ($p<0.01$)", add "(Fig. 6c1-c3)"; Line 19: After the phrase ": : : 30 cm of soil", add "(Fig. 6e1-e3)"."

Response: We agree. Following this comment, "(Fig. 6c1-c3)" and "(Fig. 6e1-e3)" have been added after the phrase "clay content ($p<0.01$)" and "… 30 cm of soil", respectively.

3.2.2 "Line22: In Table 2, what does the "SS" mean? Give its full name, please."

Response: Thanks for this comment. SS means the proportion of variance explained by a variable. The full name should be "sum of squares", which has been spelled out in Table 2.

3.2.3 "Page14775, Line 1-2: From Table 2, how can the authors get the finding "precipitation exhibited more significant effects than temperature on SOCD"? Give some explanation, please."

Response: We thank the referee for this comment. This sentence has been rephrased to be "Temperature exhibited more significant effects than precipitation on SOCD of the top 1

m. This observation is based on a larger proportion of the SOCD variance explained by temperature than precipitation for the depth range 0 -100 cm (Table 2) and a larger regressive coefficient for temperature than precipitation (Fig. 6 A3, B3). Related explanations have been added in the revised manuscript.

3.3 Comments for Discussions

3.3.1 "Line 10-16: The authors compared the approaches of mapping SOC used in this paper with Yang et al.'s, i.e. Geostatistical Kriging interpolation vs. remote sensing VI method. In the following paragraphs, the authors also compared the estimated SOCD results in Sanjiang Plain with that published in some previous studies in Loess Plateau in China, as well as that in France. What is the objective of these comparison? What topics do the authors want to discuss here? From these comparison, what are the advantages or disadvantages in this present study?"

Response: We thank the referee for this comment. In our manuscript, we made comparisons with other publications with respect to the method and results. First, a suitable method is essential to mapping the spatial distribution of SOC and quantifying the SOC storage in the Sanjiang Plain. Therefore, remote sensing VI methods was compared with Geostatistical Kriging used in this study. Remote sensing VI methods are not used here because of poor correlations between SOCD and VIs for rich ecosystem types. Second, SOC in the Sanjiang Plain with temperate continental climate is compared with those determined for different regions of the world, such as Loess Plateau in China, Laos, and France. The Loess Plateau in China located in an arid zone has a drier climate than the Sanjiang Plain. Laos dominated by tropical monsoon climate is warmer than the Sanjiang Plain. France has the same humid climate as the Sanjiang Plain. Different climate types control the variation of vegetation in type and distribution. Therefore, SOCD in the Sanjiang Plain is compared with SOCD in the three regions to explore the effects of climate factors and vegetation on the pattern of SOC. This comparison demonstrates the necessity to conduct regional quantification of SOC. These comparisons are made by one of the editor's recommendations. In the revised manuscript, we have added some sentences to state the goal of making the comparisons.

3.3.2 "Likewise, in the last paragraph of this subsection 4.1, the estimated SOC storage (2.324 Pg C) in Sanjiang Plain was compared with SOC in Northeast China and in the whole Country (26.43 Pg C and 69.1 Pg C). The acquisition time of soil data in this present study were very different from that other two studies. So in Line 6-7, how did the authors make such conclusion as "significant underestimation of SOC storage"?"

Response: We thank the referee for this comment. Our results revealed that the farmlands have a smaller SOCD than the forestland and wetland. A negative correlation of SOCD with temperature and a positive correlation of SOCD with precipitation are observed in our analysis. Meanwhile, significant losses from forestland and wetland to farmland, obvious increase in temperature, as well as notable decrease in precipitation in the Sanjiang Plain were recognized. All of these processes can contribute to the loss of SOC storage. However, examining SOCD reported in literatures indicates their smaller SOCD estimates of the Sanjiang Plain than the result observed in this study. In the revised manuscript, new sentences and references have been added to support this finding.

3.3.3 "How about is the SOC of forestlands? The authors didn't mention this land cover type here."

Response: Thanks for this positive advice. Forestland covering the second largest area of Sanjiang Plain had the second largest SOCD (23.4 kg m^{-2}) among the land-cover types and stocked the second largest SOC (827.5 Tg C) in the 1 m soil depth. Related information has been added in the revised manuscript.

3.3.4 "Some sentences are some descriptions on results of this study, not discussions. So, they should be moved into the corresponding subsection of "3 Results", e.g. Page14778, Line 16-17; Page14779, Line 10-12 and Line 24-26; and others."

Response: Thanks for this kind suggestion. These sentences describing results (e.g. Page14778, Line 16-17; Page14779, Line 10-12 and Line 24-26) have been moved to the result section in the revised manuscript.

3.4 Comments for Conclusions

3.4.1 "Page14782, Line 8-11: "Based on the comparison between our estimate and the previous studies, we demonstrated that the previous report at the Northeast China and the whole country level significantly underestimate the SOC storage in the Sanjiang Plain." This conclusion is questionable because the soil data were acquired in different time/year."

Response: We thank the referee for this comment. When addressing comment 3.2, we have argued for this conclusion. In addition, we like to emphasize that the conclusion about SOC storage from this study is based on an extensive soil investigation taking the land cover types and soil types into consideration. We have demonstrated that the present estimation might better represent the actual SOC storage distributions in the Sanjiang Plain, and consequently that the previous report at the Northeast China and the whole country level significantly is considered an underestimation of the SOC storage in the Sanjiang Plain.

4 Responses to the comments from anonymous referee #3

General Comments: "This manuscript reported the data of soil organic carbon in a region with intensive agricultural activities. The SOC storage in various ecosystems and controlling factors are of importance in quantifying regional carbon budget as well as developing/validating carbon cycling model. This study is appropriate for Biogeosciences. However, some results were poorly presented, and some patterns were lack of meaningful analysis. Therefore, many parts of discussion read weak and quite arbitrary. Discussion section was poorly written. Some statements should be made very carefully, especially the implications related to climate change. This current version needs major revision before it can be published. The English in the manuscript needs more editing as well."

Response: We appreciate the positive and detailed comments from the anonymous referee #3 about our manuscript. The manuscript has been revised by carefully following the comments, with the especial focus on the results and discussion sections. Detailed responses are shown as follows:

Specific comments

Comment 1. "Section 1, Line 3-13, Page 14767 – although there are several references listed, it provides little information. The cited data do not look like pointing to the statement of 'These estimates of SOC based on field samplings suggest a large difference of SOC in storage and distribution.' Since this study investigated the SOC storage in different ecosystems, a brief literature review about the SOC storage in similar ecosystems from previous studies would be helpful. With a brief picture about the SOC in various ecosystems, readers could understand better the characteristics of the target area of this study."

Response: Thanks for this comment. The manuscript includes a number of sentences to highlight that a necessity of improving SOC estimation at regional scales. These sentences can serve as the literature review about the SOC storage in similar ecosystems. Therefore, extra literature reviews about the SOC storage in similar ecosystems from previous studies need not here.

Comment 2. "Section 1, paragraph 3 and 4 can be combined and shortened. Little information was provided in paragraph 4. Line 2-4, Page 14768 was just repeating the point in paragraph1."

Response: We agree and thank the referee for this kind suggestion. Paragraphs 3 and 4 have been combined and revised.

Specific comment 3. " Line 21-23, Page 14768, delete or could go to the 'Methods' section."

Response: We agree and thank the referee for this comment. The sentences in lines 21-23, page 14768 have been deleted.

Comment 4. "Section 2.2, Line 14-23, Page 14769, a little more details about the GIS analysis would be useful. Although the method has been published by the author in another journal, it is better to have a brief summary here."

Response: Thanks for this helpful comment. Summary sentences about the GIS analysis have been added here, such as "Area for each land cover type was calculated through the ArcMap software"

Comment 5. "Section 2.2, Line 25, Page 14769, when did the second soil survey happen?

Add references for it."

Response: Thanks for the suggestion. The second soil survey was carried out from 1980 to 1985. A literature is cited here.

Comment 6. "Section 2.2. Since the authors did not present the GIS classification information as part of the results, you could present the results in this section—the area information of each land cover type and each soil type. I noticed the area information was presented in Table 1, and Fig. 2 has both information. It is better to briefly interpret with text. Or at least have these information in the figure caption."

Response: We appreciate this kind advice. Some brief interpretations with text have been given in section 2.2 for introducing the areal information of each land cover type and soil type.

Comment 7. "Section 2.3, unclear. Describe the design of sampling method clearly – based on the "land-cover" and "soil types", set up "plots", collect 'replicates'. . .. . . Clarify what exactly one 'sample' means. Does a complete soil profile (i.e. 3 layers) mean one sample, or each layer of each replicate means one sample?"

Response: Thanks for this suggestion. Related information for the soil sampling method has been rephrased. The word 'plot' was replaced with 'site'. At a soil sampling site, there are three soil profiles, and each profile has three soil depth ranges (0 - 30 cm, 30 - 60 cm, and 60 - 100 cm). The values of SOCD in the same depth range of three profiles at each soil sampling site were averaged to be the SOCD for the range of the soil site. In the revised manuscript, the sentence has been revised as: "For each soil site (three soil profiles at each site), the SOC content for each depth range (i.e. 0 - 30 cm, 30 - 60 cm, and 60 - 100 cm) was represented by the average of SOC values of three spatially random profiles at the sampling site."

Comment 8. "Section 2.4, Line7-9, Page 14771, the first sentence already mentioned that 12 Russian stations were included. Reorganize."

Response: We agree and thank the referee for this advice. This sentence has been reorganized.

Comment 9. "Section 2.5, should provide details about the fertilization. What is the difference in fertilization (amount, fertilizer) between dry farmland and paddy field? The effects of fertilization on the SOC storage, I think, could be the most valuable information provided by a study in such a region. However, this is the weakest part in the manuscript. This issue might not be the authors' top concern, so comments related to this point are just suggestions to the authors. But I would suggest the authors put more efforts on it."

Response: We agree and thank the referee for this advice. Generally, fertilization can raise the SOC storage by enhancing the carbon input from plant productivity and crop biomass. However, over application of fertilizer can have negative net effects on carbon sequestration because organic carbon mineralization neutralizes the carbon input. Influences of fertilization on SOC are complicated, and related to the history of cropland, cropland types, as well as soil types and texture. Long-term field experiments for different crop types are needed to investigate the effects of fertilization on SOC at local scales. We will put more efforts on the study of fertilization on SOC in the future.

Comment 10. "Section 3.4, Line 12-13, Page 14774, this pattern might not be true. The data points did not really exhibit such a decreasing-increasing pattern. It was more likely constant at higher MAT. Choosing a polynomial equation seems quite arbitrary."

Response: We appreciate the referee for this kind suggestion. Although the pattern of data points was more likely constant at higher MAT, the polynomial equation was selected because of the largest regressive coefficient compared to other regression models between SOCD and MAT. MAT is often lower than 4.6 °C in the Sanjiang Plain. A decrease in SOCD with increasing MAT was thus prevailing. Yang et al. (2007) revealed that the increasing trend of SOCD from the tropical to cold-temperate zone in the eastern part of China is correlated with temperature. Therefore, the polynomial equation used in our analysis could be explained.

Comment 11. "Section 3.4, Line 1-2, Page 14775, typo? This was opposite to what the data reflected, and also opposite to the interpretation at Line 20-21, Page 14778."

Response: Thanks for the positive advice. The sentences in page 14775 have been revised as: "When comparing temperature with precipitation, the former exhibits more significant effects on the SOCD within the depth range 0 - 100 cm than the latter as shown by a regressive coefficient (Fig. 6 A3, B3) for temperature and a larger variance of SOCD explained by temperature (Table 2)."

Comment 12. "Section 3.5, Line 12-13, Page 14775, this sentence could go to the 'Methods' section, as comment 6."

Response: We thank the referee for this suggestion. This sentence has been moved to the section "Data and methods" in the revised manuscript.

Comment 13. "Section 3.5, Line 22-23, Page 14775, should the larger SOC content be SOCD? You referred to Table 1 and Fig. 8, but the two datasets look different – the SOCD in Table1 and the SOC content in Fig. 8. Clarify them. Also, the pattern of 'paddy field had a larger SOC content than dry farmland' might not be true. If the authors only compared the mean SOCD between the two land cover types, the difference was meaningless. An ANOVA analysis at least should be done for making such conclusion."

Response: Thanks for this kind suggestion. SOC content means the ratio of soil organic carbon to soil organic matter. Based on equation 1 in section 2.6, SOCD is proportional to SOC content. Therefore, paddy fields can be recognized to have a larger SOC content than dry farmlands in our manuscript. An ANOVA analysis has been used to compare the SOC content between paddy field and dry farmland. Results from the ANOVA analysis show that the mean SOC content for paddy field (27.81 g kg^{-1}) is larger than that for dry farmland (22.19 g kg^{-1}) with a significance coefficient of 0.002. For a better discussion about the relationship between the areal proportion of paddy fields to croplands and SOC content, we have rephrased the sentences in section 4.5. The detailed contents are as follows: The results of this study indicate that paddy fields show a relatively larger carbon sequestration capacity as compared to other agricultural soils in the Sanjiang Plain (Table 1). As displayed in Fig. 8, the areal proportion of paddy fields to croplands is strongly correlated to the mean value of the topsoil SOC content in different counties ($P < 0.01$). Irrigation-based rice cultivation in China has significantly enriched SOC storage in paddy soils when compared with dry farmland cultivation (Pan et al., 2004).

Comment 14. "Section 3.5, Line 24-26, Page 14775, I don't understand the objective of this relationship analysis."

Response: We thank the referee for this comment. In this study, paddy fields show larger SOCD values than dry farmlands, and the areal proportions of the two land cover types are thus related to SOC storage. As one type of typical agricultural activities, the areal proportion of paddy fields to croplands is compared to topsoil SOC content on the county scale. The analysis was undertaken to show the effect of the agricultural activities on the pattern of SOC.

Comment 15. "Section 4.1, Line 11-14, Page 14776, you used method different from that published earlier. What was the implication of the comparison? Any weakness of Yang's method or any strength of your method? What is the contribution of your study?"

Response: Thanks for the positive comment. In our manuscript, the method used in this study was compared to other publications. A suitable method is essential to mapping the spatial distribution of SOC and quantifying the SOC storage in the Sanjiang Plain. Therefore, the remote sensing vegetation index (VI) method was compared with the Geostatistical Kriging interpolation used in this manuscript. Remote sensing VI methods are not used because of the poor correlations between SOCD and VIs for rich ecosystem types.

In the revised manuscript, these sentences have rephrased to felicitate understanding the comparison. The method that was used for estimating the regional carbon pool in the present study is different from that used by Yang et al. (2008), who estimated SOC storage by correlating SOC content with a remote sensing vegetation index. Considering the rich ecosystem types of the Sanjiang Plain and coarse resolution remote sensing imagery, this study used the Kriging method and achieved more accurate estimation of SOC than those by previous studies.

Comment 16. "Section 4.1, Line 22-23, Page 14776 and Section 4.3, Line 17-18, Page 14779, the authors compared the Sanjiang Plain area with the Loess Plateau twice, but explained with different mechanisms. While it is reasonable that several reasons caused the difference, the authors should consider the context, not just treat them independently. Also, why chose the Loess Plateau to compare?"

Response: We thank the referee for this comment. The sentence in page 14776 has been revised to improve the discussion. The same mechanism described in that sentence has been used to explain the SOCD difference between the Sanjiang Plain and Loess Plateau. Dry climate leads to low natural vegetation cover in the Loess Plateau. Both climate and vegetation affect the SOCD in the two regions.

In our manuscript, the SOC in the Sanjiang Plain with temperate continental climate was compared to the SOC value of different regions in the world, such as Loess Plateau in China. The Loess Plateau in China located in an arid zone has a drier climate than the Sanjiang Plain. Different climate types control the variations of vegetation type and distribution. Therefore, the SOCD in the Sanjiang Plain was compared with SOCD in the Loess Plateau to demonstrate the effects of climate factors and vegetation on the pattern of SOC. This comparison also indicate the necessity of regional quantification of SOC. Additionally, the comparison was made by following the recommendation by the editor. In our revised manuscript, we have added some sentences to state our goal of making those comparisons.

Comment 17. "Section 4.1, Line 8-12, Page 14777, reads weird in here. Combine it with Section 4.2."

Response: We agree and thank the referee for this advice. These sentences mentioned in the comment have been combined with section 4.2.

Comment 18. "Section 4.2, Line 11-14, Page 14778, rough. If root distribution is the primary driver of both the vertical pattern of SOC storage and the relationship between SOCD and environmental factors, make the interpretation clear. Reorganize the discussion."

Response: Thanks for this kind advice. The correlations of SOCD with the examined environmental factors decrease with the soil depth. This could be related to the change of vegetation types. Vegetation affects the lateral and vertical patterns of SOC through the distribution and production of above- or below-ground biomass. Related sentences on page 14778 have been reorganized in the section of Discussion "4.2" in the revised manuscript.

Comment 19. "Section 4.3, Line 25-26, Page 14778, over-interpretation of the pattern. See comment 10."

Response: See our response to comment 10.

Comment 20. "Section 4.3, Line 20-22, Page 14779, not clear. I don't understand how 'improved NPP induced by increasing MAP' caused 'less carbon input in deep soil layer'."

Response: We appreciate the referee for the positive advice. This sentence has been rephrased to explain the decreased correlation with SOCD. MAP decreasingly explained the variation of SOCD with increasing soil depth (Table 2) and displayed a decreased correlation with SOCD (Table 3). This can be attributed to relative low soil moisture in deep soil layers which affects the root vertical distribution with increasing soil depth (Jobbágy and Jackson, 2000).

Comment 21. "Section 4.4, Line 3-5, Page 14780, any references?"
Response: Thanks for this helpful comment. One literature has been added.

Comment 22. "Section 4.4, Line 18-20, Page 14780, any references?"
Response: Thanks for this kind suggestion. One literature has been added.

Comment 23. "Section 4.5, Line 17-20, Page 14781, this statement has to be carefully made. Paddy rice field might have less CO_2 emission, but it is one of the main sources of CH_4. Did Chinese government really make such a policy because of this?"
Response: We appreciate the referee for this kind suggestion. We have rephrased related sentences for the statement. Revised sentences are as follows: "The conversion of dry farmlands into paddy fields in the Sanjiang Plain, which is enforced by governmental policy and stimulated by economic benefit, has fostered the local carbon accumulation and mitigated climate change by reducing CO_2 emission. Additionally, one literature has been added to support this sentence."

Comment 24. "Section 5, Line 8-11, Page 14782, although your estimates were higher than the literature values, there was no discussion in the manuscript to support this conclusion. Why your method is better? Could I say your results overestimated the SOC storage?"
Response: Thanks for the positive comment. This conclusion has been rephrased and more arguments have been given to support this conclusion in the revised manuscript. This study resulted in the total estimated SOC storage 2.32 Pg C within the soil depth range 0 - 100 cm in the Sanjiang Plain. Similar estimations yielded 26.43 Pg C for the Northeast China (Wang et al., 2003) and 69.10 Pg C for the whole China (Wu et al., 2003). Converting these two SOC storage values to SOCD based on related publications would give rise to SOCD values of the Sanjiang Plain, which are smaller than the SOCD result observed in this study. Our results reveal that the farmland has a SOCD value smaller than those for the forestland and wetland. Fig. 6 shows negative correlation of SOCD with temperature and positive correlation with precipitation. Additionally, the Sanjiang Plain experienced significant losses of both forestland and wetland to farmland, obvious increases in temperature, and notable decreases in precipitation (Wang et al., 2011; Song et al., 2014). All these factors should contribute to the loss of SOC storage. Therefore, we are confident that the present SOCD estimation is more close to the actual SOC storage in the Sanjiang Plain, and the previous reported SOCD for the Northeast China and the whole country level underestimated the SOC storage.

Technical corrections:

Correction 1. Line 16, Page 14768 – translation? conversion?

Response: The word “translation” has been replaced with “conversion”.

Correction 2. Line 17, Page 14775 – reparable? What does this mean?

Response: The word “reparable” has been replaced with “remarkable”.

Correction 3. Line 14, Page 14780 – circle? cycle?

Response: The word “circle” has been replaced with “cycle”.

Soil organic carbon in the Sanjiang Plain of China: Storage, distribution and controlling factors

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Soil organic carbon in the Sanjiang Plain of China: Storage, distribution and controlling factors

Abstract

Accurate estimation of soil organic carbon (SOC) storage and determination of its pattern controlling factors is critical to understanding the ecosystem carbon cycle and ensuring ecological security. The Sanjiang Plain, an important grain production base in China, is typical of ecosystems, yet its SOC storage and pattern has not been fully investigated because of deficient soil investigation. In this study, 419 soil samples obtained in 2012 for each of the three soil depth ranges 0 - 30 cm, 30 - 60 cm, 60 - 100 cm, and a geostatistical method are used to estimate the total SOC storage and density (SOCD) of this region. The results give rise to 2.32 Pg C for the SOC storage, and 21.20 kg m^{-2} for SOCD which is higher than the mean value for the whole country. The SOCD shows notable changes in lateral and vertical distribution. In addition, vegetation, climate, and soil texture, as well as agricultural activities, are demonstrated to have remarkable impacts on the variation of SOCD of this region. Soil texture has stronger impacts on the distribution of SOCD than climate in the Sanjiang Plain. Specifically, clay content can explain the largest proportion of the SOC variations (21.2% in the top 30 cm) and is the most dominant environmental controlling factor. Additionally, the effects of both climate and soil texture on SOCD show weakening with increasing soil layer depth. This study indicates that reducing the loss of SOC requires effective wetland and forestland conservation and restoration, rational distribution of crop types and fertilization. The results from this study provide the most updated knowledge on the storage and pattern of SOC in the Sanjiang Plain, and have important implications for the determination of ecosystem carbon budgets and understanding ecosystem services.

Key words: soil organic carbon, climate, soil texture, agricultural activities, the Sanjiang Plain of China

1 Introduction

Soil is the largest terrestrial organic carbon pool, contains twice as much carbon as those in the atmosphere or vegetation (Batjes, 1996), and plays an important role in the global carbon cycle. Accurate quantification of soil organic carbon (SOC) storage and further investigating its association with environmental factors is essential to in-depth analyses of the terrestrial carbon cycle and updating the carbon budget (Conant et al., 2011; Dorji et al., 2014; Piao et al., 2009).

In the past decades, numerous studies were undertaken to investigate the storage and distribution heterogeneity of SOC in different regions, which includes the North American Arctic (Ping et al., 2008), the Amazon (Batjes and Dijkshoorn, 1999), the British moorland (Garnett et al., 2001), Laos (Chaplot, et al., 2010), France (Martin et al., 2011), and China (Ni, 2013; Yu et al., 2007). Globally, 32% of SOC is stored in tropical soils, and mainly in forest soils (Eswaran et al., 1993). In China, the total SOC storage has been estimated using field samples, and the value was 89.61 Pg C in the 1980s and 86.75 Pg C in the 2000s (1 Pg C = 10^{15} gC), representing ~5.0 % of the world storage (Xie et al., 2007). However, the large of the two estimated SOC values implies a necessity of improving SOC estimation at regional and local scales to achieve accurate updating of the world and national SOC budget.

The storage and distribution heterogeneity of SOC depend on climate conditions (Davidson and Janssens, 2006), land-use patterns (Poeplau and Don, 2013; Yu et al., 2012), and human activities and policies (Cao et al., 2011a, 2011b; Heikkinen et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2011). The distribution of SOC has been correlated with various climate factors, soil texture, and land cover types (Batjes and Dijkshoorn, 1999; Jobbágy and Jackson, 2000; Li and Zhao, 2001; Saiz et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2004; Yang et al., 2007). Globally, total SOC content has been shown to increase with precipitation but decrease with temperature, and the two climate factors control SOC in shallow soil layers (Jobbágy and Jackson, 2000). Jobbágy and Jackson (2000) also showed that total SOC increases with clay content, which drives SOC in deeper soil layers. Plant functional types can significantly impact the vertical distribution of SOC (Jobbágy and

Jackson, 2000; Yang et al., 2010). Although the influence of climate, vegetation and soil texture on SOC storage has been noticed (Chaplot et al., 2010; Liu et al., 2011; Yang et al., 2008), it has been difficult to assess this influence because of large uncertainties in characterizing the distribution of SOC. One reason for causing this difficulty is due to lack of appropriate data. A large amount of data from recent field investigations are required to facilitate the assessment of SOC storage in typical regions.

The Sanjiang Plain is one of the main food and agricultural bases and has the largest natural wetland in China (Wang et al., 2011). Typical monsoon climate of medium latitudes, diverse ecosystems, dramatic land use changes and other human disturbances in recent decades (Song et al., 2014) make it an ideal region for investigating the pattern and environmental controls of the SOC storage in Northeast Asia. Previous studies have mainly focused on the topsoil organic carbon and used a limited number of soil profiles measured in this area, which would not allow for a comprehensive investigation on and a comparison of the lateral and vertical distribution of SOC in various ecosystems (Wang et al., 2002). In addition, significant wetland reclamation, conversion from dry farmland to paddy field, and intensive chemical fertilizer applications have been observed in this region (Wang et al., 2011), which could implicate in the SOC cycle. These considerations create the need for studying the current SOC storage and distribution as well as their associations with various environmental factors so that regional soil carbon sources or sinks can be determined for this region.

In this study, the SOC storage in the Sanjiang Plain was estimated based on extensive 1 m depth soil profiles. The primary objective of the study was to further characterization of SOC of this region. The secondary objectives were to 1) estimate the SOC storage and map its lateral and vertical distribution, 2) compare SOC across different terrestrial ecosystems and 3) examine the associations of environmental factors with the lateral and vertical variability of SOC storage.

2 Data and Methods

2.1 Study area

The Sanjiang Plain is located in the northeast corner of China and separated from Russia by the Heilongjiang and Wusuli rivers (Fig. 1). The region has 23 counties and extends from 129 ° 11′ E to 134° 47′ E in longitude and from 43° 49′ N to 48°25′ N in latitude, with a total area of 108 596 km^2 (Wang et al., 2011). It is a low alluvial plain deposited by the Heilongjiang, Songhua, and Wusuli rivers with elevation in the southwest being higher than in the northeast. Annual precipitation is between 500 mm and 650 mm, and 80% of rainfall occurs in growing seasons (May to September). The mean air temperature ranges from 1.4 to 4.3 ℃, and the frost-free period is 120 - 140 days. The climate of this area belongs to the temperate humid or sub-humid continental monsoon climate (Wang et al., 2006), which is suitable for natural wetlands and growing grains.

Fig. 1. Position and terrain of the Sanjiang Plain

2.2 Land-cover and soil type datasets

The Landsat thematic mapper (TM) and Chinese Huan Jing (HJ) satellite images (Zhang et al., 2014) acquired in 2010 for the study region were classified using the eCognition software to extract land-cover data (Mao et al., 2014a). All the images (32 of them being TM and 6 for HJ) were atmospherically corrected using the 6S radiative transfer model and geometrically rectified. Furthermore, based on the digital elevation model (DEM) and field investigations, image segmentation was performed for these satellite images. Validation of the land cover classification on the field data collected in 2010 (1326 points) resulted a kappa coefficient of 0.894 and overall accuracy of 89%. Area for each land cover type was calculated through the ArcMap software. Statistic results further revealed that the major land cover types in the Sanjiang Plain were cropland, forestland, and wetland (Fig. 2A), with an area of 59 531.49 km^2, 36 556.49 km^2, 6 527.89 km^2, respectively.

The soil type dataset covering the Sanjiang Plain was clipped from the soil map of China, resulting from Chinese second soil investigations at a scale of 1: 1 000 000 (Wang et al., 2006). Five main soil types in the area were dark-brown soil, meadow soil, lessive, swamp soil, and black soil, and occupied more than 95% of the whole area (Fig. 2B). In the Sanjiang Plain, dark-brown soil and meadow soil are the largest and second largest soil type with an area of 32103.54 km^2 and 31017.36 km^2, respectively. Considering the SOC content and density differ among soil types (Mao et al., 2014b; Yu et al., 2007), different soil types need to be accommodated in the deployment of field sampling sites.

Fig. 2. Spatial distribution of field samples, land cover (A) and soil types (B) in the Sanjiang Plain

2.3 Soil sampling and determination

Soil samples were collected in 2012 on the basis of visual navigation via a GPS unit linked with ArcGIS installed laptop. Each of these samples was collected using a standard container with a volume of 100 cm^3 and a cloth pocket. For each soil site (three soil profiles at each site), the SOC content for each depth range (i.e. 0 - 30 cm, 30 - 60 cm, and 60 - 100 cm) was represented by the average of SOC values of three spatially random profiles at the sampling site. Land-cover types, sampling time and depth, and geographic locations were recorded while sampling. Because of the inaccessibility of some land-cover types and the areal difference of land-cover types, a total of 419 soil samples (59 for forestland, 13 for grassland, 59 for paddy field, 206 for dry farmland, and 82 for wetland) for each soil depth range were obtained, and their locations were overlaid on the land-cover and soil types as shown in Fig. 2.

All of the soil samples were air-dried and then oven-dried at 105℃ to determine their bulk densities. Visible plant detritus and all rock fragments were removed from the soil samples in the cloth pockets before the soil samples were further processed by grounding and sieving with 2-mm meshes and analyzed for SOC concentration and soil texture. The SOC concentration was measured by wet combustion with $K_2Cr_2O_7$ (Yang et al., 2007). A Mastersizer 2000 instrument was used to measure the soil texture of 80 sample profiles equally distributed in the study area, including clay content (< 0.002 mm), silt content (0.02 - 0.002 mm), and sand content (0.02 - 2 mm).

2.4 Climate data

The mean annual temperature (MAT) and mean annual precipitation (MAP) were calculated from the meteorological data recorded during 1981 - 2012. All of these data were downloaded from the National Climatic Data Center of NOAA (NCDC, http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/) and the

China Meteorological Data Sharing Service System (http://cdc.cma.gov.cn), respectively. For bettering the accuracy of spatial interpolation of climate factors, 35 meteorological stations (12 of them being Russia and 23 in China) were used and spatially interpolated using the Kriging method. The MAT and MAP for each sampling site were extracted based on its geographical position from the interpolated raster with a spatial resolution of 8 km.

2.5 Amounts of Fertilizer

The amounts of fertilizer for each of 23 counties in the Sanjiang Plain was obtained from the statistical yearbook of Heilongjiang Province in 2012. The ratio (kg ha^{-1}) of the amount of fertilizer to the area of croplands of each county was calculated. A relation of the fertilization amount to the SOC content was derived for the individual soil layers considered in this study.

2.6 Estimation of SOC storage

This study analyzed the spatial distribution of soil organic carbon density (SOCD) within different soil depth ranges (0 - 30 cm, 0 - 60 cm, and 0 - 100 cm). The SOCD and SOC storage in a depth of *h* (cm) were calculated as follows:

$$SOCD_h = \sum_{i=1}^{n} \frac{(1-\delta_i\%) \times \rho_i \times C_i \times T_i}{100} \quad (1)$$

$$SOC_h = SOCD_h \times AREA \quad (2)$$

where *n* is the number of the soil layer; δ_i is the concentration of gravel larger than 2 mm in the i_{th} soil layer (volume percentage); ρ_i and C_i are the bulk density and the SOC content (g kg^{-1}) in the i_{th} soil layer, respectively; T_i is the thickness of the i_{th} soil layer.

The Kriging interpolation and the semivariable function were used to determine the spatial distribution of SOC. Kriging is a geostatistical method that is commonly used to interpolate a SOCD dataset from discrete points to a spatially continuous surface (Kumar et al., 2012; Khalil et al., 2013), and the semivariable function can be used to quantify the spatial autocorrelation and provides an input parameter for a spatial interpolation (Liu et al., 2011). All of the calculations for mapping SOC within individual soil depth ranges were performed using the ArcGIS software (Version 9.3).

2.7 Statistical analysis

The General Linear Model (GLM) was used to determine the relationship between SOCD and each of different environmental factors (MAT, MAP, clay content, silt content, and sand content) and to assess how each factor influences the variation of SOC within a soil depth range (Yang et al., 2007). All GLM analyses were performed with the software package R (R Development Core Team 2005).

The coefficient of determination (R^2) and the correlation coefficient (p) obtained from regressive and correlative analyses performed with the SPSS software were employed to describe the effects of individual controlling factors on SOC, such as climate factors and soil parameters. In addition, the estimated SOCD for the Sanjiang Plain was compared to the SOCD values estimated for different regions of the world to investigate the effects of climate factors and vegetation.

To address the effects of agricultural activities on the distribution of SOC, we examined the correlation of the amount of applied fertilizers as well as the correlation of land-cover type to the SOC content on the county scale. For the second correlation analysis, the land-cover type was characterized by areal proportions of paddy fields relative to croplands. And also an ANOVA analysis was developed to compare the mean SOC content for dry farmland and paddy field.

3 Results

3.1 Storage and spatial distribution of SOC

SOCD of the 419 sampling profiles varied remarkably within each soil depth range (Fig. 3). The mean SOCD values of all sample profiles for the three depth ranges (0 - 30 cm, 0 - 60 cm, and 0 - 100 cm) were 10.19 kg m^{-2}, 15.98 kg m^{-2}, and 21.20 kg m^{-2}, and the standard deviation of the corresponding SOCD were 7.12 kg m^{-2}, 10.15 kg m^{-2}, and 12.36 kg m^{-2}, respectively. Excluding the regions of water bodies, the total SOC storage of the Sanjiang Plain was estimated to be 1.16 Pg C for the depth range 0 - 30 cm, 1.80 Pg C for 0 - 60 cm, and 2.32 Pg C for 0 - 100 cm.

Fig. 3. Frequency distributions of SOCD at different soil depth ranges (A: 0 - 30 cm; B: 0 - 60 cm; C: 0 - 100 cm)

The spatial variation of SOC storage within soil depth range is apparent (Fig. 4). For the soil depth range 0 - 60 cm, high SOCD values mainly present in the northeast, northwest corner, and small areas of the north, whereas low SOCD values present in the north central area and southwest. For the soil depth range 0 - 100 cm, the SOC storage values higher than 24 kg C m^{-2} mainly appear in the northeast and northwestern corner of the Sanjiang Plain.

Fig. 4. Spatial pattern of SOC storage at different soil depths (A: 0 - 30 cm; B: 0 - 60 cm; C: 0 - 100 cm)

3.2 Mean SOCD and SOC storage for different ecosystems

Table 1 provides a detailed description of SOCD and SOC storage for different ecosystems of the Sanjiang Plain. The SOCD for the soil depth range 0 - 30 cm increases in the order of dry farmland, paddy field, grassland, forestland, and wetland, whereas for the soil ranges 0 - 60 cm and 0 - 100 cm in the order of grassland, dry farmland, paddy field, forestland, and wetland. Wetlands have the largest SOCD at all three soil depths (0 - 30 cm, 0 - 60 cm, 0 - 100 cm). Forestlands covering the second largest area of the Sanjiang Plain have the second largest SOCD (23.40 kg m^{-2}) among the land cover types and stock the second largest SOC (827.52 Tg C, 1 Tg C = 10^{12} gC) in the soil depth range 0 - 100 cm, and forestlands and dry farmlands together account for 72.7% of SOC storage in the same depth range soil of the Sanjiang Plain.

Table 1 SOCD and SOC storage for different ecosystems in the Sanjiang Plain

3.3 Vertical distribution characteristics of SOC storage for different ecosystems

An apparent vertical differentiation of SOC storage can be observed in the Sanjiang Plain (Fig. 5). For the soil depth range 0 -100 cm, approximately 49% of total SOC storage is concentrated within the top 30 cm. The SOC storage within each soil depth range (0 - 30 cm, 30 - 60 cm, and 60 - 100 cm) varies significantly across different ecosystems. The percentage which SOC within the depth range 0 - 30 cm can account for SOC within the range 0 - 100 cm is 48%, 50%, 50%, 52%, 53% for dry farmlands, forestlands, wetlands, paddy fields, and grasslands, respectively, implying that the relative distribution of the SOC of the topsoil is the deepest in dry farmlands, intermediate in the forestlands and wetlands, and the shallowest in paddy fields and grasslands. These percentages also indicate that the SOC storage decrease with soil depth when the paddy fields and wetlands are considered. In contrast, the SOC storage increases from the depth range 30 - 60 cm to 60 - 100 cm for the grasslands and forestlands.

Fig. 5. Vertical distribution of SOC storage in different soil depth ranges for various ecosystems

3.4 Effects of environmental factors on SOCD

The SOC storages within different soil depth ranges are significantly affected by climate and soil texture. As shown in Fig. 6, SOCD in the Sanjiang Plain is not only significantly correlated with MAT (Fig. 6 A1 - A3) and MAP (Fig. 6 B1 - B3) for the different soil depth ranges, but strongly associated with soil texture as well (Fig. 6 C1 - E3 and Table 3). The SOCD in the depth ranges 0 - 30 cm, 0 - 60 cm, and 0 - 100 cm of soil decreases with increasing MAT up to ~4.6 ℃ and then increases with MAT (Fig. 6 A1 - A3). Similarly, the SOCD for the different depth ranges decreases and then increases with soil clay content ($P < 0.01$, Fig. 6 C1 - C3). In addition, SOCD increases with MAP (Fig. 6 B1 - B3) and soil silt content (Fig. 6 D1 - D3). The SOCD shows a significantly negative correlation with sand content within the depth range 0 - 60 cm and 0 - 100 cm, but an insignificant correlation for the depth range 0 - 30 cm (Fig. 6 E1 - E3).

Fig. 6. Correlations of SOCD with various environmental factors for different soil depths in the Sanjiang Plain (A1 - E1: 0 - 30 cm; A2 - E2: 0-60 cm; A3 - E3: 0 - 100 cm)

Table 2 presents the results from the GLM, which reveal that environmental factors explain 57.78%, 52.03%, and 37.67% of the overall variation of SOCD for the depth range 0 - 30 cm, 0 - 60 cm, and 0 - 100 cm, respectively. Both the associations of climate and soil texture with SOCD are weak with increasing soil depth. Clay content explains the largest proportion of the SOCD variation (21.20% for the range 0 - 30 cm, 18.30% for 0 - 60 cm, and 15.40% for 0 - 100 cm), and thus is the most dominant environmental variable. Silt content also plays an important role in shaping the pattern of SOC storage, explaining the second largest proportion of SOCD variation. Therefore, soil texture has more impacts on the distribution of SOCD than climate factors in the Sanjiang Plain. When comparing temperature with precipitation, the former exhibits more significant effects on the SOCD within the depth range 0 - 100 cm than the latter as shown by a regressive coefficient (Fig. 6 A3, B3) for temperature and a more variance of SOCD explained by temperature (Table 2).

Table 2 GLM results for correlating SOCD with environmental factors

The associations of climate and soil texture with vertical SOCD vary significantly (Table 3). For the different soil depths (0 - 30 cm, 30 - 60 cm, 60 - 100 cm), SOCD is negatively correlated to both MAT and sand content, but positively correlated with MAP, clay content and silt content. Clay content has the largest correlation coefficient with SOCD ($P < 0.01$), meaning that it plays a more important role in driving the SOCD vertical distribution as compared to other environmental variables. The correlations between SOCD and sand content are found high for deeper soil depth ranges, whereas the correlations between SOCD and other examined controlling factors are low.

Table 3 Correlation coefficients between SOCD and environmental factors in different soil layers

3.5 Effects of fertilization amount and cropland types on SOC storage

We examined the amount of fertilizer and SOC content for croplands in the 23 counties and found that agricultural activities, especially fertilization, have remarkable impacts on SOC content. Significantly negative correlations ($P < 0.01$) between the amount of fertilizer and SOC content are found for the 0 - 30 cm and 30 - 60 cm depth ranges (Fig. 7). Meanwhile, the correlation between the amount of fertilizer and SOC content decreases with soil depth.

Fig. 7. Correlations of the cropland fertilization amount with SOC content in the Sanjiang Plain for different soil layers (A: 0 - 30 cm; B: 30 - 60 cm; C: 60 - 100 cm)

In this study, result of ANOVA analysis shows that mean value of SOC content for paddy field (27.81 g kg-1) is larger than that for dry farmland (22.19 g kg-1). Additionally, paddy fields show larger SOCD values than dry farmlands within the depth range 0 - 100 cm (Table 1), and the areal proportions of the two land cover types are thus related to SOC storage. The areal proportion of paddy fields relative to cropland in the Sanjiang Plain is significantly correlated to the topsoil SOC content with an R^2 of 0.423 ($P < 0.01$), as shown in Fig. 8.

Fig. 8. Correlations of topsoil SOC content with the areal ratio of paddy field to cropland in the Sanjiang Plain

4 Discussion

4.1 SOC estimates in the Sanjiang Plain

Spatially explicit estimates of SOC at regional scales are vital for monitoring carbon sequestration, which impacts global climate change and food security (Lal, 2004a). In this study, extensive soil investigation that took land cover types and soil types into consideration has been undertaken to quantify the SOC storage in the Sanjiang Plain. A geostatistical approach was further used to map the regional pattern of SOC in different soil depth ranges. The method that was used for estimating the regional carbon pool in the present study is different from that used by Yang et al. (2008), who estimated SOC storage by correlating SOC content with a remote sensing vegetation index. Considering the rich ecosystem types of the Sanjiang Plain and coarse resolution remote sensing imagery, this study used the Kriging method to achieve more accurate estimation of SOC than those by previous studies (Wang et al., 2002; Yu et al., 2007). The SOC estimates were based on a large volume dataset including the most recently measured data.

Observed was the larger mean SOCD for the depth range 0 - 100 cm (21.20 kg m^{-2}) in the Sanjiang Plain as compared to the reported mean SOCD of China 7.8 kg m^{-2} (Yang et al., 2007) and the whole world 10.8 kg m^{-2} estimated by Post et al. (1982), which is mostly due to relatively low temperature as compared to the south, more precipitation than the western part of the country, as well as extensive wetlands and forests in the Sanjiang Plain (Yu et al., 2007). In addition, the estimated SOCD value 10.19 kg m^{-2} for the depth range 0 - 30 cm in the study area is higher than 7.70 kg m^{-2} observed in the Loess Plateau of China (Liu et al., 2011) and the value 5.91 kg m^{-2} for France (Martin et al., 2011). This is largely attributed to the humid climate and high natural vegetation (i.e. forest and wetland) cover. In this study, we have observed that forestlands have higher SOCD than grasslands, which is different from the SOC results of China reported by Wang et al. (2004) and of France by Martin et al. (2011). We attribute these differences to the climate zones in which these studies have focused on.

This study resulted in the total estimated SOC storage 2.32 Pg C within the soil depth range 0 - 100 cm in the Sanjiang Plain. Similar estimations yielded 26.43 Pg C for the Northeast China (Wang et al., 2003) and 69.10 Pg C for the whole China (Wu et al., 2003). Converting these two SOC storage values to SOCD based on related publications would give rise to SOCD values of the Sanjiang Plain, which are smaller than the SOCD result observed in this study. It is worth to discuss which SOCD estimate is more accurate.

Our results reveal that the farmland has a SOCD value smaller than those for the forestland and wetland. Fig. 6 shows negative correlation of SOCD with temperature and positive correlation with precipitation. Additionally, the Sanjiang Plain experienced significant losses of both forestland and wetland to farmland, obvious increases in temperature, and notable decreases in precipitation (Wang et al., 2011; Song et al., 2014). All these factors should contribute to the loss of SOC storage. Therefore, we are confident that the present SOCD estimation is more close to the actual SOC storage in the Sanjiang Plain, and that the previous reported SOCD for the Northeast China and the whole country level underestimated the SOC storage.

4.2 Impacts of land cover type on SOC

It has been pointed out that the SOC storage strongly depends on land cover types (Chaplot et al., 2010; Martin et al., 2011). Fig. 2 supports the same observation. It is thus necessary to discuss the impacts of land cover types on SOC storage.

Jobbágy and Jackson (2000) and Yang et al. (2007) observed that land cover types significantly affected the distribution of SOC. This conclusion is supported by our result shown in Table 1 and Fig. 5. The results demonstrate that the wetlands have the highest SOCD, which is most likely related to a low decomposition rate of soil organic matter and high soil moisture content (Taggart et al., 2012). A notable loss of topsoil SOC as a result of cultivation was observed in China (Song et al., 2005). A significant loss of wetlands to croplands was reported in the Sanjiang Plain in the past few decades (Wang et al., 2009; 2011), which is believed to lead to enhanced carbon emission. These observations imply that implementation of an effective plan for wetland management, conservation, and restoration in the Sanjiang Plain is required for increasing regional carbon sequestration and reducing the carbon budget. Similarly, effectively reducing the loss of forestlands and rationally replacing cultivated land for forestland are essential for balancing the carbon budget (Cao et al., 2011b). Intensive agricultural activities (e.g. tillage) have resulted in enhanced soil mineralization (Lal, 2002), which has led to low SOC in dry farmlands (red and orange colors in Fig. 4). Although a low SOCD was found for croplands, their large areas make them the largest SOC pool among all land cover types considered in this study (Table 1).

The results show different vertical patterns of SOC storage for the five ecosystems. Grasslands have the shallowest root distribution and less fresh carbon supply in deep soil layers, and account for a large SOC proportion in the topsoils (Fontaine et al., 2007). The relatively low decomposability and deep root distribution pattern in wetlands can be used to explain the observed difference of the vertical SOC features between the wetlands and grasslands (Jobbágy and Jackson, 2000). Loosened soil and plow tillage in dry farmlands, which are favorable to the soil respiration, can explain the low SOC storage within the soil depth range 0 - 30 cm in the Sanjiang Plain. In contrast, paddy fields exhibit a large SOC content, which is most likely related to the stability of the soil environment (Pan et al., 2004), suggesting a SOC proportion of the topsoil larger than that in dry farmlands, as shown in Fig. 5. The correlations of SOCD with the examined environmental factors decrease with the soil depth. This observation could be related to the changes of vegetation types. Vegetation affects the lateral and vertical patterns of SOC through the distribution and production of above- or below-ground biomass. Severe population pressure, and misguided policies resulted significant changes of land cover types, especially in losses of forestlands and wetlands to croplands (Song et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2012). The SOC storage dynamics controlled by changes of land cover types needs to be investigated in future.

4.3 Relationships between SOC and climate factors

MAT and MAP explain a large amount of the variation of SOCD in different soil depth ranges

(Table 2), implying that climate conditions are an important environmental force in controlling the lateral and vertical distribution of SOC. The results also show that the variances of SOCD is driven less by MAT than MAP for the soil depth range 0 - 30 cm of the study region. This is consistent with the observation made in France (Martin et al., 2011) because of humid climate in both France and the Sanjiang Plain.

With respect to the association of SOCD with MAT, SOCD goes down and then up with increasing MAT, which is most likely related to various balances between SOC inputs and outputs (Davidson and Janssens, 2006). A decrease in SOCD at low MAT could be caused by low carbon inputs of plant production and high carbon outputs of soil decomposition. MAT is often lower than 4.6 ℃ in the Sanjiang Plain. This is why a significantly negative correlation (r = -0.33, P < 0.01) is observed between MAT and SOCD (Table 3). On the contrary, MAT higher than 4.6 ℃ may increase the vegetation productivity and thus contribute to increasing carbon inputs that overrides the temperature-induced rise in the soil decomposition rate (Yang et al., 2008). Our results confirm the observation made by Yang et al. (2007) that the increasing trend of SOCD from the tropical to cold-temperate zone in the eastern part of China is correlated with temperature. In the Sanjiang Plain, MAT can explain 4.23% of the SOCD variability, suggesting that temperature plays an important role in shaping the pattern of SOC.

In relation to MAP, SOCD values within different soil depth ranges show strong positive correlations to MAP as shown by the power relationships in Fig. 6 B1 - B3). These positive correlations can be explained by the fact that precipitation enhances the vegetation productivity and thus leads to accumulation of SOC. This finding is in agreement with the observation made for the spatial pattern of SOC in Northern China, i.e., increasing precipitation contributes to an increase in SOCD from the arid to semi-humid zone (Yang et al., 2007). Similarly, the SOCD of the Sanjiang Plain estimated by this study is higher than that for the Loess Plateau (Liu e al., 2011) due to the difference of the two areas in precipitation. MAP explains the variation of SOCD at less degree when soil depth increases (Table 2) and shows diminishing correlation with SOCD (Table 3). This can be attributed to relative low soil moisture to deep soil depth layers which affects the root vertical distribution with increasing soil depth (Jobbágy and

Jackson, 2000).

4.4 Effects of soil texture on SOC

The GLM results indicate that the observed soil texture explains 48%, 44% and 35% of the variability of SOCD for the depth ranges 0 - 30, 0 - 60, and 0 - 100 cm, respectively. For the country scale of China, climate was observed as the leading factor driving the spatial pattern of SOCD (Wu et al., 2003; Yang et al., 2007). However, at a smaller regional scale, such as the Sanjiang Plain, the variation of SOCD is mostly attributed to soil texture rather than climate. The similar result was shown in Laos (Chaplot et al., 2010) where SOC storage is mainly controlled by soil types and texture. Soil texture is closely related to the soil water holding capacity and the decomposition rate of organic matter, which thus signifies a key role in shaping the spatial pattern of SOCD at the regional scale (Chaplot et al., 2010). In spite of the fact that climate controls the pattern of SOC storage in a large continental scale, soil texture shows more effects on the distribution of SOC in a small regional level.

This study shows that clay content contributes to the pattern of SOCD more significantly than silt and sand do. This result supports the observation by Jobbágy and Jackson (2000) that clay content is the best predictor of SOCD in deeper depth layers. Moreover, this study shows that SOCD is highly and positively correlated to silt content within different soil depth ranges. This result is expected because high clay and silt contents can stabilize soil organic matter and largely slow down the soil carbon cycle (Hassink et al., 1997). However, negative relationships are observed for SOCD and sand content (Fig. 6 E1 - E3 and Table 3), which can be explained by the sandy soil properties: low water holding capacity, limited vegetation productivity and carbon sequestration. Small magnitude correlation coefficients for sandy soil could be explained by low carbon inputs and relatively efficient decomposition of organic matter within deep soil layers (Ontl et al., 2013).

4.5 Impacts of agricultural activities on SOC

Given the fact that both soil texture and vegetation types are highly influenced by climate, and that soil texture has obvious effects on vegetation types. These interactive systems drive the SOC distribution in very complicated ways. The GLM results indicate that the examined environmental factors only explain 57.78%, 52.03% and 47.67% of the SOCD variability within the depth range 0 - 30 cm, 0 - 60 cm and 0 - 100 cm, respectively. Therefore, we speculate that the anthropogenic factor is critical in explaining the pattern and storage of SOC.

Croplands, including dry farmlands and paddy fields, covering 54.2% of the whole area of the Sanjiang Plain, have the largest carbon pool among the land types (Table 1). Therefore, the change of SOCD in cropland could result in significant variation in the lateral and vertical distribution of SOC. It is well known that cropland management plays an important role in the carbon exchange of ecosystems (Lal, 2004b). In the Sanjiang Plain, soil tillage and the return of crop stubble into soils have a long history, and which are expected to be a crucial force for shaping the lateral and vertical pattern of SOC (Liu et al., 2006; Mao et al., 2014b). Generally, fertilization can raise the SOC storage by enhancing the carbon input from plant productivity and crop biomass (Ren et al., 2012, Zhao et al., 2013). However, over application of fertilizer can have negative net effects on carbon sequestration because organic carbon mineralization neutralizes the carbon input (Russell et al., 2005). Influences of fertilization on SOC are complicated, and can be related to the history of cropland, vegetation types, as well as soil types and texture. Comparing between the amount of fertilizer and SOC at the county scale, indicates that the counties using high amounts of fertilizer have low SOC content (Fig. 7). This may manifest different SOC decomposition scenarios due to temperature, soil moisture and soil types in this plain. Long-term field experiments for different crop types are needed to investigate the effects of fertilization on SOC at the local scale.

The results of this study indicate that paddy fields show a relatively larger carbon sequestration capacity as compared to other agricultural soils in the Sanjiang Plain (Table 1). As displayed in Fig. 8, the areal proportion of paddy fields to croplands is strongly correlated to the mean value of the topsoil SOC content in different counties ($P < 0.01$). Irrigation-based rice cultivation in China has significantly enriched SOC storage in paddy soils, when compared with dry farmland cultivation (Pan et al., 2004). In addition, the loss of SOC storage from ground soil to the atmosphere has a positive feedback to climate change (Davidson and Janssens, 2006). It can be concluded that in the previous decades, the conversion of dry farmlands into paddy fields in the Sanjiang Plain, which is enforced by governmental policy and stimulated by economic benefit, has fostered the local carbon accumulation and mitigated climate change by reducing CO_2 emission (Ouyang et al., 2014).

5 Conclusions

This study has used Kriging, a spatial interpolation technology, and 419 soil sampling sites (1257 profiles in total) collected in 2012 for each of the soil depth ranges 0 - 30 cm, 30 - 60 cm, and 60 - 100 cm to determine the SOC storage in the Sanjiang Plain, China. Relationships of SOCD with different environmental factors were examined. The results reveal that the total SOC storage within the depth range 0 - 100 cm in the Sanjiang Plain was estimated to be 2.32 Pg C, and mainly stocked in the topsoil. Over the Sanjiang Plain, soil texture plays more important roles than climate in determining the distribution of SOC with clay content contributing more than other observed factors. Vegetation, climate, and soil texture, as well as agricultural activities has remarkable impacts on the storage and distribution of SOC. Wetlands have the highest SOCD as compared with other land cover types, but display a significant loss in the recent decades. Thus, implementation of an effective wetland management and conservation plan in the Sanjiang Plain is required for fostering regional carbon sequestration. Moreover, policy and economic benefit-driven conversion from dry farmlands to paddy fields contribute to more carbon stocking in the soil. A comparison of the estimate to those by other previous studies demonstrates underestimation of the SOC storage in the Sanjiang Plain if values at the Northeast China and the whole country level are used. An accurate and the updated estimates of SOC storage by this study will significantly improve the knowledge of carbon cycles and the determination of the carbon budget for the Sanjiang Plain.

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Table1 SOCD and SOC storage for different ecosystems in the Sanjiang Plain

Ecosystems	**Area (km^2)**	**SOCD ($kg\ m^{-2}$)**			**SOC storage (Tg C)**		
		0 - 30 cm	0 - 60 cm	0 - 100 cm	0 - 30 cm	0 - 60 cm	0 - 100 cm
Dry farmland	41462.87	9.72	14.56	19.68	412.10	637.71	821.84
Paddy field	18068.62	9.88	15.53	19.79	191.00	302.24	388.14
Grassland	124.30	10.65	11.33	17.38	1.47	2.31	71.58
Forestland	36556.49	11.41	16.84	23.40	420.20	639.10	827.52
Wetland	6527.89	14.78	23.50	29.59	76.71	123.85	160.85

Table 2 GLM results for correlating SOCD and environmental factors

Depth	Factors	MAT	MAP	Clay content	Silt content	Sand content	Others
	DF	1	1	1	1	1	80
0-30 cm	**MS**	0.87*	1.49*	4.70*	4.65*	2.40*	0.02
	SS(%)	4.23	5.21	21.20	17.80	9.34	42.22
0-60 cm	**MS**	2.24*	1.45*	8.23*	6.54*	5.23*	0.05
	SS(%)	5.21	3.22	18.30	15.20	10.10	47.97
0-100 cm	**MS**	1.11*	0.23	6.21*	5.07*	4.21*	0.07
	SS(%)	1.65	0.68	15.40	12.40	7.54	62.33

* $P < 0.01$; DF, degree of freedom; MS, mean squares; SS, sum of squares, means the proportion of variances explained by a variable.

Table3 Correlation coefficients between SOCD and environmental factors in different soil layers

Soil depth (cm)	MAT	MAP	Clay content	Silt content	Sand content
0 - 30	-0.33[b]	0.29[b]	0.49[b]	0.35[b]	-0.18
30 - 60	-0.30[b]	0.22[a]	0.46[b]	0.34[b]	-0.37[b]
60 - 100	-0.11	0.20	0.42[b]	0.22[a]	-0.38[b]

[a] $P < 0.05$; [b] $P < 0.01$

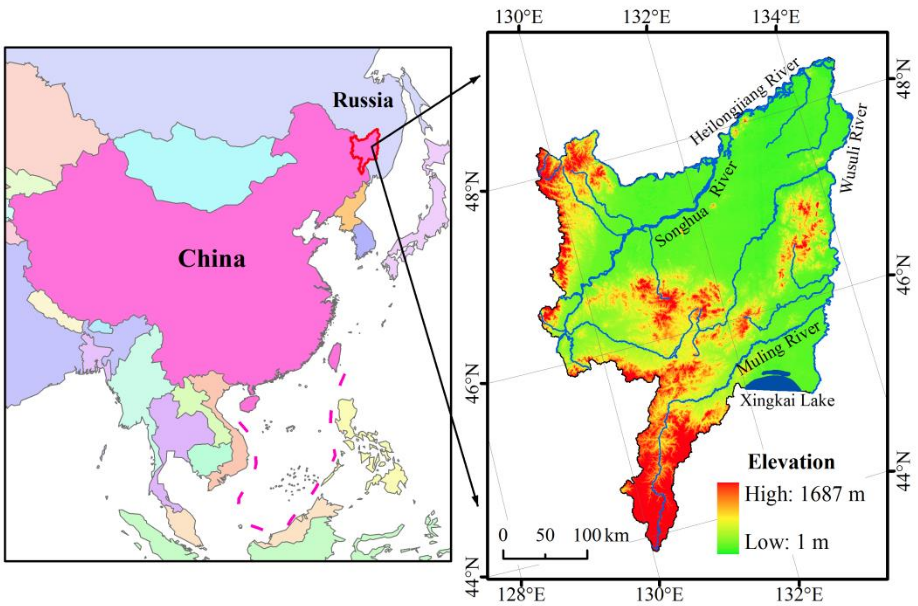

Fig. 1. Position and terrain of the Sanjiang Plain

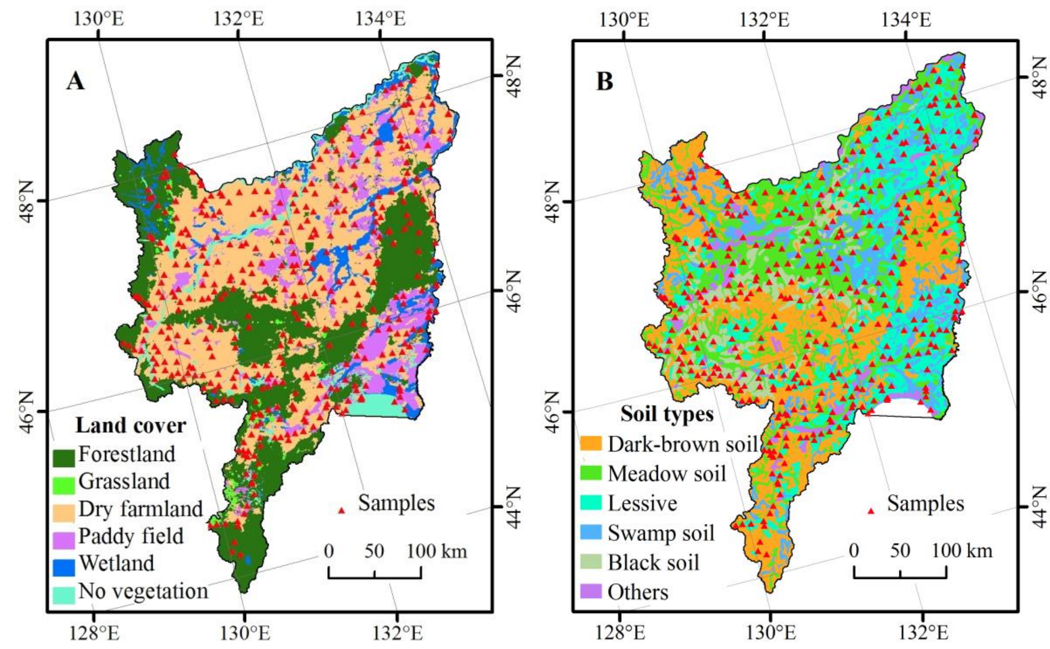

Fig. 2. Spatial distribution of field samples, land cover (A) and soil types (B) in the Sanjiang Plain

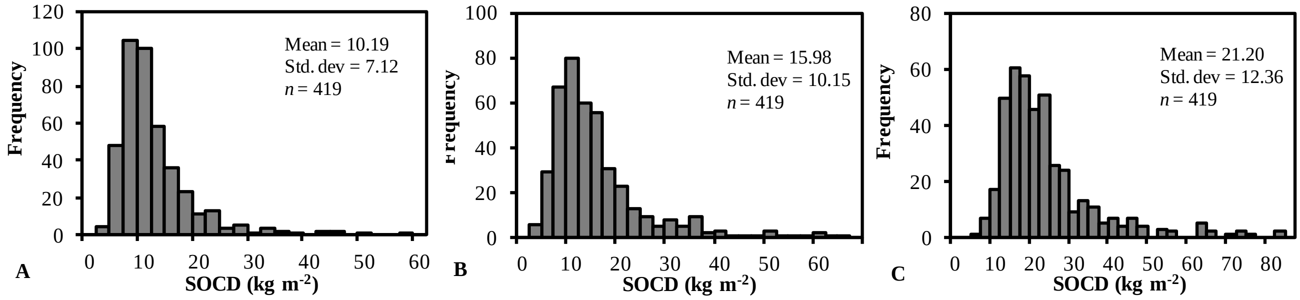

Fig. 3. Frequency distributions of SOCD at different soil depth ranges (A: 0 - 30 cm; B: 0 - 60 cm; C: 0 - 100 cm)

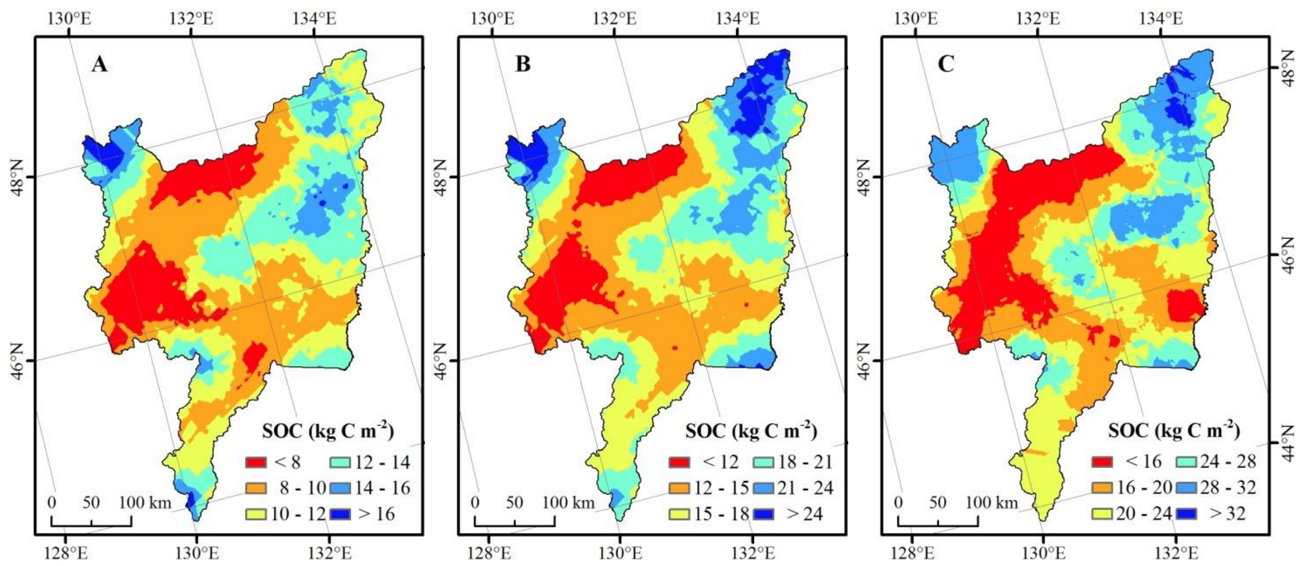

Fig. 4. Spatial pattern of SOC storage at different soil depths (A: 0 - 30 cm; B: 0 - 60 cm; C: 0 - 100 cm)

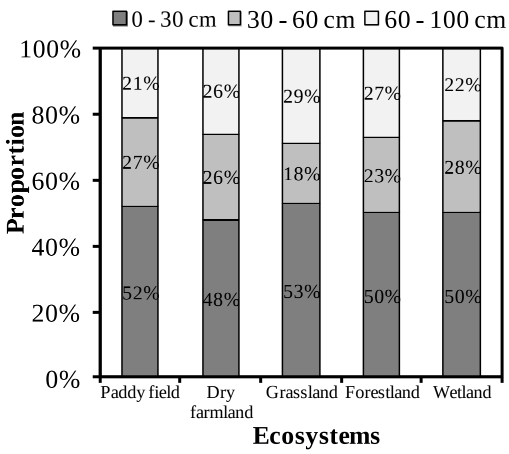

Fig. 5. Vertical distribution of SOC storage in different soil depth ranges for various ecosystems

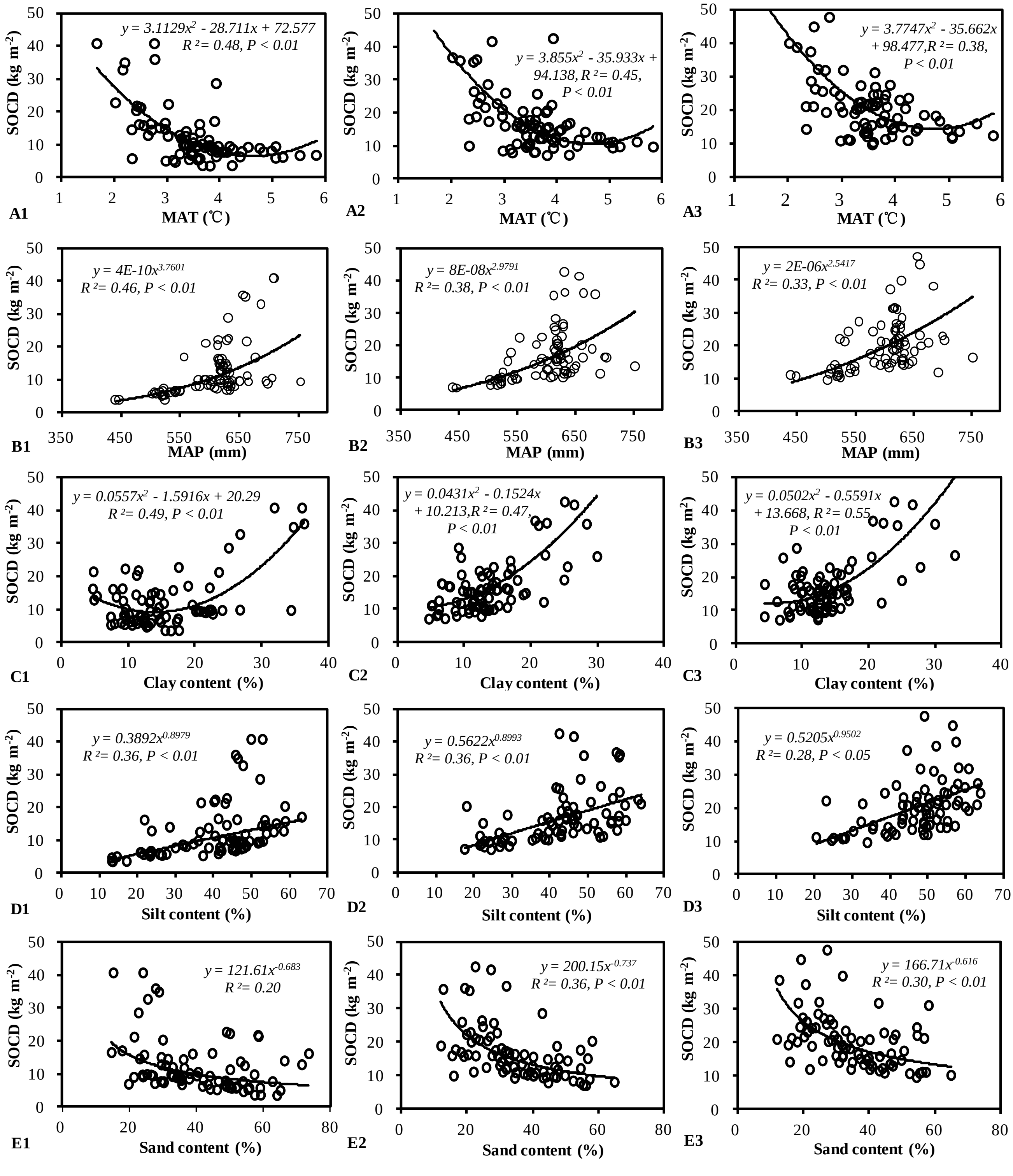

Fig. 6. Correlations of SOCD with various environmental factors for different soil depths in the Sanjiang Plain (A1 - E1: 0 - 30 cm; A2 - E2: 0 - 60 cm; A3 - E3: 0-100 cm)

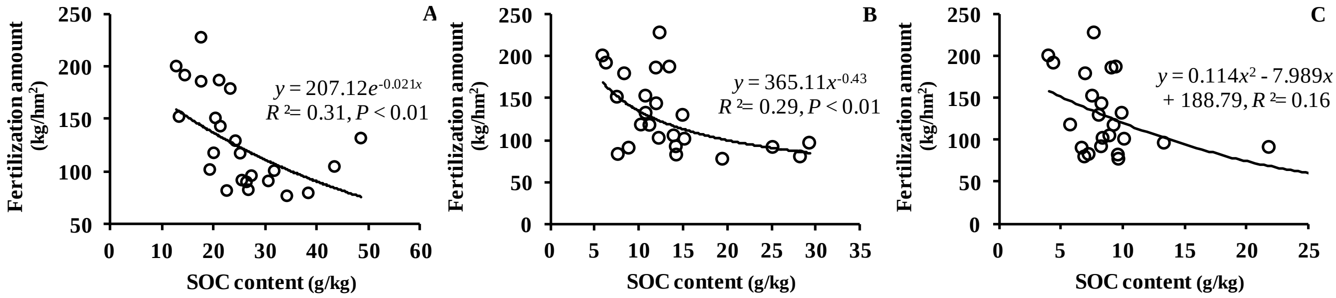

Fig. 7. Correlations of the cropland fertilization amount with SOC content in the Sanjiang Plain for different soil layers (A: 0 - 30 cm; B: 30 - 60 cm; C: 60 - 100 cm)

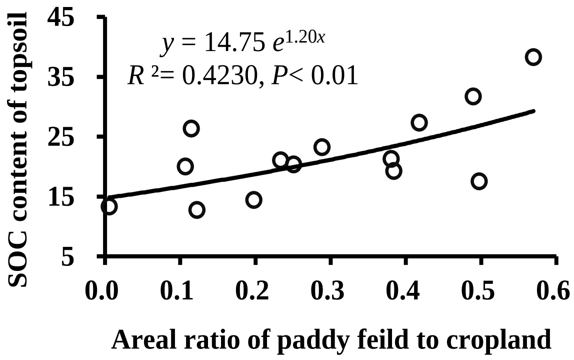

Fig. 8. Correlations of topsoil SOC content with the areal ratio of paddy field to cropland in the Sanjiang Plain