Variations of leaf N, P concentrations in shrubland biomes across Northern China: phylogeny, climate and soil

Xian Yang[1], Xiulian Chi[1], Chengjun Ji[1], Hongyan Liu[1], Wenhong Ma[2], Anwar Mohhammat[3], Zhaoyong Shi[4], Xiangping Wang[5], Shunli Yu[6], Ming Yue[7], Zhiyao Tang[1]

1. Department of Ecology, College of Urban and Environmental Sciences and Key Laboratory for Earth Surface Processes, Peking University, Beijing, China

2. College of Life Science, Inner Mongolia University, Hohhot, China.

3. Xinjiang Institute of Ecology and Geography, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Urumqi, China

4. College of Agriculture, Henan University of Science and Technology, Luoyang, China

5. College of Forestry, Beijing Forestry University, Beijing, China

6. Institute of Botany, Chinese Academy of Science, Beijing, China

7. College of Life Science, Northwest University, Xi’an, China

Correspondence to: Zhiyao Tang (zytang@urban.pku.edu.cn)

Abstract

Concentrations of leaf nitrogen (N) and phosphorus (P) are the key traits of plants for ecosystem functioning and dynamics. Foliar stoichiometry varies remarkably among life forms. However, previous studies have focused on the stoichiometric patterns of trees and grasses, leaving significant knowledge gap for shrubs. In this study, we explored the intra- and interspecific variations of leaf N and P concentrations in response to the changes in climate, soil property, and evolutionary history. We analysed 1486 samples composed of 163 shrub species from 361 shrubland sites in Northern China expanding 46.1 degrees (86.7°E -132.8 °E) in longitude and 19.8 degrees (32.6°N -52.4 °N) in latitude. Leaf N concentration decreased with precipitation, while leaf P concentration decreased with temperature and increased with precipitation and soil P concentration. Both leaf N and P concentrations were phylogenetically conserved, but leaf P concentration was less conserved than leaf N concentration. At the community level, climates explained more interspecific variation of leaf nutrient concentrations, while soil nutrient explained more intraspecific one,. These results suggested that leaf N and P concentrations responded to climate, soil, and phylogeny in different ways. Climate influenced the community chemical traits through the shift in species composition, whereas soil directly influenced the community chemical traits.

1 Introduction

Understanding how and why plant stoichiometry varies among species and sites is, in general, the most important single step towards understanding terrestrial ecosystem properties, including biogeochemical cycles, plant trait evolution, plant community structure and their functional characteristics in a changing climate (Westoby and Wright, 2006). Concentrations of leaf nitrogen (N) and phosphorus (P) play a crucial role in ecosystem functioning and dynamics (Sterner and Elser, 2002; Wright et al., 2004; Kerkhoff et al., 2006; Ordoñez et al., 2009; Vitousek et al., 2010). Leaf N concentration is critical for photosynthesis, plant production and litter decomposition (LeBauer and Treseder, 2008), while P is a limiting nutrient responsible for the energy storage, cell structure, and the composition of DNA and RNA. Despite their shared key functional purpose of photosynthetic carbon assimilation and transpiration (Elser et al., 2003; Reich and Oleksyn, 2004; Wright et al., 2004; Kerkhoff et al., 2006; Chen et al., 2013), plant leaves vary dramatically in N and P concentrations, partly because of the differences in climate, soil, vegetation types, and developing history among sites (Westoby and Wright, 2006). For example, leaf N and P concentrations are higher in herbs than in woody plants, and higher in deciduous than in evergreen species (Kerkhoff et al., 2006), and increase with latitude at large scales (McGroddy et al., 2004; Reich and Oleksyn, 2004; Han et al., 2005, 2011; Kerkhoff et al., 2006). Studying the patterns of leaf N and P concentrations is important for understanding the macroecological patterns in plant stoichiometry and related driving factors (Han et al., 2005).

Several hypotheses have been proposed to explain the patterns of plant stoichiometry (Elser et al., 2003; Reich and Oleksyn, 2004). Among these hypotheses, the plant physiology hypothesis (Woods et al., 2003; Reich and Oleksyn, 2004), the biogeochemical hypothesis (McGroddy et al., 2004; Reich and Oleksyn, 2004) and the species composition hypothesis (Reich and Oleksyn, 2004; He et al., 2006) have most often been reported. The plant physiology hypothesis proposes that the concentrations of N and P in plant tissues increase to offset the decreases in plant metabolic rate as the ambient temperature decreases (Woods et al., 2003; Reich and Oleksyn, 2004). Studies in arid regions also proposed that plants tend to have higher leaf N concentration to better adapt to arid environments (Cunningham et al., 1999; Wright et al., 2003) through exploiting greater light availability (Cunningham et al., 1999) while reducing stomatal conductance and transpiration rate (Wright et al., 2003; Luo et al. 2015). The biogeochemical hypothesis suggests that the concentrations of N and P in plant tissues are controlled by the availability of soil N and P, and thus, the concentrations of N and P in plant tissues are highly correlated with those in the soil (McGroddy et al., 2004; Reich and Oleksyn, 2004). The species composition hypothesis suggests that species composition was the primary determinant of stoichiometry, with climatic variables having little effect, which is supported by recent studies conducted from tropical forest to alpine grassland biomes (Townsend et al., 2007; He et al., 2008), despite Meng et al. (2015) found responses of leaf nutrients concentrations to climate were similar among each plant functional types. In addition, the difference in stoichiometry among species may be highly correlated with the phylogenetic relatedness of the species involved, as the related traits may be phylogenetically conserved (Kerkhoff et al., 2006; Stock and Verboom, 2012).

All hypotheses have received supports from empirical studies by using meta data (McGroddy et al., 2004; Reich and Oleksyn, 2004; Wright et al., 2004; Han et al., 2005; Ordoñez et al., 2009; Stock and Verboom, 2012) or standardized large scale samplings (He et al., 2006, 2008; Fyllas et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2013). These hypotheses may function simultaneously; none of them has been proved to be prior to others. Particularly, most of these studies have been biased for trees in forests (McGroddy et al., 2004; Townsend et al., 2007; Chen et al., 2013) and herbaceous plants in grasslands (Craine et al., 2005; He et al., 2006, 2008). Reports on simultaneous measurements of leaf chemistry from shrubland communities are rare (but see Liu et al. (2013)). There is an urgent need for a closer evaluation of plant nutrient use strategies under the greater ecological context. As foliar stoichiometry may vary remarkably among life forms (Wright et al., 2004; Han et al., 2005; Kerkhoff et al., 2006), it is therefore necessary to test these hypotheses based on the stoichiometry of shrubs before any consensus can be reached.

Shrubland covers more than 1.23 million km^2 (or 12.5% of the total) in China. The community types vary gradually from temperate shrubland in the northeast to desert shrubland in the northwest China (Editorial Committee of Vegetation Map of China, 2007). Shrubland is the climax vegetation adapted to the drought of Northern China. A survey on the shrubs in northern China and their relationship to the climate, soil properties and species composition can considerably improve our understanding on the patterns of foliar stoichiometry for shrubs and in shrubland communities. In this study, we explored the patterns of leaf N and P concentrations of shrubs and their relationships to the climate, soil and evolutionary history in Northern China. We examined the following hypotheses.

1. First, we hypothesize that both leaf N and P concentrations may decrease with mean annual temperature based on the plant physiology hypothesis; and leaf N concentration may decrease with precipitation, as plants in arid regions may contain higher N concentrations to better adapt to arid environments.

2. Second, we hypothesize that P concentration in leaf is more strongly correlated with its availability in soil than N concentration. This is because that in contrast to soil N, P is particularly low in soils in China (Han et al., 2005), and plants may absorb P from soil when it is available.

3. Finally, we hypothesize that leaf N concentration is less phylogenetically conserved than leaf P concentration. According to Fyllas et al. (2009), leaf N concentration tends to be more genetically constrained, while leaf P concentration tends to be more environmentally constrained and has higher level of plasticity. Traits that define species competition on limited resources are less likely to be phylogenetically conserved as they are under strong selection and more adapted to the environment.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Sampling collection and measurements

This study was conducted based on an investigation of 361 shrubland sites, including 289 temperate, 69 desert and 3 subalpine sites, encompassing 19.8 degrees in latitude (32.6-52.4 °N) and 46.1 degrees in longitude (86.7-132.8 °E) in Northern China (Fig. 1). The sampling was conducted in the summer (July to September) of 2011, 2012 and 2013. At each site, three plots of 5*5 m^2, with distances of 5-50 m between edges of nearby plots, were selected to present the natural shrubland communities. We identified all shrub species in each plot, and harvested leaf, stem and root biomass separately for each species. Shrub was the dominant life form in all sites, accounting for 87.3% aboveground biomass on average. Fully expanded sun leaves of at least five individuals of each species were collected and assembled in fabric bags then dried in the sun. Leaf samples were then transported to the laboratory and oven-dried at 65°C for 72 hours. In total, we collected 1486 samples composed of 163 species from 38 families and 86 genera, with 91 species sampled from more than one site.

At each plot, we removed the litter layer and excavated three pits to the depth of 1 meter to collect soil samples at the diagonal of the plot. For each profile, soil samples were taken at the depths of 0-10, 10-20, 20-30, 30-50, 50-70 and 70-100 cm, and the soil samples from the same depth were mixed. During mixing, visible roots were removed at the laboratory.

An elemental analyzer (2400 II CHNS; Perkin-Elmer, Boston, MA, USA) was employed to measure the total N concentration of the soils (STN) and leaves with combustion temperature of 950°C and reaction temperature of 640 °C. The molydate/ascorbic acid method was applied to measure total P concentration in the soils (STP) and leaves after H_2SO_4-H_2O_2 digestion (Jones, 2001). Soil pH was measured using a pH meter (S20P-K; Mettler-Toledo, Greifensee, Switzerland) in soil-water suspension. As STN and STP from 0-10 cm depth interval were highly correlated with those from other depth intervals (Table S1), we only used STN and STP from 0-10 cm depth interval.

We also extracted mean annual temperature (MAT) and precipitation (AP) from the WorldClim spatial climate data (resolution at ca 1km, available at www.worldclim.org/). The MAT in the study sites ranged from -4.1 to 16.0 °C, and the AP ranged from 15 to 974 mm. Please refer to Yang et al. (2014) for more detailed information on data collections.

2.2 Tests of the effects of climate and soil on leaf N and P concentrations

To test for the plant physiology and biogeochemical hypotheses (the first and second hypotheses), we examined effects of climate, soil property and evolutionary history on the leaf N, P concentrations and N: P ratio by plotting the concentrations against environmental factors using all data (treating all observations as equal). Leaf N and P concentrations were log base 10 transformed to normalize their distributions before analysis as their frequency distributions were skewed.

We followed Lepš et al. (2011) to assess the relative contributions of intra- and interspecific variability effects on biomass weighted site-average leaf N, P concentration and N:P ratio along the climatic and soil nutrient gradients. For each site, we calculated “specific” site-average leaf N, P concentration and N: P ratio and “fixed” site-average leaf N, P concentration and N:P ratio with the formulas below:

$$\text{Specific average} = \sum_{i=1}^{S} p_i x_j \tag{1}$$

$$\text{Fixed average} = \sum_{i=1}^{S} p_i x_i \tag{2}$$

where S is the number of species in a study site, p_i is the proportion of the ith species based on aboveground biomass (leaf and stem biomass) in the site, x_i is the fixed mean leaf N, P concentration or N:P ratio of the ith species for all study sites where the species exists, and x_j is the specific mean leaf N, P concentration or N:P ratio of the ith species for the given site. The variation of specific average values may be attribute to both intra- and interspecific leaf chemical trait variation, while the variation of fixed average values is solely affected by interspecific leaf chemical trait variation. Therefore, the effect of intraspecific variability can be estimated as:

$$\text{Intraspecific variability} = \text{Specific average} - \text{Fixed average} \tag{3}$$

We then used each of the three parameters as a single response variable in general linear model (GLM) regressions with climatic and soil nutrient factors as explanatory variables. The decomposition of sum of squares (SS) can be used across the three GLM models:

$$SS_{\text{Specific}} = SS_{\text{Fixed}} + SS_{\text{Intraspecific}} + SS_{\text{covariance}} \tag{4}$$

We could then extract the SS for each of the three GLM models explained by each of the environmental factors. In this way, we decomposed the total variation of leaf N, P concentration or N:P ratio into parts explained by intraspecific variation, interspecific variation and their covariance, we also quantified how much variability in each part can be explained by each environmental factor. We analysed the both main-effect GLM models and the GLM models with interaction terms. Since the results for the main effects of environmental variables were same, and the variation explained by interaction terms were relatively small compare to the main-effects, we only presented the main-effect models for simplicity, and showed the models with interaction terms in the supplementary material (Table S2).

Ecological data on large scale often display spatial autocorrelation, and the presence of such pattern in the residuals of a statistical model may result in significant type I error (Dormann, 2007). We tested for spatial independence of the residuals of the models using Moran's I index (Moran, 1950), and found that the Moran's I of the residuals of all the models were not significant (Fig. S1), indicating that the environments included in the models removed the spatial autocorrelation in the leaf nutrient concentration (Diniz-Filho et al., 2003).

Statistical and phylogenetic analyses were performed using R 3.1.1 (R Development Core Team, 2014) with the ape (Paradis et al., 2004) and picante packages (Kembel et al., 2010). Spatial analyses were conducted using SAM 4.0 (Rangel et al., 2010).

2.3 Phylogentic signal test

To examine the phylogenetic signal of leaf N and P concentrations and test our third hypothesis, we constructed a phylogenetic tree for the 163 species by using Phylomatic (Webb and Donoghue, 2005) based on APG III topology (Bremer et al., 2009). We then adjusted the branch length using BLADJ algorithm within the Phylocom software (http://www.phylodiversity.net/phylocom/; Wikström et al., 2001). We then conducted K statistic (Blomberg et al., 2003) to quantify the magnitude of phylogenetic signal of leaf N, P concentrations and N:P ratio. For each species, we first calculated the mean leaf N and P concentrations. To test if the phylogenetic conservatism of leaf N concentration is caused by the legumes (species from Fabaceae) or succulent species, we also conducted K statistic of leaf N after dropping the clade of Fabaceae or succulent plants. The significance (P-values) was evaluated by comparing the variance of independent contrasts for each trait to the expected values calculated by shuffling the tips for 999 times. The P-value can be used to test whether the phylogenetic signal in each trait is larger than the null expectation, while K statistic can be used to estimate the strength of phylogenetic signal. A significant P-value indicates that the phylogenetic signal of the trait was non-random, compared to the prediction of the random-tip-shuffling model.

To quantify the strength of phylogenetic signal of species' environmental traits, we calculated K statistics of mean climate (MAT and AP) and soil chemistry (STN and STP) of all sites each species occurring.

3 Results

3.1 Effects of climate and soil on leaf N and P concentrations

Leaf N and P concentrations changed from 4.26 to 46.80 mg g^{-1} (mean =21.91, std=6.84) and 0.16 to 4.80 mg g^{-1} (mean =1.30, std =0.53) for shrubs in Northern China. Leaf N:P changed from 4.07 to 145.76 (mean=18.69, std=8.40) (Table 1; Fig. S2). Leaf N concentration decreased (R^2=0.1, p<0.001), while leaf P concentration increased (R^2=0.03, p<0.001), with AP. Leaf P concentration decreased (R^2=0.03, p<0.001), while leaf N concentration showed no significant correlation (R^2<0.01, p=0.227), with MAT. Leaf N concentration decreased with STN (R^2=0.13, p<0.001), while leaf P concentration increased with STP (R^2=0.02, p<0.001). Leaf N concentration increased (R^2=0.02, p<0.001), while leaf P concentration decreased, with soil pH (R^2=0.03, p<0.001) (Fig. 2). Leaf N:P ratio increased with MAT (R^2=0.04, p<0.001) and soil pH (R^2=0.07, p<0.001), while decreased with AP (R^2=0.18, p<0.001), STN (R^2=0.07, p<0.001) and STP (R^2=0.06, p<0.001) (Fig. 3).

Climatic variables explained 3.4% of the variation in leaf N concentration, and 8.2% of the variation in leaf P concentration. Only AP significantly influenced leaf N concentration, while all environmental factors except STN and soil pH significantly influenced leaf P concentration. AP explained the most variation in leaf N:P ratio (20.6%), while the effects of other factors were not significant (Table 2).

When the total variation of leaf N and P concentrations were decomposed into intra- and interspecific variations, GLM analyses showed that AP and STN explained 5.5% and 2.5% (p<0.001) of the interspecific variation of leaf N concentration, respectively. None of MAT, AP, STN, STP and soil pH significantly influenced intraspecific variation of leaf N concentration (p>0.05 for all). For leaf P concentration, MAT and AP accounted for 1.2% (p<0.01) and 3.5% (p<0.001) interspecific variation; STN and STP explained 1.1% (p<0.01), and 3.5% (p<0.001) of intraspecific variation, respectively (Table 2; Fig. 4). For leaf N:P ratio, AP accounted for 20.0% (p<0.001) of the interspecific variation; STP explained 1.1% (p<0.01) of the intraspecific variation, respectively (Table 2; Fig. 4). As temperate shrubland and desert shrubland distributed in different climates, we further conducted the GLM analyses for the two major shrubland types separately. The temperate shrubland showed similar results with that with all data pooled. For desert shrubland, however, none of the environmental factors significantly influenced leaf N concentration, and precipitation was the major factor influencing leaf P concentration and N:P ratio through shift in species composition (Fig. S3; Table S3).

3.2 Phylogenetic signals of leaf N and P concentrations

Leaf N concentration exhibited a significantly non-random phylogenetic signal (K=0.31, p<0.001), while leaf P concentration showed significant but weaker phylogenetic signal (K=0.24, p<0.01) among all species (Table 1). The phylogenetic signal for leaf N concentration remained significant when legumes (K=0.30, p<0.001) or succulent plants were excluded (K=0.30, p<0.001) (Table 1).

4 Discussion

Using the foliar stoichiometry of 163 shrub species from 361 shrubland sites, we investigated patterns of leaf N and P concentrations in shrublands of Northern China. We focus our discussion on leaf N and P concentrations instead of their ratio because leaf N:P was strongly driven by both leaf N and P concentrations and was predictable based on leaf N and P concentrations. Given that leaf C concentration is relatively stable, leaf N and P concentrations can also be good indicators of C:N and C:P ratios (Reich, 2005). We found that mean leaf N (21.91 mg g^{-1}) and P (1.30mg g^{-1}) concentrations of shrubs in Northern China shrubland were similar to those in shrubs across China (mostly distributed in forests as understory species, Han et al., 2005), but lower than those in grasses (Han et al., 2005; He et al., 2006, 2008) and higher than those in trees in China (Han et al., 2005) (Fig. S4). The “leaf economics spectrum”, proposed by Wright et al. (2004), runs from a life strategy which was characterized by low rates of metabolism, low N and P concentrations, and extended leaf longevity, to a life strategy which was characterized by high rates of metabolism, high N and P concentrations, and short leaf longevity (Wright et al., 2004). Our result indicated distinct life strategies between shrubs and trees or herbaceous plants. Our results also suggested that the inclusion of shrubs is necessary to explore the patterns of leaf stoichiometry in relation to climate and soil property.

There are some novel findings concerning the patterns of leaf stoichiometry, which we discuss below.

4.1 Influence of climate on leaf N and P concentrations

Leaf N and P concentrations responded to climate in different ways (Figs. 3, 4). Consistent with our hypothesis, leaf N concentration decreased with precipitation. This is partly due to the higher leaf N concentration of plants in dessert shrublands (Figs. 3, 4). Higher leaf N concentration has been suggested as a general property of arid-zone plants (Wright et al., 2003). It is widely reported that plants tend to increase leaf N to exploit greater light availability while reducing stomatal conductance and transpiration rate (Cunningham et al., 1999; Wright et al., 2003; Luo et al. 2015). Succulence is such an adaption for plants to drought and salinity by accumulating nitrogen-containing compounds in their leaves to maintain water balance and therefore succulent plants are higher in leaf N concentration than other plants (Mansour 2000) (Fig. S4). In contrast, leaf P concentration increased with precipitation. P is derived primarily from the weathering of soil inorganic components and the degradation of organic matters (Aerts and Chapin, 1999). Increase in precipitation may amplify the P availability in soil by facilitating the decomposition of litters in arid region, where precipitation is lower than evapotranspiration. Among our 361 study sites, 301 have an aridity index (AI, the ratio of total precipitation to potential evapotranspiration) of <1, indicating that precipitation is generally lower than evapotranspiration in this region. The positive correlation between soil total phosphorous concentration and precipitation ($R^2=0.21$, $p<0.001$) and the lower soil total phosphorous concentration in dessert shrubland (Fig. 2) is in line with such hypothesis.

Leaf P decreased with mean annual temperature, which was consistent with the plant physiology hypothesis that plant P may increase to offset the decreases in plant metabolic rate as ambient temperature decreases (Reich and Oleksyn, 2004). However, inconsistent with other studies (Reich and Oleksyn, 2004; Han et al., 2005; Chen et al., 2013), we did not observe a decrease in leaf N concentration with temperature. Most previous studies were conducted at regions where temperature and precipitation were highly positively correlated (Ordoñez et al., 2009; Chen et al. 2013), and the effects of temperature and precipitation might be confounded. The weak negative correlation between mean annual temperature and annual precipitation in our study region (Pearson's correlation R= -0.01) allow us to test the major influencing climatic factor of leaf N concentration. We found it is precipitation, rather than temperature, that significantly influence leaf N concentration in the study region.

4.2 Influence of soil N and P concentration on leaf N and P concentration

We observed a significantly positive correlation between leaf P concentration and soil total phosphorous concentration, but not between leaf N concentration and soil total nitrogen concentration. The positive correlation between leaf and soil P concentrations might be caused by following reasons. Although leaf P concentration is higher in shrublands of Northern China than in forests in China (Han et al., 2005), it is significantly lower than those in the rest of the world (Reich and Oleksyn, 2004). It is widely reported that a leaf N and P ratio (N:P) < 14 indicates N limitation, whereas a N:P > 16 indicates P limitation, in the ecosystem (Aerts and Chapin, 1999; Koerselman and Meuleman, 1996). In this study, mean leaf N:P is 18.69, which is significantly greater than 16 (One sample t-test: $p<0.001$). This means that, shrublands of Northern China are P limited, though soil P concentration is higher than in southern part of China (Zhang et al., 2005). In the P limited ecosystems, plants may absorb P and deposit P in an inorganic form when P in soil is abundant (Sterner and Elser, 2002), resulting a positive correlation between leaf and soil P concentrations. However, leaf N concentration did not increase with soil N concentration, since N is not limited in soil. Several recent studies found similar results that leaf N concentration did not increase with soil N concentration (Ordoñez et al., 2009; Liu et al. 2013; Maire et al., 2015). We acknowledge that because the available soil N and P, though in a small quantity, can be readily absorbed and utilized by plants, they are important components of soil N and P (Bünemann and Condron, 2007; McNeill and Unkovich, 2007), and may be better indicators for soil fertility (Zhang et al., 2005; Ordoñez et al., 2009). Unfortunately, we did not include these two measures in our study. Nevertheless, we note that organic materials, which constitute the majority mass of soil total N and P, can be directly utilized by many plants that couple with mycorrhizal fungi (Aerts and Chapin, 1999). This makes the total element concentrations, including total N and P, the most effective indicators for soil nutrient level. In addition, soil pH is an integrated index of soil nutrient availability, and is correlated with various processes such as soil enzymatic and microbial activities (Sinsabaugh and Follstad Shah, 2012). Higher soil pH generally indicates higher availability of nutrients held in soil organic matter and lower costs of plant N acquisition when maintaining photosynthesis rate (Maire et al., 2015). This is consistent with our observation that leaf N concentration increased with soil pH. However, the effect of soil pH became insignificant in the multiple regressions (Table 2), which might due to the strong negative correlation between precipitation and soil pH in this region ($R^2=0.40$, $p<0.001$).

4.3 Influence of environmental factors on intra- and interspecific variation of leaf N and P concentrations

Environmental factors explained nearly 12% of total variance in leaf P concentration on community level, which was two times more than that of leaf N concentration, indicating that leaf P concentration is more affected by environmental factors. However, the explanatory powers of climate and soil for leaf N and P concentrations are comparatively low. We speculate that other factors, such as soil age, may also have effects on the leaf stoichiometry, (Vitousek et al., 2010; Hayes et al., 2014), but were not included in our model. Interspecific variation of leaf N and P concentrations is caused by the changes in species composition, and intraspecific variation of leaf N and P concentrations is driven by environmental variations. Leaf P was jointly influenced by climate and soil nutrient. Climate influenced the community leaf P concentration through shift in species composition, whereas soil influences the community P concentration directly. Leaf N concentration is mainly driven by precipitation, which affects species turnover. This pattern still holds when only considering the temperate shrbland. While for desert shrubland, leaf chemical traits are mainly driven by precipitation, which affects the species turnover.

The phylogenetic signal analysis also indicated that the temperature and precipitation niches of species exhibited phylogenetic signal, while the soil niche did not (except for soil pH, which also exhibited a phylogenetic signal) (Table 1). This result was consistent with the previous conclusion that climate explained more interspecific variation of leaf chemical traits and influenced species composition. Both results indicated that climate influences the community chemical traits mainly through the shift in species composition (He et al., 2008), whereas soil directly influences the community chemical traits. Changes in leaf chemical traits along temperature and precipitation gradient are mainly due to difference in species composition along the gradient. Particularly, annual precipitation showed the strongest phylogenetic signal, largely due to the large gradient in precipitation across the study region and the dramatic variation in species composition adapted to aridity gradient.

4.4 Influence of phylogeny on leaf N and P concentrations

Leaf N concentration exhibited strong, while leaf P concentration exhibited weak, phylogenetic conservatism (Table 1). Legumes and succulent species are higher in leaf N concentrations (Fig. S4), and therefore may significantly increase the K value of leaf N concentration. However, when they were excluded, the K-value remained almost unchanged (Table 1). Therefore, the phylogenetic conservatism of leaf N concentration did not result from the inclusion of some clades that have higher leaf N concentrations.

Plants disperse and evolve in response to environmental conditions that vary over both time and space (Kerkhoff et al., 2006). In this process, adaptive traits that are shaped by the environment conditions tend to show weaker phylogenetic signal (Losos, 2008). In this study, leaf N concentration was not influenced by soil nutrients, and we surmise that the influence of climate on leaf N concentration mainly works through species turnover. Leaf N concentration therefore exhibited significant phylogenetic signal (Table 1). Leaf P concentration was significant influenced by soil nutrient, and its conservation was therefore weakened. This could also be attributed to the uptaking mechanism of P. The “arbuscular mycorrhizal” pathway is the major pathway of P uptake in most vascular plants (Smith, 2003; Plassard and Dell, 2010) and the colonization of arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi mainly depends on environments instead of host plants (Jacobson, 1997).

5 Conclusions

We investigated the leaf N and P concentrations of 163 shrub species sampled at 361 sites in Northern China, and related the N and P concentrations to the climate, soil conditions, and species phylogenetic information. We found that leaf N and P concentrations were mainly influenced by different factors, and thus responded to climate, soil, and evolutionary history differently. Leaf P concentration is jointly driven by soil P concentration and climate, whereas leaf N concentration is mainly driven by precipitation. Both leaf N and P concentrations are phylogenetically conserved, but leaf P concentration is less conserved than leaf N concentration, which could be attributed to the mechanism that plants utilize P. Changes in leaf chemical traits along the climatic gradient are mainly due to difference in species composition along the gradient, whereas soil influences the community chemical traits directly. We note that our study is limited by only focusing on N and P, given the important physiological functions of other essential trace elements. Future studies of the biogeochemical implications and the evolutionary basis of plant nutrient concentrations, including N, P, and other essential trace elements, in various regions, plant forms and other plant organs are important to understand the macroecological patterns and mechanisms of plant nutrient concentrations.

Author contribution

X. Y. and Z. T. conceived and designed the study, X. Y., Z. T. and X. C., conducted analyses and wrote the paper. X. Y., C. J., H. L., W. M., A. M., Z. S., X. W., S. Y., M. Y., C. Z. and Z. T. contributed data, discussed the draft manuscript and interpreted the results.

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Table 1. Arithmetic mean, range and phylogenetic signal (K-value) of leaf N and P concentrations and environmental variables for shrubs in Northern China.

	Mean (std)	Range	K
Leaf N (mg g^{-1})	21.91 (6.84)	4.26-46.80	0.31[a]
Leaf N (mg g^{-1}) non-legumes	20.95 (6.47)	4.26-45.81	0.30[a]
Leaf N (mg g^{-1}) non-succulent	21.86 (6.91)	4.26-46.80	0.33[a]
Leaf P (mg g^{-1})	1.30 (0.53)	0.16- 4.80	0.24[b]
Leaf N:P	18.69 (8.40)	4.07-145.76	0.24[a]
MAT (ºC)	7.18 (3.42)	-20.03	0.26[a]
AP (mm)	478.79 (215.51)	15-974	0.53[a]
Soil pH	8.35 (1.16)	5.48-10.29	0.37 [a]
STN (mg g^{-1})	1.84 (1.67)	0.05-18.03	0.23 [NS]
STP (mg g-1)	0.56 (0.32)	0.12-3.20	0.17 [NS]

Abbreviations: MAT, mean annual temperature.

AP, annual precipitation.

STN, soil total nitrogen.

STP, soil total phosphorus.

[a] $p<0.001$.

[b] $p< 0.01$.

[NS] not significant.

Table 2. Summary of main-effect general linear models for leaf N (a), P (b) concentrations and N:P (c) of shrubs in Northern China.

		Interspecific variation		Intraspecific variation		Total variation		
		F	SS	F	SS	F	SS	SS%
(a)	MAT	1.5	43.2[NS]	0.4	6.3[NS]	0.4	17.0[NS]	0.1
	AP	26.4	737.2[a]	2.7	38.7[NS]	10.1	450.0[b]	3.3
	STN	12.1	337.8[a]	1.1	16.8[NS]	4.7	208.7[c]	1.6
	STP	0.2	5.6[NS]	2.2	31.4[NS]	0.3	11.5[NS]	0.1
	Soil pH	0.2	6.7[NS]	0.1	1.6[NS]	0.3	14.3[NS]	0.1
	Residual		7969.6		3969.6		12748.8	
	Total		9100.1		4064.4		13450.3	5.2
(b)	MAT	7.5	1.1[b]	2.1	0.3[NS]	8.5	2.5[b]	2.6
	AP	22.2	3.3[a]	1.8	0.2[NS]	18.0	5.3[a]	5.6
	STN	6.2	0.9[c]	7.5	1.0[b]	<0.1	<0.1[NS]	<0.1
	STP	0.5	0.1[NS]	24.6	3.3[a]	8.1	2.4[b]	2.5
	Soil pH	3.3	0.5[NS]	<0.1	<0.1[NS]	1.9	0.5[NS]	0.6
	Residual		42.8		36.6		84	
	Total		48.8		41.4		94.7	11.3
(c)	MAT	0.1	2.0[NS]	0.6	11.6[NS]	0.5	22.5[NS]	0.1
	AP	131.2	3055.8[a]	0.1	1.9[NS]	75.4	3203.7[a]	20.6
	STN	1.1	25.5[NS]	0.1	1.5[NS]	0.4	16[NS]	0.1
	STP	0.3	6.2[NS]	9.0	167.1[b]	2.5	106.8[NS]	0.7
	Soil pH	1.6	37.2[NS]	0.1	1.6[NS]	1.3	54.8[NS]	0.4
	Residual		6640.5		5064.1		12111.5	
	Total		9767.2		5247.8		15515.3	21.9

Abbreviations: MAT, mean annual temperature.

AP, annual precipitation.

STN, soil total nitrogen.

STP, soil total phosphorus.

[a] $p<0.001$.

[b] $p< 0.01$.

[c] $p< 0.05$.

[NS] not significant.

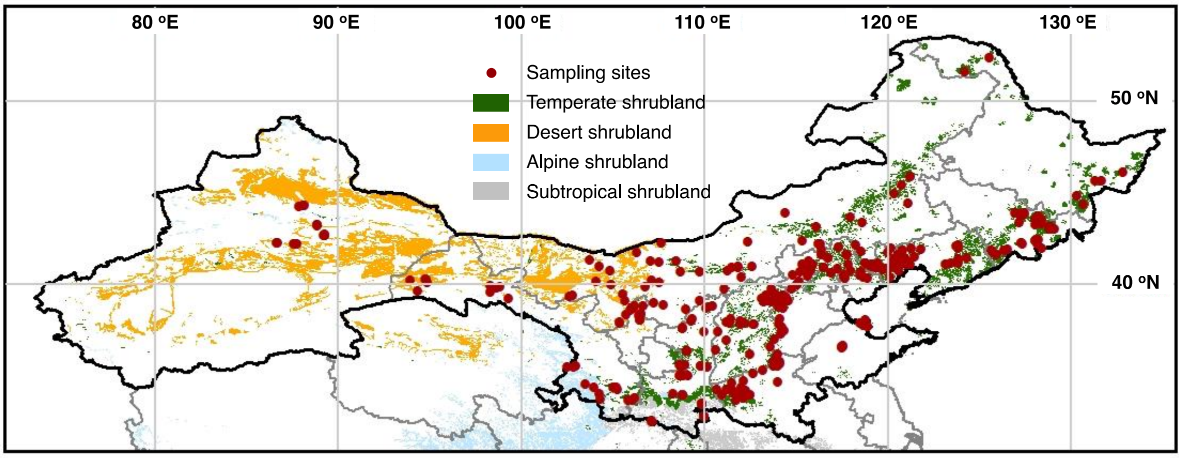

Figure 1. Locations of the sampling sites based on shrublands in Northern China.

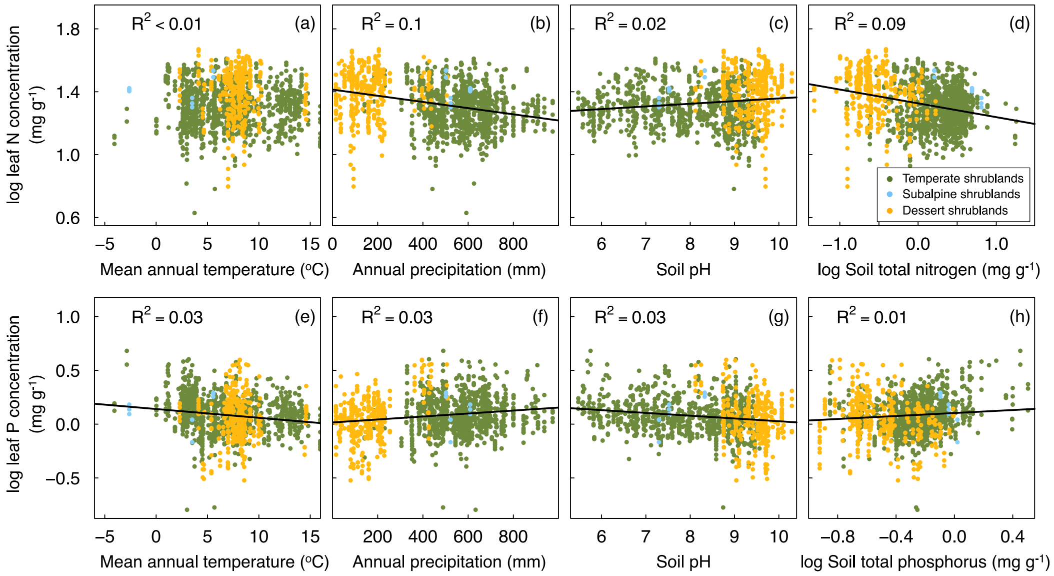

Figure 2. Changes of logarithm transferred leaf nitrogen and phosphorus concentrations in relation to climate (mean annual temperature and annual precipitation) and soil nutrient (soil pH and soil total nitrogen and phosphorus concentrations) for shrubs in Northern China. Green, yellow and blue dots represent samples from temperate, subalpine, and desert shrublands, respectively. Solid lines represent regressions significant at P<0.001.

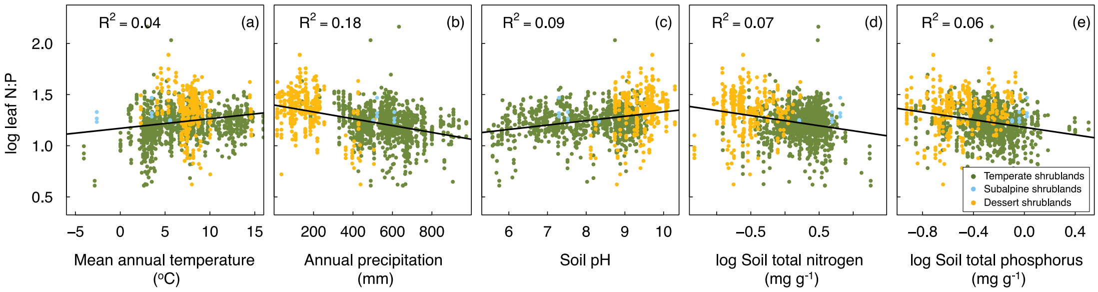

Figure 3. Changes of logarithm transferred leaf N:P ratio in relation to climate (mean annual temperature and annual precipitation) and soil nutrition (soil pH and soil total nitrogen and phosphorus concentrations) for shrubs in Northern China. Green, yellow and blue dots represent samples from temperate, subalpine, and desert shrublands, respectively. Solid lines represent regressions significant at $P<0.001$.

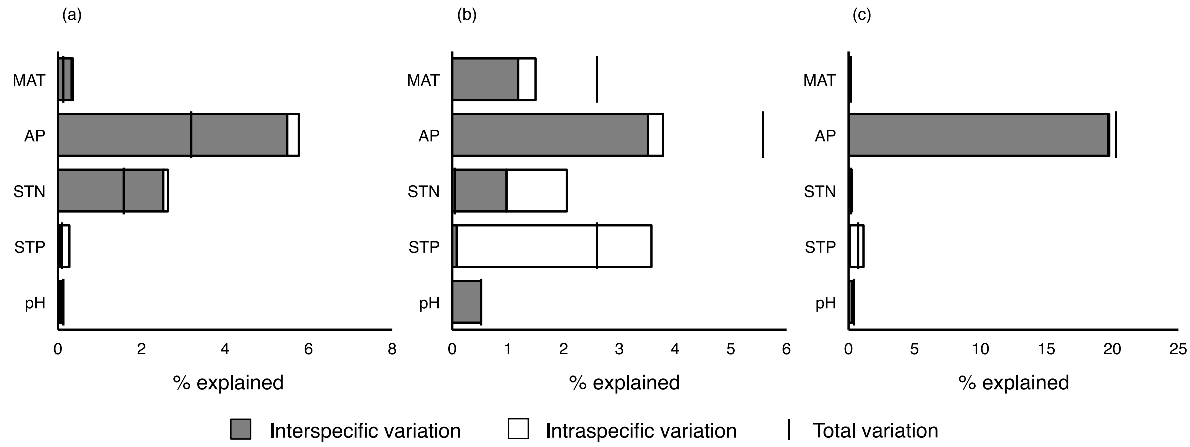

Figure 4. Decomposition of total variation in leaf N (a), P (b) and N:P (c) of shrubs in shrubland of Northern China. Gray part of the columns corresponds to interspecific variation, and open part to intraspecific variation. Black bars denote total variation.

Supplementary material

Fig. S1. Moran's I of the residuals the different GLM models.

Fig. S2. Histograms showing the distributions of leaf nitrogen (mg g^{-1}) (a), phosphorus (mg g^{-1}) (b), and N:P (c) for all observations.

Fig. S3. Decomposition of total variation in leaf N (a, d), P (b, e) and N:P (c, f) of shrubs in temperate (a-c) and desert shrubland (d-f).

Fig. S4. Different leaf N (black) and P (grey) concentrations among life forms (a) and different leaf N concentration among functional groups (b) in China.

Table S1. Pearson correlations (R) of soil total nitrogen (STN) and phosphorus (STP) concentrations between different soil intervals.

Table S2. Summary of general linear models for leaf N (a), P (b) concentrations and N:P (c) of shrubs in Northern China with interaction terms.

Table S3. Summary of main-effect general linear models for leaf N (a, d), P (b, d) concentrations and N:P (c, e) of shrubs in temperate (a-c) and desert shrublands (d-f).