Heterogeneity and non-linearity of ecosystem responses to climate change in the Qilian Mountains National Park, China (Postprint)

Authors: GAO Xiang, WEN Ruiyang, Kevin LO, Jie Li, YAN An

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Abstract

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Full Text

Preamble

Heterogeneity and non-linearity of ecosystem responses to climate change in the Qilian Mountains National Park, China

GAO Xiang[1], **WEN Ruiyang**[1], **Kevin LO**[2*], **LI Jie**[1], **YAN An**[1]

[1]College of Geography and Environmental Science, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou 730070, China
[2]Department of Geography, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong 999077, China

Abstract: Ecosystem responses to climate change, particularly in arid environments, represent an understudied topic. This study conducted a spatial analysis of ecosystem responses to short-term variability in temperature, precipitation, and solar radiation in the Qilian Mountains National Park, an arid mountainous region in Northwest China. We collected precipitation and temperature data from the National Science and Technology Infrastructure Platform, solar radiation data from the China Meteorological Forcing Dataset, and vegetation cover remote-sensing data from the Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer. We used the vegetation sensitivity index to identify areas sensitive to climate change and to determine which climatic factors were significant in this regard. The findings revealed a high degree of heterogeneity and non-linearity in ecosystem responses to climate change. Four types of heterogeneity were identified: longitudinal, altitudinal, ecosystem, and climate disturbance. Furthermore, the characteristics of non-linear ecosystem responses to climate change included: (1) inconsistency in the controlling climatic factors for the same ecosystems in different geographical settings; (2) the interaction between different climatic factors results in varying weights that affect ecosystem stability and makes them difficult to determine; and (3) the hysteresis effect of vegetation increases the uncertainty of ecosystem responses to climate change. The findings are significant because they highlight the complexity of ecosystem responses to climate change. Furthermore, the identification of areas that are particularly sensitive to climate change and the influencing factors has important implications for predicting and managing the impacts of climate change on ecosystems, which can help protect the stability of ecosystems in the Qilian Mountains National Park.

Keywords: ecosystem resistance; ecosystem stability; climate change; vegetation sensitivity index (VSI); Qilian Mountains National Park

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Introduction

As the impact of climate change becomes more pronounced and severe, understanding ecosystem responses to these changes has become crucial [?, ?, ?, ?, ?, ?, ?]. Vegetation dynamics, in particular, serve as important indicators of the impact of global climate change [?]. As a wide-ranging and persistent disturbance, climate fluctuations substantially affect the overall stability of vegetation and drive changes in vegetation cover [?, ?, ?]. In arid and semi-arid regions, climate change has been identified as the primary cause of shifts in vegetation dynamics [?, ?].

The interaction between ecosystems and climate change is highly complex owing to the intricate nature of ecosystems, the volatility and uncertainty of climate change, and the hysteresis of vegetation responses [?]. The literature regarding the relationship between climate change and ecosystems presents inconclusive results, with discussions centering primarily on the climatic factors driving ecosystem responses and whether these responses exhibit non-linear characteristics [?, ?]. A significant portion of current understanding of ecosystem responses to climate change is based on assessments of long-term climate change [?]. For instance, on glacial-interglacial timescales, fossil pollen records demonstrate that temperature fluctuations are the primary drivers of forest composition and species distribution, while hydroclimate changes strongly influence the composition and structure of forests [?]. These findings show that vegetation and ecosystems are not only vulnerable to climatic factors such as solar radiation, temperature, and precipitation [?, ?, ?, ?], but their responses are also localized, spatially heterogeneous, and species-specific [?, ?, ?, ?].

The impact of short-term climate variability on ecosystems is not well understood. Compared with long-term climate change, short-term climate variability has different effects on ecosystems, and a focus on long-term trends may ignore interannual variability in climate and ecosystem sensitivity [?]. Most ecosystems appear to be more sensitive to short-term climate extremes than to long-term climate change, with shorter response durations generally corresponding to greater impact magnitudes [?, ?, ?]. For example, sudden changes in solar radiation can influence ecosystems by affecting the interannual variability of carbon flux [?, ?]. Lower solar radiation can cause temperatures to fall below the tolerance limit of trees [?], while excessive solar radiation can inhibit photosynthesis [?]. The combined effect of temperature and solar radiation can affect vegetation stability [?]. Climate variability can also indirectly affect ecosystems by regulating biodiversity [?, ?, ?]. As the occurrence and severity of climate extremes display an upward trend and are expected to continue, determining the sensitivity of vegetation to climate variability can provide important insight into the interactions between ecosystems and climate change.

Short-term ecosystem stability can be conceptualized in terms of resistance to external disturbances [?, ?, ?, ?]. Resistance refers to the ability of vegetation to withstand environmental disturbances and has been quantified using the magnitude of the vegetation response to climate disturbances [?, ?]. In other words, resistance reflects the ability of an ecosystem to sustain a stable state in the face of changing external conditions. The resistance of an ecosystem to climate variability can be defined as the correlation between climate and vegetation indices, where stronger correlations indicate less stable ecosystems. Therefore, the quantification of vegetation sensitivity is important for understanding ecosystem resistance. To this end, Seddon et al. (2016) proposed the vegetation sensitivity index (VSI), which comprehensively assesses the vulnerability, stability, and response rate of global ecosystems to climate variability. Scholars have applied this indicator system to study the relationship between vegetation and climate in different countries and continents, including China [?, ?], Central Asia [?], and Africa [?]. These researchers have also adjusted the VSI according to local environmental conditions, such as by replacing the original climatic variables with solar radiation and the temperature vegetation dryness index.

In this study, we hypothesized that ecosystem responses to climate change exhibit heterogeneity and non-linearity. This heterogeneous and non-linear relationship can be explored by analyzing ecosystem responses along latitudinal and altitudinal gradients, the non-linear fitting between ecosystem responses and temporal changes in climate variables, and the non-linearity in global and local autocorrelation between ecosystem responses and climate variables. Specifically, our research objectives are to: (1) analyze the heterogeneity of ecosystem stability across different dimensions (longitude, altitude, and ecosystem types); (2) quantitatively evaluate the relationship between ecosystem stability and different climate factors; and (3) provide evidence for non-linear responses of ecosystems to climate change.

2.1 Study Area

This study focuses on the Qilian Mountains National Park (QMNP), a sprawling nature reserve located in the semi-arid and arid regions of Northwest China, intersecting the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, Inner Mongolia Plateau, and Loess Plateau (Fig. 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]). With a total area of 50,200 km^2 and elevations ranging from 4000–5000 m, the QMNP serves as an important ecological security barrier, water conservation area, and biodiversity conservation zone for China [?, ?]. As the core area of the Qilian Mountains, it features a complex and variable mountain climate with diverse ecosystems exhibiting considerable spatial differentiation, making it one of the most sensitive areas to climate change. Consequently, the QMNP provides an ideal testing ground for understanding how ecosystems respond to climate change in semi-arid and arid regions.

The Qilian Mountains have undergone a prolonged period of warming and increased precipitation. Studies have revealed that the region has experienced the warmest century and the wettest half-century of the last millennium, with increases in extreme precipitation and high-temperature events. In the QMNP, mean temperature and precipitation have increased by 0.39°C and 8.5 mm per decade, respectively—both higher than global and national averages [?]. Vegetation coverage also shows an increasing trend, the tree line has been significantly raised [?], and vegetation net primary productivity (NPP) is generally increasing [?]. Regarding future climate change projections for the QMNP, temperatures are expected to continue rising, while precipitation and evapotranspiration will show consistent upward trends, though the trend of increasing humidity will slow down [?]. Liu et al. (2022) predicted that in the medium-to-long term (2071–2100), temperatures will increase significantly with the largest warming occurring in winter and the smallest in summer. They also forecasted that annual precipitation will increase considerably in winter and spring, whereas summer and autumn precipitation in the eastern QMNP will decrease substantially. Furthermore, the probability of extreme climate events (drought) in this area will increase, which may have profound impacts on the ecosystem.

Recent studies on the QMNP have yielded inconsistent findings; however, they concur that climate change is the dominant driver of ecosystem changes [?, ?]. Various arguments propose that temperature, precipitation, or a combination of both—with a lag effect—exert the most prominent control over ecosystems [?, ?, ?, ?, ?, ?]. In general, several competing explanations exist for vegetation and ecosystem changes in the Qilian Mountains, and there remains a lack of research on the relationship between climate change and ecosystem stability.

2.2 Data Sources

2.2.1 Climatic Data

We selected a study period spanning 20 years (2000–2019). The cumulative impact of climate change over this period is sufficient to provide a comprehensive understanding of ecosystem resistance to climate variability. Precipitation and temperature data were obtained from the National Science and Technology Infrastructure Platform of the National Earth System Science Data Center and the China Meteorological Forcing Dataset (http://data.tpdc.ac.cn). We processed the data at monthly and annual time scales and resampled the spatial resolution to 1 km (i.e., one pixel represented an area of 1 km $\times$ 1 km on the ground).

2.2.2 Vegetation Cover Remote Sensing Data

Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS)/Terra Vegetation Indices 16-Day L3 Global 250m SIN Grid (MOD13Q1) is a 16-day synthetic vegetation index product that includes the normalized difference vegetation index (NDVI) and enhanced vegetation index (EVI). This product contains atmospherically corrected bidirectional surface reflectance masked for water, clouds, heavy aerosols, and cloud shadows. Furthermore, it uses the blue band to remove residual atmospheric effects caused by aerosols and subpixel thin clouds. Using the Google Earth Engine platform, we downloaded the EVI images of MOD13Q1 within the border of the QMNP from 2000 to 2019. The EVI layer was then converted into the World Geodetic System (WGS) 1984 projection using data management tools, and the spatial resolution was resampled to 1 km. We further processed the layer into two time series (monthly and annual) for subsequent analysis.

The spatial data of the national ecosystem classification were derived from the China Ecosystem Assessment and Ecological Security Pattern Database (http://www.ecosystem.csdb.cn/), which includes various types of ecosystems across the country, provinces, cities, and regions. The dataset includes information such as the spatial distribution pattern of ecosystems and the areas of different ecosystem types, with a spatial resolution of 30 m.

Elevation data were obtained from the global 30 m resolution digital elevation model (DEM) released by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). Compared with previous Shuttle Radar Topography Mission (SRTM) data, the NASA DEM data improve the accuracy of elevation and fill in some missing values.

2.3 Methods

2.3.1 Vegetation Sensitivity Index

The VSI is a novel empirical index proposed by Seddon et al. (2016) that combines climate and vegetation information to reflect the sensitivity of vegetation to climate variability at regional or global scales. It is suitable for assessing the climate sensitivity of vegetation over short time scales (decades). More specifically, VSI explores the relationship between vegetation productivity and the three most relevant climate variables (temperature, precipitation, and solar radiation) at a monthly time scale. VSI is adopted to represent the resistance of the ecosystem to climate variability; generally, smaller VSI values indicate stronger ecosystem resistance and greater stability. Based on the Technical Specification for Investigation and Assessment of National Ecological Status—Ecosystem Quality Assessment (Ministry of Ecology and Environment of the People's Republic of China, 2021), we divided VSI values into five levels to represent different degrees of resistance: extremely strong resistance (VSI $<$ 30.000), strong resistance (VSI [30.000, 40.000)), relatively strong resistance (VSI [40.000, 50.000)), average resistance (VSI [50.000, 60.000)), and weak resistance (VSI $\geq$ 60.000).

In this study, VSI was refined to better account for local environmental conditions. The original VSI included three climate variables: temperature, precipitation, and cloud cover. Considering that solar radiation is the main driving factor of vegetation sensitivity in the arid areas of China [**?**], and that the QMNP has a typical mountain climate where cloud cover varies greatly, we replaced cloud cover with solar radiation. In addition, although NDVI is widely used in the literature, it has the drawback of being highly sensitive to atmospheric, soil, and outlier effects. Compared to NDVI, which only shows high-level vegetation conditions throughout the year, EVI is seasonal and has a stronger ability to distinguish vegetation in areas with low vegetation coverage. Furthermore, EVI is more suitable for analyzing high-density vegetation changes in humid and sub-humid environments. Therefore, we used EVI for VSI calculation. The relative variance of vegetation productivity (using a one-month lag EVI) was compared with the three climate variables (temperature, precipitation, and solar radiation) at a monthly scale to identify regions of strong coupling between vegetation change and climate anomalies.

The basic process of VSI calculation is illustrated in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper]. First, a 20×12 matrix was built for each climate factor and EVI dataset, where 20 represents the 20 years from 2000 to 2019, and 12 represents the 12 months. The dataset, comprising 960 months of data with four variables, was processed, and "dormant period" areas (EVI ≤ 0.1) were excluded from the calculation to reduce the impact of sparse or non-existent vegetation cover. In addition, one-month lagged monthly EVI data were included as the fourth variable in the regression to investigate the memory effect of vegetation growth. The monthly data were detrended and normalized using standard scores (Z-scores). Second, we used principal component analysis and multiple linear regression to calculate the regression coefficients of the climate variables for EVI and determine the weight of the impact of each climate factor on vegetation. The weight of each variable was rescaled between 0 and 1 with reference to its minimum and maximum values. Third, we considered the weight distribution ratio of each climate factor and multiplied the weight and variance ratio to obtain a comprehensive VSI reflecting the response of the ecosystem to climate variability. Finally, the results were stretched to 0–100 in MATLAB software. Larger VSI values indicate greater vegetation sensitivity to climate variability and less stable ecosystems, and vice versa. The R package for computing VSI can be found in Seddon et al. (2016).

2.3.2 Trend Analysis

The trend analysis method models the trend of each grid cell and reflects the spatial distribution characteristics of vegetation cover changes during different periods. We used this method to model changes in EVI in the QMNP from 2000 to 2019 and to examine the spatial characteristics of EVI changes across seasons. The calculation formula is as follows:

where slop is the vegetation change trend; n is the cumulative number of years from 2000 to 2019; and MEVIi is the maximum EVI value in the ith year. slop > 0 indicates that the EVI of a pixel exhibits an increasing trend over n years; slop < 0 shows that the EVI of a pixel presents a degrading trend over n years; and slop $= 0$ implies that the EVI of a pixel remains unchanged. The F-test method was used to analyze the statistical significance of EVI trends, with results used to express the confidence level of the trend. The formulas for the F-test are shown as follows:

where y is the EVI sequence; avg(y) is the average of y; x is the raster data for the year; avg(x) is the average of x; xi and yi are independent time series subject to normal distribution; ŷi is the fitted regression value; ȳ is the average value for n years; and F is the F-test of equality of variances.

2.3.3 Hurst Index

The Hurst index describes the degree of dependence of a sequence over a long period [?] and can assess whether future changes in vegetation are persistent. To analyze future trends of vegetation cover changes in the QMNP, we used the rescaled range analysis method to calculate the Hurst index of EVI changes during the vegetation growing season. Assuming that n exists in a time series for any positive integer, there are cumulative deviation (X(t,n)), range (R(n)), and standard deviation (SD(n)) that satisfy the following conditions, indicating that the Hurst phenomenon is present in the analyzed time series. The formulas are as follows:

where t is the study time sequence; EVI(t) is the time series of EVI; EVĪ(t) is the average of EVI(t); maxX(t,n) is the maximum value of cumulative deviation; minX(t,n) is the minimum value of cumulative deviation; c is the intercept of the regression equation; and H is the Hurst index. When $0.0 < H < 0.5$, the future trend is opposite to the past change. When $H = 0.5$, the future trend is independent of past change. When $0.5 < H < 1.0$, the future trend is consistent with past changes; the larger the H, the stronger the continuity.

3.1 Climate and Vegetation Changes in the QMNP

The annual average temperature of the QMNP from 2000 to 2019 was –5.10°C with a slightly rising moving average. Average temperatures in spring, autumn, and winter displayed upward trends, with the greatest increase observed in spring. The average annual precipitation was 300.0 mm with an increasing moving average, though annual precipitation fluctuated significantly. The rate of increase in precipitation was highest in summer, followed by autumn, whereas spring and winter precipitation decreased slightly over the years. The average annual solar radiation was 1821 MJ/m^2. Solar radiation levels increased significantly in general but decreased slightly in autumn. From 2000 to 2019, the EVI of the QMNP increased slowly, with abnormally high values in 2005, 2012, and 2018 and low values in 2004 and 2014. The average EVI in spring, summer, and autumn increased, whereas the average EVI in winter decreased slightly (Fig. 3 [Figure 3: see original paper]).

The F-test was conducted on the results of EVI trend analysis, with a critical value of 4.14 at the 5% level. Based on the trend analysis and F-test results, we divided EVI changes into four categories: significant increase, non-significant increase, significant decrease, and non-significant decrease. From 2000 to 2019, an area of 47,000 km^2 in the QMNP experienced an increase in EVI, accounting for 93.70% of the total area, of which 30,600 km^2 exhibited a significant increase. Approximately 3,160 km^2 of the area experienced a decrease in EVI, accounting for 6.30% of the total area. The area where EVI decreased significantly was approximately 130 km^2.

The spatial changes in EVI can be analyzed together with the Hurst index to shed light on future trends of vegetation changes. As shown in Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper], the average Hurst index of the QMNP was 0.575, with most areas having Hurst index values of 0.500–0.600 (weak persistence, 35.26% of the total area) and 0.600–0.800 (medium persistence, 38.89% of the total area). Therefore, it can be predicted that vegetation coverage in the QMNP will continue to improve.

3.2 Ecosystem Resistance to Climate Variability in the QMNP

We conducted spatial analysis based on the overall VSI distribution at the pixel level. The median VSI value was 34.693, mainly concentrated between 25.000 and 40.000, and the area corresponding to VSI values less than 35.000 accounted for 51.57% of the total area. Pixels with a VSI value less than 25.000 accounted for 11.74% of the total area, indicating that ecosystems in the QMNP had relatively high resistance to climate variability over the past 20 years.

3.2.1 Longitudinal Heterogeneity of Ecosystem Resistance

To accurately analyze the geographical differentiation of ecosystem resistance, we divided the QMNP into three sections according to longitude: the west section (95°–98°E), the middle section (98°–100°E), and the east section (100°–103°E). Spatially, areas with strong resistance were mainly located on the western edge and central-eastern area of the QMNP. Pixels with a VSI value greater than 50.000 accounted for 16.18% of the total area and were mainly distributed on the eastern and western edges of the QMNP (Fig. 5 [Figure 5: see original paper]), indicating that ecosystems in these areas were more sensitive to climate variability and exhibited weaker resistance.

3.2.2 Altitudinal Heterogeneity of Ecosystem Resistance

In this study, the DEM of the QMNP was resampled into 1 km × 1 km pixels, and the QMNP was divided into 41 altitude intervals at 100 m intervals. In ArcMap software, the altitude interval and VSI spatial information were superimposed, and a spatial extraction tool was used to extract the average VSI value of each altitude interval. Figure 6 [Figure 6: see original paper] demonstrates significant altitudinal heterogeneity in the degree of resistance to climate variability. In the 2700–4700 m altitude range, resistance increased with increasing altitude. Forest grasslands, subalpine shrub meadows, and alpine meadows were distributed in this range, where vegetation coverage, biodiversity, and overall stability were relatively high. Areas with altitudes less than 2700 m and greater than 4700 m were small, and the average VSI value was easily affected by maximum and minimum values. Compared with VSI values of other altitude ranges, the contrast was large and not suitable for comparison. Areas below 2700 m above sea level were mostly desert steppes and mountain deserts with relatively arid climates, low precipitation, large influences from climate fluctuation, and weak ecosystem resistance. The tundra zone was located above 4700 m, where vegetation was stable, sparsely distributed with flat cushion-shaped plants and dense tomentose that have strong resistance to cold, frost, and drought.

3.2.3 Resistance of Different Ecosystem Types

The QMNP ecosystems are diverse and complex, including forests, shrublands, grasslands, wetlands, and desert ecosystems. By overlapping the spatial distribution of VSI with ecosystem distributions, we determined the resistance of different ecosystem types. In general, different ecosystem types in the QMNP exhibited significantly different resistances against climate variability, manifested in differences between areas of different ecosystem types as well as differences between different areas of the same ecosystem type. Box plots were used to represent the value ranges and medians of VSI in different ecosystems (Fig. 7 [Figure 7: see original paper]), as this method excludes the effect of outliers and describes the discrete distribution of data in a relatively stable manner.

Grasslands are a widely distributed ecosystem in the QMNP, covering approximately 31,100 km^2. Grassland ecosystem resistance was typically high, with an average VSI of 34.600. Temperate grasslands had VSI values between 35.000 and 55.000, desert grasslands between 25.000 and 45.000, and alpine grasslands between 20.000 and 45.000. The proportion of grassland with VSI less than 20.000 was 3.69%; between 20.000 and 30.000 was 24.35%; between 30.000 and 40.000 was 45.64%; between 40.000 and 50.000 was 21.84%; and greater than 50.000 was 4.47%. Spatially, the overall grassland VSI in the western section of the QMNP was generally less than 40.000, whereas VSI values in the middle section were concentrated around 40.000–50.000. In general, grassland VSI values in the western and middle sections were higher than those in the eastern section, indicating that grassland ecosystem resistance in the middle and western sections was weaker than in the eastern section.

The total area of forest ecosystems in the QMNP is approximately 2,300 km^2, mainly distributed in the middle and eastern sections. Forest ecosystem resistance was generally strong, with an average VSI value of 34.600. Areas with VSI values less than 30.000 accounted for 14.91% of the total forest ecosystem; 30.000–40.000 accounted for 46.80%; 40.000–50.000 accounted for 31.06%; and greater than 50.000 accounted for 7.20%. Spatially, the resistance of forest ecosystems in the middle section was stronger than in the eastern section, and the resistance of forest ecosystems at the edge of the QMNP was greater than in the central area.

The QMNP also features four other ecosystem types with smaller areas. First, shrub ecosystems cover approximately 3,000 km^2, mainly distributed in the eastern section. Areas with VSI values less than 20.000 accounted for 2.16%;

20.000–30.000 accounted for 23.74%; 30.000–40.000 accounted for 44.24%; 40.000–50.000 accounted for 26.26%; and greater than 50.000 accounted for 3.60%. The VSI value of shrub ecosystems in the eastern section was lower than in the middle section. Second, desert ecosystems with vegetation coverage greater than 5.00% cover approximately 10,600 km^2. Areas with VSI values less than 20.000 accounted for 5.44%; 20.000–30.000 accounted for 26.49%; 30.000–40.000 accounted for 42.33%; 40.000–50.000 accounted for 19.22%; and greater than 50.000 accounted for only 6.52%. High and low-value areas were staggered, indicating that desert ecosystem resistance fluctuated greatly. Third, wetland ecosystems typically had VSI values between 30.000–50.000, with the corresponding area accounting for 65.72% of the total wetland area, indicating strong resistance. Fourth, 76.56% of ice and snow ecosystems had VSI values between 20.000–50.000, which also indicated strong resistance.

3.2.4 Resistance to Different Climate Disturbances

To analyze ecosystem resistance to different climatic factors, we evaluated the relative contributions of temperature, precipitation, and solar radiation to vegetation sensitivity and combined the three climatic factors with their separate VSI bands. Figure 8 [Figure 8: see original paper] shows the results obtained using the RGB (red, green, and blue) band synthesis method.

Figure 8 illustrates the complex and non-linear spatial patterns in the relative importance of the three climatic factors (temperature, precipitation, and solar radiation) to vegetation sensitivity. Grasslands in the western section were mostly green, indicating that precipitation variability played a crucial role in the stability of grassland ecosystems in this area. However, grasslands in the middle section were mostly yellow, indicating they were affected by both precipitation and temperature variability. Grasslands in the eastern section were more purple, indicating that temperature and solar radiation variability affected the stability of grassland ecosystems in this area. Therefore, overall grassland ecosystems were influenced by the combined effects of temperature, precipitation, and solar radiation.

Forest ecosystem areas were mainly purple and blue, indicating the dual effects of temperature and solar radiation variability. Shrub ecosystem distributions were mostly yellow and green, indicating they were affected by both temperature and precipitation variability. Desert ecosystems in the western section were mostly green, indicating precipitation variability was the main climatic factor, whereas distribution areas in the middle and eastern sections were mostly purple, indicating that temperature and solar radiation variability influenced the stability of desert ecosystems in these regions.

Discussion

The geographical heterogeneity of the QMNP is significant. In addition to large terrain undulations, the eastern section receives more precipitation and has greater vegetation coverage than the western section. Furthermore, significant latitudinal and altitudinal gradient changes exist in the ecosystems. The QMNP features various landform types, large topographic relief, and climate differences within different types of units. In addition, differences exist in the vertical vegetation zonation among the eastern, central, and western sections, and vegetation distribution on the southern and northern slopes of the mountains also differs, leading to complex changes in climate and vegetation. The superposition of these differences provides each region with unique conditions. This complex and mosaic geospatial differentiation determines the spatial differentiation of ecosystem stability to a certain extent and the heterogeneity and non-linearity of ecosystem response to climate change.

Most ecosystems are widely distributed in the QMNP, but there are differences in the controlling climatic factors for the stability of similar ecosystems in different regions. This shows that there is a difference in the climate-ecosystem relationship at regional and global levels. Moreover, owing to the interaction between different climatic factors, it is difficult for a single climatic factor to exert a linear influence on ecosystem stability. Chaos theory holds that complex dynamic systems consist of intertwined links and therefore cannot be explained by a single relationship [?]. Fractals are chaotic on a spatial scale and can also reveal self-similarities in complex natural systems. The staggered and mosaic nature of ecosystem distribution in the QMNP produces irregular and non-linear patterns at regional and global levels, and the impact of climate change on ecosystems is complex and non-linear.

The hysteresis effect of vegetation further increases the uncertainty of ecosystem responses to climate change to a certain extent. The hysteresis effect, also known as the vegetation memory effect, implies that as vegetation grows slowly, its response to climate change tends to be delayed [?]. Therefore, vegetation growth depends not only on current disturbances but also on the residual effects of past climatic conditions. This memory effect should be considered when assessing vegetation responses to short-term climate variability [?]. Vegetation in arid areas usually has a strong ability to cope with climatic factor disturbances; therefore, vegetation in these areas typically shows a strong memory effect [?].

Although hysteresis of the response is common, there are often differences at different scales. For example, most vegetation areas in the low latitudes of the northern and southern hemispheres (30°S–30°N) have a lag time of over one month for temperature. Arid and semi-arid areas in the northern hemisphere have a lag time of approximately one month for precipitation. Vegetation in the high latitudes of the northern hemisphere has a lag time of approximately one month for solar radiation. A study of 32 major cities in China found that the memory effect was longest and strongest for humidity, whereas evaporation was shortest and weakest. Furthermore, the memory effect of precipitation and solar radiation on vegetation is stronger in southern China than in northern China [?].

Changes in gross primary productivity (GPP) in the central Qilian Mountains region are mainly caused by temperature, while in the west and east they are mainly caused by drought. Furthermore, the response of GPP to temperature, precipitation, and solar radiation varies with season and biome [?]. Differences in timescales affect the correlation between vegetation and climate. In addition to being used to determine lag time, different timescales are commonly used to determine the dominant timescale of drought response. The timescale with the highest correlation is an effective indicator of drought resistance [?]. This study found that vegetation in the growing season has different requirements for temperature and precipitation in different months; therefore, sensitivity to temperature and precipitation also differs. Studies on the relationship between vegetation cover and climate change in China over the past 20 years have reached a similar conclusion; that is, the maximum correlation coefficient between vegetation cover and climate factors of different land types is delayed by one month [?].

The climate of the QMNP belongs to the continental alpine and semi-humid mountain climate, vegetation grows slowly, and the response time of vegetation to climate variation is longer. Therefore, this study appropriately examined vegetation resistance to the three climate variables using the one-month lag EVI. However, the monthly temperature and precipitation data used in this study were obtained from the National Science and Technology Infrastructure Platform-National Earth System Science Data Center. Owing to the limited distribution of meteorological stations in the QMNP, the central data have not been revised and need improvement in the future. The memory effects of different ecosystem types and vegetation in different spaces of the same ecosystem type on climate are different, and homogenization will lead to a certain degree of distortion. Future research is needed to clarify the differences in the lag of different ecosystem responses to climate change.

Conclusions

Climate change has been identified as the most extensive and persistent disturbance of ecosystems in arid areas, driving changes in NDVI and the overall stability of vegetation. Ecosystem responses to climate change are complex phenomena affected by multiple biological and abiotic factors. This study examined ecosystem responses to short-term climate variability in the QMNP, focusing on the heterogeneity and non-linearity of ecosystem stability.

The findings show that while ecosystems of the QMNP have a high level of resistance to climate variability over the past 20 years, significant heterogeneity and non-linearity exist in the degree of resistance among different ecosystems, driven by both the spatial distribution of ecosystems and the influence of different climatic factors on different ecosystems.

Examining the heterogeneity of ecosystem resistance has deepened our understanding of the non-linear relationship between ecosystems and climate change. Climate and ecosystems are complex systems; as such, the relationship between ecosystems and climate change is inherently non-linear and uncertain, making it difficult to predict future states. The characteristics of non-linear ecosystem responses to climate change include: (1) the controlling climatic factors of the same ecosystems vary in different geographical locations; (2) the interaction between different climatic factors leads to variations in the weights that affect ecosystem stability and are difficult to determine; and (3) the hysteresis effect of vegetation adds to the uncertainty of ecosystem responses to climate change.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.