

Responses of the functional structure of soil microbial community to livestock grazing in the Tibetan alpine grassland

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Abstract

Microbes play key roles in various biogeochemical processes, including carbon (C) and nitrogen (N) cycling. However, changes of microbial community at the functional gene level by livestock grazing, which is a global land-use activity, remain unclear. Here we use a functional gene array, GeoChip 4.0, to examine the effects of free livestock grazing on the microbial community at an experimental site of Tibet, a region known to be very sensitive to anthropogenic perturbation and global warming. Our results showed that grazing changed microbial community functional structure, in addition to aboveground vegetation and soil geochemical properties. Further statistical tests showed that microbial community functional structures were closely correlated with environmental variables, and variations in microbial community functional structures were mainly controlled by aboveground vegetation, soil C/N ratio, and NH_4^+ -N. In-depth examination of N cycling genes showed that abundances of N mineralization and nitrification genes were increased at grazed sites, but denitrification and N-reduction genes were decreased, suggesting that functional potentials of relevant bioprocesses were changed. Meanwhile, abundances of genes involved in methane cycling, C fixation, and degradation were decreased, which might be caused by vegetation removal and hence decrease in litter accumulation at grazed sites. In contrast, abundances of virulence, stress, and antibiotics resistance genes were increased because of the presence of livestock. In conclusion, these results indicated that soil microbial community functional structure was very sensitive to the impact of livestock grazing and revealed microbial functional potentials in regulating soil N and C cycling, supporting the necessity to include microbial components in evaluating the consequence of land-use and/or climate changes.

Keywords: climate change, gene diversity, microbial community, summer grazing, Tibetan alpine grassland

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Introduction

Land use and climate change are projected to have a strong influence on biodiversity, with particular importance in the tropical or alpine regions (Sala *et al.*, 2000). Livestock grazing is a global land-use activity with far-ranging societal and environmental impacts. It is the major biotic factor that influences pasture ecosystems,

which span up to one quarter of the world's land area (Bokdam & Gleichman, 2000; FAO, 2008). The effects of grazing can be divided into three factors: vegetation removal, manure deposition, and trampling (Cingolani *et al.*, 2003; Kohler *et al.*, 2005). Vegetation removal changes the allocation of carbon (C) and nitrogen (N) between above- and belowground, and increases soil-extractable C in the rhizosphere (Holland & Detling, 1990; Guitian & Bardgett, 2000). Manure deposition accelerates N cycling by efficiently recycling nutrients through the animal excreta pathway (Kohler *et al.*, 2005).

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Trampling compacts soil and hence decreases air permeability and hydraulic conductivity. Nevertheless, these factors intertwine, rendering it difficult to predict the net effect of grazing. For instance, N₂O emission is increased by urine deposition that stimulates N cycling (Yamulki *et al.*, 1998; Wang *et al.*, 2006b). As a result, substantial emission of greenhouse gases such as CH₄ and N₂O has been observed for pasture soil (Radl *et al.*, 2007; Simek *et al.*, 2007, 2009). However, it can be offset by reducing denitrification and microbial biomass, resulting in a recent finding that grazing decreases N₂O emission in grasslands of Inner Mongolia, China (Wolf *et al.*, 2010).

Soil microbial community plays critical roles in regulating ecosystem function and soil biogeochemistry (Giller *et al.*, 2004; Morin & McGrady-Steed, 2004). It mediates energy and material fluxes of ecosystems and alters soil biogeochemical properties (Chapin *et al.*, 2000). Meanwhile, it is subjected to the influences of environmental changes at the levels of structure and activities (Bardgett *et al.*, 2001). On the other hand, there is a growing number of studies to investigate how changes in microbial community affect stability and quality of ecosystem processes, as well as biodiversity and productivity of aboveground vegetation (Yeates *et al.*, 1997; Wardle *et al.*, 1999; Guitian & Bardgett, 2000; Clegg, 2006). Therefore, soil microbial community, in addition to plants and animals, must be considered in elucidating the mechanisms of ecosystem function and assessing the environmental impact of land-use changes.

Although microbes comprise much of the biodiversity on earth and are vital components in ecosystem functioning (Torsvik *et al.*, 2002; Venter *et al.*, 2004), there is still paucity of data to understand the interactions of microbial community members, the robustness and resilience of microbial community, and the response to environmental changes at the levels of both individual species and whole community (Huber *et al.*, 2007; Allison & Martiny, 2008). One of the primary reasons stems from technical difficulties in studying microbial community. The recent development of high-throughput metagenomics technologies offers unprecedented opportunities for studying microbial community. The use of sequencing technologies has been successful in analyzing environmental microbiomes (Huber *et al.*, 2007; Pointing *et al.*, 2009; Dick & Tebo, 2010). Nevertheless, sequencing technologies are limited in that they are sensitive to random sampling errors, presence of contaminated DNA, and influence from the dominant organisms of microbial community (Zhou *et al.*, 2011). GeoChip, a high-throughput, microarray-based metagenomics tool, is an excellent alternative (He *et al.*, 2007, 2010b), despite that the reliability of GeoChip can be compounded by issues of probe

specificity and coverage. Its most advanced version, GeoChip 4.0, contains probes to detect a staggering number of 152,000 functional genes important to biogeochemistry, ecology, and environmental sciences.

In this study, we use GeoChip 4.0 to assess the impacts of livestock grazing on soil microbial community in Tibetan Plateau, which contains the largest grassland of the Eurasian continent (Zheng *et al.*, 2000; Wang *et al.*, 2010). Tibet is considered the third pole of the earth for its high altitude (Qiu, 2008). Its fragile ecosystem is sensitive to climate change and anthropogenic perturbation (Cao *et al.*, 2004; Yang *et al.*, 2006). It is estimated that more than 50 million sheep and 13.3 million domestic yaks (Yao *et al.*, 2006), in addition to native grazers, graze on pastoral lands of Tibet, imposing a marked pressure on the alpine grassland. Concurrently with rising temperatures of the region (Duan *et al.*, 2006), it is crucial to evaluate the impact of livestock grazing in Tibetan grassland.

Although grazing effects on the aboveground vegetation and soil physicochemical properties of Tibetan alpine grassland have been documented in recent years (Klein *et al.*, 2004, 2007; Wang *et al.*, 2010), few studies consider grazing effects on soil microbes. To address it, we initiated a study to investigate: (i) whether ungrazed and grazed sites differed in microbial community functional structure; (ii) whether the differences in microbial community structure were controlled by a few environmental factors; (iii) whether and how functional genes were changed by grazing; and (iv) whether changes of key functional genes aligned with microbe-mediated functional processes.

Materials and methods

Site and sampling

The study was conducted at Haibei Alpine Meadow Ecosystem Research Station, which is situated at latitude 37.37°N, longitude 101.12 E of Tibet. The mean annual air temperature and precipitation is -1.7 °C and 560 mm, respectively (Zhao *et al.*, 2006). The soil is silty clay loam of Mat Cry-gelic Cambisols with pH of 7.3 and 7.4, bulk density of 0.75 and 1.11 g cm⁻³ at depths of 10 and 20 cm, respectively. The aboveground vegetation is dominated by C₃ herbal species such as *Kobresia humilis* and *Potentilla nivea* (Zhao *et al.*, 2006).

At elevations of 3600 and 3800 m, the grassland has been subjected to free livestock grazing in summer (from April to September) for decades. To allow for comparison between ungrazed and grazed sites, three sites of 1 × 1 m size were fenced at each elevation in May 2006 to exclude livestock grazing. Three adjacent sites of the same size continued to be open for grazing.

Soil samples of ungrazed and grazed sites were collected in August, 2009, and used for GeoChip analysis. At each site, five soil cores at depth of 0–20 cm and diameter of 1.5 cm were collected on a grid basis and composited. The soil samples were

kept on ice, transported back to the laboratory, and sieved through 2 mm mesh to remove most of visible roots and stones. Then soil samples were stored at -80°C until DNA extraction.

Soil and vegetation property measurements

Soil temperature was measured using type-K thermocouples (Campbell Scientific, Logan, UT, USA) coupled to a CR1000 datalogger installed at the depths of 5 and 10 cm at the time of sampling, respectively. The average soil moisture at the 0–10 cm depth was measured using a frequency domain reflectometer Model Diviner-2000 (Sentek Pty Ltd., Stepney, Australia) through a tube inserted in the soil down to the depth of 10 cm at the time of sampling.

Other soil properties were measured at the depth of 0–10 and 10–20 cm, respectively. Total organic C (TOC) was measured by a TOC-5000A analyzer (Shimadzu Corp., Kyoto, Japan). Total N of soil was measured by a Vario EL III Elemental Analyzer (Elementar, Hanau, Germany) as previously described (Wang *et al.*, 2009). To measure NH_4^+ -N and NO_3^- -N, 10 g dry weight of soil samples was suspended in 50 ml of 2 M KCL solution. After shaking at room temperature for 1 h and subsequent standing for 30 min, the supernatant was filtered through a filter paper of 30–50 μm pore size. NH_4^+ -N and NO_3^- -N were analyzed by a FIAstar 5000 Analyzer (FOSS, Hillerd, Denmark). The measurements of greenhouse gases (CO_2 , N_2O , and CH_4) were conducted as described previously (Wang *et al.*, 2009). To measure vegetation variables, a quadrat in the site was selected. The vegetation species, density, abundance, and average height were recorded according to an established protocol (Klein *et al.*, 2007). Then vegetation were mowed and immediately weighted for biomass data. Vegetation diversity was measured using Shannon-Weaver index.

DNA extraction, purification, and quantitation

DNA was extracted from 0.5 g soil using FastDNA spin kit for soil (MP Biomedical, Carlsbad, CA, USA) following the manufacturer's instructions. DNA was further purified by precipitating with 2.5 vol. of 100% ice-cold ethanol and 0.1 vol. of 3 M NaOAc (pH 5.2). After incubation overnight at -20°C , the mixture was centrifuged for 30 min at $13\,000 \times g$. The supernatant was decanted and DNA pellet was washed with 1 ml ice-cold 70% ethanol. After centrifugation for 10 min at $13\,000 \times g$, the supernatant was carefully removed and DNA pellet was air dried for 30 min. Nuclease-free water was added to dissolve DNA. DNA was repurified using column-based method (Zhou *et al.*, 1996) and DNA quality was assessed by the ratios of $A_{260/280}$ and $A_{260/230}$ using a NanoDrop ND-1000 Spectrophotometer (NanoDrop Technologies Inc., Wilmington, DE, USA), and final soil DNA concentrations were quantified with PicoGreen (Ahn *et al.*, 1996) using a FLUOstar Optima (BMG Labtech, Jena, Germany).

GeoChip hybridization and scanning

GeoChip 4.0 (Hazen *et al.*, 2010; Lu *et al.*, 2012) was used for analyzing DNA samples. The experiments were performed

essentially as described previously (Lu *et al.*, 2012). In brief, DNA was labeled with the fluorescent dye Cy-5 using a random priming method and then purified with the QIA quick purification kit (Qiagen, Valencia, CA, USA) according to the manufacturer's instructions. After measuring dye incorporation on a NanoDrop ND-1000 spectrophotometer (NanoDrop Technologies Inc., Wilmington, DE, USA), DNA was dried in a SpeedVac (ThermoSavant, Milford, MA, USA) at 45°C for 45 min. Subsequently, labeled DNA was resuspended in 120 μl hybridization solution containing 40% formamide, $3 \times \text{SSC}$, 10 μg of unlabeled herring sperm DNA (Promega, Madison, WI, USA), and 0.1% SDS, and hybridizations were performed with a MAUI hybridization station (BioMicro, Salt Lake City, UT, USA) according to the manufacturer's recommended method. After washing and drying, microarray was scanned by a NimbleGen MS200 scanner (Roche, Madison, WI, USA) at 633 nm using a laser power of 100% and a photomultiplier tube (PMT) gain of 75%. Signal intensities were subsequently quantified.

Data analyses

Raw data were analyzed using a data analysis pipeline as described previously (He *et al.*, 2010b). In brief, the following steps were performed: (i) spots flagged or with a signal to noise ratio (SNR) less than 2.0 were removed as poor-quality spots; (ii) after removing poor spots, normalized intensity of each spot was calculated by dividing the signal intensity of each spot by the total intensity of the microarray and then multiplying it with a constant value of 155772337, which is the average signal intensity of all GeoChip data; (iii) natural logarithmic transformation was applied; and (iv) a minimum of two valid values of three biological replicates, that is, samples from the same elevation and treatment, was required for each gene.

Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was used to determine overall functional changes in microbial communities. For the dissimilarity test of adonis, we used Bray-Curtis and Srensen distances to calculate the dissimilarity distance matrices from GeoChip hybridization data, which are based on dissimilarities among samples and their rank order in compliance to adonis method to calculate test statistics, and the Monte Carlo permutation was used to test the significance of statistics. The similarity test between GeoChip and environmental variables was conducted by calculating Euclid distances among samples and then plotted to calculate Pearson correlation.

We also evaluated possible linkages between the functional gene structure of microbial communities (based on GeoChip data) and soil and vegetation variables to elucidate interrelationships among vegetation, soil variables, and microbial community. First, all of soil or vegetation variables were included in Mantel test and the CCA modeling. They were virtually meaningless due to the noise and redundancy among those variables for soil or vegetation. Then, the Bio-Env procedure (Clarke & Ainsworth, 1993) and variance inflation factor (VIF) were used for step-wise removal of redundant variables in CCA modeling, resulting in selection

of three soil variables ($\text{NH}_4^+\text{-N}$, $\text{NO}_3^-\text{-N}$, and C/N ratio) and three vegetation variables (vegetation biomass, Shannon diversity, and the count of species). For Mantel test, Bray-Curtis coefficient and Euclidean distance were used to construct dissimilarity matrices of communities and environmental variables, respectively. All of the analyses were performed by functions in the vegan package (v.1.15-1) in R v. 2.8.1 (Dixon, 2003).

Results

Effects of grazing on soil microbial community structure

Soils of grazed (g) and ungrazed (c) sites at the 3600 m and 3800 m elevation were sampled. DNA was extracted from the samples and analyzed by GeoChip 4.0. A total of 51 945 genes were detected in this experiment. The dissimilarity test of adonis indicated that grazing imposed changes in GeoChip 4.0 and environmental variables to both 3600 and 3800 m sites, albeit it was marginally significant for 3800 m sites (Table S1). Hierarchical clustering analysis indicated that samples were well grouped according to grazing or elevation (Fig. S1), demonstrating that site differences at the same elevation were minor compared with differences in grazing or elevation. To confirm these observations, PCA was conducted using the whole GeoChip dataset. Samples were grouped by grazing or elevation, and samples from grazed sites were well separated from the ungrazed ones (Fig. 1).

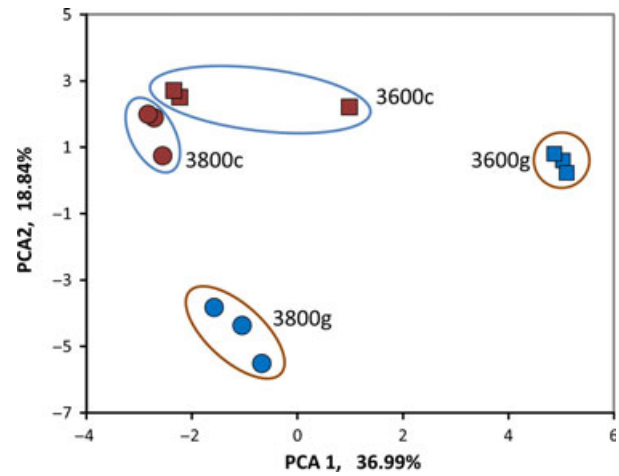


Fig. 1 Principal Component Analysis of GeoChip data. Circles and triangles represent ungrazing and grazing samples, respectively. The values of Axis 1 and 2 are percentages of total variations that can be attributed to the corresponding axis.

Examination of GeoChip results indicated that alpha diversity, represented as Shannon and Simpson diversities, was significantly ($P < 0.03$) smaller at grazed sites than those at ungrazed sites (Table 1). The gene richness was also significantly ($P < 0.03$) different between ungrazed and grazed samples. These results indicated that grazing reduced microbial functional diversity at these sites.

Table 1 Diversity indices of functional genes

Gene categories	Indices	3600c	3600g	<i>P</i> value	3800c	3800g	<i>P</i> value
All GeoChip genes	Richness index*	37612	30430	0.027 [§]	38545	30771	0.011
	Shannon index (H) [†]	10.53	10.32	0.025	10.56	10.33	0.015
	Simpson's diversity index (1/D) [‡]	37307.78	30230.26	0.026	38260.68	30556.36	0.010
	Pielou (Shannon) evenness (J)	0.9996	0.9997	0.309	0.9997	0.9997	0.787
	Simpson evenness	0.9920	0.9934	0.274	0.9926	0.9930	0.653
C cycling genes	Richness Index*	4907	3968	0.028	5044	4033	0.013
	Shannon index (H) [†]	8.49	8.28	0.026	8.52	8.30	0.018
	Simpson's diversity index (1/D) [‡]	4867.41	3942.81	0.027	5007.62	4006.07	0.012
	Pielou (Shannon) evenness (J)	0.9995	0.9996	0.233	0.9996	0.9996	0.827
	Simpson evenness	0.9921	0.9937	0.201	0.9929	0.9933	0.671
N cycling genes	Richness index*	3492	2863	0.030	3591	2792	0.009
	Shannon index (H) [†]	8.15	7.96	0.028	8.18	7.93	0.013
	Simpson's diversity index (1/D) [‡]	3465.46	2845.36	0.029	3566.09	2773.27	0.009
	Pielou (Shannon) evenness (J)	0.9995	0.9996	0.255	0.9996	0.9996	0.987
	Simpson evenness	0.9925	0.9940	0.223	0.9931	0.9933	0.780

*Detected gene numbers.

[†]Shannon index, higher number represents higher diversity.

[‡]Reciprocal of Simpson's index, higher number represents higher diversity.

[§]Values of significance at $P < 0.05$ are shown in bold.

Relationship between microbial community structure and environmental variables

GeoChip results indicated that livestock grazing changed both microbial community structure and environmental variables. As grazing effects on microbial community were possibly mediated by aboveground vegetation and soil geochemical variables, we explored whether there existed a relationship between microbial community structure and environmental variables (Table S2). The results unveiled a strong relationship between microbial community structure and environmental variables (Fig. 2a). Therefore, CCA was performed to reveal major environmental variables shaping microbial community structure. To eliminate variables that depend on other measured variables, automatic forward selection and variance inflation factors (VIF) were used. The significance was based on 999 Monte Carlo permutations. The top seven variables (C/N ratio, NH_4^+ -N, NO_3^- -N, elevation, total vegetation biomass, vegetation diversity, and species numbers) were then selected as inputs for CCA. As shown in Fig. 2b, both soil variables (C/N ratio and NH_4^+ -N) and vegetation variables (vegetation biomass and diversity) showed a significant ($P < 0.05$) relationship with microbial community structure, which was also supported by Mantel test at $P < 0.05$ (Table 2). Furthermore, C/N ratio and NH_4^+ -N were major factors linking to the microbial community structure of 3600 g samples, suggesting that grazing-induced N cycling activity had a strong relationship with the microbial community of 3600 g sites. Meanwhile, vegetation removal by grazing, indicated by vegetation biomass data (Table S2), showed distinct impact on microbial communities and differentiated the grazed samples from the ungrazed.

Variance partitioning analysis was subsequently performed to dissect the contribution of elevation, vegetation, and soil variables to the microbial community structure. A total of 81.7% of the community variations could be explained by these selected variables (Fig. 2c). Elevation, vegetation, and soil variables contributed to 7.7%, 25.5%, and 22.7% of the total variance, respectively. Moreover, vegetation and soil variables together contributed extra 11.1% of the total variance, indicating that there were considerable interactions between soil and vegetation variables.

N cycling genes

Significant relationship between microbial community structure and C/N ratio and NH_4^+ -N provoked us to investigate N cycling genes. As urine deposition by livestock provided a unique N source to grazed sites

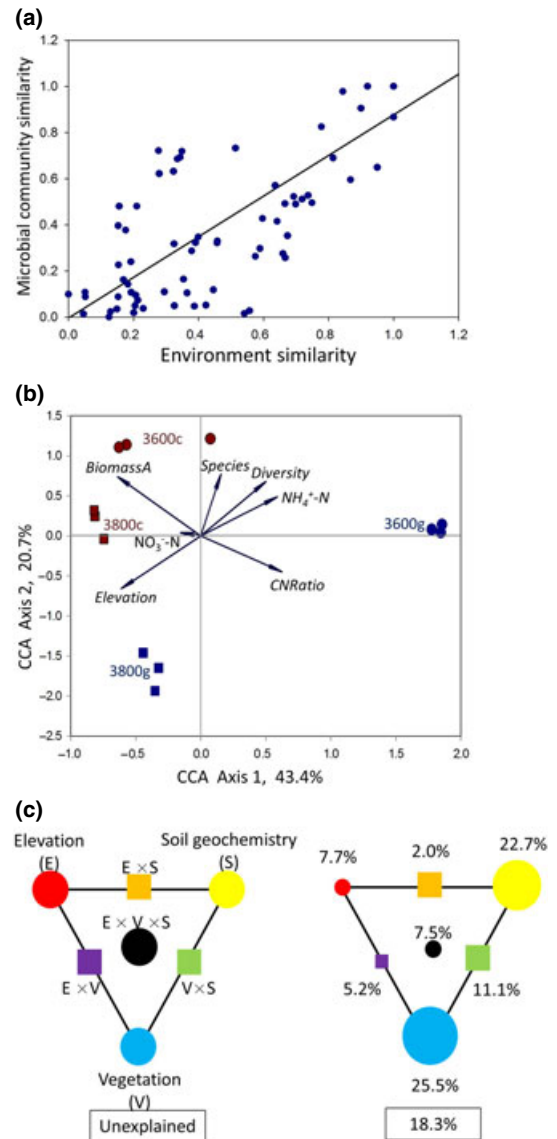


Fig. 2 (a) The similarity test between GeoChip and environmental variables. Euclid distances among samples were calculated and plotted. (b) Canonical correspondence analysis (CCA) using all detected genes (symbols) of GeoChip data and seven selected environmental variables (arrows). The values of Axis 1 and 2 are percentages that the corresponding axis can explain. (c) Variation partitioning analysis that partitions relative influence of environmental variables on microbial community structure. Environmental variables are divided into groups of soil (C/N ratio, NO_3^- -N, and NH_4^+ -N), vegetation (biomass, species, and diversity), and elevation. The circles represent individual variable group by partitioning out the effects of other groups. The geometric areas of the circles are proportional to the respective percentages of effects as indicated by the numbers. The squares between the circles represent the joint effect of the circles on both sides of the square. The portion unexplained by any of tested variable groups is shown in the square at the bottom of the figure. P values were determined to be 0.05 by partial CCA.

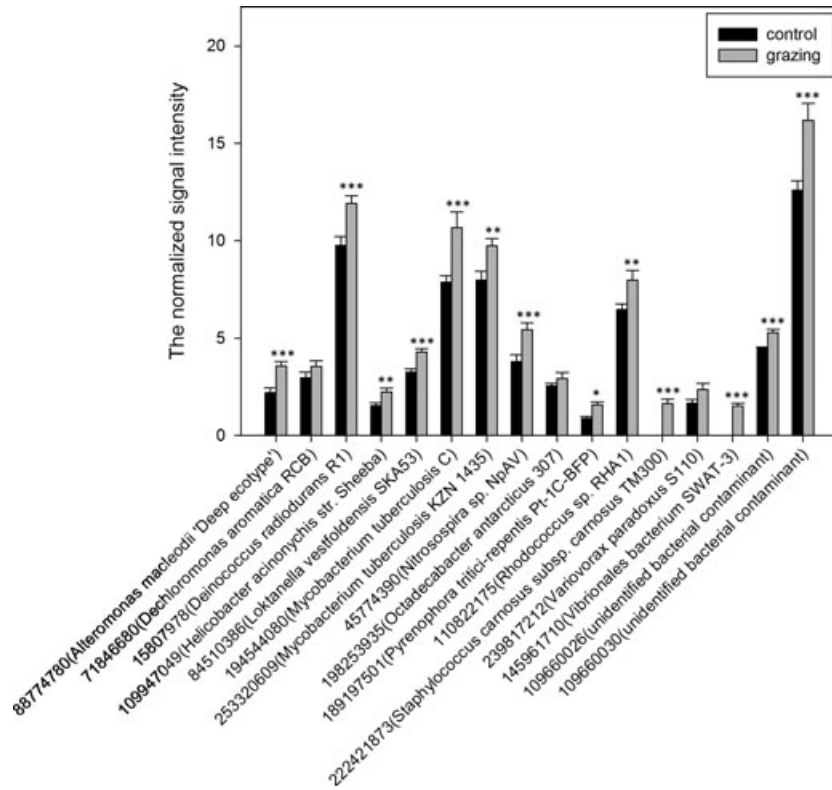


Fig. 4 The normalized signal intensity of the most increased *ureC*. Gene number is the protein ID number for each gene as listed in the GenBank database. All data are presented as mean \pm SE. *** $P < 0.01$, ** $P < 0.05$, * $P < 0.1$ as examined by *t*-test.

denitrification genes occurred in all of the major branches of microbial phyla present on GeoChip. Together, these results suggested that regulation of these bioprocesses did not target specific bacteria. Meanwhile, Mantel tests indicated that *nifH*, a key gene of N fixation, was significantly correlated with NH_4^+ -N, C/N ratio, total N, total organic C, vegetation biomass, and diversity at $P < 0.05$ (Table 2). The top 10 upregulated genes were derived from *Anabaena variabilis*, *Methanococcus aeolicus*, *Paenibacillus massiliensis*, and several uncultured bacteria (data now shown).

C cycling genes

The abundances of most C fixation and degradation genes were either reduced or unchanged by grazing (Fig. 5a,b), suggesting that the microbe-mediated C cycling potential was inhibited. In accordance, CO_2 emission and soil TOC were decreased and increased, respectively (Table S2). Thus, grazing seemed to promote net C storage at our sites.

Three of four major C fixation gene families targeted by GeoChip were decreased, all of which were derived from bacteria except a few (*rubisco* derived from uncultured methanogenic archaeon, and *pcc* derived from *Haloarcula marismortui* and *Hyperthermus butylicus*).

Meanwhile, substantial variations within C degradation genes were notable. A multitude of genes seemed to be sensitive to grazing as they became undetectable at grazed sites, which included *amyA* genes derived from *Psychromonas ingrahamii* 37, *Cellvibrio japonicus* Ueda107, *Thermoanaerobacter mathranii* subsp. *mathranii* str. A3, *Vibrio orientalis* CIP102891, and *Erythrobacter litoralis* HTCC2594. In contrast, there were also many genes detected in high abundance across all samples, including acetylglucosaminidase genes derived from *Gluconacetobacter diazotrophicus* PA15 and *Streptomyces roseosporus* NRRL11379, arabinofuranosidase gene derived from *Aspergillus terreus* NIH2624, and lignin peroxidase gene derived from *Pseudotrametes gibbosa*. There were also exceptions of genes that were significantly increased at grazed sites (Fig. 5b). Among them, there were amylopullulanase genes, which functioned in starch utilization.

Three key functional genes related to CH_4 emission were analyzed by GeoChip. *mcrA* encoded an enzyme that was considered as a diagnostic indicator of methanogenesis (Luton *et al.*, 2002), whereas *pmoA* and *mmoX* encoded for the two methane monooxygenases. Response ratios showed that whereas the abundance of *pmoA* remained unchanged, those of *mcrA* and *mmoX* were decreased at grazed sites (Fig. 5c). Twelve *mcrA*

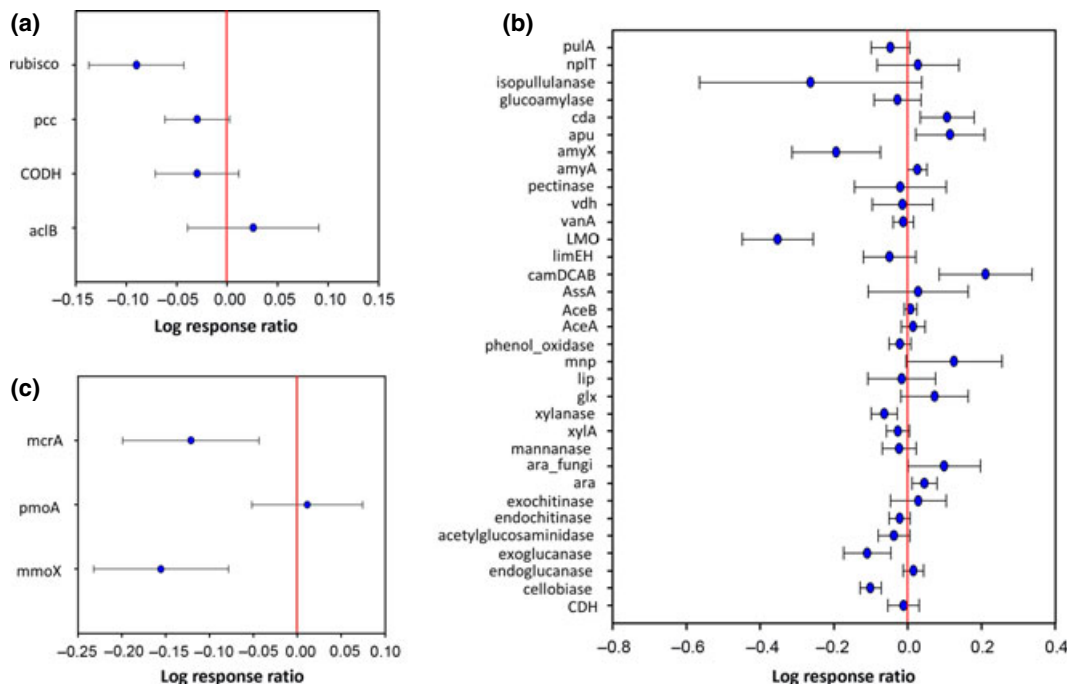


Fig. 5 Response ratios to compare gene abundance under ungrazing and grazing conditions for (a) C fixation; (b) C degradation; and (c) CH₄ cycling genes at the confidence level of 0.90.

genes, which were mainly derived from uncultured methanogenic archaeon except for *Methanosarcina mazei* Go1, appeared to be sensitive to grazing as they were reduced at both grazed sites (Fig. S2).

Virulence, stress, and antibiotics resistance genes

Response ratio analysis showed that gene categories of virulence and stress were marginally significantly

($P < 0.1$) more abundant at grazed sites (Fig. 6). The category of antibiotics resistance was also notably more abundant, albeit insignificant at the confidence level of $P < 0.1$.

A multitude of increased virulence genes were derived from *Clostridia*, which was prevalent in animal gut (Hess *et al.*, 2011). The most highly increased genes included those derived from mesophilic *Clostridia* of *C. phytofermentans*, *C. acetobutylicum*, *C. botulinum*,

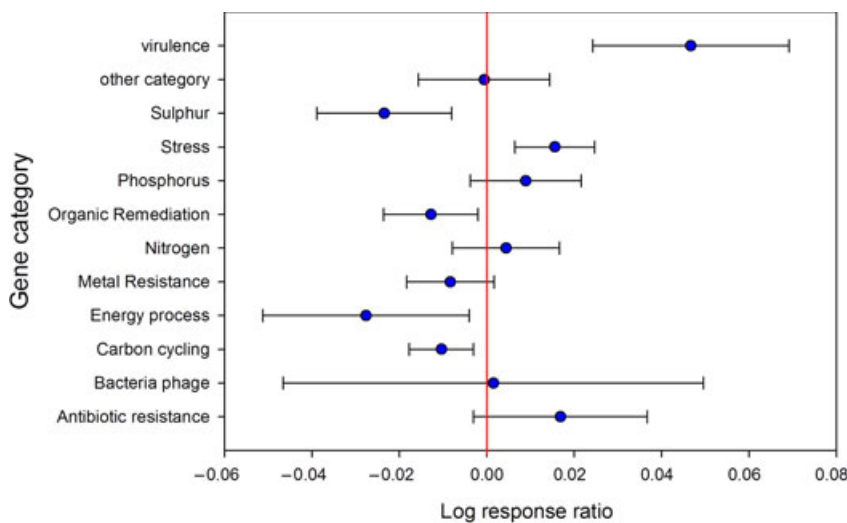


Fig. 6 Response ratios to compare gene abundance at ungrazed and grazed sites for all of the gene categories detected by GeoChip at the confidence level of 0.90. Total abundances of detected individual genes in the same gene categories were used for calculating response ratios.

C. perfringens, and *C. tetani*. *C. phytofermentans* and *C. acetobutylicum* were known for their efficiency in cellulose degradation or butanogenesis (Mermelstein *et al.*, 1992; Liu *et al.*, 2010), whereas others had close relatives that were pathogenic to animal health (Sebahia *et al.*, 2007).

The significantly ($P < 0.1$) induced stress genes were responsive to a variety of stress types, including *sigma 24* (heat-induced transcription initiation), *sigma 70* (general transcription initiation), *pstB* (phosphate transporter subunit), *narL* and *narH* (respiratory nitrate reductase subunits), *cydB* (cytochrome d ubiquinol oxidase subunit II), *arcB* (aerobic respiration control sensor protein), *opuE* (sodium/proline symporter), *tnrA* (N sensing transcriptional regulator), *hrcA* (heat-inducible transcription repressor), *bgIH* (glucoside-specific outer membrane porin), and *desK* (two-component sensor histidine kinase of cold shock). In addition, a variety of bacteria were subjected to the influence of stress as indicated by the wide range of bacterial phyla from which the stress genes were derived (data not shown). For antibiotics genes, the most increased genes were *van*, *tet*, and *B lactamase* conferring resistance to vancomycin, tetracycline, and beta-lactam antibiotics, respectively. Similar to the observation of stress genes, the increased antibiotics genes were derived from a variety of bacterial phyla such as *Actinobacteria*, *Firmicutes*, *Verrucomicrobia*, and *Proteobacteria*.

Discussion

Livestock grazing is a major land use with extensive economic and environmental consequences. Accumulating evidences have linked livestock grazing to greenhouse gas emission and thus climate changes because of grazing effects on vegetation litter, soil aeration, and manure deposition (Yamulki *et al.*, 1998; Wang *et al.*, 2006b; Radl *et al.*, 2007; Simek *et al.*, 2007, 2009; Wolf *et al.*, 2010). As microbes are crucial for ecosystem function as important engines in driving biogeochemical cycles (Grime, 1997; Hooper & Vitousek, 1997; Duffy *et al.*, 2001; Thompson *et al.*, 2005; Falkowski *et al.*, 2008), it is necessary to understand the molecular mechanisms of microbe-mediated processes. To address it, we adopted GeoChip 4.0 to dissect microbial community functional structure. Although GeoChip is limited in representing microbial species identity and the breadth of *in situ* microbial community, it can overcome several major problems of sequencing technology (Zhou *et al.*, 2011) and thus has been successfully used in dissecting functional potentials of microbial communities (Van Nostrand *et al.*, 2009; He *et al.*, 2010a; Lu *et al.*, 2012).

Our results showed that the structure of soil microbial community clearly underwent changes, which was

in consistency with changes in soil and vegetation variables. Although this observation was not surprising in light of previous studies dedicated to grazing effects of microbial community structure, most of such studies addressed grazing effects at the species level (Dowd *et al.*, 2008; Jesus *et al.*, 2009) or focused on single functional process (Wright *et al.*, 2007; Le Roux *et al.*, 2008). This is limited because knowing the species is insufficient to infer its roles in regulating material and energy flow of the ecosystem (Chapin *et al.*, 2000), and ignoring the interaction among functional processes resulted in inaccurate estimation of outcomes of the ecosystem function. Therefore, it is crucial to focus on a more complete set of microbial functional genes to achieve a better understanding of microbe-mediated processes.

Microbial biomass and/or diversity can be increased, decreased, or unchanged, depending on grazing regimes and intensities (Bardgett & Wardle, 2003; Harrison & Bardgett, 2004; Mills & Adl, 2006; Wang *et al.*, 2006a). Therefore, microbial communities do not respond in a uniform way. Also, it seems that aboveground vegetation plays a role in determining microbial community as vegetation can select soil microbes to be associated with (de Goede *et al.*, 2002; Bardgett & Wardle, 2003; Ebersberger *et al.*, 2004; Colon-Carmona *et al.*, 2009). The grazing effect on aboveground vegetation is apparent as indicated by the reduction in vegetation biomass (Table S2). In addition, grazing decreased the proportion of herbaceous vegetation, which were abundant in cellulose and lignin components, and increased the proportion of *Artemisia*, which were abundant in N content (Bates *et al.*, 2009). Thus, grazing can change vegetation composition as well. Accordingly, our Mantel tests showed significant correlations between microbial community functional structure and vegetation biomass ($r = 0.431$, $P < 0.008$) and diversity ($r = 0.309$, $P < 0.02$), respectively (Table 2). Therefore, changes in aboveground vegetation have a clear linkage to those of belowground microbial community. In addition, it was noted that changes in aboveground vegetation corresponded to the decrease in C degradation gene abundance (e.g., *cellobiase* and *exoglucanase*) (Fig. 5c) and the increase in N mineralization and nitrification gene abundance (*ureC* and *amoA*) (Fig. 3).

Also, soil geochemical variables appeared to play an essential role in shaping microbial community. For example, patches of bare soil caused by grazing could lead to loss of soil organic matter by wind erosion (Hoffmann *et al.*, 2008; Kolbl *et al.*, 2011), which in turn affects microbial biomass and activity (Holt, 1997). The essential role of soil variables in shaping microbial community was apparent, as indicated by a strong positive correlation between microbial functional structure and soil organic C ($r = 0.492$, $P < 0.003$), total N

($r = 0.314$, $P < 0.05$), and soil moisture ($r = 0.631$, $P < 0.01$) (Table 2).

Nevertheless, correlations between microbial community and environmental factors must be interpreted with caution because it is often difficult to firmly establish a relationship between microbial community and soil nutrient cycling (Bardgett, 2005). One of possible explanations is that biotic factors only control part of ecosystem processes. It is also likely that functional gene abundance, which represents genetic potential, is not necessarily in accordance with microbial activity, which is more pertinent to ecosystem processes. Furthermore, changes at the gene or species levels may not be scaled up to the level of ecosystem processes. Bearing in mind these caveats, it was still striking to note the remarkable correlation between microbial community functional structure and environmental variables (Fig. 2a), which was further supported by the observation that the portion of the total unexplained variation (Fig. 2c) was small compared with several recent GeoChip studies (Van Nostrand *et al.*, 2009; Liang *et al.*, 2011; Lu *et al.*, 2012). This indicated that the identified environmental variables were major factors influencing the microbial community structure. As a few environmental variables were sufficient in explaining a majority of variations in microbial community functional structure, it seemed to suggest that stochastic factors played a relative minor role in shaping microbial community, as one would expect for harsh environments of Tibet as the third pole of the earth.

Livestock grazing has important effects on soil N cycling (Ruess & Mcnaughton, 1987), which are influenced by animal excreta N return, compaction of soil bulk density through animal trampling, and changes in modified N input rates and quality of litter accumulation, to name a few (Roux *et al.*, 2003; Le Roux *et al.*, 2008). Consequently, soil N cycling could vary by grazing intensity/regimes, grassland types, and habitat conditions. Increased nitrification was reported previously in grasslands and prairies (Groffman *et al.*, 1993; Tracy & Frank, 1998), which was supported by modeling (Seagle & McNaughton, 1993). Denitrification can also be stimulated following urine deposition (Monaghan & Barraclough, 1993) or defoliation events (Roux *et al.*, 2003), but can also remain unchanged or even be repressed under certain conditions such as overgrazing (Groffman *et al.*, 1993). Our results showed that livestock grazing increased soil N mineralization potential (Fig. 3), which was in consistency with general observation (Ruess & Mcnaughton, 1987; Tracy & Frank, 1998). The increase in nitrification and decrease in denitrification were interesting, which had influence on the balance between NH_4^+ -N and NO_3^- -N and consequently N

conservation of the sites. This shift could also affect N_2O emission.

Vegetation removal by grazing caused less litter input to soils. Accordingly, abundances of most C fixation, C degradation, and CH_4 cycling genes were significantly lower in grazing samples than in ungrazing samples (Fig. 5), suggesting that microbe-mediated C cycling was reduced. Accordingly, CO_2 emission was significantly reduced at 3800 m grazed sites (Table S2), whereas CH_4 emission was not altered. This finding raised an intriguing benefit of grazing in mitigating greenhouse gas emission, which was in alignment with the recent finding that grazing inhibited N_2O emission in the grasslands of Inner Mongolia, China (Wolf *et al.*, 2010). Nonetheless, it is apparent that soil C retention and greenhouse gas emission are strongly influenced by grazing intensity and regime, thus further study is necessary to analyze their effects. Notably, correlation was observed between greenhouse gas fluxes and microbial activities (unpublished data), thus *in situ* microbial community might play an active role in mediating greenhouse gas fluxes on these sites. In addition, in consistency with previous studies in upland grasslands (Hütsch *et al.*, 1994; Castaldi *et al.*, 2007), Tibetan alpine grassland may have acted as a source for carbon dioxide rather than a sink for CH_4 .

The increase in virulence, stress, and antibiotics resistance gene abundance by grazing is not surprising. The virulence genes are required for bacteria to colonize within the digestion system of animal hosts, which could be released from livestock dung (McAllister & Topp, 2012) and thus result in the increase in virulence genes at grazed sites. The increase in stress genes could be explained by their functional roles in bacteria's coping with the environmental changes stemmed from grazing or during bacterial infection of animal hosts. In addition, modern pasturing has widely used antibiotics to control animal disease (Kemper, 2008), which could be reflected in the upshift of antibiotics resistance genes.

In conclusion, we examined grazing effect on soil microbial community by focusing on functional genes. GeoChip results showed that grazing altered the structure of microbial community. Moreover, changes in microbial community were largely attributed to vegetation and soil variables. The increase in N mineralization and nitrification and the decrease in denitrification indicated that grazing altered microbe-mediated N cycling. The decrease in key genes involved in CH_4 and N_2O cycling sheds light on the microbial functional potential in mitigating greenhouse gas emission. Although it remains unclear whether these conclusions can be generalized to other alpine grasslands as this study has been conducted in one location with limited

sampling size, it represents an important step forward to understand the microbial functional potentials changed by livestock grazing.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

Table S1. The grazing effect on overall microbial community structure and environmental variables as examined by the dissimilarity test of adonis.

Table S2. Summary of environmental variable measurements.

Figure S1. Hierarchical clustering analysis of microbial communities for all of the sites.

Figure S2. The normalized signal intensity of the significantly decreased mcrA genes.