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# Geophysical constraints on the link between cratonization and orogeny: Evidence from the Tibetan Plateau and the North China Craton



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#### ABSTRACT

Understanding the geodynamic process of orogeny and cratonization, and their transition is among the key topics of research in evaluating the link between plate tectonics and continental dynamics. The Tibetan Plateau and the North China Craton (NCC), two key areas in mainland China, offer excellent laboratories to understand continental tectonics over a broad span of Earth history. Particularly, the deep structure of the lithosphere as imaged from geophysical data on the Tibetan Plateau and the NCC provide important clues in understanding orogeny and cratonization. The Tibetan Plateau is the largest and highest plateau on Earth in terms of mean altitude, and is an important region for understanding the mechanisms of continent-continent collision and Cenozoic plateau uplift. The NCC is an Archean craton that underwent lithospheric disruption during the Mesozoic. Here we reconstruct the main features of the structure of the crust and upper mantle from surface wave tomography and gravity modeling in Tibet and its neighboring regions, in order to understand the modality of the convergence and collision process between the Indian and Eurasian plates, and the influence of this process on the uplift of the plateau. In the NCC, geological, geochemical, geophysical and tectonic investigations demonstrate that lithospheric destruction mainly occurred in the Eastern Block. The crustal structure of the NCC is reconstructed from ambient noise surface wave tomography and the different possible disruption mechanisms are evaluated. The Vs (shear-wave velocity) tomography results, and the density  $(\rho)$  structure of the crust and upper mantle (to about 350 km depth) demonstrate the lateral variation of the thickness of the metasomatic lid between the south and north of the Bangong-Nujiang suture (BNS) and the west and east of Tibet, which suggest that the leading edge of the subducting Indian slab reaches the BNS. The subduction angle of Indian Plate indicates a transition from steep to shallow from the west to east Tibet. Sections depicting the gravitational potential energy suggest that mantle flow contributes to the subduction of the Indian Plate as far as the BNS and the transition from the asthenospheric layer to the metasomatic lid overlaps with the transition from north-south shortening in south Tibet to eastward tectonic escape in north Tibet (Qiangtang and Songpan–Ganzi blocks). Both Vs and ρ models suggest the following. (1) North-southward lower-crust flow beneath the eastern NCC and interaction between the westward mantle flow and eastward escape flow beneath the central NCC (in addition to the earlier proposed mechanisms of delamination and thermal erosion) played important roles in the lithospheric disruption of the Archean craton. (2) Mantle flow plays an important role in the continental tectonic transition between neighboring tectonic blocks and within the cycle between orogeny and cratonization.

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#### Contents

1.	Introduction	2
2	Salient tectonic features of the Tibetan Plateau and the North China Craten	1

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3.1. Uplift mechanism: Tibetan Plateau and for the disruption of the North China Craton 3.1. Uplift mechanism: Tibetan Plateau 3.2. Disruption mechanism: North China Craton 4.1. Description of data 4.1.1. Surface wave data in the plateau and surrounding region 4.1.2. Gravity data in the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks 4.1.3. Ambient noise data in North China 4.2. Methods 4.2.1. Surface wave tomography 4.2.2. Ambient noise surface wave tomography 4.2.3. 3-D density structure inversion (crust and upper mantle) 5. New development of crust/mantle structure imaging in the Tibetan Plateau and North China Craton 5.1. Lithosphere-asthenosphere shear wave velocity structure of the plateau 5. Lithosphere-asthenosphere density structure beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks 5. Crustal structure in the North China Craton 5. Surface and the North China Craton 5. Lithosphere-asthenosphere density structure beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks 5. Crustal structure 6. Discussion 6. Literal variation of the metasomatic lid and partial melting anomaly beneath the Tibetan Plateau 6. Transition from W- to E- and NE-directed subduction: a mechanism to explain the lateral variation of the mantle lid? 6. Influence of the transition of the subduction polarity of the Indian Plate 6. Does the Indian Plate subduct beneath the Himalaya as a low angle slab? 6. Tringithe crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates 6. Crustal "esponses to lithospheric disruption 6. Crustal "esponses to lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton 6. Indial and boundary conditions between orgeny and craton 6. Form orgeny to craton to orgeny: the North China Craton 6. Form orgeny to craton to orgeny: the North China Craton 6. Form orgeny to craton to orgeny: the North China Craton 6. Form orgeny to craton to rogeny: the North China Craton 6. Form orgeny to craton to rogeny: the North China Craton 6. Form orgeny to craton to rogeny: the North China Craton 6. Form orgeny to craton to rogeny: the North China Craton 6. Colla		Tibetan Plateau
3.1. Uplift mechanism: Tibetan Plateau 3.2. Disruption mechanism: North China Craton 4. Materials and methods 4.1. Description of data . 4.1.1. Surface wave data in the plateau and surrounding region 4.1.2. Gravity data in the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks 4.1.3. Ambient noise data in North China 4.2. Methods 4.2.1. Surface wave tomography 4.2.2. Ambient noise surface wave tomography 4.2.3. 3-D density structure inversion (crust and upper mantle) 5. New development of crust/mantle structure imaging in the Tibetan Plateau and North China Craton 5.1. Lithosphere-asthenosphere density structure for the plateau 5.2. Lithosphere-asthenosphere density structure beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks 5.3. Crustal structure in the North China Craton 5.3.1. Group velocity distribution 5.3.2. Crustal structure 6. Discussion 6.1. Lateral variation of the metasomatic lid and partial melting anomaly beneath the Tibetan Plateau 6.2. Transition from W- to E- and NE-directed subduction: a mechanism to explain the lateral variation of the mantle lid? 6.3. Influence of the transition of the subduction polarity of the Indian Plate 6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates 6.3.2. Does the Indian Plate subduct beneath the Himalaya as allow angle slab? 6.4.1 Evidence from lower crustal density 6.4.1 Evidence from lower crustal density 6.4.2 Evidence from crustal composition modeling 6.5. Crustal responses to lithospheric disruption 6.6.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton: the Tibetan Plateau  7. Concluding remarks 7. Acknowledgments 7. Appendix A. Supplementary data		North China Craton
3.2. Disruption mechanism: North China Craton  4.1 Materials and methods  4.1.1 Surface wave data in the plateau and surrounding region  4.1.2 Gravity data in the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks  4.1.3 Ambient noise data in North China  4.2 Methods  4.2.1 Surface wave tomography  4.2.2 Ambient noise surface wave tomography  4.2.3 3-D density structure inversion (crust and upper mantle)  5. New development of crust/mantle structure imaging in the Tibetan Plateau and North China Craton  5.1 Lithosphere-asthenosphere shear wave velocity structure of the plateau  5.2 Lithosphere-asthenosphere density structure beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks  5.3 Crustal structure in the North China Craton  5.3.1 Group velocity distribution  5.3.2 Crustal structure  6.1 Lateral variation of the metasomatic lid and partial melting anomaly beneath the Tibetan Plateau  6.2 Transition from W- to E- and NE-directed subduction: a mechanism to explain the lateral variation of the mantle lid?  6.3 Influence of the transition of the subduction polarity of the Indian Plate  6.3.1 Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates  6.3.2 Does the Indian Plate subduct beneath the Himalaya as a low angle slab?  6.4. The lower crust beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa: is it eclogitizing now or was it eclogitized?  6.4.1 Evidence from lower crustal density  6.4.2 Evidence from crustal composition modeling  6.5. Crustal responses to lithospheric disruption  6.6.1 Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton  6.6.1 From orogeny to craton: the Tibetan Plateau  7. Concluding remarks  Acknowledgments  Appendix A. Supplementary data	3.	nisms for the formation of the Tibetan Plateau and for the disruption of the North China Craton
4.1. Description of data 4.1. Description of data 4.1.1. Surface wave data in the plateau and surrounding region 4.1.2. Gravity data in the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks 4.1.3. Ambient noise data in North China 4.2. Methods 4.2.1. Surface wave tomography 4.2.2. Ambient noise surface wave tomography 4.2.2. Journal of ensity for density structure inversion (crust and upper mantle)  5. New development of crust/mantle structure imaging in the Tibetan Plateau and North China Craton 5.1. Lithosphere—asthenosphere density structure of the plateau 5.2. Lithosphere—asthenosphere density structure of the plateau 5.3.1. Group velocity distribution 5.3.1. Group velocity distribution 5.3.1. Crustal structure 6. Discussion 6.1. Lateral variation of the metasomatic lid and partial melting anomaly beneath the Tibetan Plateau 6.2. Transition from W- to E- and NE-directed subduction: a mechanism to explain the lateral variation of the mantle lid? 6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates 6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates 6.3.1. Does the Indian Plate subduct beneath the Himalaya as a low angle slab? 6.4.1 Evidence from crustal density 6.4.2 Evidence from crustal density 6.5.1 Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton 6.5.1 Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton 6.6.1. From orogeny to craton: the Tibetan Plateau  7. Concluding remarks  Acknowledgments  Appendix A. Supplementary data		Uplift mechanism: Tibetan Plateau
4.1. Description of data 4.1.1. Surface wave data in the plateau and surrounding region 4.1.2. Gravity data in the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks 4.1.3. Ambient noise data in North China 4.2. Methods 4.2.1. Surface wave tomography 4.2.2. Ambient noise surface wave tomography 4.2.3. 3-D density structure inversion (crust and upper mantle) 5. New development of crust/mantle structure inversion (crust and upper mantle) 5.1. Lithosphere—asthenosphere shear wave velocity structure of the plateau 5.1. Lithosphere—asthenosphere density structure beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks 5.3. Crustal structure in the North China Craton 5.3.1. Group velocity distribution 5.3.2. Crustal structure 6. Discussion 6.1. Lateral variation of the metasomatic lid and partial melting anomaly beneath the Tibetan Plateau 6.2. Transition from W- to E- and NE-directed subduction: a mechanism to explain the lateral variation of the mantle lid? 6.3. Influence of the transition of the subduction polarity of the Indian Plate 6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates 6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates 6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates 6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates 6.3.1. Evidence from lower crustal density 6.4.1. Evidence from lower crustal density 6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton 6.5.2. Evaluation of different mechanisms of lithospheric destruction in the North China Craton 6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to rogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to rogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to rogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to rogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to rogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton t		Disruption mechanism: North China Craton
4.1.1. Surface wave data in the plateau and surrounding region 4.1.2. Gravity data in the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks 4.1.3. Ambient noise data in North China 4.2. Methods 4.2.1. Surface wave tomography 4.2.2. Ambient noise surface wave tomography 4.2.3. 3-D density structure inversion (crust and upper mantle) 5. New development of crust/mantle structure imaging in the Tibetan Plateau and North China Craton 5.1. Lithosphere—asthenosphere shear wave velocity structure of the plateau 5.2. Lithosphere—asthenosphere density structure beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks 5.3. Crustal structure in the North China Craton 5.3.1. Group velocity distribution 5.3.2. Crustal structure 6. Discussion 6.1. Lateral variation of the metasomatic lid and partial melting anomaly beneath the Tibetan Plateau 6.2. Transition from W- to E- and NE-directed subduction; a mechanism to explain the lateral variation of the mantle lid? 6.3. Influence of the transition of the subduction polarity of the Indian Plate 6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates 6.3.2. Does the Indian Plate subduct beneath the Himalaya as a low angle slab? 6.4.1. Evidence from lower crustal density 6.4.2. Evidence from lower crustal density 6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton 6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton 6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to rospeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to rospeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to rospeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to rospeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to rospeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to rospeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From oroge	1.	als and methods
4.12. Gravity data in the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks 4.13. Ambient noise data in North China 4.2 Methods 4.2.1. Surface wave tomography 4.2.2. Ambient noise surface wave tomography 4.2.3. 3-D density structure inversion (crust and upper mantle) 5. New development of crust/mantle structure imaging in the Tibetan Plateau and North China Craton 5.1. Lithosphere-asthenosphere shear wave velocity structure of the plateau 5.2. Lithosphere-asthenosphere density structure beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks 5.3. Crustal structure in the North China Craton 5.3.1. Group velocity distribution 5.3.2. Crustal structure 6. Discussion 6.1. Lateral variation of the metasomatic lid and partial melting anomaly beneath the Tibetan Plateau 6.2. Transition from W- to E- and NE-directed subduction; a mechanism to explain the lateral variation of the mantle lid? 6.3. Influence of the transition of the subduction polarity of the Indian Plate 6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates 6.3.2. Does the Indian Plate subduct beneath the Himalaya as a low angle slab? 6.4.1. Evidence from lower crustal density 6.4.2. Evidence from lower crustal density 6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton 6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton 6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric destruction in the North China Craton 6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From oroge		Description of data
4.1.3. Ambient noise data in North China 4.2. Methods 4.2.1. Surface wave tomography 4.2.2. Ambient noise surface wave tomography 4.2.3. 3-D density structure inversion (crust and upper mantle) 5. New development of crust/mantle structure imaging in the Tibetan Plateau and North China Craton 5.1. Lithosphere—asthenosphere shear wave velocity structure of the plateau 5.2. Lithosphere—asthenosphere density structure beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks 5.3. Crustal structure in the North China Craton 5.3.1. Group velocity distribution 5.3.2. Crustal structure 6. Discussion 6.1. Lateral variation of the metasomatic lid and partial melting anomaly beneath the Tibetan Plateau 6.2. Transition from W- to E- and NE-directed subduction: a mechanism to explain the lateral variation of the mantle lid? 6.3. Influence of the transition of the subduction polarity of the Indian Plate 6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates 6.3.2. Does the Indian Plate subduct beneath the Himalaya as a low angle slab? 6.4. The lower crust beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa: is it eclogitizing now or was it eclogitized? 6.4.1. Evidence from lower crustal density 6.4.2. Evidence from crustal composition modeling 6.5. Crustal responses to lithospheric disruption 6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton 6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton 6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton: the Tibetan Plateau		4.1.1. Surface wave data in the plateau and surrounding region
4.2.1. Surface wave tomography 4.2.2. Ambient noise surface wave tomography 4.2.3. 3-D density structure inversion (crust and upper mantle)  5. New development of crust/mantle structure imaging in the Tibetan Plateau and North China Craton 5.1. Lithosphere—asthenosphere shear wave velocity structure of the plateau 5.2. Lithosphere—asthenosphere density structure beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks 5.3. Crustal structure in the North China Craton 5.3.1. Group velocity distribution 5.3.2. Crustal structure  6. Discussion 6.1. Lateral variation of the metasomatic lid and partial melting anomaly beneath the Tibetan Plateau 6.2. Transition from W- to E- and NE-directed subduction: a mechanism to explain the lateral variation of the mantle lid? 6.3. Influence of the transition of the subduction polarity of the Indian Plate 6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates 6.3.2. Does the Indian Plate subduct beneath the Himalaya as a low angle slab? 6.4.1 Evidence from lower crustal density 6.4.1. Evidence from crustal composition modeling 6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton 6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton 6.5.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton: the Tibetan Plateau  7. Concluding remarks  Acknowledgments  Appendix A. Supplementary data		4.1.2. Gravity data in the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks
4.2.1. Surface wave tomography 4.2.2. Ambient noise surface wave tomography 4.2.3. 3-D density structure inversion (crust and upper mantle)  5. New development of crust/mantle structure imaging in the Tibetan Plateau and North China Craton  5.1. Lithosphere—asthenosphere shear wave velocity structure of the plateau  5.2. Lithosphere—asthenosphere density structure beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks  5.3. Crustal structure in the North China Craton  5.3.1. Group velocity distribution  5.3.2. Crustal structure  6. Discussion  6.1. Lateral variation of the metasomatic lid and partial melting anomaly beneath the Tibetan Plateau  6.2. Transition from W- to E- and NE-directed subduction: a mechanism to explain the lateral variation of the mantle lid?  6.3. Influence of the transition of the subduction polarity of the Indian Plate  6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates  6.3.2. Does the Indian Plate subduct beneath the Himalaya as a low angle slab?  6.4. The lower crust beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa: is it eclogitizing now or was it eclogitized?  6.4.1. Evidence from lower crustal density  6.4.2. Evidence from lower crustal density  6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton  6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton  6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny; the North China Craton  6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny; the North China Craton  6.6.2. From orogeny to craton: the Tibetan Plateau  7. Concluding remarks  Appendix A Supplementary data		4.1.3. Ambient noise data in North China
4.2.2. Ambient noise surface wave tomography 4.2.3. 3-D density structure inversion (crust and upper mantle)  5. New development of crust/mantle structure imaging in the Tibetan Plateau and North China Craton 5.1. Lithosphere-asthenosphere shear wave velocity structure of the plateau 5.2. Lithosphere-asthenosphere density structure beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks 5.3. Crustal structure in the North China Craton 5.3.1. Group velocity distribution 5.3.2. Crustal structure 6. Discussion  6.1. Lateral variation of the metasomatic lid and partial melting anomaly beneath the Tibetan Plateau 6.2. Transition from W- to E- and NE-directed subduction: a mechanism to explain the lateral variation of the mantle lid? 6.3. Influence of the transition of the subduction polarity of the Indian Plate 6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates 6.3.2. Does the Indian Plate subduct beneath the Himalaya as a low angle slab? 6.4.1 Evidence from lower crustal density 6.4.2. Evidence from crustal density 6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton 6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric destruction in the North China Craton 6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.3. Supplementary data		Methods
4.2.3. 3-D density structure inversion (crust and upper mantle)  5. New development of crust/mantle structure imaging in the Tibetan Plateau and North China Craton  5.1. Lithosphere—asthenosphere shear wave velocity structure of the plateau  5.2. Lithosphere—asthenosphere density structure beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks  5.3. Crustal structure in the North China Craton  5.3.1. Group velocity distribution  5.3.2. Crustal structure  6. Discussion  6.1. Lateral variation of the metasomatic lid and partial melting anomaly beneath the Tibetan Plateau  6.2. Transition from W- to E- and NE-directed subduction: a mechanism to explain the lateral variation of the mantle lid?  6.3. Influence of the transition of the subduction polarity of the Indian Plate  6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates  6.3.2. Does the Indian Plate subduct beneath the Himalaya as a low angle slab?  6.4.1 Evidence from lower crustal density  6.4.2. Evidence from lower crustal density  6.4.3. Evidence from crustal composition modeling  6.5. Crustal responses to lithospheric disruption  6.5.1 Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton  6.5.2. Evaluation of different mechanisms of lithospheric destruction in the North China Craton  6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton  6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton  6.6.1 From orogeny to craton: the Tibetan Plateau  7. Concluding remarks  Acknowledgments  Appendix A. Supplementary data		4.2.1. Surface wave tomography
<ul> <li>New development of crust/mantle structure imaging in the Tibetan Plateau and North China Craton         <ul> <li>5.1. Lithosphere—asthenosphere shear wave velocity structure of the plateau</li> <li>5.2. Lithosphere—asthenosphere density structure beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks</li> <li>5.3. Crustal structure in the North China Craton</li> <li>5.3.1. Group velocity distribution</li> <li>5.3.2. Crustal structure</li> </ul> </li> <li>Discussion         <ul> <li>6.1. Lateral variation of the metasomatic lid and partial melting anomaly beneath the Tibetan Plateau</li> <li>6.2. Transition from W- to E- and NE-directed subduction: a mechanism to explain the lateral variation of the mantle lid?</li> <li>6.3. Influence of the transition of the subduction polarity of the Indian Plate</li> <li>6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates</li> <li>6.3.2. Does the Indian Plate subduct beneath the Himalaya as a low angle slab?</li> <li>6.4.1 Evidence from lower crustal density</li> <li>6.4.2. Evidence from crustal composition modeling</li> <li>6.5.1 Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton</li> <li>6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton</li> <li>6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton</li> <li>6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton</li> </ul> </li> <li>Acknowledgments</li> <li>Acknowledgments</li> <li>Asupplementary data</li> </ul>		4.2.2. Ambient noise surface wave tomography
<ul> <li>New development of crust/mantle structure imaging in the Tibetan Plateau and North China Craton         <ul> <li>5.1. Lithosphere—asthenosphere shear wave velocity structure of the plateau</li> <li>5.2. Lithosphere—asthenosphere density structure beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks</li> <li>5.3. Crustal structure in the North China Craton</li> <li>5.3.1. Group velocity distribution</li> <li>5.3.2. Crustal structure</li> </ul> </li> <li>Discussion         <ul> <li>6.1. Lateral variation of the metasomatic lid and partial melting anomaly beneath the Tibetan Plateau</li> <li>6.2. Transition from W- to E- and NE-directed subduction: a mechanism to explain the lateral variation of the mantle lid?</li> <li>6.3. Influence of the transition of the subduction polarity of the Indian Plate</li> <li>6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates</li> <li>6.3.2. Does the Indian Plate subduct beneath the Himalaya as a low angle slab?</li> <li>6.4.1 Evidence from lower crustal density</li> <li>6.4.2. Evidence from crustal composition modeling</li> <li>6.5.1 Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton</li> <li>6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton</li> <li>6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton</li> <li>6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton</li> </ul> </li> <li>Acknowledgments</li> <li>Acknowledgments</li> <li>Asupplementary data</li> </ul>		4.2.3. 3-D density structure inversion (crust and upper mantle)
5.2. Lithosphere–asthenosphere density structure beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks 5.3. Crustal structure in the North China Craton . 5.3.1. Group velocity distribution . 5.3.2. Crustal structure 6. Discussion . 6.1. Lateral variation of the metasomatic lid and partial melting anomaly beneath the Tibetan Plateau . 6.2. Transition from W- to E- and NE-directed subduction: a mechanism to explain the lateral variation of the mantle lid? . 6.3. Influence of the transition of the subduction polarity of the Indian Plate . 6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates . 6.3.2. Does the Indian Plate subduct beneath the Himalaya as a low angle slab? . 6.4. The lower crust beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa: is it eclogitizing now or was it eclogitized? . 6.4.1. Evidence from lower crustal density . 6.4.2. Evidence from crustal composition modeling . 6.5. Crustal responses to lithospheric disruption . 6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton . 6.5.2. Evaluation of different mechanisms of lithospheric destruction in the North China Craton . 6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton . 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton . 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton: the Tibetan Plateau .  7. Concluding remarks .  Acknowledgments .  Appendix A. Supplementary data .	j.	evelopment of crust/mantle structure imaging in the Tibetan Plateau and North China Craton
5.3. Crustal structure in the North China Craton		Lithosphere–asthenosphere shear wave velocity structure of the plateau
5.3.1. Group velocity distribution		Lithosphere–asthenosphere density structure beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa blocks
5.3.2. Crustal structure  6. Discussion		Crustal structure in the North China Craton
6.1. Lateral variation of the metasomatic lid and partial melting anomaly beneath the Tibetan Plateau  6.2. Transition from W- to E- and NE-directed subduction: a mechanism to explain the lateral variation of the mantle lid?  6.3. Influence of the transition of the subduction polarity of the Indian Plate  6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates  6.3.2. Does the Indian Plate subduct beneath the Himalaya as a low angle slab?  6.4. The lower crust beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa: is it eclogitizing now or was it eclogitized?  6.4.1. Evidence from lower crustal density  6.4.2. Evidence from crustal composition modeling  6.5. Crustal responses to lithospheric disruption  6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton  6.5.2. Evaluation of different mechanisms of lithospheric destruction in the North China Craton  6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny; the North China Craton  6.6.2. From orogeny to craton: the Tibetan Plateau  7. Concluding remarks  Acknowledgments  Appendix A. Supplementary data		5.3.1. Group velocity distribution
6.1. Lateral variation of the metasomatic lid and partial melting anomaly beneath the Tibetan Plateau 6.2. Transition from W- to E- and NE-directed subduction: a mechanism to explain the lateral variation of the mantle lid? 6.3. Influence of the transition of the subduction polarity of the Indian Plate 6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates 6.3.2. Does the Indian Plate subduct beneath the Himalaya as a low angle slab? 6.4. The lower crust beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa: is it eclogitizing now or was it eclogitized? 6.4.1. Evidence from lower crustal density 6.4.2. Evidence from crustal composition modeling 6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton 6.5.1. Lateral variation of different mechanisms of lithospheric destruction in the North China Craton 6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny and craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton: the Tibetan Plateau 7. Concluding remarks  Acknowledgments  Appendix A. Supplementary data		5.3.2. Crustal structure
6.2. Transition from W- to E- and NE-directed subduction: a mechanism to explain the lateral variation of the mantle lid?  6.3. Influence of the transition of the subduction polarity of the Indian Plate  6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates  6.3.2. Does the Indian Plate subduct beneath the Himalaya as a low angle slab?  6.4. The lower crust beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa: is it eclogitizing now or was it eclogitized?  6.4.1. Evidence from lower crustal density  6.4.2. Evidence from crustal composition modeling  6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton  6.5.2. Evaluation of different mechanisms of lithospheric destruction in the North China Craton  6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton  6.6.2. From orogeny to craton: the Tibetan Plateau  7. Concluding remarks  Acknowledgments  Appendix A. Supplementary data	5.	sion
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6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates 6.3.2. Does the Indian Plate subduct beneath the Himalaya as a low angle slab?  6.4.1 The lower crust beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa: is it eclogitizing now or was it eclogitized? 6.4.1. Evidence from lower crustal density 6.4.2. Evidence from crustal composition modeling. 6.5.1 Crustal responses to lithospheric disruption 6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton 6.5.2. Evaluation of different mechanisms of lithospheric destruction in the North China Craton 6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny and craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 7. Concluding remarks  Acknowledgments  Appendix A. Supplementary data		Transition from W- to E- and NE-directed subduction: a mechanism to explain the lateral variation of the mantle lid?
6.3.2. Does the Indian Plate subduct beneath the Himalaya as a low angle slab?  6.4. The lower crust beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa: is it eclogitizing now or was it eclogitized?  6.4.1. Evidence from lower crustal density  6.4.2. Evidence from crustal composition modeling  6.5. Crustal responses to lithospheric disruption  6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton  6.5.2. Evaluation of different mechanisms of lithospheric destruction in the North China Craton  6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny and craton  6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton  7. Concluding remarks  Acknowledgments  Appendix A. Supplementary data		Influence of the transition of the subduction polarity of the Indian Plate
6.4. The lower crust beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa: is it eclogitizing now or was it eclogitized?  6.4.1. Evidence from lower crustal density  6.4.2. Evidence from crustal composition modeling  6.5. Crustal responses to lithospheric disruption  6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton  6.5.2. Evaluation of different mechanisms of lithospheric destruction in the North China Craton  6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny and craton  6.6.2. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton  6.6.2. From orogeny to craton: the Tibetan Plateau  7. Concluding remarks  Acknowledgments  Appendix A. Supplementary data		6.3.1. Tracing the crust/lithosphere/asthenosphere boundaries between the Indian and Eurasian plates
6.4.1. Evidence from lower crustal density		6.3.2. Does the Indian Plate subduct beneath the Himalaya as a low angle slab?
6.4.2. Evidence from crustal composition modeling		The lower crust beneath the Himalaya and Lhasa: is it eclogitizing now or was it eclogitized?
6.5. Crustal responses to lithospheric disruption  6.5.1. Lateral variation of crustal responses to the lithospheric disruption of the North China Craton  6.5.2. Evaluation of different mechanisms of lithospheric destruction in the North China Craton  6.6.1. Initial and boundary conditions between orogeny and craton  6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton  6.6.2. From orogeny to craton: the Tibetan Plateau  7. Concluding remarks  Acknowledgments  Appendix A. Supplementary data		
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6.5.2. Evaluation of different mechanisms of lithospheric destruction in the North China Craton  6.6.1 Initial and boundary conditions between orogeny and craton		Crustal responses to lithospheric disruption
6.6. Initial and boundary conditions between orogeny and craton		
6.6.1. From orogeny to craton to orogeny: the North China Craton 6.6.2. From orogeny to craton: the Tibetan Plateau  7. Concluding remarks  Acknowledgments  Appendix A. Supplementary data		6.5.2. Evaluation of different mechanisms of lithospheric destruction in the North China Craton
6.6.2. From orogeny to craton: the Tibetan Plateau		Initial and boundary conditions between orogeny and craton
7. Concluding remarks		
Acknowledgments		
Appendix A. Supplementary data	7.	ıding remarks
		gments
References		
References		

#### 1. Introduction

Since late 60s, plate tectonics has been accepted as the general framework that governs global tectonics with supportive evidence from multi-disciplinary investigations and considerably advanced our understanding of orogeny and the evolution of cratons. China mainland, composed of three tectonic domains: the Tethys, circum Pacific and Paleo-Asia (Fig. 1a), and subdivided into 18 tectonic units, is one of the excellent regions to evaluate continental dynamics (Yuan, 1996a, b; Li and Mooney, 1998; Zhang et al., 2011e; Teng et al., 2013). The Tibetan Plateau (Fig. 1b) and the North China Craton (NCC) (Fig. 1c) have been in global focus for two main reasons: (1) the Tibetan Plateau is a key area for the understanding of the Cenozoic (and ongoing) continent-continent collision (Yin and Harrison, 2000; Aitchison et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2012), and (2) the NCC is one of the best natural laboratories to evaluate decratonization through Mesozoic lithospheric thinning (Zhai et al., 2007; Zhu and Zheng, 2009; G. Zhu et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2012; Guo et al., 2013; Li et al., 2013a,b; Yang et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2013b,c).

The Tibetan Plateau is characterized by a high mean altitude (>4000 m) and ongoing continent-continent collisional orogeny. This orogenic system has been largely created by the India-Asian collision over the past 70–50 million years, and is part of the greater Himalayan-Alpine system that extends from the Mediterranean Sea in the west, to the Sumatra arc of Indonesia in the east, over a distance of more than 7000 km (Yin, 2006). This extraordinarily long

and complex amalgamated belt developed in response to the closure of the Tethys Ocean between two great landmasses, namely between Laurasia in the north and Gondwana in the south, a process that has been taking place since the Paleozoic (Hsü et al., 1995; Sengör and Natal'in, 1996).

The Himalayan-Tibetan orogen and its neighboring regions in East Asia are ideal regions for studying continent-continent collision (Yin, 2006). The mountain building process is active, so many geological relationships can be demonstrated directly using the methods of neotectonic studies (Armijo et al., 1989; Holt et al., 1995; Bilham et al., 1997; Lacassin et al., 1998; Van der Woerd et al., 1998; Larson et al., 1999; Shen and Jin, 1999; Shen et al., 2001). Secondly, the history of the plate boundary is well known, so the cause of intracontinental deformation can be quantitatively defined as a time-dependent, boundaryvalue problem (Peltzer and Tapponnier, 1988; Houseman and England, 1996; Kong and Bird, 1996; Peltzer and Saucier, 1996; Royden, 1996; Kong et al., 1997; Royden et al., 1997; Kumar et al., 2006). Thirdly, the collision process has produced a variety of geological characteristics, such as large-scale thrust, strike-slip and normal fault systems (Burg and Chen, 1984; Tapponnier et al., 1986; Burchfiel et al., 1992; Yin et al., 1994), leucogranite magmatism (Harrison et al., 1998), widespread volcanism (Deng, 1989; Arnaud et al., 1992; Turner et al., 1993; Chung et al., 1998; Deng, 1998), regional metamorphism (Le Fort, 1996; Searle, 1996) and the formation of intracontinental and continental-margin oceanic basins (Brias et al., 1993; Song and Wang, 1993). All these geological characteristics and processes may be useful

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