Millet arrived in the South China Coast around 5,500 years ago

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Crop dispersal has long been recognised as an important topic in agricultural archaeology and food globalisation. One of most pressing questions facing archaeologists is determining when and where millet arrived in the South China Coast. Our study focused on the millet phytoliths remains from three Neolithic sites in southeast coastal Fujian. Multiple dating methods, including charred carbon dating, phytolith carbon dating, and optically stimulated luminescence were used to construct the chronologies of the sites. The dating results showed that BTS was initially occupied at approximately 5,500 cal a BP. The millet phytoliths recovered in this study are likely the earliest millet remains found in Fujian, suggesting that millet arrived in the South China Coast at least 5,500 years ago. However, questions about whether millet agriculture in northern China dispersed southward through the inland or coastal routes remain unanswered. Given that millet remains were found in Jiangxi and northern Fujian – two important gaps in the inland route – no earlier than 5,000 cal a BP, it seems that the millet remains recovered from the coastal sites of Fujian might have dispersed following a coastal route from northern China. Nevertheless, Fujian is an important junction of the coastal route for the dispersal of millet from northern China. These findings not only provide new insights to millet dispersal routes in China, but also have significant implications for crop communications between Taiwan and mainland China during the Neolithic age.