Within-season effects of climate variability on leafhopper abundance and shoot growth in tea fields

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# Abstract

Climate change is predicted to impact insect herbivores and their host plants through increases in mean annual temperature and changes in annual precipitation. However, weather is also predicted to become more variable over time, so integrating the effects of climate on growth rates over years may not be appropriate, especially for organisms with multiple generations per year. Additionally, the effects of temperature and precipitation may differ between insect herbivores and their host plants and have the potential for delayed effects. We investigate the effects of daily changes in temperature and precipitation on the growth rate of tea (*Camellia sinensis*) and a widespread, multivoltine tea pest, the tea green leafhopper (*Empoasca onukii*) in a field study in Fujian Province, China in June and July 2017. Although *E. onukii* is often considered a pest, some tea farms, including the one in our study, appreciate and encourage *E. onukii* herbivory, which induces the production of volatiles by the tea plant and improves tea quality. Our results indicate that leafhopper density was highest under cool wet conditions, but that tea shoot growth was improved under warm, dry conditions. Precipitation had a stronger effect on both tea shoot growth and leafhopper density compared to temperature. Furthermore, the effects of weather on tea shoot growth were essentially immediate, while there was evidence of only lagged effects of temperature and both immediate and lagged effects of precipitation on leafhopper density. The delayed effects of weather may be an indication that earlier, less detectible life stages (i.e. eggs and early instar nymphs) may be more susceptible to desiccation. Although average yearly warming is expected to benefit insect pests, especially those that are multivoltine, our results show that within a growing season, cool wet conditions benefit the tea green leafhopper most.

# Introduction

The years between 2010 and 2019 represent the warmest decade on record (NOAA, 2020). There is consensus that this warming is caused primarily by anthropogenic release of CO2 into the atmosphere (Cook et al., 2016). ﻿In addition to elevated mean temperatures, the variability of climate within years has increased. For example, the frequency of extreme events such as heat waves and precipitation anomalies have increased over the last century (IPCC, 2007). These changes are predicted to have diverse effects on organisms that vary by species and geography (Bale et al., 2002). Because insects are poikilotherms, changes in temperature are particularly likely to affect insects directly by altering metabolic rates (Bale et al., 2002). For example, an increase in 10 ºC results in roughly a doubling of insect metabolic rates across the range of regularly experienced temperatures (Bale et al., 2002; Berggren et al., 2009). Therefore, increasing mean temperature is expected to increase the vital rates and populations of many groups of insect herbivores (Bale et al., 2002; Berggren et al., 2009; Porter et al., 1991), and to increase the latitudinal ranges and populations of some agricultural pests (Bebber et al., 2013; Macgregor et al., 2019; Porter et al., 1991). Warming has resulted in a documented increase in herbivory on herbarium specimens (Meineke et al., 2018) and crop damage (Deutsch et al., 2018) over time.

Changes in precipitation, on the other hand, are less uniform across the globe, with some regions seeing increases in precipitation and others seeing relative decreases (IPCC, 2007). In addition, the predicted effects on insect populations are less clear, partly due to limited research relative to the effects of temperature (Bale et al., 2002). Precipitation may moderate the impacts of temperature through changing humidity. Dry conditions can lead to increases in insect mortality due to desiccation, so in dry habitats, increased precipitation may result in increases in herbivore populations (Beirne, 1970). In tropical climates, where climate change is resulting in increasing frequency and severity of drought, insects may be at greater risk of desiccation over time (Bujan et al., 2016). Espeset et al. (2016) found that the western population of monarch butterflies in North America benefitted from warm, wet springs. However, precipitation and increased humidity can also favor the spread of entomopathogenic fungi, which could reduce insect herbivore densities (Goettel and Glare, 2010).

Because the temperature optima of insects and plants are likely to differ, warming has the potential to have different impacts on plants and their insect herbivores culminating in predicted increases in rates of herbivory (Berggren et al., 2009; DeLucia et al., 2012). Although some degree of warming may improve plant growth, insect populations are predicted to benefit more from high temperatures than their host plants. At high temperatures that are beneficial to herbivores, plants are likely to experience increased respiration and decreased photosynthetic efficiency due to photorespiration, thus decreasing their growth rate relative to their insect herbivores (Berggren et al., 2009). Because many herbivores feed exclusively on developing plant tissue, high temperatures may increase herbivory as a combined function of increased herbivore densities and either increased rates of leaf maturation or decreased plant growth, both of which would reduce availability of young leaves (Bale et al., 2002; Berggren et al., 2009).

For organisms with long lifespans, it is difficult to study effects of climate change on their abundance. However, multivoltine insects may offer an opportunity to study the effects of changes in temperature and precipitation over a shorter time scale. Multivoltine insects complete multiple generations per season, with each cohort experiencing a unique climate history. Multivoltine insects are predicted to benefit from climate change because of the potential to add additional generations due to advancing phenology (Bale et al., 2002; Kerr et al., 2019; Macgregor et al., 2019; Tobin et al., 2008). However, weather conditions within a year may affect the abundance of multivoltine insects independently from mean yearly trends in temperature and precipitation. For example, although the arrival date of the migratory crop pest, the potato leafhopper (*Empoasca fabae*) has been advancing with warming temperatures (-3 days per ºC), the arrival date had less of an impact on crop infestation than within-season temperatures (Baker et al., 2015). For multivoltine organisms, focusing on changes in mean annual temperature and precipitation aggregates across multiple generations, and we lose information on responses to weather at more appropriate time scales.

Tea (*Camellia* sinensis) is a long-lived perennial crop cultivated in sub-tropical regions predicted to be severely impacted by climate change (IPCC, 2014). Insect herbivores attack all parts of the tea plant and can be responsible for up to 55% yield loss (Hazarika et al., 2009). The tea green leafhopper, *Empoasca onukii*, is a widespread pest on tea (Jin et al., 2012). Like other *Empoasca* species, *E. onukii* feeds by rupturing cells and ingesting fluids (Backus et al., 2005; Jin et al., 2012). This causes chlorosis, stunting, thickening, and curling of leaves, and in severe infestations can cause necrosis at leaf margins and early leaf abscission—a set of symptoms collectively referred to as “hopperburn”. Although direct consumption of leaves by *E. onukii* is minimal, the effects of hopperburncan reduce tea yields by up to 20% (Fu et al., 2014). However, in late summer when tea quality generally declines, *E. onukii* infestations can be beneficial to some tea farmers because of the volatiles induced uniquely by leafhopper damage (Cho et al., 2007; Zeng et al., 2019). One such tea produced from leafhopper attacked plants is known as Eastern Beauty oolong (东方美人, dongfang meiren) (Cho et al., 2007; Scott and Orians, 2018). Eastern Beauty oolong originated in Taiwan but is now produced in other tea-growing regions of Asia where *E. onukii* is a common pest. This type of tea is produced in the late summer when leafhoppers are abundant and tea quality would otherwise be low, offering farmers a way to increase their income while reducing insecticide inputs. *Empoasca onukii* is highly multivoltine, having 9-15 generations per summer in the warmest parts of its range (Fu et al., 2014), and leafhopper vital rates are influenced by temperature (Reineke and Hauck, 2012). Therefore, there is the potential for within-season temperature and precipitation to have an impact on leafhopper population. In addition, climate may affect shoot growth of tea plants. Young shoots are not only the unit of harvest, but also the preferred feeding sites for *E. onukii* (Jin et al., 2012) so changes in shoot elongation must be considered together with *E. onukii* population in order to understand changes in functional density. As the climate becomes more variable, we anticipate changes in leafhopper abundance and tea plant growth, but it is unclear how temperature and precipitation will impact each species and whether this will have a net positive or negative impact on tea yields and quality.

Here we present an observational study performed at a tea farm in Fujian Province, China that produces Eastern Beauty oolong when leafhopper herbivory is high enough in the late summer. We tracked leafhopper population density and tea shoot growth in tea fields and modeled their (potentially delayed) responses to recent temperature and precipitation.

# Materials and Methods

The study was conducted at Shanfu Tea Company in Shaxian, Sanming Prefecture, Fujian Province, China (26°25'04.1"N 117°44'56.8"E, elevation ~ 200m) from June 5 to July 22, 2017. Two adjacent fields (hereafter A and B) planted with the same tea cultivar (铁观音, Tie Guan Yin) were used for this experiment. Tea plants in both fields were of similar age (ca. 30 years, according to the farm manager). Field A was on a slope facing north-east and Field B faced south and south-west. In each field, we labeled 10 randomly chosen plants. Each day at 6:00am, we counted tea green leafhoppers (*Empoasca onukii*) on the undersides of the second leaf from the apical meristem of 30 or 50 haphazardly chosen shoots on these plants. E. onukii is the only common leafhopper pest on tea (Mao et al., 2014). At the beginning of the summer, we counted leafhoppers on 30 leaves per plant, but increased our search effort to 50 leaves per plant on June 24th. Leafhopper counts were performed by three observers and observer ID was recorded along with the count data. Leafhopper counts were collected every day from June 5 to July 24 on both fields. The tea farm operated as usual in these fields and they were harvested several times during the experiment. Field A was harvested on June 28, July 8, and July 22. Field B was harvested on June 8, July 13, and July 24. Each combination of field and inter-harvest period (hereafter “harvest”) experienced a unique weather history and is treated as a blocking factor. At our request, all harvests followed a plucking grade of 2 leaves and a bud, and the leaves were processed as Eastern Beauty oolong.

Shoot growth was assessed using the same plants. Seven actively growing shoots per plant were labeled below the second leaf. “Actively growing” was defined as having an expanding leaf at the apical meristem. Each day, the length of the shoot was measured from the node immediately above the label to the shoot tip. When fields are harvested, young shoots are plucked from all plants in the field, including the plants we labeled. Therefore, after each harvest, new shoots on the same plants were selected and measured daily as described above until the next harvest. Shoot diameter was measured at the beginning of each harvest period to use as a covariate. Because our study began only three days before the first harvest of Field B, we excluded this first inter-harvest period from analyses of shoot growth.

A temperature sensor and datalogger (HOBO 8k Pendant® temperature data logger, Onset Computer Corporation, Bourne, MA, USA) was installed between the two fields on a stake at the height of the tea canopy in a solar radiation shield (Onset Computer Corporation). Air temperature was logged hourly, and later averaged to get mean daily temperatures. Precipitation data was obtained for a weather station in nearby Sanming for June and July 2017 from the Chinese Agricultural Academy of Sciences.

## Distributed Lag Non-Linear Models

We assessed the effects of precipitation and temperature on leafhopper density and tea shoot growth rate (daily change in shoot height in cm). We were interested in accounting for potentially delayed effects of weather, but because weather is likely to be autocorrelated through time, using lagged weather (e.g. temperature one day ago, two days ago, etc.) as independent predictor variables would result in overfitting. Furthermore, the choice of how to discretize lag (days, weeks, etc.) is arbitrary. Instead of including parameters for every unit of lag as an independent predictor, we can model the delayed effects of weather with fewer parameters by fitting a curve. The effects of weather may decay linearly over time, so rather than choosing a kernel (e.g. exponential or gaussian) a priori, we can model the effects of lag as a non-linear spline (Gasparrini, 2011; Teller et al., 2016). Distributed lag non-linear models (DLNMs) model potentially delayed effects of predictor variables by fitting a bi-dimensional dose-lag-response association spline where the effect of a predictor can vary non-linearly through lag time and across predictor intensity (Gasparrini, 2011; Gasparrini et al., 2017). These bi-dimensional kernels were constructed using a cross-basis function provided by the dlnm package in R (Gasparrini, 2011) with a maximum lag effect of 15 days, the mean survival time for female *E. onukii* individuals in the field reported by Shi et al. (2015). Only data points with at least 15 days of weather history were retained (June 16 and onward). Penalized cubic regression splines were used for both dimensions with 5 knots for the response dimension and 7 knots for the lag dimension. These two-dimensional splines were then included as predictor variables in generalized additive models (GAMs) using the mgcv package in R (Wood, 2017). Preliminary analyses revealed high concurvity between the temperature and precipitation cross-basis functions (Wood, 2008, 2017) (Appendix 3). To avoid unstable estimates resulting from this concurvity, we fit separate models for precipitation and temperature. We report results of both models and compared them with AIC to determine which weather variable better explained the response.

Penalized cubic regression splines were used for modeling the cross-basis functions for weather as well as covariates. Penalization favors more linear shapes such that unless the data supports non-linearity, the resulting fitted relationship will be linear. Effective degrees of freedom (edf) represent the degree of non-linearity of the penalized spline and are reported for each predictor. For example, edf = 0 is equivalent an intercept only, edf = 1 is a linear relationship, and edf = 2 is a quadratic relationship.

Linear shoot growth rate, *r*, was calculated as the difference between height on the day measured and height on the previous day. Growth was modeled as:

Where *a* is the intercept, *f(W, lag =* ***15****)* is the cross-basis function for either temperature or precipitation, *f(dayph)* and *f(dia.)* are a penalized cubic splines for the effect of number of days post-harvest and stem diameter, respectively, and *re(harvest)* and *re(plant)* are random effects of the harvest/field blocking factor and the plant ID within each field. Stem diameter and day post-harvest were used as co-variates as we expected shoot growth to be higher for larger stems and to change over time as shoots matured. We used a scaled t family error distribution because residuals followed a leptokurtic gaussian distribution when a gaussian family error distribution was used. For leafhopper counts, we used the following model:

Where *H* is number of leafhoppers per plant, with an offset of ln(*L*), number of leaves sampled per plant, to account for variation in sampling effort and to put the expected values in units of leafhoppers per leaf. Predictor variables are the same as defined above with the addition of observer as a random effect to account for differences in detection probability among the three researchers who collected leafhopper count data. Here, days post-harvest is included as a co-variate to test for an effect of harvesting shoots on leafhopper population density. This GAM was fit using a Poisson family error distribution with a log link.

# Results

Mean precipitation (± standard deviation) was 7.37 ± 12.29 mm with 68% of the days having some rain (Figure 3.1A). The mean temperature over the experiment was 26.9 ± 2.5 ºC (Figure 3.1B).

Leafhopper density averaged 0.056 ± 0.046 leafhoppers per young leaf. Leafhopper densities were higher in field A on all but three dates (Figure 3.1C).

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Figure 3.1. Weather patterns and leafhopper densities over the course of this study (June 5 through July 26, 2017). (A) Precipitation data from weather station in Shaxian, Fujian Province, China. (B) Mean (solid line), minimum, and maximum (dashed lines) temperatures from data logger on site. (C) Mean number of leafhoppers per young leaf on two fields. Harvest of each field are marked by changes in line color.

For leafhopper densities, the precipitation model had the lower AIC than the temperature model (dAIC = 16.9). Lagged precipitation had a significant effect on leafhopper density (edf = 10.3, p < 0.001). High precipitation had a positive effect on leafhopper densities (Figure 3.2A). The relationship between precipitation and leafhopper densities was essentially monotonic regardless of lag time with highest predicted densities at the highest observed precipitation (83.5 mm) and lower predicted densities at 0 mm precipitation. Unlike the effects of precipitation on shoot growth, the effects of precipitation on leafhopper densities remained strong between 1 and 14 days of lag indicating delayed effects of precipitation on leafhopper densities (Figure 3.2A).

Lagged temperature also had a significant effect on leafhopper density (edf = 6.6, p < 0.001). High temperatures had detrimental effects on leafhopper densities especially at lag times of 5–13 days (Figure 3.2B). Temperature had the strongest effects at 9 days of lag with the lowest recorded temperatures resulting in the highest predicted leafhopper density (0.05 leafhoppers/leaf at 20.15 ºC). At 9 days lag, predicted leafhopper density declines up to about 24 ºC, after which there is little effect of temperature (Figure 3.2B). In contrast to precipitation, there was little effect of temperature on leafhopper density with 1 day of lag.

Number of days post-harvest had no significant effect on leafhopper density in both the temperature and precipitation models (edf = 0, p > 0.5).

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Figure 3.2. Partial effects plot for the lagged effect of weather on leafhopper density from models including (A) lagged precipitation as a predictor and (B) lagged temperature as a predictor. The highest leafhopper densities occurred when there were cool temperatures 9 days previous and higher temperatures (at any lag) resulted in lower leafhopper densities. The temperature on the day of measurement had only a weak effect on leafhopper densities.

For shoot growth, the precipitation model had a lower AIC than the temperature model (dAIC = 4.7). Precipitation had a significant effect on plant growth (edf = 10.4, p < 0.001) with little evidence of delayed effects (Figure 3.3A). At 1 day lag, the optimum precipitation for growth is 13.85 mm (growth rate = 0.42 cm/day) with a modest decrease in growth at the low end of observed precipitation (0.39 cm/day at 0 mm) and substantial decreases at the high end of observed precipitation (0.21 cm/day at 83.5 mm).

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Figure 3.3. Partial effects plots for the effects of weather on shoot growth from the model including (A) lagged precipitation as a predictor and (B) lagged temperature as a predictor. Plots show predicted shoot growth from a two-dimensional cross-basis smooth and can be interpreted as the predicted effects of precipitation or temperature at lag times of 1–15 days, all else being equal. For example, in panel B, temperature has a non-linear relationship with shoot growth at 0 days of lag (the day the measurements were taken) with the highest growth rates occurring around 27 ºC. In contrast, temperature at lag times greater than 5 days has little effect on shoot growth.

Lagged temperature had a significant effect on growth (edf = 9.3, p < 0.001). Temperature effects were mostly immediate, with negligible effects of temperature lagged past 5 days (Figure 3.3B). At one day of lag, the optimum temperature for growth was 26.5 ºC (growth rate = 0.34 cm/day) with substantially lower growth at temperatures at the low end of observed values (20.1 ºC, growth rate = 0.28 cm/day) and modest decreases at the upper end (30.1 ºC, growth rate = 0.32 cm/day). The relationship between temperature and shoot growth shows little effect of temperature above 26 ºC and beyond 5 days of lag (Figure 3.3B).

Stem diameter had a significant, nearly linear effect on growth with wider shoots growing faster in both models (edf = 2.6, p < 0.001) (Figure 3.4A). Number of days post-harvest had a non-monotonic relationship with growth with the highest growth rate at about day 10 with declining growth after that, although this relationship was not statistically (temperature model: edf = 2.6, p = 0.452, precipitation model: edf = 2.4, p = 0.425)(Figure 3.4B).

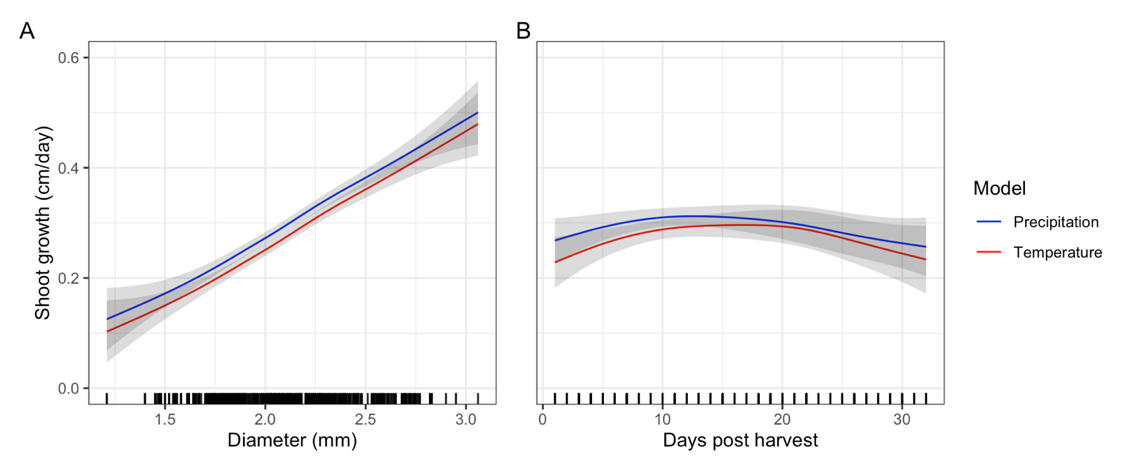


Figure 3.4. Predicted effects of covariates from models including either lagged temperature or precipitation as predictors. Plots show the effect of stem diameter (A) and number of days post-harvest (B) on shoot growth (cm/day). Predicted effects of co-variates differed only slightly between the two models. The effect of days post-harvest is not statistically significant.

# Discussion

We found contrasting effects of weather on tea shoot growth and leafhopper density. Tea shoot growth was highest in warm, dry periods and leafhopper density was highest in wet and cool conditions. Responses of tea shoot growth to temperature and precipitation were essentially immediate, while temperature had only a delayed effect on leafhopper densities, and the effect of precipitation on leafhoppers was both immediate and delayed.

Leafhopper density increased in wet and cool conditions, which suggests that desiccation may be an important source of mortality for *E. onukii* in the field. This result is similar to that of Mao et al. (2014). They found that higher maximum daily temperatures corresponded to lower *E. onukii* densities in a field study in Shaanxi Province, although higher minimum temperatures increased densities. They also found that higher humidity and precipitation was beneficial to leafhopper population densities, although this finding did not reach statistical significance.

The negative effects of warm and dry conditions on leafhopper densities were delayed, having the strongest effect 9 days prior to measurement. One possible explanation for this is that earlier life stages, which are less conspicuous, are more susceptible to these warm, dry conditions than later life stages which are more conspicuous. For example, eggs are unaccounted for in this study and 1st instar nymphs may be underestimated because they are very small, colorless and therefore likely less detectible than later instars. Mortality in these early life stages would therefore not be detected in leafhopper counts immediately, but as the cohort matured and became more detectible, the effects of that mortality on population densities would become noticeable. Reineke and Hauck (2012) investigated development of a related leafhopper, *Empoasca vitis*, under laboratory conditions and found an average development time of 5.9 days from egg to second instar and 8.7 days from egg to third instar. If development times are similar for *E. onukii*, then a lag time of about 9 days could be explained by an effect of temperature on egg eclosion. Reineke and Hauck (2012) also showed that first and second instar nymphs have lower optimum temperatures for development (17.55 and 15.55 ºC, respectively) than later instars which thrived at temperatures between 22.35 and 26.8 ºC (Reineke and Hauck, 2012). In addition, they found a strong decrease in egg hatching at temperatures above 18 ºC at night and 28 ºC in the day. The mean temperature in our study was 26.9º, although maximum daily temperatures were often above 28 ºC (Figure 1). Although Reineke and Hauck (2012) may overestimate the effects of temperature on leafhoppers because their study does not account for microclimatic variation in the crop canopy, our results suggest the possibility for similar patterns in mortality and hatching rates in the field. In addition, our methods are likely to be biased toward nymphs and underestimate adult population size (Shi et al., 2015). It is possible that adverse weather conditions affect the oviposition rates of adult female leafhoppers resulting in a delayed effect on nymph densities. Future field studies that track abundances of *E. onukii* life stages separately might be able to infer the exact nature of these delayed effects.

Alternatively, the negative impact of high temperatures could be due to indirect effects. Arthropod predators or parasitoids are also sensitive to temperature and warmer temperatures may increase their population and/or improve their prey searching efficiency. Additionally, predators of leafhoppers rely on tea plant volatile organic compounds (VOCs) to find their prey (Gao et al., 2004) and tea VOC profiles may be altered by climate (Kfoury et al., 2018, 2019; Kowalsick et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2019). Weather may also directly impact the quality of tea leaves as a food source for leafhoppers, which could have a delayed effect on their densities. Because we did not census leafhopper predators or parasitoids or measure plant chemistry in this study, we cannot disentangle biotic and abiotic effects on population densities.

Interestingly, number of days post-harvest had no effect on leafhopper densities. We included this co-variate because the farm manager at Shanfu Tea Company suggested that harvesting may help control leafhopper densities by removing food sources for leafhopper nymphs and potentially eggs which are laid under the epidermis of tea shoots (Xin et al., 2017). However, we found no evidence that harvesting affected leafhopper densities. In another study at Shanfu tea company, we harvested leafhopper eggs to rear a lab colony and eggs were often found below the second or third leaf of tea shoots and would not be removed by tea plucking (Scott, personal observation).

In contrast to leafhoppers, tea shoot growth was favored by warmer temperatures and low precipitation, with precipitation having a stronger effect than temperature. While we did not measure photosynthetic activity or water stress in this experiment, these results suggest that tea plants in this experiment were not water limited. Temperature and precipitation had high concurvity (analogous to collinearity), and precipitation is likely a proxy for sunlight and photosynthetic activity in this experiment since high precipitation resulted in slower shoot growth. Faster growth under lower precipitation (higher light availability) is typical of woody understory plants that do not experience water limitation (Condit et al., 2004). Responses to changes in temperature and precipitation by tea shoot growth were mostly immediate, as the relationship between growth and weather is strongest with only 1 day of lag.

It is important to note that in this observational study, tea shoot growth may be partially confounded with leafhopper herbivory as one of the symptoms of hopperburn is stunted growth. However, leafhopper densities were quite low over this period compared to other studies that investigate the effects of leafhoppers on quality (Scott et al., 2020), and we believe the variation in leafhopper densities we saw is unlikely to have large effects on tea shoot growth. Unfortunately, in this dataset we cannot completely disentangle the effects of precipitation, temperature, and leafhopper densities on tea shoot growth. More years of data or manipulative experiments where leafhopper density is not correlated with weather may help explore these interactions further.

Future impacts of global change on precipitation are less predictable and more geographically variable than warming. While increases in mean annual temperature may lengthen the growing season for multivoltine insects, this will not necessarily result in increases in population density if conditions within the growing season are not favorable. In this study, precipitation was a stronger driver of herbivore density and plant growth within the growing season compared to mean temperature. Furthermore, herbivores and plants responded in an opposite way to increases in precipitation, potentially compounding the effects of precipitation on herbivory (i.e. damage per young leaf). However, we suspect that the responses of plants and insect herbivores to changes in precipitation will vary widely over habitats and among species. For example, in more water-limited regions of China, increases in precipitation have been shown to increase rather than decrease tea plant growth (Ahmed et al., 2014).

To cope with increasing variability in precipitation, tea farmers in Fujian province may benefit from switching from yield focused strategies during dry conditions to quality focused strategies during wetter conditions. For example, when leafhopper damage is too low, Shanfu Tea Company often plucks 3–4 leaves and a bud and processes tea as Iron Goddess of Mercy oolong, rather than plucking 2 leaves and a bud for Eastern Beauty oolong (Shanfu Tea Company, personal communication).

Because we asked that all harvests be processed as Eastern Beauty oolong, harvest was delayed for one of the two fields due to insufficient accumulation of leafhopper damage (Shanfu Tea Company, personal communication). This was the longest inter-harvest period (32 days) during the study, and it corresponded to a relatively low mean leafhopper density (0.047 leafhoppers/leaf). Interestingly, this particular harvest period experienced higher than average precipitation (mean = 9.23 mm, median = 2 mm, 72% of days with some rain) and slightly cooler than average temperatures (26.13 ºC). A previous study showed that feeding damage by *E. onukii* is not strongly correlated with *E. onukii* density when densities are below 0.5 leafhoppers per leaf. Therefore, while cool wet conditions support higher leafhopper densities, they may not necessarily result in increased leafhopper feeding and damage that farm managers are hoping for (Scott et al., 2020).

Because tea prices depend strongly on quality, tea farmer income may not be correlated to yield (Lou et al., 2014). Tea quality is determined primarily by the concentrations and composition of volatiles, catechins, methylxanthines, and amino acids. In some tea cropping systems, metabolite blend can be more valuable than crop yield, resulting in farmers sacrificing yield to maximize quality in a number of ways, including allowing for some damage by *E. onukii* (Ahmed et al., 2014; Cho et al., 2007; Saijo, 1980). In fact, slow growth in itself can actually be beneficial for quality and outweigh the reduction in yield in some systems. Long Jing tea, for example, is produced from one or two leaves and a bud and the slow shoot elongation typical of cool spring weather is important for quality (Lou et al., 2014).

Shoot growth rate may also be important in Eastern Beauty oolong production in terms of the relative rates of new leaf production and leafhopper herbivory. If shoot growth outpaces herbivory, the apical leaves of tea shoots, which are the harvest unit for Eastern Beauty oolong, may never accumulate enough damage to produce a strong enough induced response to improve quality. On the other hand, slow shoot growth and high leafhopper densities may lead to accumulation of too much damage before shoots have developed enough for harvest. This could result in intense hopperburn symptoms that decrease yield such that it reduces farmer income despite an increase in quality due to induced defenses. Additionally, the changes in tea chemistry with leafhopper density are complex and non-linear and it is unclear how a range of leafhopper densities affects finished tea quality (Scott et al., 2020).

# Conclusion

Milder winters and longer growing seasons caused by increases in mean temperature are predicted to benefit population densities of multivoltine insect pests like the tea green leafhopper (Bale et al., 2002; Tobin et al., 2008). However, our results show that within the growing season, cool and wet conditions actually promoted higher leafhopper densities in the tea canopy and slower shoot elongation potentially leading to higher levels of leafhopper damage. This study demonstrates the importance of considering the effects of within-season climate variability in the field to understand future impacts of climate change on crop pests and other plant­–insect interactions.

# Acknowledgments

We thank the Shanfu Tea Company who generously allowed us to use their farm as a study side and provided lodging, food, and tea for researchers on site. We especially thank the general manager Mr. Liu and the manager Mr. Zeng. Dr. Qihong Du introduced us to the Shanfu Tea Company and helped arrange travel and lodging in Shaxian. Gabriel Taylor assisted in data collection and data entry. Collin E. Edwards advised us on implementing the distributed lag non-linear models. Funding was provided by NSF Grant ﻿BCS-1313775, the Tufts Institute for the Environment fellowship, and the National Key R&D Program of China (2017YFE0107500).

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