Detection of a widespread mantle component of $^{3}\text{He}$ in thermal springs of Lhasa Block and Tethyan Himalaya, eastern Tibet: evidence for roll-back of the Indian-Asian mantle suture south of the Yarlung suture zone, and asthenospheric upwelling beneath the Lhasa block

Simon L. Klemperer$^1$, Ping Zhao$^2$, Danian Shi$^3$, Laura J. Crosse$^4$, Karl E. Karlstrom$^4$, Carmen L. Winn$^4$, Tianze Liu$^1$, Zhongyu Xiong$^2$, Xudong Guo$^2$, Shiqi Wang$^1$, Thomas H. Darrah$^5$, David R. Hilton$^6$, Lin Ding$^2$.

1 Department of Geophysics, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305-2215, U.S.A., sklep@stanford.edu
2 Institute of Tibetan Plateau Research of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, 18 Shuang Qing Rd., Beijing 100085, China.
3 MLR Key Laboratory of Metallogeny and Mineral Assessment, Institute of Mineral Resources, CAGS, 26 Baiwanzhuang Road, Beijing 100037, China.
4 Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131, U.S.A.
5 School of Earth Sciences, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210, U.S.A.
6 Scripps Institution of Oceanography, UC San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92093, United States (deceased)

Our Sino-US collaborative study of Xizang thermal springs and their noble gases has thus far sampled 100 separate springs for $^{3}\text{He}/^{4}\text{He}$ analyses, including 33 new measurements discussed here. Although eastern Tibet, 88–93°E has historically seen the densest $^{3}\text{He}/^{4}\text{He}$ analyses in Tibet due to the relatively simple access, this sampling was focussed on the active geothermal fields and springs in the Yangbajain-Gulu rift zone, with only three reliable air-corrected values published from outside this rift, and no analyses from south of the Yarlung Tsangpo suture. Here we focus on extending the distribution of sampled springs into regions clearly outside the Neogene rift systems, and south into the Tethyan Himalaya.

Observations of mantle contributions to $^{3}\text{He}$ at Earth’s surface require incipiently melting mantle at depth to continuously release $^{3}\text{He}$ into the crust faster than the $^{3}\text{He}$ signal can be overwhelmed by radiogenic production of $^{4}\text{He}$. Cratonic Indian mantle that is far colder than its melting temperature cannot be a source of $^{3}\text{He}$, so mantle-sourced $^{3}\text{He}$ in Tibet must come from hotter Tibetan mantle or asthenosphere. Crustal helium (dominated by radiogenic $^{4}\text{He}$) has a $^{3}\text{He}/^{4}\text{He}$ ratio of 0.02$\times R_A$ ($R_A$ is the atmospheric $^{3}\text{He}/^{4}\text{He}$ ratio), whereas upper-mantle helium (enriched in primordial $^{3}\text{He}$) has the value $8\times R_A$. Any measured $^{3}\text{He}/^{4}\text{He}$ ratio after correction for atmospheric contamination (denoted $R_C$) > 0.1$\times R_A$ is considered to have an unequivocal mantle component.

All previously studied springs within the Yangbajain-Gulu rift zone have $^{3}\text{He}/^{4}\text{He}$ ratios $0.1 \leq R_C/R_A \leq 0.9$, as far south as 30°N, just 90 km north of the Yarlung Zangbo Suture, leading to the claim that the “mantle suture” (northern limit of Indian lithosphere at the Moho, southern limit of incipiently melting Asian mantle at the Moho) must be south of 30°N. This location is controversial because many seismologists place the mantle suture at 31–33°N, encouraging an alternative explanation that a tear in the subducting Indian plate along the line of the Yadong-Gulu rift permits asthenospheric upwelling and transfer of $^{3}\text{He}$ into the Tibetan crust. Our new data show a single tear is not a good explanation, because we measure unequivocal mantle contributions of $^{3}\text{He}$ far outside the rift zone, for example within the Gangdese batholith in Lhasa (measurements of $R_C/R_A = 0.14$ and 0.70), and also close to the Banggong suture ($R_C/R_A = 0.25$ and 0.88 85 km northeast of Nagqu). However, we also extend the region of elevated $R_C/R_A$ significantly further south, to the Yarlung Zangbo river along the line of the Yadong Gulu rift ($R_C/R_A = 0.60$), and south of the suture (Yalaxiangbo Dome: $R_C/R_A = 0.57$). With our current spatial coverage, the southern limit of mantle contributions to surface thermal springs trends east-southeast, from 50 km north of the Yarlung Tsangpo in the PumQu-Xainza graben to 100 km south of the Yarlung Tsangpo in the Cona-Sangri graben.

Our widespread observation of $^{3}\text{He}$ enrichment, now across 10$^5$ km$^2$ of eastern Tibet, is convincing evidence that the India-Asia mantle suture (northern limit of Indian lithosphere at the Moho, equivalently
southern limit of incipiently melting Asian mantle at the Moho) must lie close to and in places south of the Yarlung Zangbo suture, and that even if Indian crust is underthrust north of the suture its subjacent lithospheric mantle has rolled back or delaminated. We believe our new results, combined with alternate interpretations of seismic common-conversion point receiver-function profiles, help address the long-standing controversy about the northern limit of subducting India beneath eastern Tibet.