

# Contemporary Deformation of the Fenwei faulted zone From Global Positioning System Data

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November 24, 2022

## Abstract

The Fenwei faulted zone is a region with high level of seismic hazard. Different models are proposed for the formation of the Fenwei faulted zone, but none has given its specific kinematic mechanism. Using updated GPS data covering the eastern China, we discover that although the Ordos block, the North China Plain and the South China block are moving in the southeast direction, the relative motion between them is obviously different: there is basically no shear slips inside the Weihe graben, and the extension rate across it is significant; in addition, the Shanxi graben system has roughly equal extensional and right-lateral strike-slip components. We suggest that rapid southeastward motion of the rigid South China block and the North China Plain, with respect to the Ordos block, has imposed intensive tectonic extension on the Fenwei faulted zone forming the contemporary deformation.

1 **Contemporary Deformation of the Fenwei faulted zone From Global Positioning System Data**

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7 **Key Points:**

- 8 • Fenwei faulted zone is a region with high-level of earthquake hazard  
9 • Fenwei faulted zone is undergoing significant tectonic extension and right-lateral strike-slip  
10 • Relative motion between blocks contributes to the formation of the Fenwei faulted zone and repeated large  
11 earthquakes with short intervals

12 **Abstract**

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14 formation of the Fenwei faulted zone, but none has given its specific kinematic mechanism. Using updated GPS  
15 data covering the eastern China, we discover that although the Ordos block, the North China Plain and the South  
16 China block are moving in the southeast direction, the relative motion between them is obviously different: there is  
17 basically no shear slips inside the Weihe graben, and the extension rate across it is significant; in addition, the  
18 Shanxi graben system has roughly equal extensional and right-lateral strike-slip components. We suggest that rapid  
19 southeastward motion of the rigid South China block and the North China Plain, with respect to the Ordos block,  
20 has imposed intensive tectonic extension on the Fenwei faulted zone forming the contemporary deformation.

21 **1. Introduction**

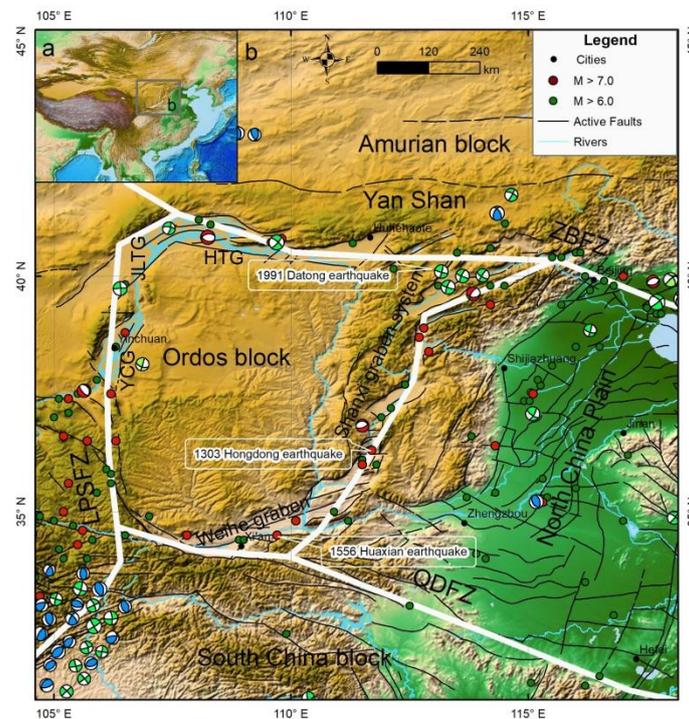
22 The Fenwei faulted zone (FFZ, including the Weihe graben and the Shanxi graben system) has been the  
23 political and cultural center in western China with a dense population and prosperous economy. However, the FFZ  
24 is also famous for its high level of earthquake hazards. There have been 8 earthquakes of magnitude greater than 6  
25 and 2 earthquakes of magnitude greater than 7 so far (Figure 1).

26 The Fenwei faulted zone, located at the position of intersection and superposition between three major blocks  
27 (the Ordos block, the North China Plain (NCP) and the South China block), has been an intensively active basin in  
28 the Cenozoic. The Fenwei faulted zone whose trend is NEE to NNE from S to N is characterized by transtensional  
29 right-lateral shear faults to the east, and is bounded by left-lateral shear extensional faults to the south. Over the  
30 past three decades, different models have been developed to describe the tectonic evolution of the graben systems  
31 around the Ordos block (Molnar and Tapponnier, 1975; Tapponnier and Molnar, 1977; Tian et al., 1992; Northrup  
32 et al., 1995; Yin, 2010; Liu et al., 2007). Some researchers considered that the tectonic deformation and evolution  
33 of the Ordos area are the result of the far-field Indo-Asian collision (Molnar and Tapponnier, 1975; Tapponnier and  
34 Molnar, 1977). Alternatively, Some interpreted the idea that North China crustal thinning and volcanic activity  
35 may be closely related to the westward subduction of the Pacific plate beneath the Eurasian continent and the  
36 roll-back mechanism (Tian et al., 1992; Northrup et al., 1995).

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45 Previous GPS observations from 1992 to 2002 show almost no deformation across the FFZ, neither extension  
 46 nor strike slip (He et al., 2003; Shen et al., 2000; Wang et al., 2001). Zhang et al. (2018) used updated GPS data to  
 47 conclude that there is no obvious east-west extension across either the Shanxi graben and the entire NCP. It is  
 48 unlikely that a region with such frequent great historical earthquakes associated with no present-day deformation.  
 49 There must be crustal deformation that has not yet been observed. Contradict the previous GPS studies, Modern  
 50 seismicity indicates active rifting (Figure 1). Wesnousky et al. (1984) estimated a coseismic extension rate around  
 51 ~1.0 mm/yr based on seismic moment data. This is close to the 0.5–1.6 mm/yr extension rate averaged over the  
 52 Late Pliocene-Quaternary time (Zhang et al., 1998). Surface ruptures associated with great historical earthquakes  
 53 on the graben-bounded faults do show prominent normal faulting with right-lateral strike-slip component such as  
 54 the 1556 Huaxian earthquake (Rao et al., 2014), the 1303 Hongdong earthquake (Xu et al., 2014, 2019; Jiang et al.,  
 55 2004). Fault plane solutions of recent earthquakes also show overwhelming dip-slip and strike-slip motions on  
 56 almost vertical dipping NNE-trending faults planes such as the 1991 Datong earthquake (Figure 1; He et al., 2003;  
 57 Xu et al., 2012, 2019; Chen & Nabelek, 1988; Gao et al., 2016). Hao et al. (2016) used precise leveling data  
 58 observed in the period of 1970–2014 around the Ordos block to conclude that with respect to the stable Ordos, the  
 59 Weihe and southern Shanxi grabens are subsiding at the rates of 4–6 mm/a. The subsidence of the Shanxi graben  
 60 indicates that the graben is experiencing extensional movement on a long timescale.

61 Recently, Zheng et al. (2017) have published GPS velocity field that covers entire China and vicinity regions.  
 62 In this paper we use a subset of their GPS data in the entire eastern China that spans three crustal blocks rather  
 63 than restricting our analysis to only one block or one fault, trying to understand the pattern of contemporary  
 64 tectonic deformation of the FFZ and earthquake hazards in the graben systems. The velocity field of tectonic  
 65 deformation provides an important basis to understand the dynamic driving mechanism and is one of the keys to  
 66 address the issues of Cenozoic deformation in eastern China.



67  
 68 Figure 1. Seismotectonic map of the North China. (a) The thick gray lines outline boundaries of Figure 1b. (b) The bold white lines are  
 69 block boundaries. Earthquake focal mechanism (>4.0) is taken from <http://www.ceic.ac.cn/>. HTG: Hetao graben; ZBFZ:  
 70 Zhangjiakou-Bohai fault zone; QDFZ: Qinling-Dabie fault zone; LPSFZ: Liupanshan fault zone; YCG: Yinchuan graben; JLTG:  
 71 graben.

72 **2. Geological setting**

73 The Ordos block is characterized by low strain rate and seismicity. In contrast, the margins of this stable block  
74 have been active since Cenozoic. The block is surrounded by four graben systems: the Yinchuan graben along its  
75 western margin, the Hetao graben along its northern margin, the Shanxi graben system along its eastern margin,  
76 and the Weihe graben along its southern margin (Yin et al., 2010; Zhao et al., 2017, Figure 1).

77 During the Yanshan movement, the Ordos block showed intermittent uplift and subsidence movements, while  
78 strong tectonic activities occurred on its periphery. In the Hetao and Weihe basins, a near east-west trend  
79 compressional tectonic belt is formed, while a NE-NNE trend compressional tectonic belt is formed in the Shanxi  
80 and Yinchuan basins. The basic tectonic setting formed by the Mesozoic, especially the Yanshan movement, laid  
81 the foundation for the geological evolution in this area in the Cenozoic. During the Cenozoic era, the most  
82 outstanding features of the southwestern margin and adjacent areas of Ordos were the formation of a series of  
83 extensional faulted basins on its periphery and the formation of thrusting fault zone on its southwestern margin.  
84 According to the sediment distribution of the Ordos block and the developmental characteristics of the faulted  
85 zones, the tectonic activities of the area can be roughly divided into three main stages: (1) the Weihe basin, the  
86 Yinchuan basin and the Jilantai basin begin to develop in the Eocene. It had basically formed at the end of the  
87 Oligocene. (2) at the end of the Miocene, the Ordos Block continued to uplift. and the peripheral faulted zones  
88 continued to develop. In addition, the Weihe faulted zone extended eastward into Shanxi, forming the Yuncheng  
89 basin; (3) at the end of the Pliocene, controlled by the NE-NNE trend faults, the Shanxi faulted zone was basically  
90 formed. (Deng et al., 1999; Zheng et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2013; Shi et al.,  
91 2013; Chen et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2017; Working Group of the Active Fault Zone Around the Ordos, Chinese  
92 Seismological Bureau, 1988).

93 The northern boundary of the Ordos block and NCP consists of the EW-trending Hetao graben and the  
94 Zhangjiakou-Bohai fault zone (Figure 1), separating the North China block from Yan Shan mountains or the  
95 Amurian block (Zhang et al., 2018; Figure 1). The southern boundary of the Ordos block and NCP is the  
96 approximately EW-trending Qinling-Dabie Shan range-front fault zone (Figure 1). Geomorphological and  
97 seismological studies suggest that this fault zone has limited Quaternary tectonic activity (Deng et al., 2003; Zhang,  
98 Deng, et al., 2003).

99 The western boundary of the NCP is the Shanxi graben system where great historical earthquakes occurred  
100 mostly inside the sedimentary basin, suggesting intensive tectonic activity on this boundary. The western boundary  
101 of the Ordos block is the NS-trending Jilantai-Yinchuan graben and the Liupanshan thrust-fold zone, which both  
102 have intensive tectonic activity and seismicity.

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### 116 3. Pattern and Rate of Deformation From GPS Analyses

#### 117 3.1. GPS Data and Relative Motion Among the Crust Blocks in Eastern China

118 The principal data used for this study come from the Crustal Movement Observation Network of China  
119 collected during 1998 to 2015. The procedures of data collection and process are described recently in detail by  
120 Zheng et al. (2017).

121 Figure 2 depicts motions of different crustal blocks relative to the fixed Eurasia. Stations in the Ordos block,  
122 move with respect to the fixed Eurasia at velocities of 4 to 7 mm/yr in the directions ranging from N100° to 130°E  
123 (Figure 2), suggesting almost a stable relative motion between the Ordos block and Eurasian plate.

124 Most of the GPS velocity vectors in the NCP are within the rates of  $5.0 \pm 1.5$  mm/yr and the directions of  
125 N100°–120°E (Figure 2) despite of isolated large local variations. It is worth to note that the velocities gradually  
126 increase from 1–2 mm/yr in the Amurian block to 5–6 mm/yr in the interior of NCP (Figure 2, Zhang et al., 2018).

127 The South China block is regarded as a tectonically stable block due to the absence of active faults and strong  
128 earthquakes (Deng et al., 2003; Zhang, Deng, et al., 2003). GPS velocities show coherent movement of the South  
129 China with a rate of 7–8 mm/yr in the directions of N100°–120°E (Figure 2, Zhang et al., 2018). No velocity  
130 gradient can be identified in the rigid South China block. Similar to the northern edge of NCP, the average 5–6  
131 mm/yr relative motions near the southern edge of NCP gradually change to average 7–8 mm/yr velocities in the  
132 South China block (Figure 2, Zhang et al., 2018).

#### 133 3.2 Velocity Profiles in the Direction of N0°E

134 The N0°E velocity profiles is constructed to explore the movement differences between the South China  
135 block and the Ordos block (the gray polygon in Figure 2). It can be seen from N90°E velocity components in the  
136 direction of N0°E velocity profiles that there is a obvious left-lateral strike-slip rate difference of  $2.27 \pm 0.52$   
137 mm/yr between the South China block and the Ordos block within a distance of about 200km across the Weihe  
138 graben (Fig 3a). Figure 3b shows that both the South China block and the Ordos block move southward at the rate  
139 of  $-2.78 \pm 0.98$  mm/yr and  $-2.27 \pm 0.80$  mm/yr, respectively. The  $0.51 \pm 0.18$  mm/yr rate difference demonstrates  
140 that the extension rate of the Weihe graben in the NS direction is relatively small, but can be detected easily.

141 Wang et al. (2011) reported the predicted fault slip rates of the Weihe rift that the Weihe rift has a left-lateral  
142 strike-slip rate of  $1.4 \pm 0.5$  mm/yr and extension rate of  $0.5 \pm 0.3$  mm/yr. These results are comparable with our  
143 estimates.

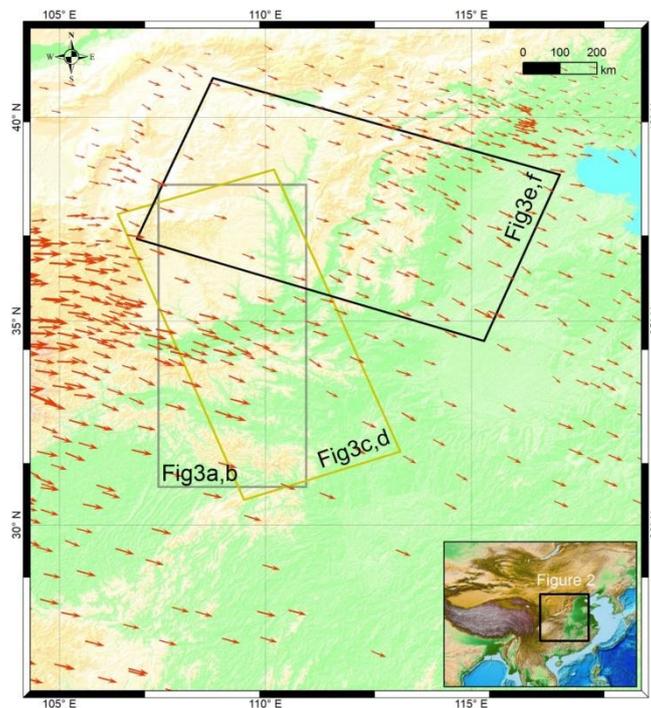
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160 **3.3 Velocity Profiles in the Direction of N160°E**

161 We have constructed velocity profiles across the South China block and the Ordos block in the direction of  
162 N160°E to study if there are differential motions perpendicular to the main structure trend in the Weihe graben (the  
163 yellow polygon in Figure 2; Figure 3c and 3d ).

164 From N70°E velocity components basically parallel to the main structural lines of the Weihe graben in the  
165 N160°E velocity profiles (Figure 3c), we can find that there is no obvious differences in shear slip rates across the  
166 Weihe graben indicating that the formation of the Weihe graben may not be related to the strike-slip movements  
167 of the internal faults in the graben or the contemporary deformation of the Weihe graben is not dominated by  
168 strike-slip movements.

169 In Figure 3d, although both the Ordos block and the South China block move southeastwards, however, there  
170 are obvious rate differences on both sides of the Weihe graben or across the Husshan Fault. From the beginning to  
171 a distance of ~ 400km, the rates remain within a stable range of ~ 4.0 mm/yr. But the rates show an rapid growth  
172 while entering the South China block. The rates maintains averaged ~ 5 mm/yr in the interior of the South China  
173 block (Figure 3d). The rate difference of about ~ 1 mm/yr between the South China block and the Ordos block in  
174 the N160°E direction, which is twice as much the extension rate in the direction of N0°E velocity profiles means  
175 that the main extensional direction of the Weihe graben is NW-SE trend. The seismogenic fault of the catastrophic  
176 1556 Huaxian earthquake killing 800 thousands people is thought to be the roughly NE-NEE trend Huashan fault.  
177 The fault is a Holocene active fault, controlling the Quaternary subsidence center of the Weihe basin and the  
178 highest terrain. Interestingly, the ~ 1mm/yr we observed is basically equivalent to the ~ 1mm/yr dip-slip rate of the  
179 Huashan fault from geologic studies (Xu et al.,2017; Yang et al., 2012; Li et al., 2015; Li et al., 1983; Rao et al.,  
180 2014) indicating the Huashan fault absorbs the main extension deformation.



181  
182 Figure 2. Global Positioning System (GPS) velocity field of the North China in the Eurasia fixed reference frame. The gray polygon  
183 marks data used to plot Figures 3a and 3b. The yellow polygon covers velocity vectors plotted in Figures 3c and 3d. The black polygon  
184 covers velocity vectors plotted in Figures 3e and 3f. The insert shows the location of the figure. The GPS data are from Zheng et al.  
185 (2017).  
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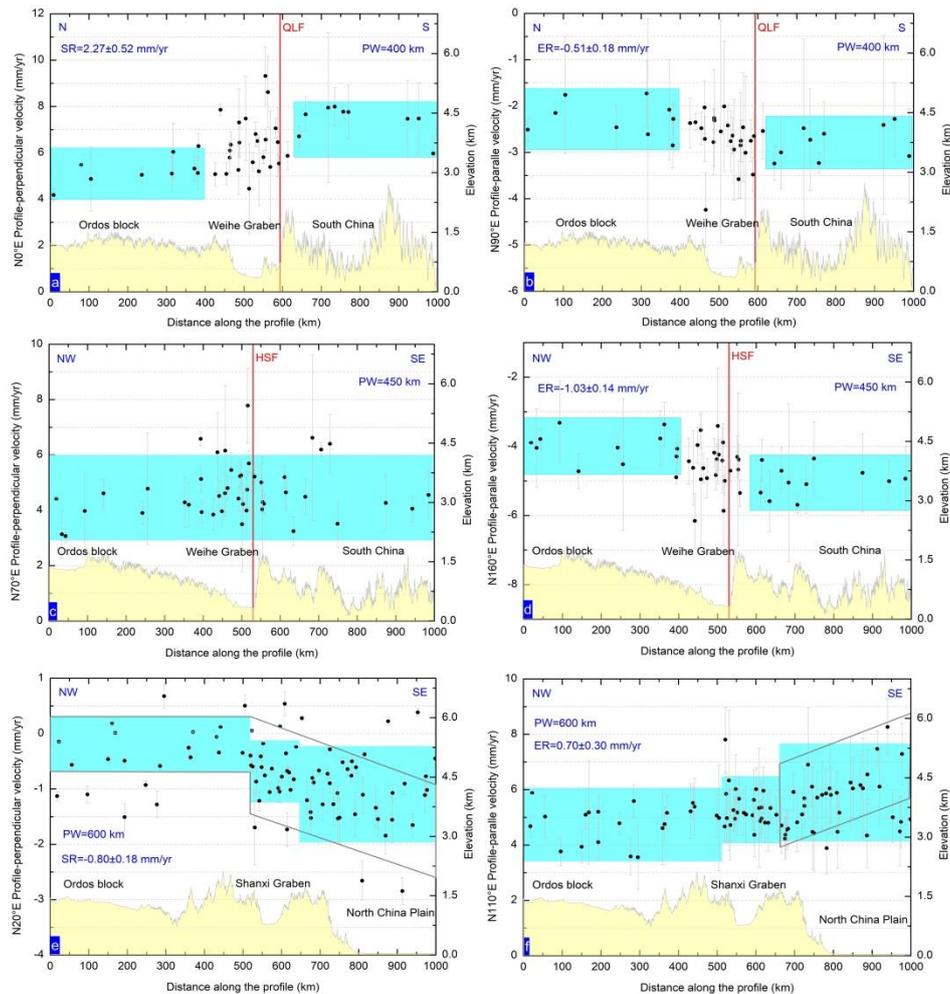
187 **3.4 Velocity Profiles in the Direction of N110°E**

188 To probe deformation of the Shanxi graben system we construct velocity profiles in the direction of N20°E  
189 and plot velocity components of both N20°E and N110°E for stations in the Ordos block, the NCP (the black  
190 polygon in Figure 2; Figures 3e and 3f).

191 The N20°E components of GPS stations plotted on the profile are intended to detect if there is strike-slip  
192 movements between the Ordos block and the NCP in roughly NS orientation (Figure 3e). The profile obviously  
193 depicts that both the Ordos block and NCP move slightly southward (Figure 3e). However, the profile across the  
194 Shanxi graben system and NCP shows different kinematic patterns from the Ordos block (Figure 3e). Two  
195 interpretations can be proposed. One is that rate differences across the Shanxi graben system behaves as step-wise  
196 variety showing by the cyan rectangle in Figure 3e to result in about 0.8 mm/yr right-lateral strike-slip. The other  
197 one, shown by the gray polygon, is that the rates increases progressively southeastward to create right-lateral  
198 strike-slip within a broader range, whereas the Ordos block maintains its velocities within a stable range (Figure  
199 3e).

200 The N110°E components of GPS stations plotted on the profile are intended to detect if there is extension or  
201 contraction between the Ordos block and NCP in roughly EW orientation (Figure 3f). The profile obviously  
202 depicts that both the Ordos block and NCP move eastward (Figure 3f). However, the profile across the Shanxi  
203 graben system and NCP also shows different kinematic patterns from the Ordos block (Figure 3f). Two  
204 interpretations can be proposed. One is that rate differences across the Shanxi graben system behaves as step-wise  
205 variety showing by the cyan rectangle in Figure 3f to result in about 0.7 mm/yr extension rate. The other one,  
206 shown by the gray polygon, is that the rates increases progressively southeastward within the NCP, whereas the  
207 Ordos block maintains its velocities within a stable range (Figure 3f).

208 Wang et al. (2011) reported the predicted fault slip rates of the Shanxi rift that the Shanxi rift has a  
209 right-lateral strike-slip rate of  $0.6 \pm 0.5$  mm/yr and extension rate of  $0.8 \pm 0.3$  mm/yr. These results are basically  
210 consistent with our estimates.



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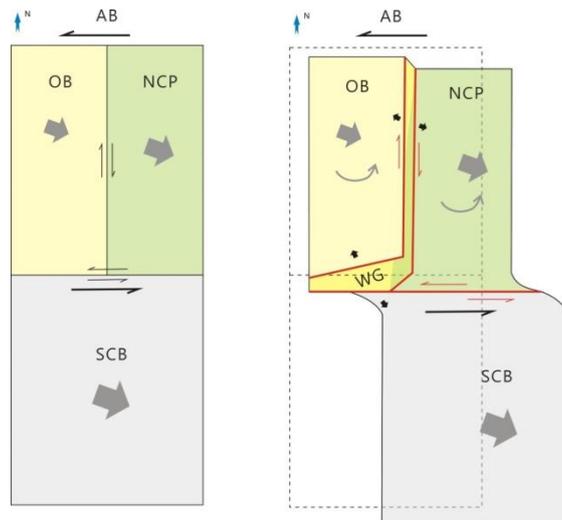
212 Figure 3. Global Positioning System (GPS) velocity profiles and swath profiles. GPS velocity components are designated that eastward  
 213 and northward are positive. The cyan strips mark acceptable ranges of average velocity components. SR: strike-slip rate; ER: extension  
 214 rate. PW: profile width. QLF: Qinling fault; HSF: Huashan fault. The locations of each profile are referred in Fig 2.

215 **4. Model of Deformation and seismicity**

216 The pattern of deformation of the FFZ is very different from the NCP (Zhang et al., 2018) where the roughly  
 217 EW-trending left-lateral shear zone has been accommodated by a group of nearly NS-trending right-lateral faults  
 218 and from the eastern Tibet (England & Molnar, 1990) where the NS-trending right-lateral shear zone bounds a  
 219 group of EW-trending left-lateral faults within the zone (e.g., Zhang et al., 2018; England & Molnar, 1990; Nur et  
 220 al., 1989; Savage et al., 2004).

221 Figure 4a shows original cartoon that the Ordos block and NCP behaves as a whole block and the South  
 222 China block is rigid.

223 During the period of relative motion between different blocks, the South China block moves ESE-ward more  
 224 rapidly than the Ordos block to create a left-lateral simple shear on the southern border of the Weihe graben and a  
 225 extension to the Weihe graben in the both NS and SES direction (Figure 3, Figure 4b). The left-lateral simple shear  
 226 provides space for the further expansion of the Weihe graben (Figure 4b). As the extension continuing, the pure  
 227 shear might have taken advantage of weak zones forming a series of NEE-trending normal faults in the Weihe  
 228 graben. The NEE-trending faults absorb most interseismic shearing to accumulate elastic strain. When strain  
 229 accumulation exceeds the frictional strength of a particular NEE-trending fault, great earthquake occurs to release  
 230 the accumulated strain. The earthquake rupture and permanent deformation are expected to be pure dip-slip on the  
 231 NEE-trending faults (Figure 4b).



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233 Figure 4. Conceptual cartoon diagram showing deformation pattern of the Weihe-Shanxi graben . (a) Original cartoon before deformation.  
 234 (b) Pattern of permanent deformation in the long term induced by relative motion among the Weihe graben, the NCP and the South  
 235 China block. The red lines shows active faults. The gray bold arrow denote direction and rate of the block motion. The small black bold  
 236 arrow denote direction of the tectonic extension. AB: Amurian block; OB: Ordos block; NCP: North China Plain; SCB: South China  
 237 block. WG: Weihe graben.

238 The NCP moves ESE-ward more rapidly than the Ordos block to create a right-lateral simple shear on the  
 239 eastern border of the Ordos block and a extension to the Shanxi graben system in the ~ EW direction forming the  
 240 Shanxi graben system (Figure 4b). The right-lateral strike-slip and extension rates are about 0.8 mm/yr and 0.7  
 241 mm/yr respectively. This pattern of transextensional deformation contributes to the formation of a series of small  
 242 pull-apart basins such as Linfen basin, Taiyuan basin and Datong basin from south to north. Geological and  
 243 seismological observations support the scenario of this kind of deformation. Almost all great historical earthquakes  
 244 in the Shanxi graben system occurred along the NNE-trending faults with both dip-slip displacements or strike-slip  
 245 displacements. The surface ruptures of the 1303 Hongdong earthquake, for example, dominated by dip-slip  
 246 displacements with some horizontal displacements from geological observations and paleoearthquake trenches (Xu  
 247 et al., 2014, 2019; Jiang et al., 2004). The Hongdong M8.0 earthquake in 1303 was the earliest magnitude 8  
 248 earthquake in China based on historical documents and the largest earthquake recorded in the Shanxi graben  
 249 system. Fault plane solutions of large historical earthquakes (Figure 1) also manifest prominent right-lateral  
 250 strike-slip displacements in the northern segment and dip-slip displacements in the southern segment (He et al.,  
 251 2003).

252 This pattern of deformation of the FFZ causes repeated occurrences of large earthquakes with relatively short  
 253 interseismic intervals (Xu et al., 2014, 2019). The characteristics of the FFZ could be summarized as follows: First,  
 254 the strain produced by extension-induced pure shear can be easily concentrated on the main boundary faults.  
 255 Second, due to continuing extension in the long run, the strain rate across each fault can be sustained to account for  
 256 big earthquakes. Third, the secondary faults will be produced by earthquakes and accommodate the interseismic  
 257 strain, which in turn could generate earthquakes.

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264 **5. Discussion and Implication**

265 To summarize, the most important discovery of our new analysis of GPS data is that the contemporary  
266 deformation of the FFZ is dominated by almost pure normal slip which is driven by the relative motion between  
267 the Ordos block, NCP and the South China block (Figure 4). The extension is accommodated by right-lateral  
268 strike-slips along the NNE-trending faults in the Shanxi graben system and left-lateral strike-slips between the  
269 Ordos block and the South China block. This pattern of deformation provides important implications for  
270 earthquake occurrences and geodynamics for the FFZ.

271 Seismic hazards and risks in the eastern section of the Weihe graben are much higher than its western section.  
272 An important reason for this is that extension rates in the SES direction across the eastern section are ~2 times  
273 bigger than the rates in the NS direction across the western section. While seismic hazards and risks in the Shanxi  
274 graben system are also high. The reason for this is that the strike-slip and extension rates in the Shanxi graben  
275 system are basically equivalent to each other. It is likely that future large earthquakes will continue to occur in the  
276 whole Shanxi graben system on the NNE-trending faults with both dip-slips and right-lateral strike-slips.

277 The formation of the FFZ, as a Cenozoic extensional basin, was due to crustal extension and lithospheric  
278 thinning associated with geological processes of “block motion”. Our results indicate that the processes that  
279 driving the extension are continuing in a long time scale. The geodynamic processes that caused the processes are  
280 unclear, but based on the maximum extension direction of the Weihe graben, we propose a combined model that  
281 rapid eastward motion of the eastern China, driven by eastward growth of the Tibetan Plateau, has created the  
282 eastward motion of the NCP and the South China block relative to the stable Ordos block, accompanied by the  
283 westward subduction of the Pacific plate, accelerating the tectonic extension of the FFZ.

284 **Acknowledgments**

285 We thank all the GPS field crews for collecting the high-quality data that we used for this paper. We are  
286 grateful to all the people who contribute to CMONOC-I/II. We also thank Zheng et al. (2017) for making the data  
287 available for this study. This work was funded by National Natural Science Foundation of China (No.41631073).

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