

1 Direct stratigraphic dating of India-Asia collision onset at the Selandian (middle Paleocene, 59 ± 2 1 Ma)

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11

12 ABSTRACT

13 The collision of India with Asia had a profound influence on Cenozoic topography, oceanography,
14 climate, and faunal turnover. However, estimates of the time of the initial collision, when Indian
15 continental crust arrived at the Transhimalayan trench, remain highly controversial. Here we use
16 radiolarian and nannofossil biostratigraphy coupled with detrital zircon geochronology to constrain
17 firmly the time when Asian-derived detritus was first deposited onto India in the classical Sangdanlin
18 section of the central Himalaya, which preserves the best Paleocene stratigraphic record of the distal
19 edge of the Indian continental rise. Deep-sea turbidites of quartzarenite composition and Indian
20 provenance are replaced upsection by turbidites of volcano-plutoniclastic composition and Asian
21 provenance. This sharp transition occurs above abyssal cherts yielding radiolaria of Paleogene
22 radiolarian zones (RP) 4–6 and below abyssal cherts containing radiolaria of zone RP6 and calcareous
23 shales with nannofossils of the Paleocene calcareous nannofossil zone (CNP) 7, constraining the age
24 of collision onset to within the middle Paleocene (Selandian). The youngest U-Pb ages yielded by
25 detrital zircons in the oldest Asia-derived turbidites indicate a maximum depositional age of 58.1
26 ± 0.9 Ma. Collision onset is thus mutually constrained by biostratigraphy and detrital zircon
27 chronostratigraphy as 59 ± 1 Ma. This age is both more accurate and more precise than those previously
28 obtained from the stratigraphic record of the northwestern Himalaya, and suggests that, within the
29 resolution power of current methods, the India-Asia initial collision took place quasi-synchronously in
30 the western and central Himalaya.

31

32 INTRODUCTION

33 The onset of collision between India and Asia, defined as the moment when Neotethyan oceanic
34 lithosphere was subducted completely at a point along the plate boundary and the two continental
35 margins came into direct contact, terminated a period of very rapid Indo-Asian convergence, and
36 brought about profound consequences on Cenozoic topography, atmospheric circulation, climate,
37 oceanography, and faunal turnover. Defining the age of such major geological event with the best
38 possible accuracy and precision is essential in order to understand its wide paleogeographic
39 consequences and their mutual relationships and feedbacks. However, the range of ages hypothesized
40 by different researchers has remained wide, ranging from as early as the latest Cretaceous (Yi et al.,
41 2011) to as late as the earliest Miocene (van Hinsbergen et al., 2012). Chiefly because of the dearth of
42 suitable stratigraphic sections providing optimal conditions for direct dating, the topic has been debated
43 for decades.

44 Dating the first arrival and deposition of volcano-plutonic and ultramafic detritus derived from the
45 Asian active margin onto the inner part of the Indian passive margin provides undisputable evidence that
46 collision was well underway and India was welded to Asia in the early Eocene both in the
47 northwestern Himalaya (Garzanti et al., 1987) and southern Tibet (Najman et al., 2010).
48 Unconformities identified at a lower stratigraphic level within the inner Indian mar- gin succession and
49 interpreted as associated with collision onset were dated around the Paleocene- Eocene boundary both in
50 the northwestern and central Himalaya (Garzanti et al., 1987; Li et al., 2015), thus providing an older
51 minimum age for collision onset. Considering the time required by the flexural wave to propagate across
52 the distal Indian margin, collision must have begun some- what earlier, a time that needs to be
53 established from the stratigraphic record of the very distal edge of the Indian continental margin.
54 Distal successions recording the continuous transition from continental rise to trench sedimentation,
55 however, are only exceptionally exposed along the suture zone. The most complete of these is the
56 Sangdanlin section of south Tibet, for which initial collision ages ranging from 50 Ma or earlier (Wang
57 et al., 2011) to ca. 60 Ma (DeCelles et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2014) or even ca. 65 Ma (Ding et al., 2005)
58 were suggested, based principally on detrital zircon geochronology. Here we accurately revise the
59 radiolarian biostratigraphy, calibrated with a new firm nannofossil datum, and provide new detrital
60 zircon U-Pb ages from the crucial interval documenting the sharp provenance change from Indian-
61 derived to Asian-de- rived detritus. The onset of the India-Asia collision could thus be dated directly
62 with improved accuracy and precision.

63

64 STRATIGRAPHY OF THE SANGDANLIN SECTION

65 The Sangdanlin section (29°15'28N", 85°14'52" E; Fig. 1; Fig. DR1 in the GSA Data Repository¹)
66 includes three formations. Siliceous shale, chert, and mainly quartzarenitic turbidites of the
67 Denggang Formation are followed by siliceous shale, chert, and interbedded quartzose and volcano-
68 plutonic turbidites of the Sangdanlin Formation, overlain in turn by siliceous shale with thin- to thick-
69 bedded volcano-plutonic turbidites of the Zheyia Formation (Fig. 2).

70

71 Radiolarian Biostratigraphy

72 We collected 44 chert samples from the Denggang, Sangdanlin, and Zheyia Formations, 28 of which
73 yielded age-diagnostic radiolaria (see methods and Tables DR1 and DR2; see footnote 1), which are
74 not abundant and are poorly preserved. Identifications were based on general outline and size, number
75 of segments (Nassellaria), and pore size, shape, and arrangement when visible (Fig. DR2). Reworking
76 of Cretaceous to Paleocene specimens is common throughout the section (Table DR1). Strati- graphic
77 age was thus based on the earliest appearances of index species.

78 In units 9–12 (Fig. 2), *Buryella granulata*, *B. foremanae*, *Lithostrobus cf. longus*, and *Orbiculiforma*
79 sp. aff. *renillaeformis* point to Paleogene radiolarian zones RP4–RP6 (Sanfilippo and Nigrini, 1998). In
80 the overlying units 16, 25, and 32, *Bekoma(?) demissa*, *Buryella tetradica*, *B. pentadica*, *Calocycloma*
81 *ampulla*, *Dictyoceras caia*, *Dorcadospyrus* sp. A (from Blome, 1992), *Lychnocanoma auxilla*,
82 *Phormocyrtis striata exquisita*, and *Theocorys? phyzella* indicate zone RP6 (Sanfilippo and Nigrini,
83 1998). *Phormocyrtis striata striata* in unit 25 and *Giraffospyrus lata* in unit 32 suggest that these strata
84 may extend into zone RP7, although coexistence with *Buryella pentadica* would indicate the
85 uppermost zone RP6 for the lower Zheyia Formation (Sanfilippo and Nigrini, 1998; Nishimura, 1992).
86 *Phormocyrtis striata striata* and *Giraffospyrus lata* are absent in unit 41, where the radiolarian

87 assemblage resembles otherwise those in units 16, 25, and 32. Zone RP6 ranges from the early
88 Selandian to the early Thanetian (Vandenberghe et al., 2012).

89

90 Nannofossil Biostratigraphy

91 Five mudrock samples from the Zheya Formation were analyzed. Two samples from unit 26 (Fig. 2)
92 yielded a calcareous nannofossil assemblage with moderately preserved specimens including
93 *Biantholithus sparsus*, *Chiasmolithus bidens* gr., *Cruciplacolithus tenuis* s.s., *Ellipso- lithus bollii*,
94 *Ericsonia robusta*, *Fasciculithus clinatus*, *F. cf. magnicordis*, *F. tympaniformis*, and *Sphenolithus*
95 *moriformis* gr. (Fig. DR3 in the Data Repository). This assemblage suggests a biostratigraphic position
96 corresponding to the upper part of Paleocene calcareous nannofossil zone CNP7, constrained between
97 the base of *Fasciculithus tympaniformis* and the base of *Heliolithus cantabriae*, and correlated
98 robustly with the upper part of Chron 26r (Selandian) in Ocean Drilling Program Site 1262 (Agnini et
99 al., 2014).

100

101 Detrital Chronostratigraphy

102 Detrital zircons separated from 3 sandstones in the Sangdanlin Formation (units 14, 15, and 16)
103 yielded 197 concordant U-Pb ages (for analytical details and complete data set, see the Data
104 Repository; Table DR4). These compare well with results of Wang et al. (2011), Wu et al. (2014),
105 and DeCelles et al. (2014), and con- firm provenance from the Asian active margin. The main age
106 cluster is between 103 Ma and 77 Ma (88 grains); the youngest single grain age is 57 ± 1 Ma (Table
107 DR4). The maximum depo- sitional age is constrained to be 58.1 ± 0.9 Ma [weighted mean of 8 grain
108 ages of the youngest cluster (YC) overlapping at $1\chi\rho$; YC $1\chi\rho(2+)$ Dickinson and Gehrels, 2009].

109

110 AGE OF COLLISION ONSET

111 The Denggang Formation, characterized by turbiditic quartzarenites fed from the Indian continent and
112 deposited on the Indian continen- tal rise, is capped by quartzolithic basalticlastic turbidites (unit 10).
113 Detrital zircons display the Early Cretaceous (141–117 Ma) U-Pb age peak characteristic of
114 Cretaceous–Paleocene Tethys Himalayan units (Gehrels et al., 2011). A Cretaceous age was inferred
115 previously for the Deng- gang Formation (Wang et al., 2011; DeCelles et al., 2014) because radiolarians
116 in the overlying cherts were assigned to the Campanian (unit 11; Li et al., 2007). However, we show
117 here that radiolarian faunas in units 4–12 belong instead to biozones RP3–RP4 to RP4–RP6,
118 indicating the Danian (Fig. 2). The Denggang Formation is thus reinterpreted to represent the distal
119 equiva- lent of quartzose sandstones generated during the tectonic and magmatic upwelling event that
120 affected northern India in the latest Cretaceous to early Paleocene (Garzanti and Hu, 2015). The
121 overlying red cherts at the base of the Sangdanlin Formation document entirely abyssal and condensed
122 sedimentation during the late Danian and early Selandian, while the distal margin of India was crossing
123 the near-equatorial upwell- ing zone of high biosiliceous productivity (van Hinsbergen et al., 2011).
124 The overlying strata record the crucial transition from quartzose, Indian-derived turbidites (unit 13) to
125 dominantly Asian-derived volcano- plutoniclastic turbidites (unit 14; Fig. 3). Detrital zircons in units
126 14–16 yielded U-Pb ages mainly between 103 Ma and 57 Ma, documenting continuing magmatism in
127 the Gangdese arc to the north during the Late Cretaceous and Paleocene, and the maximum
128 depositional age of 58.1 ± 0.9 Ma (Fig. DR4; Table DR3). The ra- diolarian assemblage in unit 16

129 indicates zone RP6. The lower Zheyia Formation yielded radiolarian faunas possibly extending to zone
130 RP7 (unit 25) and calcareous nannofossils of upper zone CNP7 (unit 26), constraining deposition
131 firmly to the late Selandian. The top of zone CNP7 was assigned an age of 58.3 Ma by Ag-nini et al.
132 (2014), in excellent agreement with our zircon age data. Paleogene chronostratigraphy, however, is
133 controversial (Westerhold et al., 2012). The top of Chron 26r, corresponding to the Selandian-
134 Thanetian boundary and preceded shortly by the early-late Paleocene event of intense carbonate
135 dissolution, has been recently assigned ages as old as 59.2 Ma (Vandenberghe et al., 2012). A more
136 robust calibration of the magnetostratigraphic scale is thus needed to translate our data into a more
137 precise age for the India-Asia collision onset.

138 Turbiditic deposition, fed initially from the Indian side only, and next chiefly and finally exclusively
139 from the Asian side, took place at abyssal depths in trench settings. DeCelles et al. (2014) obtained a
140 robust U-Pb zircon age of 58.5 ± 0.6 Ma (2σ) for a tuff layer at the top of the Zheyia Formation (unit
141 48), which is identical within error to the age indicated by biostratigraphy and zircon
142 chronostratigraphy for the base of the Zheyia Formation. This would indicate very rapid accumulation
143 rates (~500 m in less than 1 m.y.), and thus massive turbiditic supply to the trench during the very first
144 collisional stages. However, chert layers of unit 41 in the upper part of the section yielded a radiolarian
145 assemblage similar to that in unit 16, suggesting that they may represent a tectonic repetition of the
146 chert interval at the top of the underlying Sangdanlin Formation (Fig. 2). If stratigraphic thickness is
147 duplicated tectonically, then accumulation rates do not need to be extreme, and the exposed Asian-
148 derived trench sediments would not be thicker than 300 m and all deposited between the Selandian and
149 the early Thanetian.

150

151 REGIONAL EVIDENCE

152 The onset of collision between India and Asia was first dated stratigraphically in the northwestern
153 Himalaya as ca. 57 Ma, based on the identification of a major unconformity inferred to document
154 uplift associated with the passage over a flexural bulge (Garzanti et al., 1987). Such an age is fully
155 consistent with the age of northwestern Himalayan eclogites dated as 53.3 ± 0.7 Ma, which implies
156 first arrival of Indian continental crust at the Transhimalayan trench ca. 57 Ma (Leech et al., 2005).

157 A prominent disconformity, marked by a conglomerate packed with clasts eroded from the underlying
158 limestone unit, also occurs within the shallow-water carbonate succession of the inner Indian passive
159 margin in the Gamba section of south Tibet, where it is dated as ca. 56 Ma and equally inferred to
160 document uplift associated with the passage over a flexural bulge (Li et al., 2015). Such a bulge
161 unconformity developed close to the Paleocene-Eocene boundary all along the inner Indian passive
162 margin, ruling out markedly diachronous collision, as suggested independently by Indian foreland-
163 basin successions farther south (Najman et al., 2005).

164 Our new data indicate that the distal edge of the Indian passive margin reached the Transhimalayan
165 trench in the Selandian (59 ± 1 Ma). Southward propagation of a flexural wave followed during the
166 Thanetian, and reached the inner Indian margin ~3 m.y. after collision onset.

167 The new detailed biostratigraphic and geochronological data presented in this study tightly constrain the
168 initial collision between the Indian and Asian continents as within the Selandian, without evidence of
169 major diachroneity between the western and central Himalaya. The age of 59 ± 1 Ma is compatible
170 with geological information retrieved from both the Tethys Himalayan passive margin and the
171 Transhimalayan active margin (i.e., the Cuojiangding section; Fig. 1; Hu et al., 2015), and allows

172 refinement of collision scenarios inferred from paleomagnetic studies of both southern (Yi et al.,
173 2011) and northern margins (Lippert et al., 2014) of the Neotethys Ocean.

174

175 CONCLUSIONS

176 Trench sediments of the Sangdanlin Forma- tion, deposited on top of the subducting Indian plate,
177 document a radical provenance change dated at the middle Paleocene (59 ± 1 Ma) by radiolarian and
178 nannofossil biostratigraphy coupled with zircon chronostratigraphy. The Himalayan orogeny is thus
179 constrained firmly to have begun at least 10 m.y. earlier than inferred previously from the cessation of
180 marine sedimentation in the Tethys Himalaya (e.g., Rowley, 1996).

181

182

183 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

184 We thank Juan Li, Jiangan Wang, Wei An, Hui Luo, and Sunlin Chung for their assistance in the field
185 or in the laboratory. This study was financially supported by the Chinese Ministry of Science and
186 Technology (MOST) 973 Project (2012CB822001), the Strategic Priority Research Program (B) of
187 the Chinese Academy of Sciences (XDB03010100), and the National Science Foundation of China
188 (projects 41172092, 40772070). We thank Ellen Thomas, Mary Leech, Chris Hollis, and an
189 anonymous reviewer for their constructive comments.

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272 Manuscript received 8 April 2015 Revised manuscript received 25 July 2015 Manuscript accepted 1
273 August 2015

274 Printed in USA

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277 **FIGURE CAPTIONS**

278 **Figure 1.** Simplified geologic map of the Himalaya, showing study area and location of Paleogene
279 sections discussed in text. 1—Sangdanlin; 2—Tingri; 3—Cuojiangding; 4—Zanskar

280 **Figure 2.** Biostratigraphy of the Sangdanlin section (Himalaya). The distribution of radiolaria and
281 calcareous nannofossils constrains the age of interbedded Indian- and Asian-derived turbidites
282 within the middle Paleocene (Selandian radiolarian zone RP6 and calcareous nannofossil zone CNP7,
283 respectively). Stratigraphic log after DeCelles et al. (2014); units 1–49 after Wang et al. (2011). Both
284 minimum (after Agnini et al., 2014) and maximum ages (after Vandenberghe et al., 2012; in Ma) are
285 indicated for the lower and upper boundaries of the Selandian stage.

286 **Figure 3.** Zircon chronostratigraphy and sandstone petrography of the Denggang and Sangdanlin
287 Formations, Himalaya (including data from Wang et al., 2011; DeCelles et al., 2014). Ternary
288 diagrams: QFL—quartz, feldspar, lithics; LmLvLs—metamorphic lithics, volcanic lithics,
289 sedimentary lithics. The first arrival of Asian-derived turbidites is recorded in middle Paleocene units
290 14–15, the maximum depositional age of which is constrained by U-Pb ages of detrital zircons of
291 58.1 ± 0.9 Ma. Triangular diagrams highlight the sharp compositional difference between Indian-
292 derived quartzose turbidites and Asian-derived volcano-plutonic sandstones. Maximum depositional
293 ages of strata inferred from U-Pb zircon chronostratigraphic results obtained in this study, from
294 DeCelles et al. (2014), and from Wu et al. (2014) are compared in the lower panel (five alternative
295 measures of youngest zircon age after Dickinson and Gehrels, 2009).

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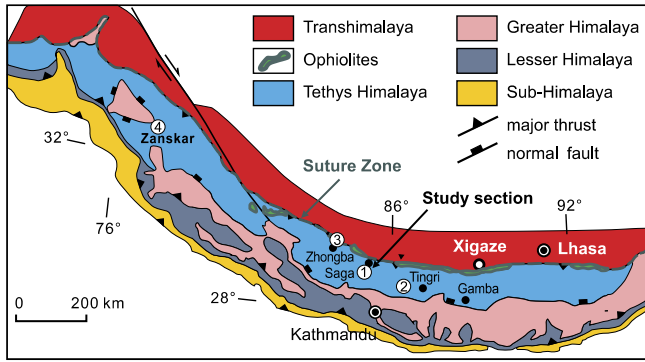


FIGURE 1

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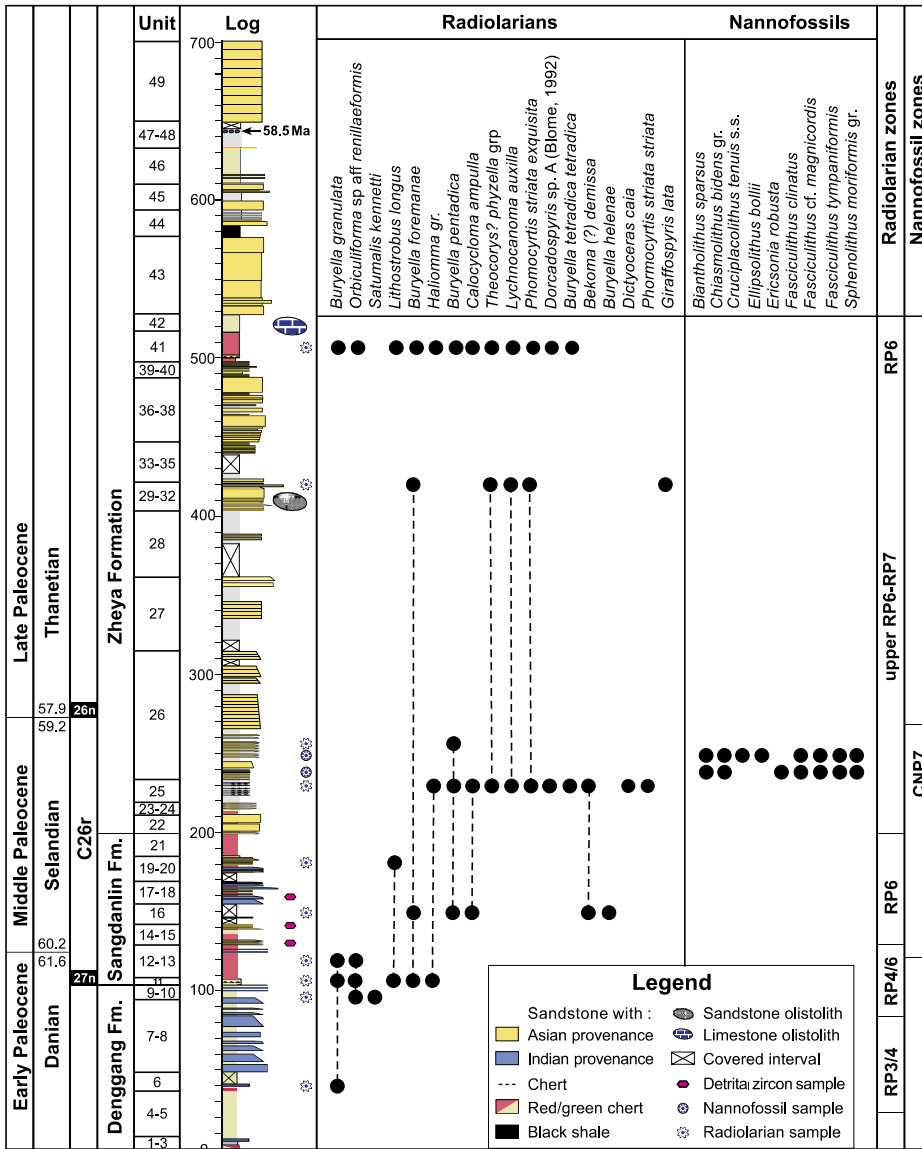


FIGURE 2

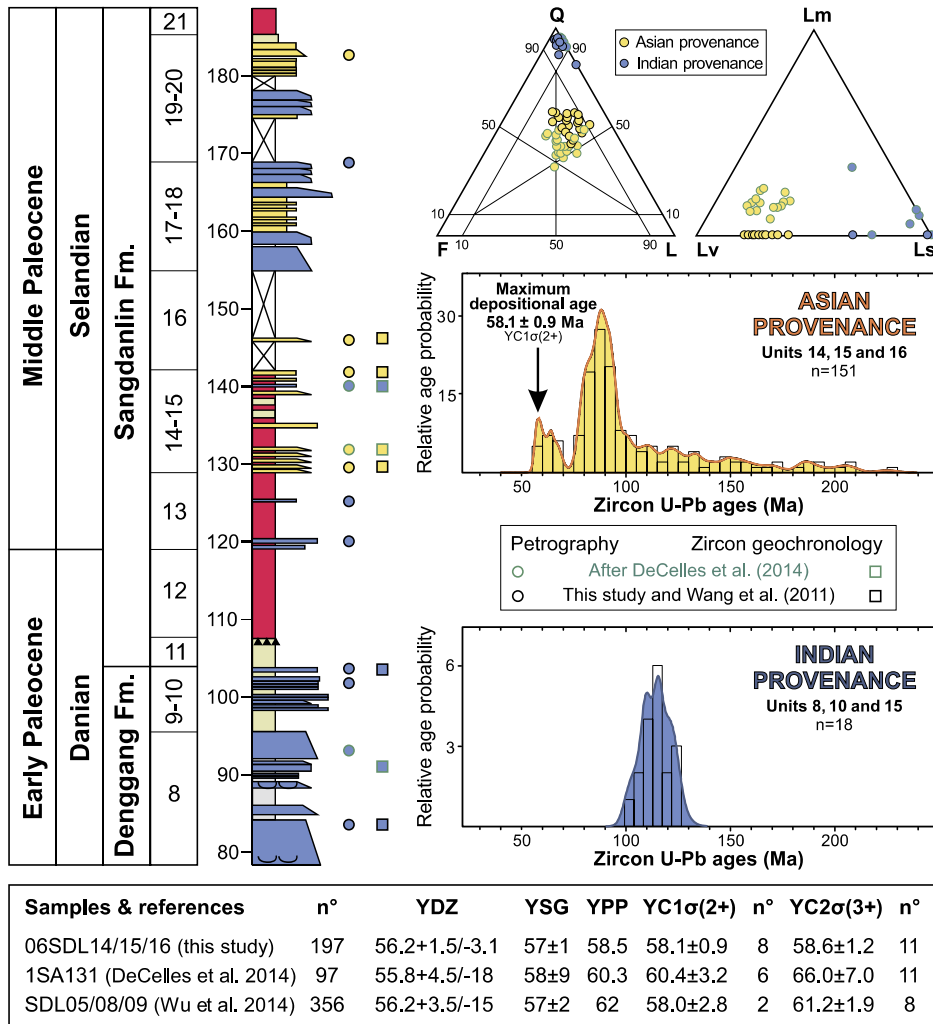


FIGURE 3