

Seasonally Distinctive Growth and Drought Stress Functional Traits Enable *Leucaena Leucocephala* to Successfully Invade a Chinese Tropical Forest

Authors: Luo, Jinhuan, Cui, Jie, Pandey, Shree P., Jiang, Kai, Tan, Zhaoyuan, et al.

Source: Tropical Conservation Science, 13(1)

Published By: SAGE Publishing

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940082920949176>


BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

Seasonally Distinctive Growth and Drought Stress Functional Traits Enable *Leucaena leucocephala* to Successfully Invade a Chinese Tropical Forest

Jinhuan Luo¹, Jie Cui¹, Shree P. Pandey^{2,3}, Kai Jiang^{2,3}, Zhaoyuan Tan^{2,3}, Qifang He^{2,3}, Hui Zhang^{2,3} , and Wenxing Long^{2,3}

Tropical Conservation Science
Volume 13: 1–7
© The Author(s) 2020
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/1940082920949176
journals.sagepub.com/home/trc



Abstract

The nitrogen-fixing mimosid *Leucaena leucocephala* continues to be used for afforestation in degraded tropical forests. Yet, fast-growth and high drought stress tolerance enables *L. leucocephala* to outperform native species and *L. leucocephala* has been identified as one of the 100 most invasive species globally. This warrants development of effective control measures, including bio-controls, to prevent the spread of this species particularly across tropical islands. Here, we compare differences in key functional traits between *L. leucocephala* and eight dominant native species (*Bridelia tomentosa*, *Radermachera frondosa*, *Lepisanthes rubiginosa*, *Rhaphiolepis indica*, *Pterospermum heterophyllum*, *Fissistigma oldhamii*, *Psychotria rubra* and *Cudrania cochinchinensis*) in *L. leucocephala* invaded tropical forests of Hainan Island, China. Functional traits related to growth (photosynthesis rate, stomatal conductance and transpiration rate) and drought stress tolerance (leaf turgor loss point) were measured in wet and dry seasons to investigate whether these functional traits differed between *L. leucocephala* and the eight dominant native species. Our results demonstrate that *L. leucocephala* has significantly increased growth rates (at least two-fold) in both wet and dry seasons. Additionally, *L. leucocephala* shows significantly higher drought stress tolerance (lower TLP) in the dry season. These results indicate that *L. leucocephala* would almost certainly outperform the eight dominant native species and might successfully invade Hainan tropical forests. There is an urgent need to identify native species that have similar growth and drought stress tolerance traits to enable the development of effective strategies to control *L. leucocephala* on Hainan Island.

Keywords

drought stress tolerance, fast-growing, functional traits, invasion, tropical forest

The fast-growing, nitrogen-fixing species, *Leucaena leucocephala* is widely used for restoring highly degraded tropical forests (Liu et al., 2018; Peng et al., 2019; Wolfe & van Bloem, 2012). Due to its deep roots, capacity to fix nitrogen, drought tolerance capacity, high protein content, and fast foliage growth, it has several potential usages such as serving as livestock fodder, and in controlling soil erosion (Liu et al., 2018; Wolfe & van Bloem, 2012). But it has also become an aggressive invader in many tropical and sub-tropical locations (e.g. on Hawaii islands) and is listed in '100 of the world's worst invasive alien species' (Global Invasive

¹Sanya Academy of Forestry

²College of Forestry/Wuzhishan National Long Term Forest Ecosystem Monitoring Research Station, Hainan University

³Key Laboratory of Genetics and Germplasm Innovation of Tropical Special Forest Trees and Ornamental Plants, Ministry of Education, College of Forestry, Hainan University

Received 23 April 2020; Revised 17 July 2020; Accepted 18 July 2020

The first three authors contributed equally to this work.

Corresponding Author:

Hui Zhang, College of Forestry, Hainan University, Haikou 570228, Hainan Province, P. R. China.

Email: 993781@hainu.edu.cn



Creative Commons Non Commercial CC BY-NC: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

Species Database, 2020; Richardson & Rejmánek, 2011). This warrants developing effective control measures (including bio-controls) to prevent the spread of this species, particularly across tropical islands.

Determining the key characteristics/traits of invasive exotic plant species that help them successfully invade the native plant ecosystem is critical their biological control (Funk et al., 2008; Moran et al., 2005; Seastedt, 2015). Traits that help exotic plant species to better adapt to the local environment and are functionally distinct from the native dominant plant species can facilitate invasion (Funk et al., 2008). Moreover, functionally similar plant species cannot coexist (MacArthur & Levins, 1967), and thus mixing plant species that are functionally similar to *L. leucocephala* may help in bio-control of *L. leucocephala*. Indeed, Liu et al. (2018) has found that *Eucalyptus citriodora*, which is functionally similar to *L. leucocephala*, was able to restrict latter's growth.

We hypothesize that *L. leucocephala*'s nitrogen fixation and high drought stress tolerance capacity would, on one hand, help *L. leucocephala* to better adapt to the local environment as compared to the native dominant plant species (e.g., due to its higher growth rate). On the other hand, fast growth and high drought stress tolerance could enable *L. leucocephala* to be functionally distinct from the native dominant species. Thus, fast growth and high drought stress tolerance might be the key characteristics that help *L. leucocephala* to successfully invade tropical forests. To test this hypothesis in a tropical monsoon forest, which has been successfully invaded by *L. leucocephala* in Sanya City (China), we tested whether, i) *L. leucocephala* has significantly

higher growth rates across seasons as compared to the native dominant plant species, which have a suppressed growth between wet to dry season; ii) *L. leucocephala* is more drought tolerant than the dominant plant species in dry as well as in wet seasons; and, iii) whether the such high growth rates and drought stress tolerance enable *L. leucocephala* to be functionally distinct from dominant native species in both dry and wet seasons.

Methods

Study Area

The study site is located in Baopoling Mountain (109°30'30"E, 18°19'10"N), at an elevation of 200 m, in Sanya City of the Hainan island, China (Figure 1). The study site has a tropical monsoon oceanic climate with a mean annual temperature of 28°C, precipitation of 1500 mm, with approximately 91% of the precipitation occurring between June to October (Luo et al., 2018). The vegetation of this area is described as tropical monsoon broad-leaf forest. In year 2016, *L. leucocephala* was introduced to recover a 0.2 km² highly degraded area in Baopoling Mountain (Figure S1), but within 2 years, the old-growth tropical monsoon board-leaf forest had been successfully invaded by *L. leucocephala* (Figure S1).

Trait Collection and Measurement

We measured functional traits related to plant growth [maximum photosynthesis rate ($\mu\text{mol m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$), stomatal conductance ($\text{mmol m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$), and transpiration rate ($\mu\text{mol m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$)] and drought stress tolerance

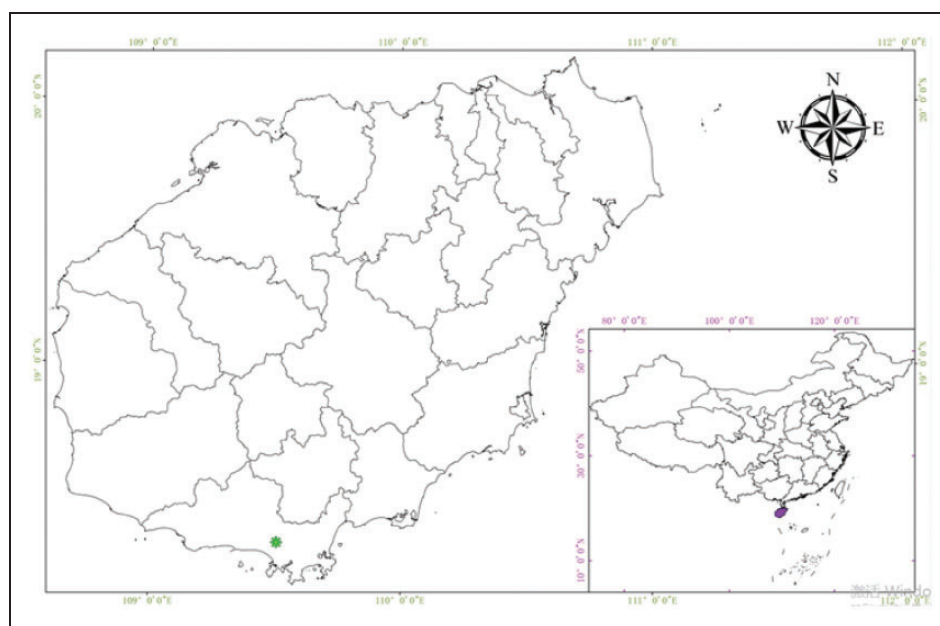


Figure 1. The Map of the Location of the Study Site.

(leaf turgor loss point, Mpa). All the sampling and measurements were made twice, in the peak of wet (August) and dry seasons (February) in 2019. 30 fully expanded and healthy leaves were collected from five mature individuals of *L. leucocephala* and eight native dominant species (*Bridelia tomentosa*, *Radermachera frondosa*, *Lepisanthes rubiginosa*, *Rhaphiolepis indica*, *Pterospermum heterophyllum*, *Fissistigma oldhamii*, *Psychotria rubra* and *Cudrania cochinchinensis*). We selected individuals that were healthy and with diameters at breast height (DBH) comparable to the mean DBH values of that species (Table S1). Traits were measured following the methods described in Hua et al. (2017) and). Detailed procedures for measuring these functional traits are described in the Supplementary Material.

Data Analysis

We used paired t-test to compare the differences in all the traits between *L. leucocephala* and the eight dominant native species in both the seasons. We used Bartlett's test to insure that all the data met the requirements of homogeneity of variance, as required by paired t-test ($P > 0.05$, Tables S2 and S3). Principal component analysis (PCA) is effective for determining functional traits that could best discriminate plant species

(Zhu et al., 2013). Thus, we also utilized PCA to investigate whether the differences in growth rate and drought stress tolerance can (functionally) distinguish *L. leucocephala* from the eight dominant native species.

Results

Our paired t-test results demonstrated that there was no significant variation in *L. leucocephala*'s growth traits (transpiration rate, maximum photosynthesis rate and stomatal conductance) between the two seasons ($P > 0.05$, Figure 2 and Table S4). Whereas, the leaf turgor loss point in the wet season was significantly lower (1/6th) than that in the dry season ($P < 0.05$, Figure 2 and Table S4). In contrast, the eight native dominant species had significantly lower (1/4th–1/2th) transpiration rate, maximum photosynthesis rate, stomatal conductance and leaf turgor loss point in the dry season compared to those in the wet season ($P < 0.05$, Figure 2 and Table S4). Transpiration rate, maximum photosynthesis rate, stomatal conductance and leaf turgor loss point for *L. leucocephala* were 5–10 times higher than all the eight dominant native species in both the seasons ($P < 0.05$, Figure 3 and Table S5). However, there was no difference in leaf turgor loss

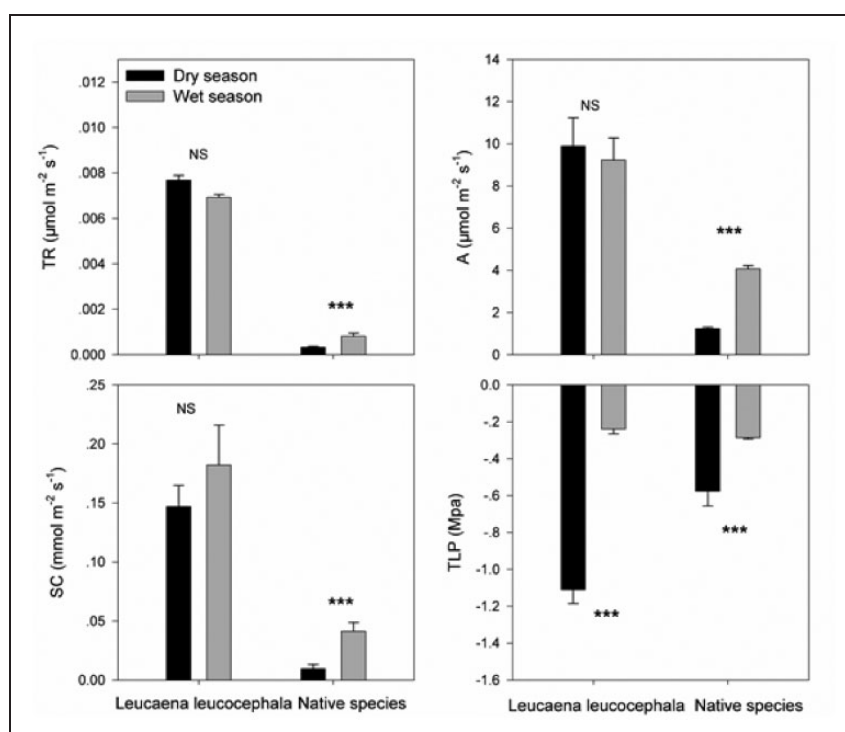


Figure 2. Differences in Functional Traits Associated With a Fast-Growth Strategy (Transpiration Rate (TR, $\mu\text{mol m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$), Maximum Photosynthesis Rate (A, $\mu\text{mol m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$), Stomatal Conductance (SC, $\text{mmol m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$) and Leaf Turgor Loss Point (TLP, Mpa)) in Wet and Dry Seasons for the Invasive Exotic Plant Species (*Leucaena leucocephala*) and the Eight Dominant Native Species (*Bridelia tomentosa*, *Radermachera frondosa*, *Lepisanthes rubiginosa*, *Rhaphiolepis indica*, *Pterospermum heterophyllum*, *Fissistigma oldhamii*, *Psychotria rubra* and *Cudrania cochinchinensis*) Respectively. *** indicates $P < 0.001$ and NS (non-significant differences) indicates $P > 0.05$ based on paired t-test.

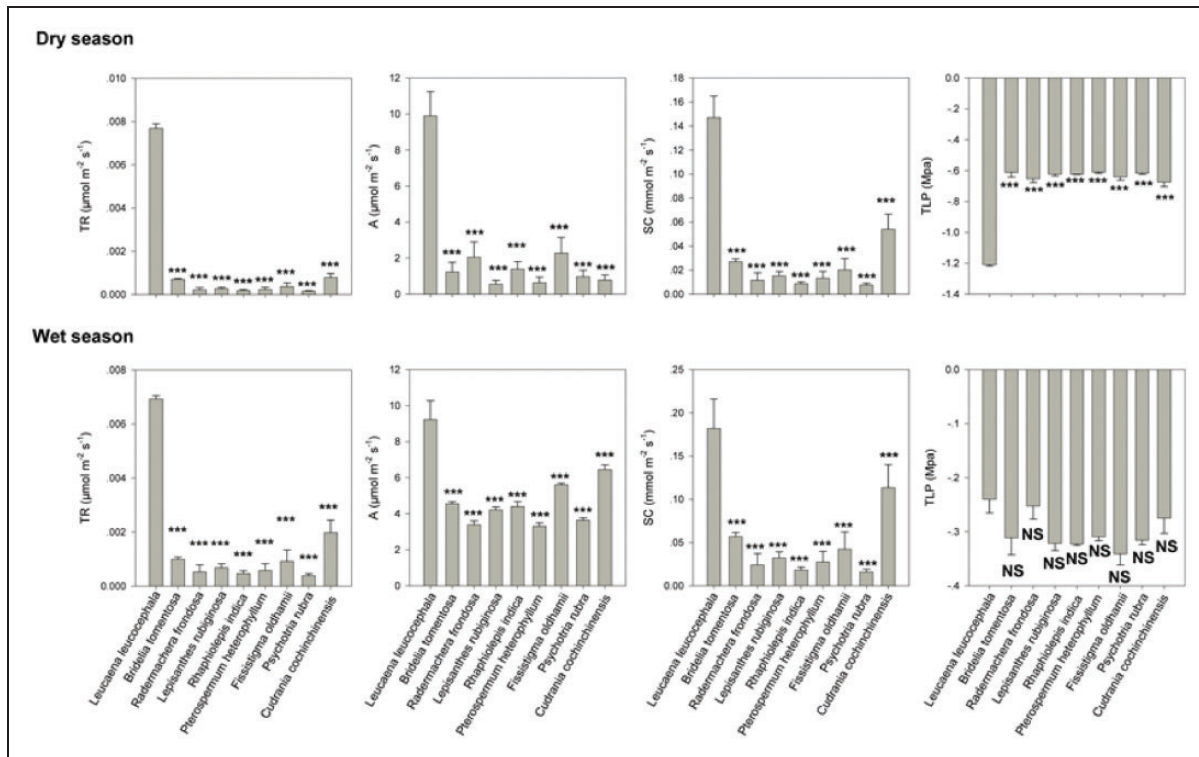


Figure 3. The Differences in the Four Functional Traits (Transpiration Rate, TR; Maximum Photosynthesis Rate, A_{max} ; Stomatal Conductance, SC; and Leaf Turgor Loss Point, TLP) Between the Invasive Exotic Plant Species (*Leucaena leucocephala*) and Each of the Eight Dominant Native Plant Species. *** indicates $P < 0.001$ and NS (non-significant differences) indicates $P > 0.05$ based on paired t-test.

point between *L. leucocephala* and each of the eight dominant species in the wet season. But in the dry season, leaf turgor loss point of *L. leucocephala* was significantly lower (half) than those of the eight dominant species ($P < 0.05$, Figure 3 and Table S5). Results from the PCA showed that all the traits were able to discriminate *L. leucocephala* from the eight dominant native species (Figure 4 and Table 1).

Discussion

Here, we provide evidence to support the hypothesis that higher drought tolerance of *L. leucocephala* in dry season assists in its fast growth throughout the year, as compared to the native dominate species in Hainan forest. Moreover, its high growth rate and drought stress tolerance could functionally distinguish *L. leucocephala* from the dominant native plant species. Thus, our study provides a physiological framework that explains the invasive behavior of *L. leucocephala* in Hainan island.

High photosynthetic rates can result in increased stomatal conductance (Lawson & Viallet-Chabrand, 2019; McAusland et al., 2016) and transpiration rates (Bucci et al., 2019; Maherali et al., 2008; Santos et al., 2018). *L. leucocephala* has evolved leaf traits for maximizing

photosynthetic capacity and increasing overall growth, which plausibly facilitates it to outperform the native dominant plant species. Since precipitation in the dry season in this tropical forest is only 1/10th of that in the wet season (Luo et al., 2018), plants are expected to suppress their photosynthesis as the water availability is a key constraint (Guan et al., 2015). Interestingly, photosynthesis rates of *L. leucocephala* were similar in wet and dry seasons, whereas the eight dominant native species suppressed their photosynthesis in the dry season. Therefore, we infer that photosynthesis rate is a key facilitator of *L. leucocephala* in outperforming native species.

No differences in leaf turgor loss point were noticed between *L. leucocephala* and the eight dominant native tree species in the wet season. Leaf turgor loss point is an indicator of water supply (Bartlett et al., 2012). Nearly 90% of the precipitation occurs in the wet season that insures sufficient water supply in this season. Leaf turgor loss point of *L. leucocephala* in the dry season was half of those for each of the eight dominant native species. Under limited water supply, plants with low leaf turgor loss point can maintain high stomatal conductance, photosynthesis and transpiration (Blackman et al., 2010; Mitchell et al., 2008; Sack et al., 2003).

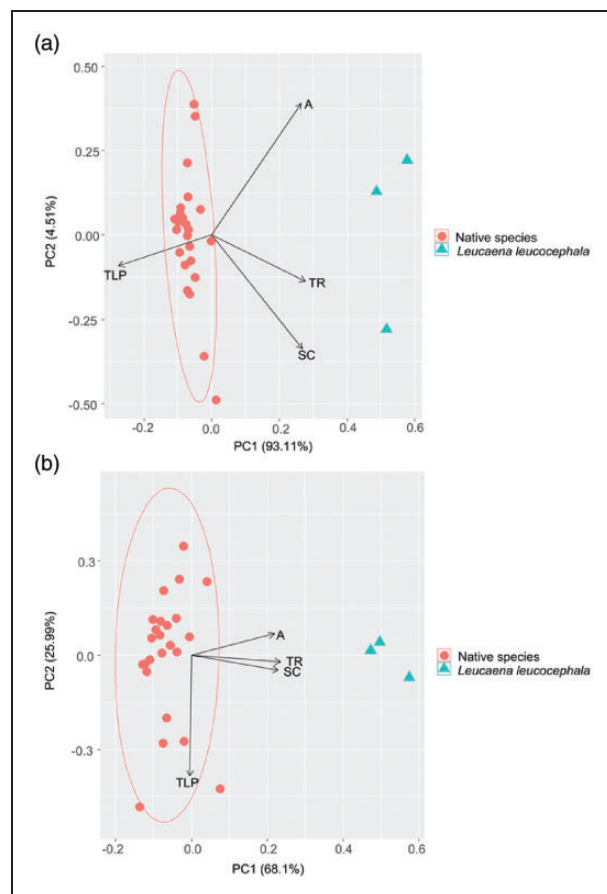


Figure 4. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) of the Four Functional Traits Associated With Fast Growth and Drought Stress Tolerance Between the Invasive Exotic Plant Species (*Leucaena leucocephala*) and the Eight Dominant Native Plant Species.

Table 1. The first two axes of a principal component analysis (PCA) for invasive exotic plant species (*Leucaena leucocephala*) and the eight dominant native species (*Bridelia tomentosa*, *Radermachera frondosa*, *Lepisanthes rubiginosa*, *Raphiolepis indica*, *Pterospermum heterophyllum*, *Fissistigma oldhamii*, *Psychotria rubra* and *Cudrania cochinchinensis*), based on four plant functional traits.

Functional traits	PC1	PC2
Transpiration rate	0.51	−0.16
Maximum photosynthesis rate	0.77	−0.15
Stomatal conductance	0.58	−0.19
Leaf turgor loss point	0.11	0.53

These include transpiration rate ($\mu\text{mol m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$), maximum photosynthesis rate ($\mu\text{mol m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$), stomatal conductance ($\text{mmol m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$) and leaf turgor loss point (Mpa). Bolds indicates significant (PC1 value OR PC2 value >0.5).

Thus, the high drought stress tolerance is critical for *L. leucocephala*'s growth, and assists it in outperforming native species.

The above inferences were supported by the results of PCA analysis, which discriminated *L. leucocephala* from

the native species on the basis of four growth- and drought tolerance- related traits (maximum photosynthesis rate, stomatal conductance, transpiration rate and leaf turgor loss point). As the key characteristics of invasive exotic plant species can significantly discriminate them from native plant species (Funk et al., 2008; Laughlin, 2014), we infer that these four traits could enable *L. leucocephala* to be functionally distinct from the native species.

We conclude that fast growth and high drought stress tolerance in the dry season could promote invasion of *L. leucocephala* in the tropical forests. A limitation of our study is that the inferences are drawn from a single year's data. However, previous studies have also found that high growth rate and drought stress tolerance can help *L. leucocephala* to successfully outperform the native forest species (Barros et al., 2020; Chiou et al., 2016; Wolfe & van Bloem, 2012). Therefore, it is safe to conclude that fast-growing capacities in wet as well as in dry seasons, and high drought stress tolerance in the dry season are the key traits that help *L. leucocephala* to successfully invade tropical forests.

Implications for Conservation

The results of this study clearly revealed that *L. leucocephala* outperforms the eight dominant native species and can successfully invade Hainan tropical forests. There is an urgent need to identify native species that have similar growth and drought stress tolerance traits to enable their development as part of an effective strategy to control *L. leucocephala* invasion of forests on Hainan Island. Here, we have demonstrated that four functional traits (maximum photosynthesis rate, stomatal conductance, transpiration rate and leaf turgor loss point) can facilitate *L. leucocephala* to successfully invade the tropical forest. These four traits can be utilized to develop a 'native species selection' software (details see Wang et al., 2020) that would assist in the selection and deployment of multiple native tree species that are functionally similar to *L. leucocephala* for bio-control of *L. leucocephala* on Hainan island.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Christine Verhille at the University of British Columbia for assistance with English language and grammatical editing of the manuscript.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this

article: This work was funded by RSanya Baopolin Restoration Research Project (RH2000008233), the National Natural Science Foundation of China (31770469) and a start-up fund from Hainan University (KYQD (ZR) 1876).

ORCID iD

Hui Zhang  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2180-4855>

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

References

- Barros, V., Melo, A., Santos, M., Nogueira, L., Frosi, G., & Santos, M. G. (2020). Different resource-use strategies of invasive and native woody species from a seasonally dry tropical forest under drought stress and recovery. *Plant Physiology and Biochemistry*, 147, 181–190.
- Bartlett, M. K., Scoffoni, C., & Sack, L. (2012). The determinants of leaf turgor loss point and prediction of drought tolerance of species and biomes: A global meta-analysis. *Ecology Letters*, 15(5), 393–405.
- Blackman, C. J., Brodribb, T. J., & Jordan, G. J. (2010). Leaf hydraulic vulnerability is related to conduit dimensions and drought resistance across a diverse range of woody angiosperms. *The New Phytologist*, 188(4), 1113–1123.
- Bucci, S. J., Carbonell Silletta, L. M., Garré, A., Cavallaro, A., Efron, S. T., Arias, N. S., Goldstein, G., & Scholz, F. G. (2019). Functional relationships between hydraulic traits and the timing of diurnal depression of photosynthesis. *Plant, Cell & Environment*, 42(5), 1603–1614.
- Chiou, C.-R., Chen, Y.-J., Wang, H.-H., & Grant, W. E. (2016). Predicted range expansion of the invasive plant *leucaena leucocephala* in the Hengchun Peninsula, Taiwan. *Biological Invasions*, 18(2), 381–394.
- Funk, J. L., Cleland, E. E., Suding, K. N., & Zavaleta, E. S. (2008). Restoration through reassembly: Plant traits and invasion resistance. *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, 23(12), 695–703.
- Global Invasive Species Database. (2020). *Species profile: Leucaena leucocephala*. <http://www.iucngisd.org/gisd/speciesname/Leucaena+leucocephala>
- Guan, K., Pan, M., Li, H., Wolf, A., Wu, J., Medvigy, D., Caylor, K. K., Sheffield, J., Wood, E. F., Malhi, Y., Liang, M., Kimball, J. S., Saleska, S. R., Berry, J., Joiner, J., & Lyapustin, A. I. (2015). Photosynthetic seasonality of global tropical forests constrained by hydroclimate. *Nature Geoscience*, 8(4), 284–289.
- Hua, L., Chen, Y., Zhang, H., Fu, P., & Fan, Z. (2017). Stronger cooling effects of transpiration and morphology of the plants from a hot dry habitat than from a hot wet habitat. *Functional Ecology*, 31(12), 2202–2211.
- Laughlin, D. C. (2014). Applying trait-based models to achieve functional targets for theory-driven ecological restoration. *Ecology Letters*, 17(7), 771–784.
- Lawson, T., & Viallet-Chabrand, S. (2019). Speedy stomata, photosynthesis and plant water use efficiency. *The New Phytologist*, 221(1), 93–98.
- Liu, F., Gao, C., Chen, M., & Li, K. (2018). Above- and below-ground biomass relationships of *leucaena leucocephala* (lam.) de wit in different plant stands. *PLoS One*, 13(11), e0207059.
- Luo, H. X., Dai, S. P., Li, M. F., & Xi, Z. H. (2018). The climate characteristics of Hainan island from 1959–2015. *Jiangsu Agricultural Science*, 46(15), 261–268.
- MacArthur, R., & Levins, R. (1967). The limiting similarity, convergence, and divergence of coexisting species. *The American Naturalist*, 101(921), 377–385.
- Maherali, H., Sherrard, M. E., Clifford, M. H., & Latta, R. G. (2008). Leaf hydraulic conductance and photosynthesis are genetically correlated in an annual grass. *New Phytologist*, 180(1), 240–247.
- McAusland, L., Viallet-Chabrand, S., Davey, P., Baker, N. R., Brendel, O., & Lawson, T. (2016). Effects of kinetics of light-induced stomatal responses on photosynthesis and water-use efficiency. *The New Phytologist*, 211(4), 1209–1220.
- Mitchell, P. J., Veneklaas, E. J., Lambers, H., & Burgess, S. S. (2008). Leaf water relations during summer water deficit: Differential responses in turgor maintenance and variation in leaf structure among different plant communities in South-Western Australia. *Plant, Cell & Environment*, 31(12), 1791–1802.
- Moran, V. C., Hoffmann, J. H., & Zimmermann, H. G. (2005). Biological control of invasive alien plants in South Africa: Necessity, circumspection, and success. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 3(2), 71–77.
- Peng, S.-H., Wang, H.-H., & Kuo, Y.-L. (2019). Methods for preventing the invasion of *leucaena leucocephala* in coastal forests of the Hengchun Peninsula, Taiwan. *Taiwan Journal of Forest Science*, 34(2), 99–112.
- Richardson, D. M., & Rejmánek, M. (2011). Trees and shrubs as invasive alien species—A global review. *Diversity and Distributions*, 17(5), 788–809.
- Sack, L., Cowan, P., Jaikumar, N., & Holbrook, N. (2003). The ‘hydrology’ of leaves: Co-ordination of structure and function in temperate woody species. *Plant, Cell and Environment*, 26(8), 1343–1356.
- Santos, V. A. H. F. D., Ferreira, M. J., Rodrigues, J. V. F. C., Garcia, M. N., Ceron, J. V. B., Nelson, B. W., & Saleska, S. R. (2018). Causes of reduced leaf-level photosynthesis during strong El niño drought in a Central amazon Forest. *Global Change Biology*, 24(9), 4266–4279.
- Seastedt, T. R. (2015). Biological control of invasive plant species: A reassessment for the anthropocene. *The New Phytologist*, 205(2), 490–502.
- Wang, C., Zhang, H., Liu, H., Jian, S., Yan, J., & Liu, N. (2020). Application of a trait-based species screening framework for vegetation restoration in a tropical coral island of China. *Functional Ecology*, 34(6), 1193–1134.
- Wolfe, B. T., & van Bloem, S. J. (2012). Subtropical dry Forest regeneration in grass-invaded areas of Puerto Rico: Understanding why *leucaena leucocephala* dominates and

- native species fail. *Forest Ecology and Management*, 267, 253–261.
- Zhang, H., Chen, H. Y. H., Lian, J., John, R., Ronghua, L., Liu, H., Ye, W., Berninger, F., & Ye, Q. (2018). Using functional trait diversity patterns to disentangle the scale-dependent ecological processes in a subtropical Forest. *Functional Ecology*, 32(5), 1379–1389.
- Zhu, S. D., Song, J. J., Li, R. H., & Ye, Q. (2013). Plant hydraulics and photosynthesis of 34 woody species from different successional stages of subtropical forests. *Plant, Cell & Environment*, 36(4), 879–891.