Variation of sediment supply by periglacial debris flows at Zelunglung in the eastern syntaxis of Himalayas since the 1950 Assam Earthquake

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ABSTRACT. Periglacial debris flows boosted by strong earthquakes or climatic warming in alpine mountains play a crucial role in delivering sediment from hillslopes and downslope channels into rivers. Rapid and massive sediment supply to rivers by the debris flows has profoundly influenced the evolution of the alpine landscape. Nonetheless, there is a dearth of knowledge concerning the roles tectonic and climatic factors played in the intensified sediment erosion and transport. In order to increase our awareness of the mass wasting processes and glacier changes, five debris flows that occurred at the Zelunglung catchment of the eastern Himalayan syntaxis since the 1950 Assam earthquake are investigated in detail by field surveys and long-term remote sensing interpretation. Long-term seismic and meteorological data indicate that the four events of 1950-1984 were the legacies of the earthquake, and recent warming events drove the 2020 event. The transported sediment volume indexed with a non-vegetated area on the alluvial fan reduced by 91% to a stable low level nearly 40 years after 1950. It is reasonable to hypothesize that tectonic and climatic factors alternately drive the sediment supplies caused by the debris flows. High concentrations of coarse grains, intense erosion, and extreme impact force of the 2020 debris flow raised concerns about the impacts of such excess sediment inputs on the downstream river evolution and infrastructure safety. In regard to the hydrometeorological conditions of the main river, the time to evacuate the transported coarse sediments is approximately two orders of magnitude longer than the recurrence period of periglacial debris flows.

1 Introduction

Glacier-related hazards are widely developed in alpine regions around the world, such as the Alps, Himalayas, Caucasus, Tianshan, and Andes (Huggel et al., 2004; Iribarren Anacona et al., 2015; Petrakov et al., 2007; Richardson and Reynolds, 2000; Shen et al., 2013). These hazards, including ice/rock avalanches, periglacial debris flows, glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs), and dammed lakes, have caused substantial economic and human losses in the high mountains and their surrounding area (Bajracharya and Mool, 2009; Hu et al., 2019; Tian et al., 2017; Yu et al., 2021). Especially in the context of climate

change (rising temperatures and increased extreme precipitation events), the high-altitude regions such as European mountains, high-mountain Asia, and the Andes are undergoing rapid deglaciation that increases the magnitude and frequency of ice/rock avalanches and low-angle glacier detachments accordingly (Iribarren Anacona et al., 2015; Krautblatter et al., 2013).

Earthquakes, climate warming, geothermal heating, rainfall, and meltwater all directly trigger glacier-related hazards (Haeberli and Whiteman, 2021; Huggel et al., 2004). The Himalayan mountains, which are tectonically active and sensitive to climate change, have experienced many glacier-related disasters triggered by large-magnitude earthquakes or climate warming in recent years. For example, on the 25 April 2015 Gorkha earthquake triggered a catastrophic ice-rock collapse in Nepal's Langtang Valley, causing over 350 casualties (Kargel et al., 2016). Between 2017 and 2018, multiple ice-rock avalanches in the Sedongpu catchment, Milin County, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, which triggered large-scale glacial debris flows that twice dammed the Yarlung Tsangpo River (Hu et al., 2019; Jia et al., 2019; Li et al., 2022). On 7 February 2021, about 27×10^6 m^3 of rock and ice collapsed and quickly transformed into a debris flow in Chamoli, Uttarakhand region of India, which killed more than 200 people and severely damaged two hydropower projects (Shugar et al., 2021). The rising frequency and magnitude of such disasters have profound hydrogeomorphic and socio-economic impacts on the high-altitude and surrounding regions, including sediment yield and transportation, alpine landscape evolution, river management, food and water security, hydropower utilization, and infrastructure construction (Evans and Clague, 1994; Kääb et al., 2021), leading to the challenges of transboundary hazards and international collaboration.

Periglacial debris flows triggered by earthquake or climatic events are a major agent of sediment evacuation from steeplands to rivers in high-altitude mountains. These flows result in massive ice loss and sediment transport, causing long-term impacts on high mountain environment. The Institute of Mountain Hazards and Environment, Chinese Academy of Sciences (IMHE, CAS) reported that periglacial debris flows in the Guxiang catchment of southeastern Tibet transported a total of 200 Mm^3 of sediment into an upstream tributary of the Brahmaputra River between 1953 and 1999 (Wang et al., 2022). Similarly, the ice-rock avalanches of the Sedongpu in October 2018 delivered approximately 33.2 Mm^3 of sediment into the Yarlung Tsangpo River (Hu et al., 2019). The total mass loss caused by glacier-rock avalanches in Sedongpu between 2014 and 2018 reached > 70 Mm^3 of glacier and rock and > 150 Mm^3 of moraine deposits (Li et al., 2022). Furthermore, after the glacier detachment of the Sedongpu in 2018, a huge volume of ~335 Mm^3 material was eroded from its glacier bed and transported into the Yarlung Tsangpo (Kääb and Girod, 2023). Such, sudden, massive sediment inputs greatly influence sediment transport capacity, knickpoint formation, river water quality, downstream floods, and delta progradation. For instance, the 2021 Chamoli event resulted in extremely suspended sediment as 80 times high as the permissible level in the Ganga River, ~900 km from the source (Shugar et al., 2021). Sediment fluxes have increased two- to eight-fold in many glacierized and peri-glacierized basins between the 1950s and 2010s (Zhang et al., 2022a). Until now, most of previous studies have focused on the residence time and transport of earthquake-triggered landslide sediment at an orogenic scale in no-glacierized environments (Dadson et al., 2004; Dai et al., 2021; Parker et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2015). Little attention has been given to the sediment evacuation

progress by post-seismic debris flows at a catchment in glacierized environments owing to relatively low likelihood of debris flows and absence of long-term site-specific data.

In order to investigate the long-term effects of earthquakes on sediment evacuation in a glaciated catchment, the Zelunglung (ZLL) catchment, a tributary of the Yarlung Tsangpo river in southeastern Tibet that has large areas of temperate glaciers and disturbed intensely by the Ms 8.5 earthquake in 1950, is chosen as our study case. The catchment has long-term remote sensing imagery for interpreting glacier changes and associated debris flows and relatively well-documented records of at least four historical periglacial debris flows in 1950, 1968, 1972, and 1984 since the 1950 Assam earthquake (Zhang and Shen, 2011; Zhang, 1992). The most recent debris-flow event occurred on 10 September 2020, triggered by a small-scale ice-rock avalanche. It is believed that historical earthquakes and ongoing climate warming drove such events (Bessette-Kirton and Coe, 2020; Deline et al., 2015; Stoffel et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2022b). Field surveys were carried out before and after the 2020 event, including three aerial photography sessions on 9 September, 11 September 2020, and 21 December 2022, using a DJI Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV). Dynamic process and sediment characteristics of the 2020 event were examined with the details of aerial photos and field measurements. The ZLL glacier and alluviation fan changes were interpreted with high-resolution optical remote sensing images from 1969 to 2022. The non-vegetated area of the alluvial fan was used as an index to reflect the variation of sediment supply caused by the periglacial debris flows. By integrating with historical data on neighboring earthquakes, temperature, and precipitation, we analyzed the trend of periglacial debris flows over different periods. This case study is helpful for a better understanding of the controlling factors and sediment transportation of periglacial debris flows in High Mountain Asia (HMA).

2 Study area

The ZLL catchment (94°56′13.4″E, 29°36′25.6″N) at Zhibai Village in the China's TAR is a tributary on the right bank of the lower Yarlung Tsangpo River, originating from the west side of Namche Barwa massif (7782 m) in the easternmost part of the Himalayas. The main stream flows westward into the Yarlung Tsangpo at an elevation of 2810 m, with a local relief of 4972 m (**Fig. 1b**). It has a drainage area of 41.21 km^2 with a 17.9 km^2 glacier area. High lateral moraines on both sides of the main glacier divide the drainage network into the main channel, south branch, and north branch (**Fig. 1c**). The south branch, with a total length of 9.8 km and an average gradient of 275%, originates from the southern cliff at an elevation of ~5900 m. Hanging glaciers on the ridge and freeze-thawing in the cold region make the study area prone to ice and rock avalanches (**Fig. 1d**).

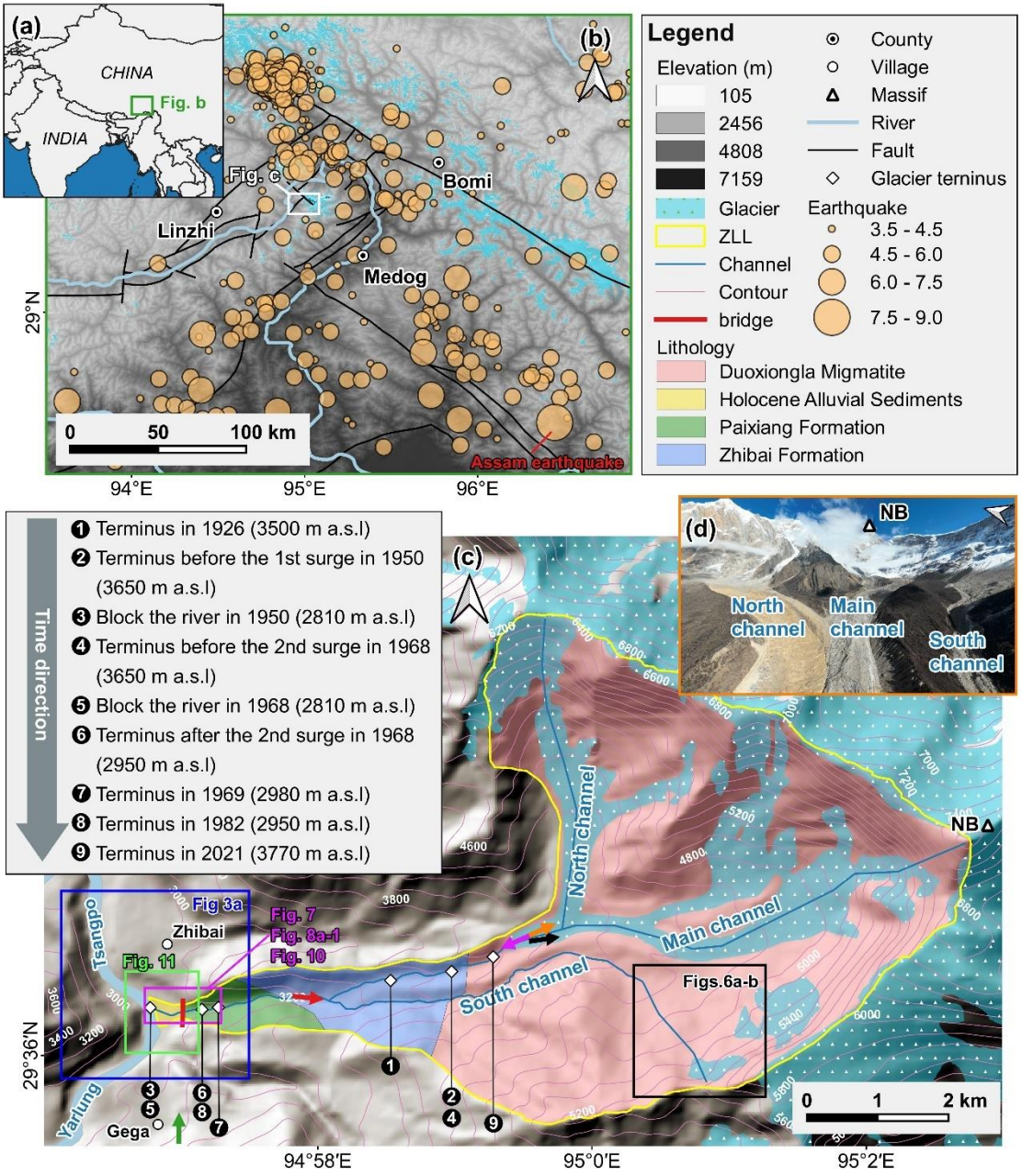


Figure 1: (a) Regional overview map of southeastern Tibet. (b) Regional settings and historical earthquakes of southeastern Tibet. (c) Topographic, geological and glacier terminus change maps of the Zelunglung catchment (the lithology refers to (Zhang and Shen, 2011)). The orange, rose-red, green, black and red coloured arrows represent the view angle direction of figures 1d, 4, 5, 6c and 6d. (d) Aerial photo of the Zelunglung glacier and channels on December 21, 2022 (NB denotes the Namche Barwa massif).

The regional tectonic units are the Lhasa terrane, the Indus-Yarlung Tsangpo suture, and the eastern syntaxis of the Himalayas from north to south (Hu et al., 2021). The catchment lies in the eastern syntaxis, which is uplifting at a rate of 5-10

mm/a (Ding et al., 2001). The exposed stratum in the ZLL is known as the Namche Barwa Group complex, which is composed of Duoxiongla migmatite, Zhibai group, and Paixiang group gneiss. The Quaternary deposits consist of Holocene alluvium at its outlet, thick layers of glacial till, and glacio-fluvial accumulation, especially hundreds of meters of huge thick moraine layers with large boulders accumulated on both sides of the main channel (**Fig. 1c**) (Han and Feng, 2018; Zhang and Shen, 2011). Many active faults are distributed around the study area, such as the Aniqiao-Medog Fault to the east, which is considered the seismogenic fault of the 1950 Ms=8.5 Assam earthquake, NW-SE Xixingla fault that is the seismogenic fault of the 2017 Ms=6.9 Milin earthquake, and Daduka Fault across the ZLL downstream (Hu et al., 2019). Neotectonic movement makes this area highly susceptible to intense and frequent earthquakes.

This catchment lies in the rain shadow area of Mt. Namche Barwa, and its precipitation is controlled by the Indian Ocean's humid monsoon through the Yarlung Tsangpo Gorge. The climate has a strong vertical difference: semi-humid climate zone beneath 3200 m, cold temperate climate zone between 3200-4000 m, and cold climate zone above 4000 m. According to the data recorded at the Linzhi meteorological station 46.2 km west of the ZLL, the annual air temperature with a mean value of 9.8 °C increases at an average rate of 0.36 °C/10a from 2000 to 2021, which is much higher than the global average (Chen et al., 2015). The annual precipitation ranges from 514 mm to 972 mm, exhibiting notable inter-annual variation, with no distinct trend over the past 20 years (**Fig. 2**).

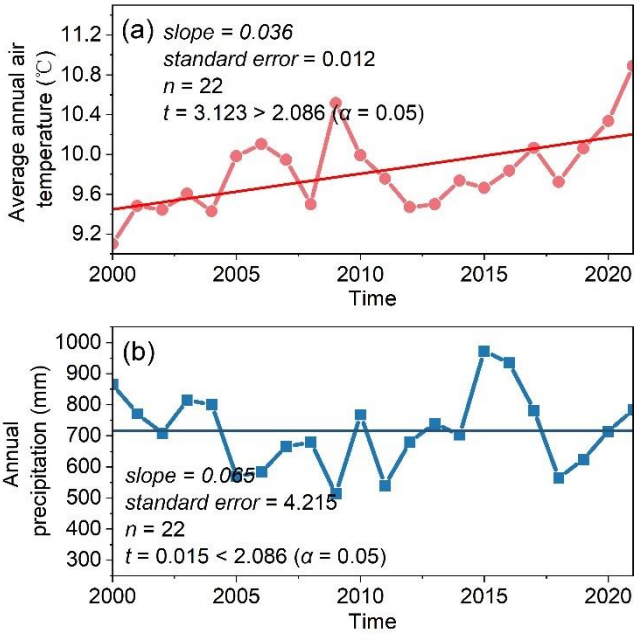


Figure 2: Annual temperature and precipitation data from 2000 to 2021 at Linzhi Meteorological Station. (Data source: https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/maps/annual/).

The ZLL catchment, characterized by unique geographical and climatic conditions, has hosted extensive glaciation and frequent glacial activity over geological time. The ZLL has experienced at least three glaciations in the Last Glacial Maximum

(LGM), Neoglaciation, and Late Holocene (Hu et al., 2020). The LGM moraine extended into the Yarlung Tsangpo and dammed the river (Huang et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2006; Montgomery et al., 2004; Zhu et al., 2012). The glacier surges/debris flows - dammed lake - outburst flood disaster events since the last glacial period also had an important impact on the landform and paleogeographical environment of the Yarlung Tsangpo Valley (Wang et al., 2021). The modern glaciers in this area are strongly influenced by the Indian monsoon and are highly sensitive to climate change. Hence, the ZLL glacier has advanced and retreated many times since the last century. The high instability and rapid changes of the glacier result in several glacier surges or calving events. As shown in **Fig. 1c**, the glacier snout was 3500 m a.s.l in 1926 (Ward, 1926). Since the 1950s, the ZLL glacier has experienced three surges or rapid advances (Zhang, 1985, 1992). The first surge occurred on August 15, 1950. Following the 1950 Assam earthquake, the terminus of ZLL Glacier advanced from 3650 m a.s.l to the Yarlung Tsangpo at 2810 m a.s.l with a horizontal displacement of up to 4.5 km. This event destroyed the Zhibai Village completely at the mouth of the Zhibai gully, killed 98 people, and formed an ice dam as high as tens of meters in the main river. The second surge occurred one afternoon in August or September of 1968 (corresponding to July 1968 in Tibetan calendar) when it was sunny (Zhang, 1985, 1992). The advance also resulted in a temporary ice dam in the Yarlung Tsangpo and deposited a glacial boulder of 4.0×5.0×5.5 m upstream of the dam (Zhang, 1985). It is worth noting that the position of the ice tongue before the second glacier surge has returned to the position before the first surge (3650 m a.s.l), and the peak velocity of these surges reached 1.5 km/d. After the second surge, the main glacier split into 6 segments due to differential ablation, and the terminus of the lowest segment of the glacier was at 2950 m a.s.l. The terminus of the lowest segment was about 2980 m a.s.l in 1969 as shown by the Corona reconnaissance satellite images (Kääb et al., 2021). The terminus of the lowest part of the glacier had probably been at 2950 m a.s.l before 13 April 1984 when an ice mass of 80000 m^3 detached at 3700 m a.s.l and traveled horizontally 150 m, which was the third rapid advance of the ZLL glacier (Zhang, 1992). After that, no glacier surges or detachments were recorded, but small-scale mountain torrents or debris flows occurred almost yearly (Zhang and Shen, 2011). At present, the glacier terminus is about 3770 m a.s.l.

3 Data and methodology

3.1 Data sources

We collected a total of 30 different remote sensing images from various sources dating back to 1969, with resolutions ranging from 1m to 15m (**Table 1**). The Keyhole images before 1982 were sourced from the Keyhole reconnaissance satellites (https://earthexplorer.usgs.gov/), originally serving as the primary data source for the United States Department of Defence and intelligence agencies for Earth imaging. These high-resolution images provide valuable visible data in the era without commercial satellite imagery. Images from 1988 to 2007 originated from the Centre National d'Études Spatiales (CNES) SPOT series data (https://regards.cnes.fr/user/swh/modules/60). Images from 2009 are sourced from the RapidEye series and Planet satellites (https://account.planet.com/), which are known for their short revisit periods and high resolution. To

comprehensively document the historical debris flow activity in ZLL, we diligently chose images captured after every rainy season (October to December) whenever feasible. Due to high cloud cover in the study area and limited availability of image resources, we substituted images from the following year before May for specific periods with significant image data gaps (e.g., before 2000) for those of the missing year (Li et al., 2017). Although the Landsat satellite series may offer more continuous observational records, their relatively coarse resolution makes them unsuitable for our study area.

Table 1: Data sources of the satellite images used in this study.

No.	Date	Data sources	Resolution (m)
1	1969/12/08	Keyhole	1
2	1972/2/28	Keyhole	1
3	1973/3/26	Keyhole	1
4	1975/12/21	Keyhole	4
5	1979/4/10	Keyhole	1
6	1982/10/15	Keyhole	1
7	1988/2/20	Spot1	15
8	1989/12/1	Spot1	15
9	1990/12/21	Spot2	12
10	1991/11/25	Spot3	12
11	2000/11/17	Spot4	10
12	2002/12/5	Spot5	6
13	2004/12/28	Spot5	6
14	2005/10/10	Spot5	6
15	2006/12/21	Spot5	6
16	2007/11/29	Spot5	6
17	2009/12/22	RapidEye	5
18	2010/12/15	RapidEye	5
19	2011/11/23	RapidEye	5
20	2012/12/15	RapidEye	5
21	2013/12/7	RapidEye	5
22	2014/12/13	RapidEye	5
23	2015/12/6	RapidEye	5
24	2016/12/13	Planet	3
25	2017/12/11	Planet	5
26	2018/12/13	Planet	3

27	2019/12/7	Planet	3
28	2020/12/10	Planet	3
29	2021/12/12	Planet	3
30	2022/12/10	Planet	3

3.2 Methodology

This study combines field surveys, aerial drone photography, and satellite imagery analysis to investigate debris flow events in the ZLL catchment. Historical records of the four debris flows lack volume data. High-resolution orthoimages and digital surface models are generated to assess terrain changes, while non-vegetated area (NVA) serves as a proxy for sediment volume for time series analyses. The integration of these methods provides detailed insight into the debris flow history and its influencing factors.

3.2.1 Field surveys

We conducted three field surveys in the ZLL between 2020 - 2022. During the initial two survey, we conducted two aerial drone photography works on September 9 and 11, 2020, using DJI MAVIC 2. Additionally, we measured downstream channel cross-sectional morphology, debris flow particle characteristics, and the extent of damage to the Zhibai Bridge, and sampled debris flow materials with size < 100 mm on the accumulation fan in the second survey. A full 3D view of the ZLL was captured with an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) in the third survey on December 21, 2022, a sunny winter day (**Fig. 1d**).

3.2.2 NVA interpretation

The inundation of debris flow on the alluvial fan often destroys vegetation cover and causes the affected area desertification in a few years. Generally, the NVA depends on the flow magnitude. So, the NVA of the alluvial fan shortly after a glacial debris flow can serve as a proxy of the volume of transported sediment. It should be noted that distinguishing fresh debris flow deposits on an alluvial fan from pre-existing exposed surfaces in the surrounding area is challenging in satellite images due to minimal color differences. Therefore, the NVA has some uncertainties in representing the real magnitude of the debris flows. We employed a visual interpretation approach to delineate NVAs within the ZLL alluvial fan. Identifying the NVA is primarily based on differences in color, hue, texture, and shading between vegetated and unvegetated regions. The Keyhole black and white photos and the SPOT single-band black and white images show distinct tonal differences between vegetated and unvegetated areas. In the true-color images obtained from RapidEye and Planet, the boundaries of NVAs are highly conspicuous. The ZLL interpretation zone is limited to the region between the two adjacent confluences of its upstream and downstream catchments with the main river.

Due to potential misalignment between remote sensing images from different sources, image matching is performed before manual delineation of the NVAs (Cui et al., 2022). To eliminate the errors of geospatial locations of the images from different

sources, we used the 2020 Planet image as the reference image and selected ground control points with clear markers on this image, such as road junctions, rivers, and typical topographic points. Third-order polynomial transformation is applied to match the images from other sources accurately with the 2020 image, ensuring a positional error of less than 20 m relative to the reference image. The original Keyhole images without geographical coordinates and projection system information are georeferenced with the 2020 Planet image with the ground control points. We assume that the visual interpretation error of NVAs is approximately one grid cell on either side of the boundary. Moreover, we verified the interpretation results of the remote sensing images with the UAV orthoimages.

3.2.3 Drone image interpretation

We employed Pix4DMapper and Arcmap10.8 to generate the UAV digital orthophoto maps (DOMs) and digital surface models (DSMs), as well as to perform DSMs differencing. As ground control points (GCPs) were not deployed during drone photography, we generated the DSM and DOM for September 9 in Pix4DMapper. Subsequently, 20 relatively stable points, unaffected by debris flow events, were selected as GCPs in Arcmap using the September 9 DOM as a reference. These control points were then applied in Pix4DMapper to generate the DSM and DOM for September 11. The DSMs of difference (DoD) analysis was subsequently conducted in Arcmap. To determine the uncertainty in our DoD differencing result we follow methods outlined in Shugar et al. (2021). Fifteen stable areas on old debris flow terraces adjacent to the valley floor, mainly roads and unseeded farmlands, were identified. The standard deviation of DoD values within these areas was calculated and used to estimate a two-sigma DoD uncertainty. The resulting uncertainty was estimated to be ±0.493 m.

Utilizing post-event DOM captured on September 11, we visually interpreted the distribution of particles from the downstream channel to the depositional fan on Arcmap10.8. High resolution and accurate color representation of the drone aerial images enable us to reliably identify coarse particles (>50 cm). The interpretation results were compared with measurements obtained with a caliper during the 2022 field survey.

4 Debris-flow events and Sediment characteristics

4.1 Multi-periodic glacial debris flows

Glacier surges or ice-rock avalanches can be transformed into debris flows that deliver massive amounts of sediment into the river or deposit on the alluvial fan. Four large-magnitude debris flows accompanied by glacier instability occurred in 1950, 1968, 1973, and 1984 (Zhang, 1992; Peng et al., 2022). The 1968 event coused significant deposition in the alluvial fan, characterized by a rough surface and indistinct channels (**Fig. 3-a2**). The magnitude of the 1950 event is perhaps more significant than that of the 1968 event. According to Zhang (1992), the detached glacier in 1950 climbed over the ~80 meters lateral moraine on the north at an elevation 4000 m and traveled downstream along the Zhibai gully (**Fig. 3-a1 and Fig. 4**). Based on the erosional scar photo on the lateral moraine (Zhang, 1992) and the 2022 UAV photo, the residual depositional

area of the 1950 event in the upstream gully is ~ 65,000 m^2 (**Fig. 4**). Although the glacier detachment happened in ZLL in 1950, most of the sediment deposited in the Zhibai channel and its alluvial fan. Fine sediment from the catchment can be quickly transported downstream by river flows, but most coarse sediment is still left on the bank or the alluvial fans. There are two terraces on the banks of the main river along the confluences of the ZLL catchment and Zhibai gully (**Fig. 5a**). T1 and T2 terraces are ~10 m and ~ 150 m above the river level, respectively (**Fig. 5b**). The 1950 and 1968 events completely dammed the Yarlung Tsangpo (Zhang, 1992). Compared with the 1969 Keyhole image (**Fig. 3a**), it is likely that the T1 terrace is the residual dam of the 1968 event. The debris flows in the 1950 glacier surge event eroded the T2 terrace (**Fig. 3-a2**), which implies that the T2 terrace formed before 1950. The residual inundation area of the 1950 event is ~0.78 km^2 (**Fig. 5a**). If the magnitude is proportional to the inundation area, the flow magnitude of the 1950 event could be larger than that of the 1968 event. From the 1972 and 1973 images, it is observed that fresh debris deposits inundated the north part of the fan and did not go beyond the 1968 accumulation zone (**Fig. 3-a2, 3-b2 and 3-c2**). The same lobes and deposition boundary and the marked collapse of the terminal glacier (**Fig. 3-b3 and 3-c3**) indicate that the so-called 1973 event mentioned by Peng et al. (2022) likely happened in 1972. The fan in December 1975 exhibits significant brightness variations (**Fig. 3-d2**), with pronounced channelization above the glacier (**Fig. 3-d1**), suggesting possible debris flow activity prior to this time. Compared with 1975, the fan in 1979 displays a flatter terrain and more distinct channelization (**Fig. 3-e2**), indicating the modification of the rough fan surface by debris flow activity. This also implies that, due to limited information at the time, additional events during this period may have gone unrecorded. By 1982, noticeable vegetation had recovered in the middle part of the fan (**Fig. 3-f2**). Concurrently, accelerated glacier ablation exposed lateral moraines (**Fig. 3-e3 and 3-f3**), while the glacier terminus developed an extensive crevasse network (**Fig. 3-f4 and 3-f5**). These fractured ice bodies and moraine materials, under the impact of ice avalanche at 3700 m described by Zhang (1992), contributed to the formation of the 1984 large-scale debris flow.

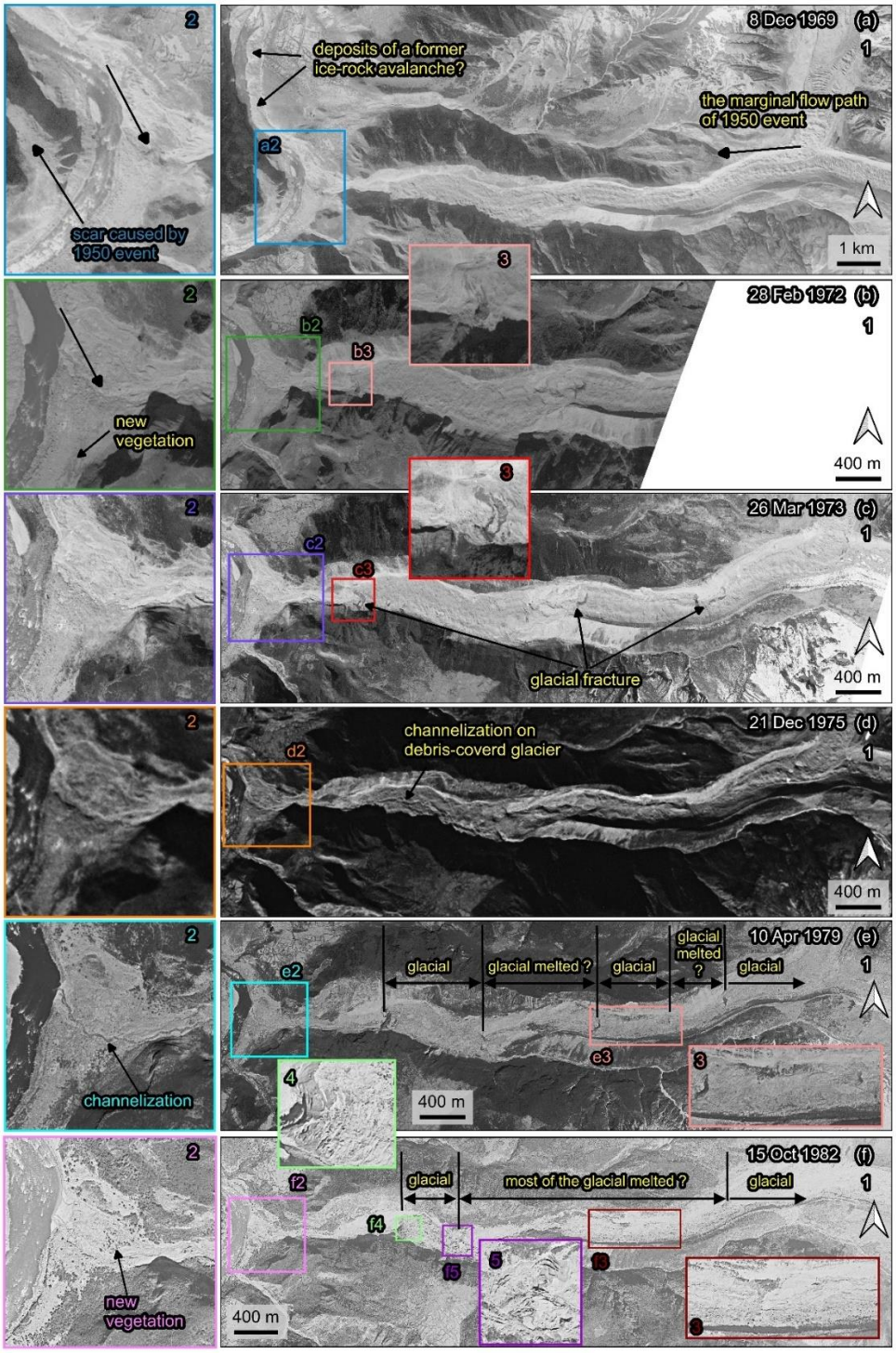


Figure 3: Variations of the Zelunglung alluvial fan and channel during 1969 – 1982. The images are taken from Keyhole reconnaissance satellites (https://earthexplorer.usgs.gov/).

Figure 4: Aerial photo of the Zelunglung main channel on December 21, 2022, and the old deposits in Zhibai gully left by the 1950 event (the view angle direction is denoted by green arrow in figure 1c, and the dashed rectangle indicates the location of Figure 5b).

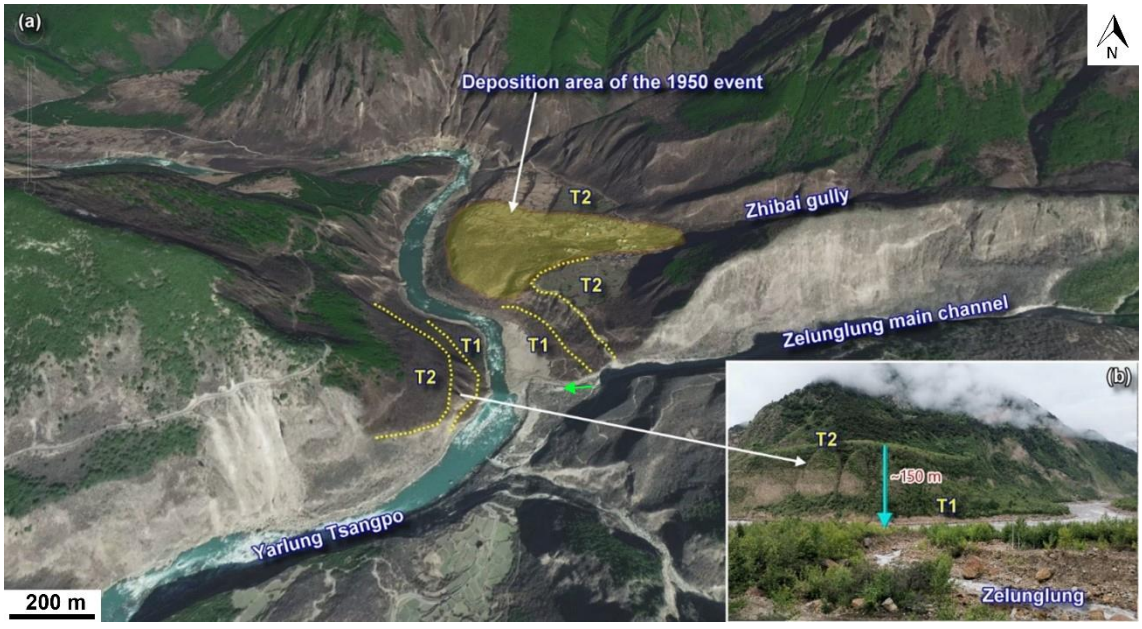


Figure 5: Two terraces on the banks of the main river. (a) Century Space's satellite image on 9 February 2021. (b) Picture of the terraces on the opposite bank of the Zelunglung taken on 8 September 2020. (T1 and T2 represent the terraces formed in two different periods. The green arrow denotes the view angle direction of figure b)

An ice-rock avalanche triggered the recently documented glacial debris flow on Sep. 10, 2020. The 2020 ice-rock avalanche initiated on the top ridge of the south branch at an elevation of 5500 m. The scar area of initiated ice and rock was 1.35×10^4 m^2 on the upper cliff (**Figs. 6a-b**). The initiated volume is estimated to be 7.0×10^4 m^3 by using the bedrock landslide area-volume empirical relationship ($V = \alpha A^{\gamma};\ \alpha = 0.186, \gamma = 1.35$) (Larsen et al., 2010). In the Google image on December 4, 2017 (**Fig. 6-c2**), it can be seen that there is a protruding rock mass on the cliff below the unstable ice-rock block. The rock mass develops many lateral cracks, and the top is covered with fresh, weathered materials, indicating freezing severe weathering. The fallen ice-rock block partially disintegrated and impacted colluvial deposits on steep hillslope below the cliff at elevations 4570–4800 m, forming a muddy fresh area of 0.134 km^2 (**Fig. 6b**). This area is often covered by snow and ice, and the ice-snow melting water easily infiltrates into the debris-ice mixtures. Once the slope material was entrained into the mass flow, such a nearly saturated mixture could quickly turn into a debris flow. Peng et al. (2022) estimated a debris loss of 1.14 Mm^3 in the scarp area except for the initiated ice and rock. But they mistake the hillslope below the cliff as the source area of the event. It is noted that there is an ice-rock residual of ~ 7.14×10^3 m^2 left under the cliff (**Fig. 6-b3**). That means the volume of the debris mass flowed downward into the south channel should include half of the initiated ice-rock mass and the debris loss of 1.14 Mm^3. The entrained volume is at least 16 times the initiated volume.

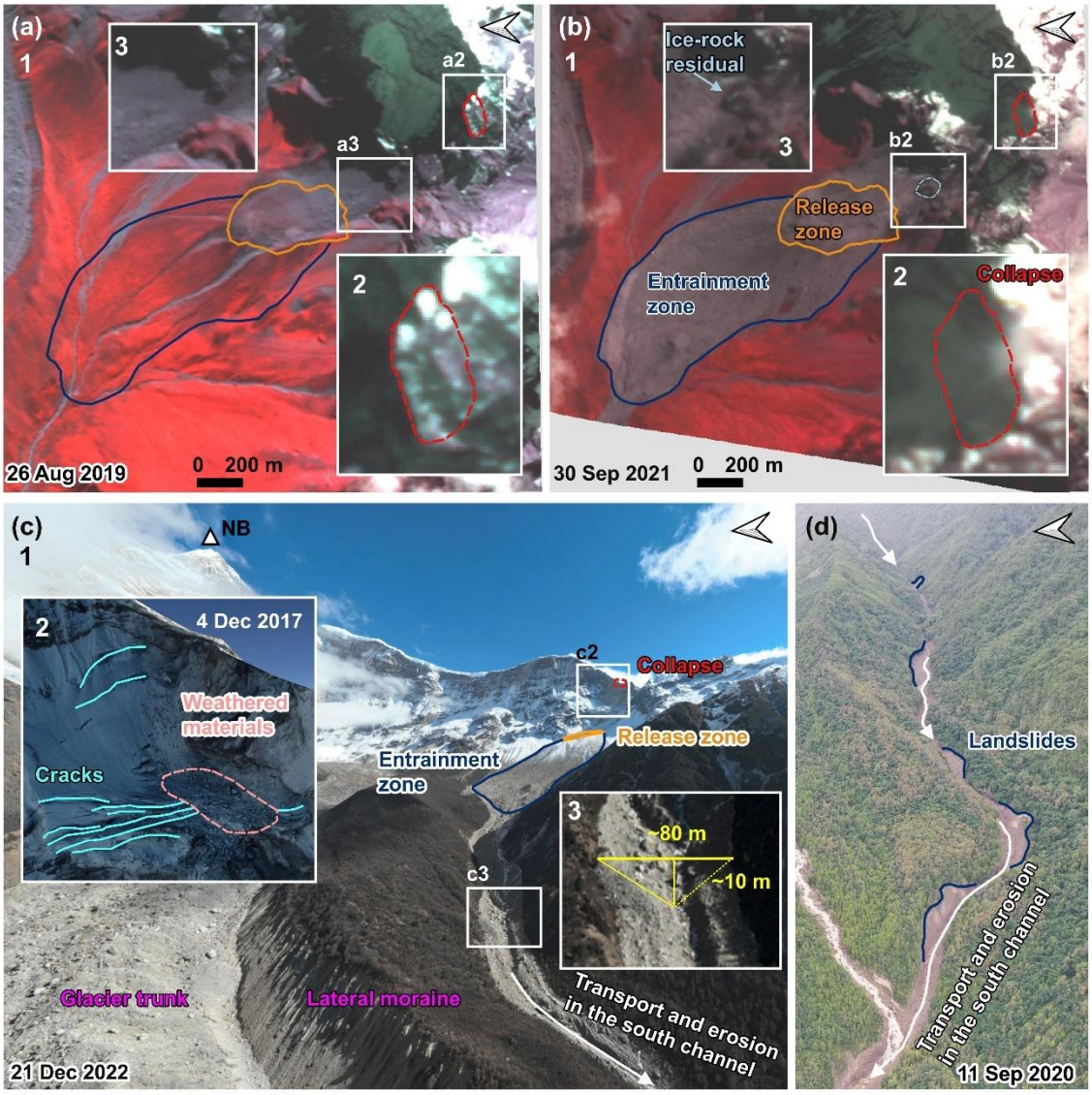


Figure 6: The initiation and propagation of the2020 Zelunglung periglacial glacier debris flow. (a) The planet image of the initiation area before the event. (a2) enlarged region over the pre-collapse site. (a3) Enlarge the region over the hillslope before the collapse. (b) The planet image of the initiation area after the event. (b2) enlarged region over the post-collapse site. (b3) enlarged region over the hillslope after the collapse. (base data of a-b: © 2024 Planet Labs PBC) (c) An aerial photo of the source area and the south channel on 21 December 2022 was taken by the UAV. (c2) Google Earth imagery of the initiation area on 2 December 2017 (base data: ©Google Earth). (c3) The region was enlarged over the south channel on 21 December 2022. (d) An aerial photo of the downstream channel on 11 September 2020 was taken by the UAV.

When the debris flows traveled downstream, parts of old channel sediment and lateral moraines were eroded while some of the flow mass was deposited on the banks. The flows also triggered many small landslides on both banks of the middle stream (**Fig. 6d**). The blockage by large boulders and the induced landslides on the narrow channel may enlarge the magnitude of the debris flows in the end (**Fig. 6d**) (Cui et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2020). The UAV photo shows the influx of debris flows that

transformed from the entrained sediment and melting water exceeded the average water level of the south channel. The flow cross-section is ~ 80 m wide at the top and ~ 10 m high in the thalweg based on the UAV photo and OpenCycle topographic map (**Fig. 6-c3**). The peak discharge and frontal flow velocity reached 4700 m^3/s and 11.4 m/s at the outlet (Peng et al., 2022). According to the description of local villagers, the first debris flow surge arrived at ZLL outlet at about 5:00 pm on September 10, and the second larger one arrived about one hour later. Two ice-rock avalanches with different volumes probably happened on the ridge and were the corresponding trigger of the downstream debris-flow surges. But it is more likely that there was only one ice-rock avalanche during the event, but a synchronization of the ice-rock impacts in the scarp area, and the channel blockage caused two debris-flow surges.

4.2 Sediment characteristics of the 2020 event

4.2.1 Difference between the initiation and the downstream areas

Periglacial debris flows can transport rocks or boulders not only in midstream steep channels but also in gentle downstream channels or alluvial fans. The sediment transportation capacity of the flows depends on flow hydrodynamics, grain composition, and topographic conditions. The 2020 ZLL event provides first-hand information for examining such sediment characteristics of the flows. Next, we present on-site data such as the size distribution of coarse grains, their impact, and erosion. The field evidence shows some features of periglacial debris-flow transportation that differ from fluvial transport.

There is a big difference between the sediment composition in the source and depositional areas. The initiated ice-rock debris and colluvial deposits on steep hillslopes consisted of angular rocks of various sizes. However, we observe that the deposits in the downstream areas are sub-rounded stones, and the downstream banks and channel bed are composed of sands and boulders up to several meters in diameter (**Fig. 7**). That means most of the angular rocks resided in the upslope or upstream channel and did not move downward. The angularity of the fragmented rocks reduced their mobility, and the attenuated overland flow had less transport capacity. The large sub-rounded or sub-angular boulders in the lower reaches came from the middle of the downstream reaches. We guess that grain segregation happened initially, and only fine parts of the ice-rock mass and melting water traveled downward the midstream. The resident angular rocks would be rounded gradually by the periglacial stream and transported downward by the subsequent floods or debris flows. The transportation mode of coarse grains is a kind of "Relay-race style", one event by one event.

Numerous boulders were on the channel and banks before the 2020 event, as seen from the aerial photo on 9 September 2020 (**Fig. 7a**). The in situ boulders were mobilized by the upstream flows and reorganized spatially. The boulders were prone to move together on the flat banks such as a flat storage yard near the bridge and the fan middle (**Fig. 7b**). The slope and flow depth are critical for the boulder's transport. Interstitial slurry among the boulders could separate from the boulders when the debris flows moved on a gentle slope or spread over an open fan (**Fig. 7c**). The interstitial slurry provided buoyancy for the boulders and reduced resistance between them and the bed. Once there was no interstitial slurry, the boulders quickly stopped.

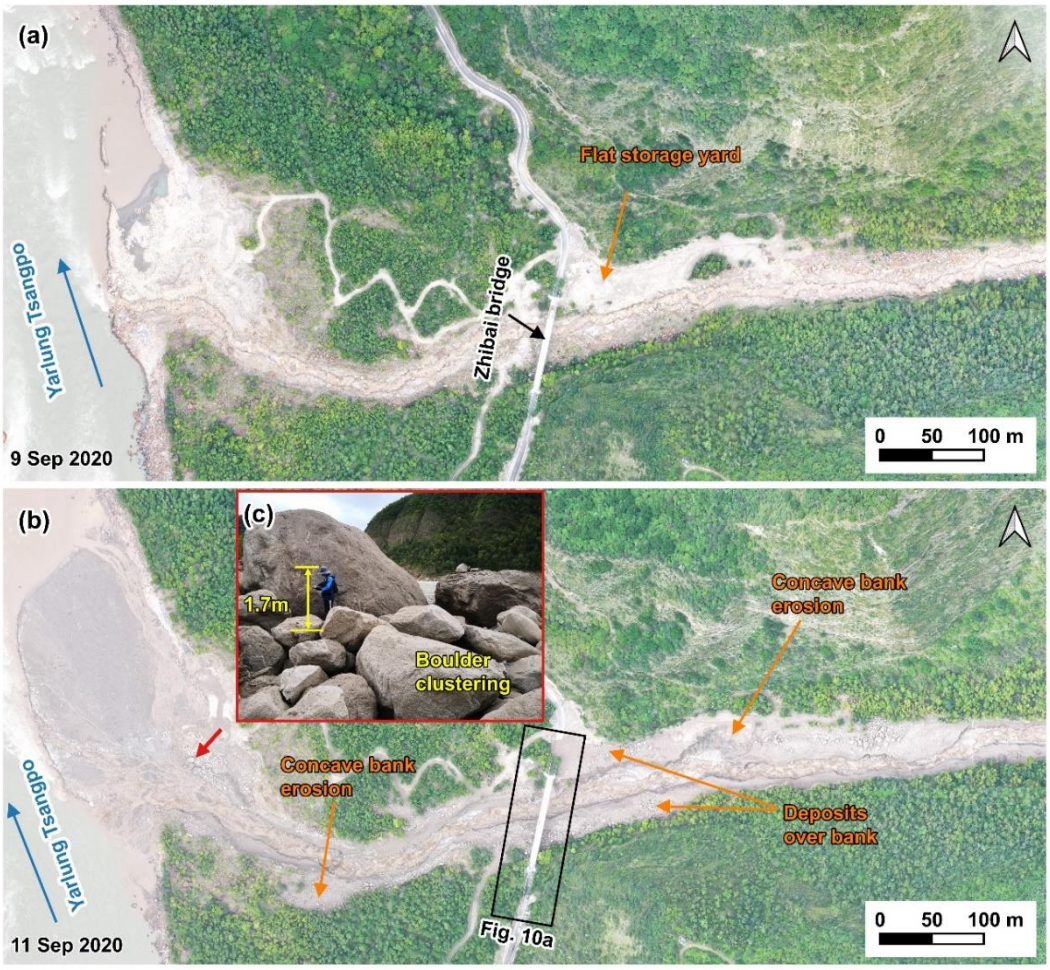
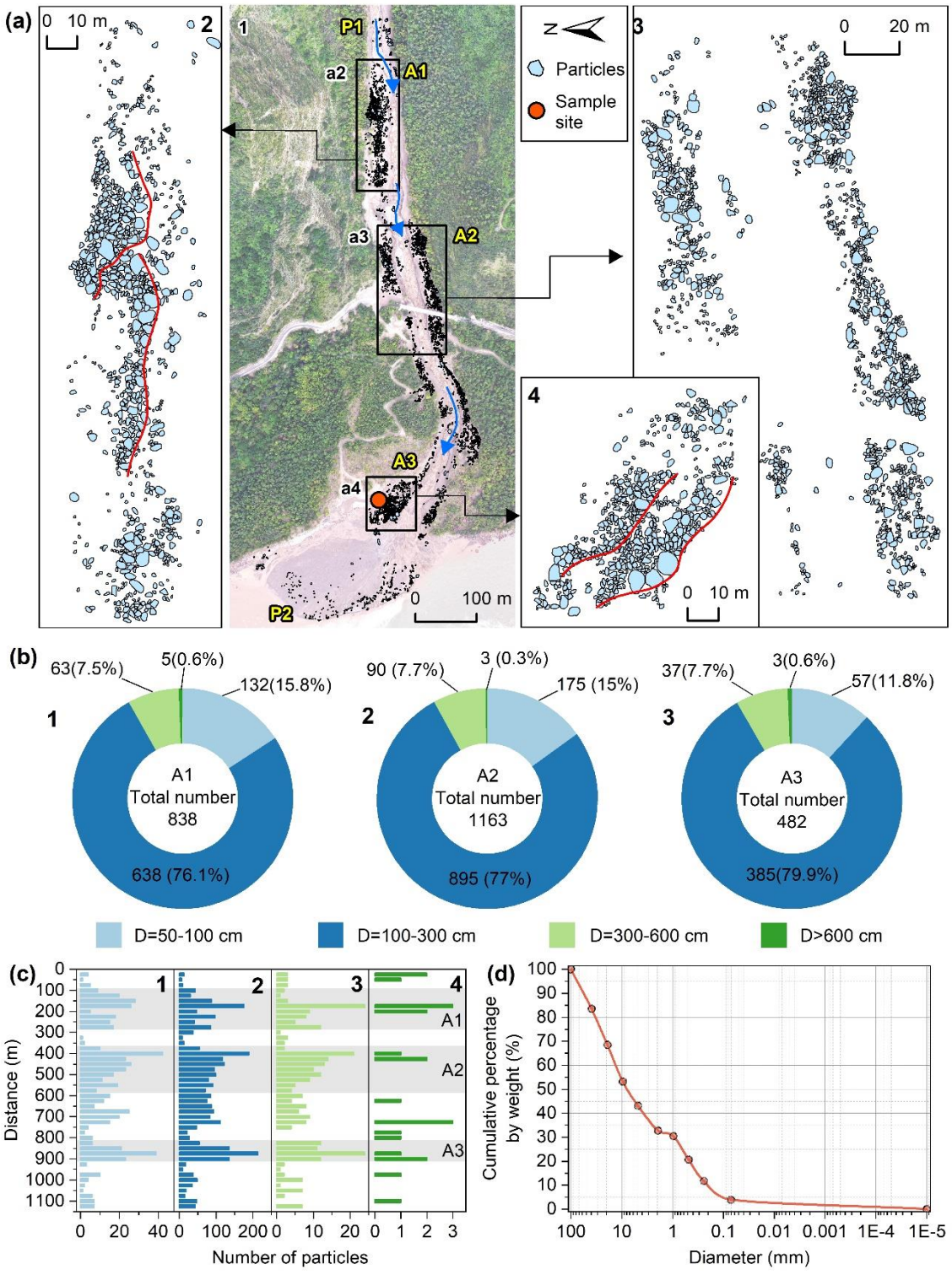


Figure 7: Comparison of pre-and post-event aerial photos on the downstream channel and alluvial fan. (a) the UAV photo on 9 September 2020; (b) the UAV photo on 11 September 2020; (c) On-site picture of the boulder clustering on 11 September 2020 (the camera angle direction is denoted by red arrow in figure b).

4.2.2 Grain-size distribution of coarse particles > 50 cm

In the downstream channel, with an average gradient of 13.8%, a relatively high velocity (11.4 m/s) enabled the flows to mobilize boulders of 5.0 meters in diameter (Costa, 1983). An 1125 m long straight reach from the first bend upstream of the bridge to the edge of the alluvial fan was chosen. Coarse particles > 50 cm on the deposition surface were visually interpreted from the orthophotos with a resolution of 0.17 m on September 11, 2020, after the debris-flow event. The long axis of the equivalent ellipse of these particles represents the particle size. Due to the limitation of resolution, only coarse particles with a long axis larger than 50 cm were counted (**Fig. 8**). A total of 3943 coarse particles were identified and divided into four size ranges of 50-100, 100-300, 300-600 and >600 cm. Spatial statistics of these particles were made every 25 m along the central flow line, and then 45 segments were divided.


(a)
0 10 m
2
1
P1
a2
A1
a3
A2
A3
a4
P2
0 100 m
N
Particles
Sample site
3
0 20 m
4
0 10 m
(b)
1
63(7.5%)
5(0.6%)
132(15.8%)
A1
Total number
838
638 (76.1%)
2
90 (7.7%)
3 (0.3%)
175 (15%)
A2
Total number
1163
895 (77%)
3
37(7.7%)
3(0.6%)
57(11.8%)
A3
Total number
482
385(79.9%)
D=50-100 cm
D=100-300 cm
D=300-600 cm
D>600 cm
(c)
Distance (m)
Number of particles
A1
A2
A3
(d)
Cumulative percentage by weight (%)
Diameter (mm)

310

Figure 8: Distribution of the grain size. (a) The distribution of coarse particles along the channel and alluvial fan. P1 and P2 represent the places where the count starts and ends, respectively. A1-A3 are the three main deposition sites. The blue arrow is the direction of the debris flows. The bottom image is an orthographic image taken by a drone on September 10, 2020. The locations of the enlarged regions (a2)-(a4) are shown as black boxes. (a2)-(a4) enlarged region over the three main deposition sites A1-A3. Panels (b1)-(b3) show the counts of four groups of the particles in the three main deposition sites A1-A3. Panels (c1)-(c4) show the counts of four groups of the particles in the 45 segments along the channel from P1 to P2. Particles with diameters of 50-100 cm, 100-300 cm, 300-600 cm, and particles larger than 600 cm in panels b-c are shown in light blue, blue, light green, and green. (d) Cumulative grain size distribution of the on-site sample with size < 100 mm.

63% of the particles are concentrated in three zones A1, A2, A3 (**Figs. 8a-b**). The three zones are gentle banks or floodplains. The large stones easily slowed down when the flow depth and the velocity decreased on the edges of the debris flows. The composition of the particles in A1-A3 exhibits similar grain size distribution (**Fig. 8b**). The size of the most numerous particles is between 100 and 300 cm. The stones with the size > 600 cm are the least. The number of particles with 100-300 cm size accounts for 77.4% of the total. Likewise, the particles with sizes of 50-100 cm, 300-600 cm, and >600 cm, accounted for 14.3%, 7.7%, and 0.6% of the total, respectively. If the particle volume is estimated with the equivalent ellipsoid volume, i.e. $V = (4\pi abc)/3$ (where a is major radius, b is short radius, c is polar radius and equal to b), the two groups of particles with the sizes of 100-300 cm and 300-600 cm have the largest volume.

The spatial distribution of these particles in the 45 segments is shown in **Figure 8c**. The same four size ranges are used (50-100 cm, 100-300 cm, 300-600 cm, and > 600 cm). The particles with the first three sizes have three peaks in A1, A2, and A3 (**Fig. 8c**). The first peak is located on the right bank highland of A1. When the debris flows moved to A1, the flow depth was far higher than the channel depth. Many coarse particles were left on the highland. The second peak is located on both channel sides above Zhibai Bridge. When the debris flow enters the bend at a high speed, a large velocity difference will be generated on the concave-convex bank, i.e., the super-elevation effect (Chen et al., 2009). The debris flows produced the super-elevation effect when they moved to A2, a partially curved channel. Then, some coarse particles overflowed the channel and deposited on the A2 banks. The third peak is at the top of the alluvial fan. When the debris flows moved out the catchment outlet and had no boundary constraint, the other coarse particles gradually deposited from the fan top to the fan edge due to loss of kinetic energy. In the A1 highland, the particle size decreased toward the outer edge of the channel (**Fig. 8-a2**), while the coarse particles in A2 were poorly sorted (**Fig. 8-a3**). In A3, the coarse particles on the surface show the parallel superposition of two depositional units, and the particle size of each depositional unit generally decreases toward the outer edge of the channel (**Fig. 8-a4**). It reflects the gradual accumulation of multiple debris-flow surges (Sohn, 2000; Major, 1998). The two depositional units may correspond to the two successive debris flow surges in ZLL at 5:00 pm and 6:00 pm.

4.2.3 Impact and erosion

Debris flows usually have steep coarse-grained surge fronts (snouts) and inter-surge watery flows (McCoy et al., 2013; Yan et al., 2023). The periglacial debris flows in ZLL had similar spatial compositions. The granular flows (coarse-grained snouts) at the fronts exerted a powerful impact on obstacles, and the inter-surge watery flows or water-rich tails with relatively low sediment concentration played critical roles in erosion. The ZLL debris flows had a very high content of coarse particles and

wide distribution. The impact of the coarse particles witnessed by the damages of the Zhibai bridge, a 100m long cable bridge with a steel frame (**Fig. 9a**). The foundation of the bridge was exposed by the strong erosion capacity of the debris flows (**Fig. 9b**). The middle steel frame was intensely impacted by run-up boulders and highly deformed (**Fig. 9c**). The concrete bridge body displaced 16 cm in vertical direction and 36 cm in horizontal direction (**Figs. 9d and e**). The velocity of the largest boulder with a size of 9.9 m was 12.6 m/s, and the impact force of the largest boulder was estimated to be 3.64×10^6 kN. The velocity of the debris flow at the selected cross section near the Zhibai bridge was 9.65 m/s, the peak value of debris-flow runoff was 1743.4 m^3/s（**Fig. 10**）(Li et al., 2024).

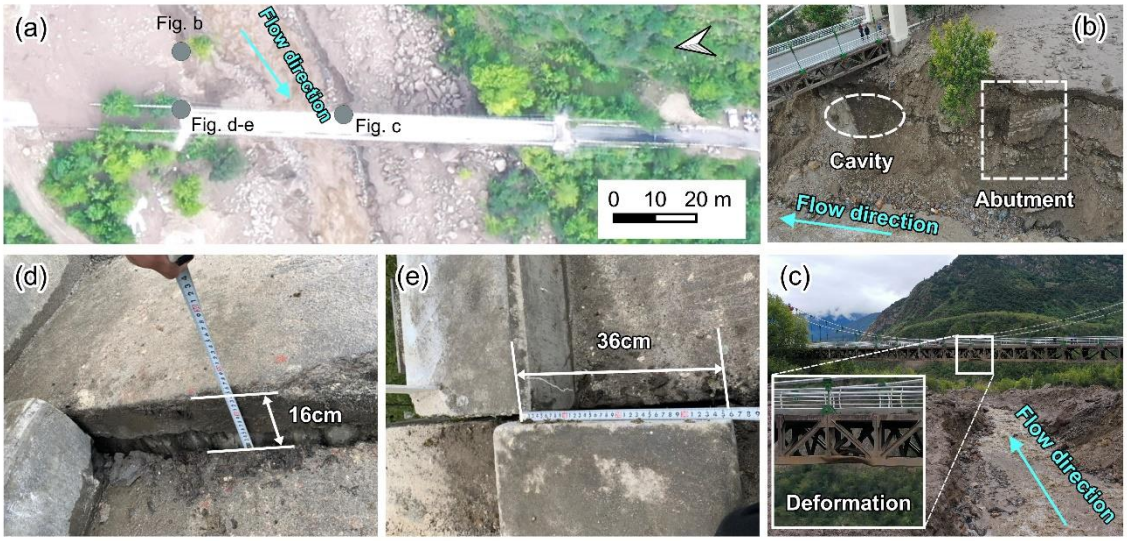


Figure 9: Damages to the Zhibai Bridge caused by debris flows (photos taken on 11 Sep 2020). (a) The overview of Zhibai Bridge taken by UAV and the locations shown in photographs (b)-(e) taken with handheld cameras are shown in gray circles. (b) The photo of the damaged bridge foundation. (c) The photo of the damaged steel frame. (d) Photo of on-site measurements of the vertical displacement of the bridge. (e) Photo of on-site measurements of the horizontal displacement of the bridge.

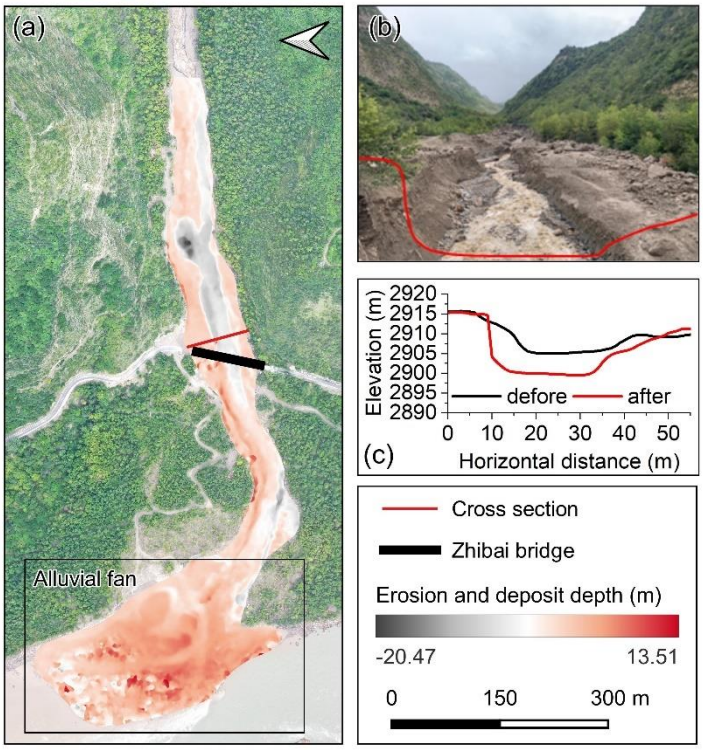


Figure 10: Geomorphic changes of the channel and alluvial fan after the debris flows of 2020. (a) Erosion and deposit depth caused by the debris flows. The base map is taken by UAV on 10 Sep 2020. (b) Photo of the channel after the debris flows. The red line represents the cross-section next to the Zhibai Bridge (photo taken on 11 Sep 2020). (c) Cross-sections before (black) and after (red) the debris flows.

A vibrating sieve measured one sample taken from the debris-flow deposits with the size < 100 mm. The concentration of sediment finer than 0.075 mm is low, only 3.8% of the whole sample's mass (**Fig. 8d**). D50 and D90 of the sample are 8.3 mm and 62.9 mm, respectively, as linearly interpolated from the sieve-measured data. The field evidence shows that the debris flows strongly eroded the downstream channel. Comparing the DSMs before and after the 2020 event, the maximum erosive depth was up to 20.47 m, and the mean erosive depth was 4.17 m (**Fig. 10a**). Peng et al. (2022) numerically simulated the final erosion and deposition along the flow path. The maximum erosion depth was 7.41 m at the beginning of the downstream channel. We think the simulation underestimates the erosion depth because the final erosion accumulates several erosive watery flows. Lateral erosion happened nearly along the whole downstream channel. The channel width increased from 17 m to 33 m at 70 m upstream of the bridge. The lateral erosion exposed the bridge foundation, and a cavity formed below the pier (**Fig. 9b**). Concave bank erosion widened the channel by 14 m downstream. Based on the DoD, we estimated that at least 12.8×10^4 m^3 ($\pm1.85\times10^4$ m^3) of debris was transported out of the catchment (**Fig. 10a**). However, compared with the study of Peng et al. (2022), the true volume may be seriously underestimated because part of the sediment may be submerged by the Yarlung Tsangpo River, which is a bias caused by the difference in data acquisition time and DEM/DSM resolution.

5 Multi-periodic Sedimentation in the confluence

Multi-periodic periglacial debris flows are strongly related to variations in the NVA of the alluvial fan. In practice, the NVA includes a fixed part of the area inundated by the river and then is larger than the debris-flow depositional or flooded area (**Fig. 11**). Technically, the NVA caused by the main river cannot be completely excluded from the total area. However, the river bank line was fixed from the 1980s to the 2010s when no large periglacial debris flows happened (**Figs. 11b and c**) (Zhang and Shen, 2011). So, it is reasonably assumed that the variation of the river water level has no significant influence on the NVA's change, and it represents the volume trend of the sediment transported by the debris flows.

From the Keyhole satellite image in 1969, the deposited debris from the 1968 event resided on the confluence and covered a 2.5 km downstream reach of the Yarlung Tsangpo River from the junction (**Fig. 3a**) (Kääb et al., 2021). During 1969 – 1979, the area of the accumulated fan kept at about 0.28 km^2. The 1972 image shows vegetation gradually developed from the edge of the accumulation fan (**Fig. 3-b2**). A new channel developed along the 1972 deposition boundary across the middle of the fan (**Fig. 3b-2**). Since then, the area without vegetation cover has reduced to 0.048 km^2 in 2005 and kept a slight fluctuation from 1985 to 2005. It indicates that only rainfall-induced small-scale flash floods or debris flows occurred during 1985-2005, which is confirmed by Zhang and Shen (2011). The NVA increased slowly, with a slight variation from 2005-2019. In 2020, the NVA abruptly increased to 0.112 km^2 due to the ice-rock avalanche that happened on September 10 (**Fig. 11**). The expansion of NVA in 2020 demonstrates it is the most enormous debris flow event in the ZLL since 1972. At the same time, the river channel narrowed down by more than 60 meters compared to before. The multi-periodic sedimentation in the ZLL and Zhibai fans leads to rapids in this reach, forming a knickpoint before the river enters the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon.

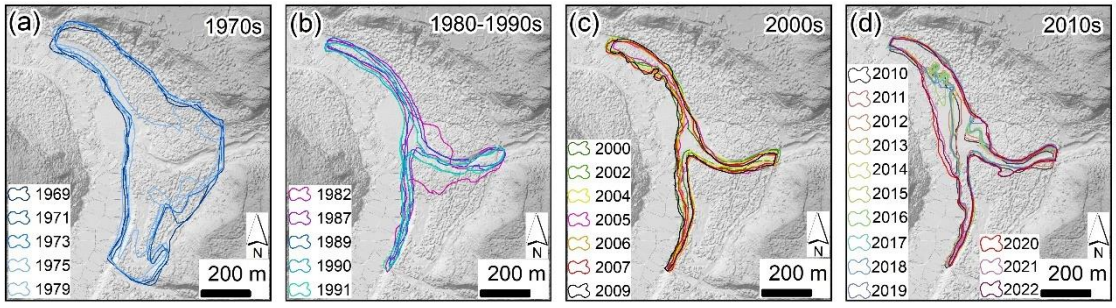


Figure 11: Evolution of the non-vegetated area in the Zelunglung alluvial fan from 1969 to 2022

6 Discussions

6.1 The dominant factor for debris flows and sediment yield

Strong ground vibrations caused by earthquakes can intensify cracking within the ice/rock mass, ultimately leading to the formation of substantial failure surfaces (Kilburn and Voight, 1998). Additional loading by earthquakes and coseismic-ice/rock avalanches could damage the englacial conduit and subglacial drainage system. These changes can cause dynamic alterations

to the glacier's thermal sensitivity, exacerbating its instability (Zhang et al., 2022b). As critical solid material sources, these highly active ice/rock masses caused by seismic disturbance are prone to avalanches, calving, detachment and remobilization to form glacial debris flows (Deng et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2022b). The data of seismic events since 1940 are collected from the United States Geological Survey (USGS) National Earthquake Center (NEIC) (https://earthquake.usgs.gov/earthquakes/search/) (**Fig. 12a**). It is observed that the four events in the ZLL in 1950, 1968, 1984, and 2020 were preceded by significant seismic activity. However, not all earthquakes influenced the instability of ZLL glaciers and hillslopes. Keefer (1984) presented an upper bound curve of maximum distance from epicenter to disrupted slide or fall (**Fig. 13**). Since 1940, only 12 earthquakes within a 420-km radius of ZLL fall below the bound curve, including the 1947 earthquake, the 1950 Assam earthquake and its aftershocks, the 1985 earthquake, and the 2017 Milin earthquake. Notably, the impact distance of a large earthquake can reach hundreds of kilometers. For example, the co-seismic landslides triggered by the 2015 Gorkha Mw 7.8 earthquake extended to a distance of over 130 km from the epicenter (Martha et al., 2017). The 1950 Assam earthquake, with its epicenter approximately 199 km from the ZLL, had a very high magnitude (Mw 8.6) and occurred in the tectonically active eastern Himalayan syntaxis. Coupled with subsequent high-magnitude aftershocks near the ZLL (**Fig. 13**), the seismic impact on the ZLL was significantly amplified despite the distance. This seismic event also triggered a prolonged period of debris flow activity, persisting for decades, in Guxianggou, approximately 50 kilometers northeast of the ZLL (Du and Zhang, 1981). Although 13 earthquakes of $Mw > 5.1$ occurred in 1968 and 6 earthquakes of $Mw \geq 4.5$ occurred in 1984, none of these seismic events fell within the range of influence as defined by the Keefer curve (**Fig. 13**). This suggests that these earthquakes did not have a significant influence on the debris flow events of 1968 and 1984. The 1950 debris flow event was directly triggered by the 1950 Assam earthquake (Zhang, 1992), and the root causes of the 1968, 1972 and 1984 events were the structural damage to the glacier and its exposure to lower altitudes with higher temperatures, both resulting from the 1950 earthquake. If including the inundated area of ~0.78 km^2 in 1950, the alluvial area disturbed by debris flows or floods decreased by 91% until 1990 (**Fig. 12d**). This means the earthquake effect becomes negligible 40 years later, as the understability of the glacier/materials caused by the earthquake may have improved. While the highest frequency of earthquakes occurred near the time of the 2020 event, they could be ignored due to their small magnitude ($Mw \leq 5.2$) and long distance (>30km) (**Fig 13**). This is because even the 2017 Mw 6.4 Milin earthquake, with an epicenter 24 km from the ZLL, had a very limited impact area (310 km^2, ~10 km impact radius) (Hu et al., 2019), and there were no report or sign of such glacier-related hazards in the ZLL. However, there are direct proofs that the Milin earthquake caused the 2018 glacier surges and extra large-scale debris flows in the Sedongpu (Hu et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2022b), 25 km dowstream of the ZLL.

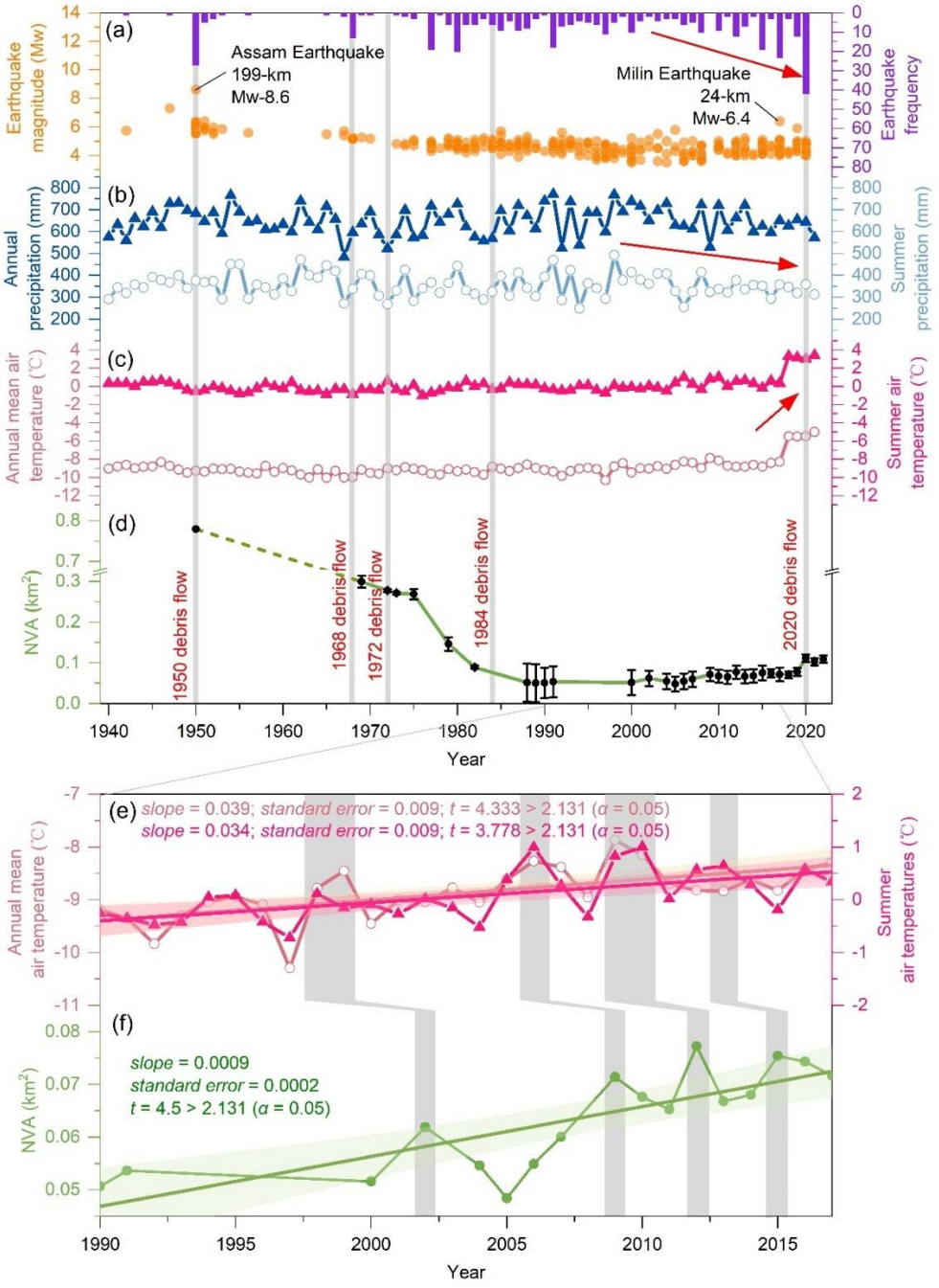


Figure 12: (a) Seismic events within a 200 km distance to the Zelunglung from 1940 to the present. (b) Changes in the annual mean and summer air temperatures in the Zelunglung from 1940 to the present. (c) Changes in the annual and summer precipitation in the Zelunglung from 1940 to the present. (d) Changes in the non-vegetated area of the Zelunglung alluvial fan from 1969 to the present (although the deposition of the 1950 event did not happen at the Zelunglung's outlet like the later events, we plot the NVA of the 1950 event as the starting point). (e) Changes in the annual and summer precipitation in the Zelunglung from 1990 to 2017. (f) Changes in the non-vegetated area of the Zelunglung alluvial fan from 1990 to 2017.

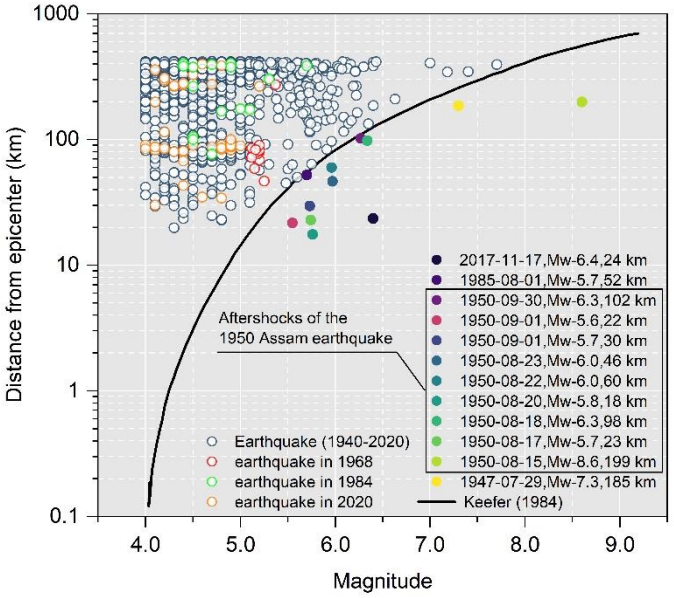


Figure 13: Distance from epicenters of the collected seismic events to the Zelunglung vs. the seismic magnitude (the black solid curve refers to Keefer (1984)).

Furthermore, we extracted the gridded mean values of annual mean air temperature, summer air temperature, annual precipitation, and summer precipitation within the ZLL catchment during 1940 - 2021 from a dataset for China (1901-2021) (Peng, 2019) and 1-km monthly precipitation dataset for China (1901-2021) (Peng, 2020), respectively (**Fig. 12b and c**). These data were validated using 496 independent meteorological observation points (Peng et al., 2019). From 1940 to 2017, the annual mean and summer air temperatures at the ZLL kept relatively stable. However, in 2018, there was a sudden and significant increase in the annual mean and summer air temperatures, with an amplitude exceeding 2.5 ℃. Since then, the temperatures have maintained at a high level. There has been no significant change in annual and summer precipitation since 1940, but a slight decreasing trend has been observed since 2000. The rates of atmospheric warming in the Tibetan and Himalayan regions are far higher than the general global warming rate since 1960, which accelerates the rates of most glaciers shrinking and ice mass loss across the regions (Shugar et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020). Recent studies have shown that the on-going climate warming increases the frequency of such glacier-related slope failures. For instance, the number of rockfalls per decade show a similar growing trend with mean annual air temperature in Chamonix, Mont Blanc massif, France since 1934 (Deline et al., 2015). The frequency of non-seismic rock avalanches in the glaciated Saint Elias Mountains of Alaska was associated with above-average temperatures and is expected to continue increasing with ongoing climate warming (Bessette-Kirton and Coe, 2020). Shugar et al. (2021) suggested that the 2021 Chamoli catastrophic ice-rock avalanche and subsequence mass flow resulted from a complex response of the geologic and topographic settings to regional climate change. Figure 12f highlights four distinct NVA peaks, which likely correspond to small mountain torrents or debris-flows, as suggested by Zhang and Shen (2011). These NVA peaks exhibit a lag of 2–4 years relative to annual mean or summer air temperature peaks **(Figure**

12e and 12f). Similarly, the sharp increase in NVA caused by the 2020 debris flow event occurred two years after the 2018 warming anomaly (**Fig. 12b and 12d**). This lag phenomenon has also been observed in other comparable regions (Stoffel et al., 2024). Even though there is no direct observation data of surface temperature in the ZLL highland, years of intense warming may change the thermal and hydrological conditions of the ZLL glaciers, such as the thermal regime at the rock-ice contact surface, melting rate of the surface ice and snow, englacial drainage system, fostering the instability of ice-rock blocks on the top. Previous intense seimic shaking could widen rock fractures and reduce the ice-rock strength. It is no doubt that the 2020 ZLL event is the product of the interplay among geological movement, steep topography, and climate warming. However, based on the fact that the lag relationship between the fluctuation peaks of NVAs and temperature fluctuations from 1990 to 2020, it is likely that the 2020 event was triggered by the recent local warming.

It is evident that either earthquakes or climate change may increase the occurrence of periglacial debris flows and their sediment yield in southeastern Tibet (Du and Zhang, 1981; Deng et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2023). In the case of ZLL, the NVA closely related to the debris flows decreased until 1990 and slightly fluctuated increased around a low level until 2020. That means the effects of the 1950 earthquake were decaying. The response of hillslopes or glaciers to earthquakes is immediate. Had the 2017 Milin earthquake strongly impacted the glaciers in the ZLL, ice-rock failures would have happened a few months later, like in the Sedongpu catchment. By contrast, the response of glaciers to warming will take longer. Meanwhile, approximately one month prior to the 2020 debris flow event, the maximum temperature recorded was 27°C, with a peak precipitation of only 17.5mm. Notably, on the day the 2020 debris flow occurred, the steel bridge deck remained dry, indicating that the precipitation was very light (Peng et al., 2022). On the other hand, the magnitude of the warming-driven debris flows is smaller than that of the earthquake-driven. We believe the abrupt 2.5 ℃ warming in 2018-2020 is dominant in initiating the 2020 ice-rock avalanche.

6.2 The future risk

Zhang et al. (2022a) predicted that cryosphere degradation driving the increasing sediment yield in cold regions is likely to shift from a temperature-dependent regime toward a rainfall-dependent one in the next century. But in tectonically active high-altitude areas, the temperature-dependent and the earthquake-dependent regimes will alternate in the future.

The period of the ZLL glacier surges is getting shorter. Zhang (1985) supposed that the surging cycle of the ZLL glacier was about 20 years. According to the latest research by Guillet et al. (2022), the ZLL glacier showed signs of surge in 2004, 2005, and 2006. Moreover, there are more obvious signs of a surge in 2015 (**Fig. 14**). The interval between the last two surges is ten years, which shows that the surging cycle of the ZLL glacier may be decreasing, and the next large-scale surge may happen in the next ten years. Furthermore, changes in the speed of glacier movement can strongly impact channel side moraines or terminal moraines and lead to slope failures (Richardson and Reynolds, 2000). The potential ice collapse area in the formation area of the ZLL catchment is 2.4 km^2, the rock collapse area reaches 0.96 km^2, and the loose moraine accumulation reaches 5.2 km^2 (Li et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022). However, the 2020 debris flow was caused by a relatively small area of ice-rock

collapses in the formation area, which is only the tip of the iceberg compared to the overall high-risk provenances in the formation area of the ZLL catchment. That means if intense earthquakes or extreme warming events happen not far away from the catchment, the risk of slope failures or glacier detachment on the steep slopes and ridges is high and huge amounts of sediment will bey transported into the river by large-scale debris flows.

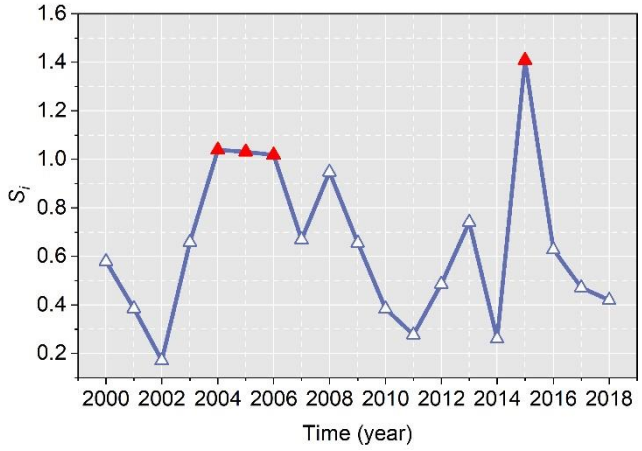


Figure 14: Surge-index (S_i) of Zelunglung Glacier from 2000 to 2018. S_i is a quantitative index of the surge magnitude, calculated by the formula $S_i = \frac{IPR_i}{k \cdot V_0}$, where IPR_i is the inter-percentile range for year i, k is a threshold for surge identification, and V_0 is the error-weighted mean velocity for the study year. The years with S_i>1 are marked with red triangles. (Data source: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5524861 (Guillet et al., 2022)).

6.3 Effects on river geomorphology

The moraine and old deposits on both channel sides provided numerous boulders for debris flows. The number of coarse particles transported by the ZLL periglacial debris flows is very high, and there is no obvious particle sorting along the flow path. Most of the boulders are gneiss with high hardness, and the wearing and disintegration effects are not significant during the movement along the channel. Coarse particles are deposited on the platform at the bend and the top of the alluvial fan, where the channel suddenly widens. Such phenomenon demonstrates that the movement, deposition, and particle size distribution of the debris flow are not only related to the type of debris flow (Bardou et al., 2003) but also to topographic conditions (Ghilardi et al., 2001; Zhou et al., 2019).

The deposition of the 2020 debris flow narrowed the Yarlung Tsangpo River at the outlet of the ZLL, and the river bed was significantly elevated. The river flow hardly transports the boulders on the alluvial fan. The peak discharge of the largest flood in the Yarlung Tsangpo recorded by the hydrologic station at Nuxia, 40 km upstream of the ZLL, is 16800 m^3/s. The maximum size of the particles in such a flood is about 150 cm. The floods capable of moving the coarsest boulders (> 600 cm) deposited on the ZLL fan should be on the order of 10^6 m^3/s of peak discharge (Lang et al., 2013). Such high-magnitude floods in the Yarlung Tsangpo were caused by catastrophic breaching of landslide or glacial dams, e.g., several Quaternary megafloods in the middle and downstream of Yarlung Tsangpo (Hu et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2022), rather than caused by

monsoonal runoffs. Modern outburst floods higher than 10^5 m^3/s only happened on the Yigong River, a downstream tributary of the Yarlung Tsangpo Gorge (Hu et al., 2021). Therefore, the time to evacuate the coarse sediments on the alluvial fan is two orders of magnitude of the recurrence period of periglacial debris flows. The long-lived protruding fan forms a knickpoint at the confluence. The repeated glacial and landslide dams in the margin of the Tibetan Plateau play significant roles in reducing the river incision into the plateau interior together with the moraine dams in the glaciation ages (Hu et al., 2021).

7 Conclusions

High-magnitude sediment evacuation by periglacial debris flows is a crucial surface process that links sediment yield from high-altitude slopes to river sediment transportation. The ongoing glacier degradation in the Himalayan mountains in response to recent earthquakes and climate change increases the frequency of the debris flows and their sediment volume. The ZLL catchment in the tectonically active eastern Himalayan syntaxis with a high uplift rate has recorded five periglacial debris flow events since 1950. These events delivered huge volumes of sediment into the Yarlung Tsangpo River. We examine the history of the five events and their sediment characteristics, especially the ice-rock-avalanche-triggered event in 2020, through field investigations and remote sensing interpretations. Some findings are concluded as follows:

a) The periglacial debris flows have great capacities to erode channels, transport sediment, and impact obstacles. The maximum values of the erosion depth, the erosion width, and the impact force near the ZLL outlet are about 20 m, 14 m, and 3.64×10^6 kN, respectively, in the 2020 event. The debris flows transported a high concentration of coarse grains with the size > 50 cm. The 100-300 cm grains account for 77.4% of the coarse grains.

b) Most of the angular rocks moved by the 2020 avalanche were not delivered downward further. The boulders transported by subsequent debris flows probably originated from the middle of the downstream reaches. The grain size segregation was not observed between the middle reach and the alluvial channel.

c) The NVA of the ZLL fan reduced from 0.78 km^2 in 1950 to 0.067 km^2 in 1990, and kept at a stable low value until 2020, indicating the influence of the 1950 earthquake on the debris-flow sediment transportation could last 40 years. Compared with the 1999 Chi-chi earthquake and the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in non-glaciated areas, the influence period of the 1950 earthquake is much longer.

d) The seismic and local meteorological data show that the recent warming events drove the 2020 debris-flow event during 2018-2020. The surging cycle of ZLL glaciers is getting short due to climate change. The correspondence between the recent increases in the local air temperature and the NVA implies that the debris flow occurrences in ZLL transfer from the tectonic-driven to the climatic-driven, with debris flows exhibiting a lagged response of 2-4 years to rising temperatures.

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Data availability. All raw data can be provided by the corresponding authors upon request.

Author contributions. KHH conceptualized the study, interpreted the images, wrote and edited the manuscript. HL analyzed the data and wrote the manuscript draft. KHH, HL, SL, LW, XPZ, and BZ performed the field surveys. HL and MRG collected satellite and background data. LMZ provided constructive suggestions. All authors contributed to the preparation and editing of the paper.

Competing interests. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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