Highlights

1. Stepwise including topography ~~&~~and vegetation improved runoff ~~&~~and snow simulations.

~~Simulations.~~

2. ~~Snowmelt contributed 23.5% & 14.7%~~The ratio of snowmelt runoff to streamflow was 23.6% and 15.9% in two Mongolian basins.

3. High elevations showed slower snowmelt release; low elevations ~~responded rapidly to~~generate rapid, rainfall ~~events~~-driven runoff.

Revealing the Influence of Topography and Vegetation on Hydrological Processes Using a Stepwise Modelling Approach in Cold Alpine Basins of the Mongolian Plateau

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Abstract: Topography and vegetation are critical factors influencing catchment hydrology; however, their individual contributions are often underestimated in hydrological models. This limitation is particularly evident in cold, mountainous regions such as the Mongolian Plateau, where observational data are sparse. To address this, we employed a stepwise, top-down modelling strategy based on ~~the FLEX~~a flexible modelling framework to systematically assess the influence of topography and vegetation on hydrological processes in the Bogd Uliastai and Zavkhan Guulin river basins. Beginning with a lumped model ($FLEX^{L}$), we successively integrated snow

processes (FLEX^{L}-S), topographic distribution (FLEX^{D}), and finally, a landscape-based parameterization accounting for vegetation heterogeneity (FLEX^{T}). Both FLEX^{D} and FLEX^{T} outperformed the lumped models in simulating runoff and ~~SWE.~~snow water equivalent (SWE). Interestingly, FLEX^{T} showed similar performance to FLEX^{D}—likely due to limited vegetation heterogeneity—it offers more physically realistic parameterization by explicitly representing landscape units, suggesting its potential in more complex basins. ~~Snowmelt contributions~~The ratio of snowmelt runoff to streamflow ~~were~~was quantified as 23.~~5~~6%±0.7% and 15.9%±1.3~~% and 14.7%±1.6~~% in the Bogd Uliastai and Zavkhan Guulin river basins, respectively, with peaks in spring and a clear increase with elevation. At high elevations, ~~delayed~~ runoff is primarily snowmelt~~-resulted~~-driven, resulting in ~~sustained~~delayed and gradual runoff, ~~while~~whereas lower elevations ~~responded more rapidly to~~ dominated by rainfall~~. The explicit representation of vegetation heterogeneity further improved the model's capacity to capture landscape complexity and~~ generate rapid runoff. Controlled by distinct dominant hydrological mechanisms, different landscape units contribute unequally to streamflow. This study underscores the pivotal roles of topography and vegetation in runoff generation and demonstrates the effectiveness of a stepwise modelling framework for improving hydrological understanding in cryospheric and data-scarce regions.

Keywords: Mongolian Plateau, FLEX model, stepwise modelling framework, snowmelt, topography, vegetation

1. Introduction

Understanding and accurately simulating hydrological processes are fundamental for elucidating basin hydrological patterns and supporting water resource management and ecological protection~~, especially~~ under ~~the context of~~ global environmental change ~~(Gomes et al., 2023; Oki and Kanae, 2006)~~(Gomes et al., 2023; Oki and Kanae, 2006). Topography and vegetation play essential roles as drivers of hydrological processes, influencing ~~key aspects such as~~ precipitation, interception ~~(Dwarakish and Ganasri,~~

2015)(Dwarakish and Ganasri, 2015), snowmelt (Hammond et al., 2019)(Hammond et al., 2019), evaporation (Jiao et al., 2017)(Jiao et al., 2017), and runoff generation (Qin et al., 2025)(Qin et al., 2025). Topography governs water flow paths and moisture release processes (Gao et al., 2014), while vegetation affects water movement and infiltration by regulating precipitation interception and soil moisture dynamics (Zhu et al., 2022). The complex interaction between topography and vegetation not only define Hydrological Response Units (HRUs) but also shape the spatial heterogeneity and dominant hydrological mechanisms within a river basin (Savenije, 2010; Sivapalan, 2009). However, in cold-arid regions, data scarcity often leads to oversimplified hydrological models, limiting accurate simulations (Ragettli et al., 2014; Tarasova et al., 2016). Therefore, a more comprehensive evaluation of topography–vegetation interactions is essential for improving model fidelity and supporting effective water resource management and ecological conservation.. Their combined influence underpins landscape organization, forms the basis for Hydrological Response Units (HRUs), and shapes spatial heterogeneity and dominant hydrological mechanisms (Savenije, 2010; Sivapalan, 2009). Limited observational data in cold-arid regions often results in oversimplified hydrological models, emphasizing the need to represent landscape controls more explicitly (Ragettli et al., 2014; Tarasova et al., 2016).

Topography plays a fundamental role in governs water redistribution across landscapes by shaping hydrological processes by influencing the spatial distribution of soil moisture, regulating precipitation patterns, modulating precipitation and evaporation dynamics, and drivingcontrolling runoff generation, thereby governing the movement and storage of water across the landscapepathways (Wicki et al., 2023)(Wicki et al., 2023). In mountainous basins, variations in topographicstrong relief introduceintroduces substantial uncertainty intochallenges for hydrological modelingmodelling and increase predictive uncertainty (Seibert and McDonnell, 2002)(Seibert and McDonnell, 2002). Steeper slopes typically lead to more rapid runoff, while gentler slopes promote greater infiltration and moisture retention, thusthereby affecting the

~~spatial and temporal~~spatiotemporal distribution of water resources ~~(Ye et al., 2023)~~(Ye et al., 2023). ~~Moreover, topography critically influences snow distribution and snowmelt dynamics. Terrain~~In addition, topographic features such as slope, aspect, and elevation ~~induce spatial heterogeneity in~~control snow accumulation and ~~melting processes~~melt, resulting in ~~diverse~~highly heterogeneous hydrological responses across ~~the basin~~basins ~~(Broxton et al., 2020)~~(Broxton et al., 2020).

Vegetation ~~plays a crucial role in regulating~~also regulates hydrological processes~~,~~ ~~particularly through interception~~ by intercepting snow and ~~root zone water storage. First,~~ ~~vegetation canopies intercept~~ rainfall, ~~reducing the amount of~~facilitating water infiltration and storage in the root zone, and absorbing and transpiring water through its roots. Canopies reduce effective precipitation reaching the ~~soil, while also mitigating~~ground and can mitigate surface ~~erosion and slowing~~ runoff ~~(Cheng et al., 2020)~~(Cheng et al., 2020)~~. Second,~~, while root ~~zone storage capacity and plant transpiration regulate~~systems shape soil moisture~~, enhance evaporation~~ dynamics and ~~facilitating~~ water redistribution ~~(Luo et al., 2022; Volpe et al., 2013)~~(Luo et al., 2022; Volpe et al., 2013). ~~These effects vary by~~ Consequently, different vegetation ~~type, as different structural forms~~types (e.g., forests ~~vs. grasslands)~~, grassland, and abandoned farmland) often exhibit distinct hydrological behaviors ~~(Chen et al., 2023)~~(Chen et al., 2023). In cold mountainous regions, vegetation ~~also affects~~further alters snow processes ~~by affecting snow distribution~~through shading and ~~retention. For example, forest canopies can shield snow accumulation, delay snowmelt, and reduce~~moderating wind~~-driven~~ redistribution, thereby ~~significantly altering~~influencing the ~~spatiotemporal dynamics of~~ meltwater ~~runoff~~timing and magnitude ~~(Sun et al., 2022)~~(Sun et al., 2022). Over long timescales, snow-vegetation interactions can modulate runoff sensitivity to precipitation, evapotranspiration, and vegetation dynamics, especially in regions such as Central Asia (Feng et al., 2025) and the Tibetan Plateau (Ni et al., 2025).

Despite ~~,~~

~~Although the regulatory role of topography and vegetation in basin hydrology are widely acknowledged,, their synergistic interactions remain insufficiently understood, particularly in cold high-altitude mountainous regions characterized by complex terrain, harsh climatic conditions, and limited observational data (Stephens et al., 2021). Cryospheric regions serve as critical freshwater resources for downstream areas and are especially sensitive to changes in the hydrological cycle and climate (Immerzeel et al., 2010). In these regions, snowfall and snowmelt processes often dominate runoff generation, with topography and vegetation jointly modulating hydrological responses by influencing snow distribution, accumulation, and melt rates (Dharmadasa et al., 2023; Zhong et al., 2021). Therefore, quantifying the individual and combined effects of topography and vegetation, and effectively integrating them into hydrological models, is essential for advancing cold-region hydrology.~~

~~Existing hydrological models often struggle to adequately capture the complexities introduced by topography and vegetation. Early lumped models typically used basin-averaged precipitation and temperature to simulate runoff, thereby oversimplifying spatial heterogeneity within catchments (Beven, 2012). While computationally efficient, lumped models fail to accurately represent the spatial variability of terrain and land cover, especially in mountainous regions. The advent of distributed hydrological models has allowed more spatially explicit simulations by incorporating topographic and land cover data (Fenicia et al., 2016). However, the performance of these models is highly dependent on data quality, which remains a significant limitation in cold, high-mountain regions where traditional observations are sparse or unavailable.~~

~~Remote sensing has become an invaluable tool for providing high-resolution data on topography, vegetation, and snow in hydrological studies of cold regions. Digital elevation models (DEMs) offer critical topographic information such as slope, aspect, and elevation, while vegetation indices derived from remote sensing (e.g., NDVI and EVI) effectively characterize vegetation cover (Xiong et al., 2023). In addition, remote sensing techniques enable spatial monitoring of snow water equivalent and snowmelt~~

~~processes (Duethmann et al., 2014). Integrating remote sensing data with distributed hydrological models helps to overcome the limitations of traditional in-situ observations, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the roles that topography and vegetation play in shaping hydrological processes (Gao et al., 2014).~~

~~In the absence of direct measurements of individual hydrological processes, the top-down modelling approach offers a powerful means of exploring the internal dynamics of basin behavior (Fenicia et al., 2008b). Originally proposed by Klemes (Klemeš, 1983) and later reformulated by Sivapalan et al. (Sivapalan et al., 2003), the top-down approach is rooted in a deductive philosophy that infers the underlying 'causes' from the overall observed 'effect' of a system. In hydrological modeling, this method begins with a simple structure that is progressively refined to address limitations in reproducing observed catchment behavior (Fenicia et al., 2008a). In cold mountainous regions, the top-down approach holds significant potential for improving model realism by systematically incorporating key variables such as snow processes, topography, and vegetation.~~

~~This study focuses on the Bogd Uliastai and Zavkhan Guulin river basins on the Mongolian Plateau, aiming to investigate the roles of topography and vegetation in shaping hydrological processes in cold mountainous regions. Due to the scarcity of observational data, traditional hydrological models face significant challenges in these areas. To address this, we employ a top-down modelling approach, beginning with a lumped model to assess runoff dynamics and progressively advancing toward a distributed framework. This model explicitly incorporates key components—including snowmelt, topography, and vegetation—to better capture the hydrological responses of different landscape units. The study seeks to address three key research questions: (1)~~ the recognized importance of topography and vegetation, their influences remain insufficiently represented in many hydrological modelling frameworks (Stephens et al., 2021). This gap is especially critical in cryospheric regions, where snow accumulation

and melt dominate runoff generation and are strongly shaped by terrain and vegetation controls (Dharmadasa et al., 2023; Immerzeel et al., 2010; Zhong et al., 2021). Quantifying and integrating these controls into hydrological models is therefore essential for advancing cold-region hydrology and improving model realism.

Existing hydrological models often struggle to adequately capture the complexities introduced by topography and vegetation heterogeneity. Early lumped models, relying on basin-averaged inputs, oversimplify spatial heterogeneity within catchments (Beven, 2012). Distributed hydrological models allow spatially explicit simulations but are highly dependent on the availability and quality of input data (Fenicia et al., 2016), which remains a significant limitation in cold, high-mountain regions. Remote sensing has become an invaluable tool for providing spatially continuous data on topography (e.g., Digital Elevation Models, DEMs), vegetation (e.g., Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) and Enhanced Vegetation Index (EVI)) (Xiong et al., 2023), and snow dynamics (e.g., SWE) (Duethmann et al., 2014), enabling a more realistic representation of landscape-dependent controls in hydrological models (Gao et al., 2014).

In the absence of direct measurements of individual hydrological processes, the top-down modelling approach offers a powerful and practical means of exploring the internal dynamics of basin behavior (Fenicia et al., 2008b). Originally proposed by Klemeš (Klemeš, 1983) and later reformulated by Sivapalan et al. (Sivapalan et al., 2003), the top-down approach is rooted in a deductive philosophy that infers the underlying ‘causes’ from the overall observed ‘effect’ of a system. In hydrological modelling, this method begins with a simple structure that is progressively refined to address limitations in reproducing observed catchment behavior (Fenicia et al., 2008a).

The Bogd Uliastai and Zavkhan Guulin river basins, in the headwaters of the Zavkhan River on the western Mongolian Plateau, exhibit a cold, arid continental climate with

sparse vegetation (Baasanmunkh et al., 2019). Strong cryospheric influences control hydrological processes, making these basins key areas for regional ecological security and downstream water-resource resilience. However, monitoring networks are sparse and long-term observational data are limited, leaving runoff generation mechanisms and their interactions with topography, vegetation and the cryosphere poorly understood (Dorjsuren et al., 2024).

To address these challenges, we employ a top-down modelling framework that begins with a lumped model to assess runoff dynamics and progressively incorporates distributed representations of snowmelt, topography, and vegetation. This framework allows assessment of hydrological responses across different landscape units and addresses three research questions:

(1) How can runoff be effectively simulated in data-scarce, cold mountainous regions using a top-down modelling approach? ~~(2)~~

(2) How can the contribution of snowmelt runoff to streamflow be quantified ~~through~~using a landscape-based hydrological model? ~~(3)~~

(3) How do topography and vegetation influence runoff generation processes?

The study aligns with the IAHS HELPING Decade (Hydrology Engaging Local People IN one Global world, 2023–2032), which calls for interdisciplinary research in data-scarce and ecologically vulnerable regions. By developing a modelling framework for cold basins with limited observational data and improving understanding of hydrological processes on the Mongolian Plateau, this work provides an important case study contributing to the goals of the HELPING initiative.

2. Study site

2.1 Bogd Uliastai river basin

The Bogd Uliastai river basin (47°30′N-48°10′N, 96°45′E-97°45′E) is located in the

northern part of the Zavkhan river headwaters, along the southern foothills of the central Khangaï Mountains in Mongolia (Fig.1). The basin spans an area of 1610 km^2 and is predominantly mountainous, with elevations ranging from 1753 m a.s.l. to 3972 m a.s.l. The region receives an average annual precipitation of approximately 200 mm, with more than 80% of rainfall occurring between June and September. The average annual temperature is -1°C, while winter temperatures frequently fall below -30°C, reflecting a typical alpine climate. Runoff displays strong seasonal variability, with distinct peaks during the spring and summer and almost no flow in winter, resulting in extreme hydrological conditions ~~(Dorjsuren et al., 2024)~~(Dorjsuren et al., 2024). The vegetation exhibits clear altitudinal zonation: alpine meadows and tundra, dominated by mosses and lichens, prevail at higher elevations, whereas needlegrass steppe and low shrublands are common in mid~~-~~ and low~~-~~ elevation ~~zones~~areas ~~(Baasanmunkh et al., 2019)~~(Baasanmunkh et al., 2019).

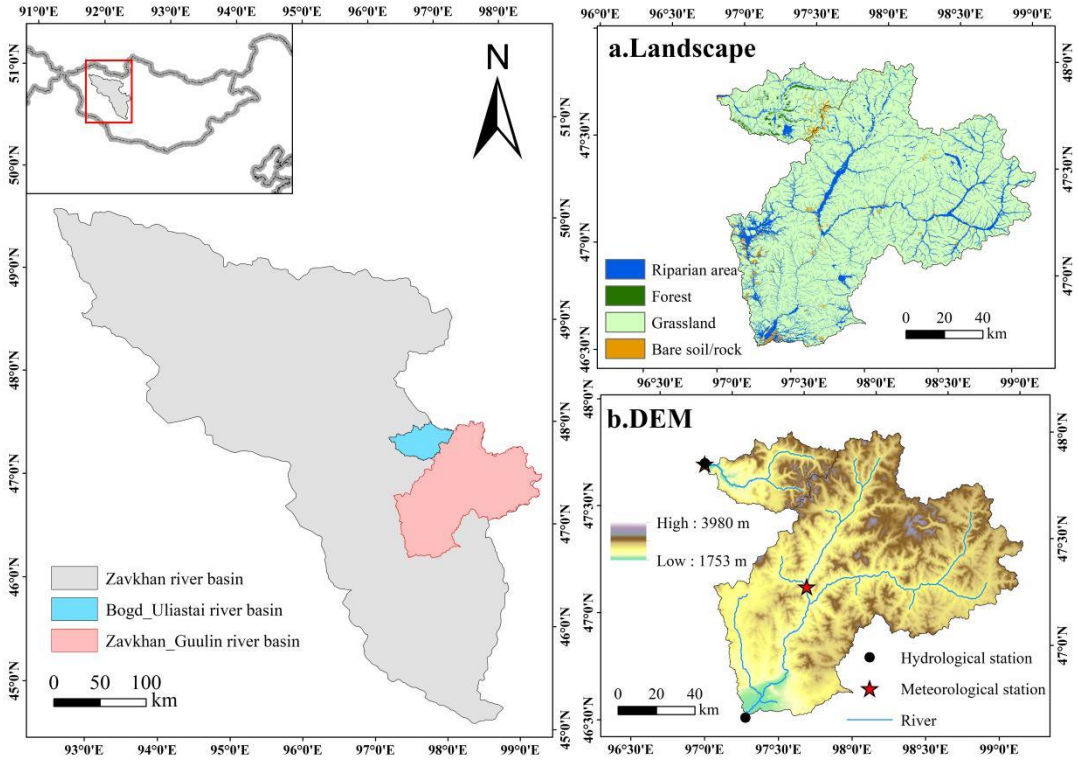


Fig.1 Location, landscape (a) and topography (b) of the Bogd Uliastai and Zavkhan Guulin river basins on the Mongolian Plateau.

2.2 Zavkhan Guulin river basin

The Zavkhan Guulin river basin (46°30′N-47°50′N, 96°45′E-97°00′E), located in the central and southern parts of Zavkhan Province, lies within the transitional zone of the southern Khangaï Mountains (Fig.1). The basin covers an area of approximately 12258 km^2 and is predominantly composed of low mountains and hills, with elevations ranging from 1785 m a.s.l. to 3980 m a.s.l. The basin's annual average precipitation is about 160 mm, with most precipitation concentrated in ~~the summer, primaril in the form of heavy rain, which serves the main source of runoff.~~summer. The annual average temperature is approximately -3°C, with summer temperatures exceeding 20°C and winter temperatures dropping as low as -50°C, characteristic of a temperate continental climate ~~(Dorjsuren et al., 2023)~~(Dorjsuren et al., 2023). Vegetation in the region is sparse, primarily dominated by drought-tolerant *Artemisia* species, with scattered distributions of grass and shrubs. At higher elevations, the landscape is characterized by alpine meadows, exposed rock surfaces, and cold desert environments. Soils are nutrient-poor, and the ecological environment is fragile, facing severe challenges such as soil erosion ~~(Baasanmunkh et al., 2019)~~(Baasanmunkh et al., 2019).

3. Data

3.1 Data set

Hydrometeorological data: Daily precipitation, runoff, and temperature data for the Bogd Uliastai river basin (2007–2015) and the Zavkhan Guulin river basin (2000–2020) were obtained from the Information and Research Institute of Meteorology, Hydrology, and Environment (IRIMHE) via its official website (http://irimhe.namem.gov.mn). For each basin, one meteorological station and one hydrological station served as the primary sources of observational data. The Arctic Snow Water Equivalent (SWE) Grid Dataset (2003–2016) was obtained from National Tibetan Plateau/Third Pole Environment Data Center (https://cstr.cn/18406.11.Snow.tpdc.271556). The SWE product has a daily temporal resolution and a spatial resolution of 10 km, covering

latitudes from 45°N to 90°N and longitudes from 180°W to 180°E.

Topographic data: The Shuttle Radar Topography Mission Digital Elevation Model (SRTM-DEM), with a spatial resolution of 90 m, was acquired from the official website of the ~~International Center for Tropical Agriculture~~CGIAR Consortium for Spatial Information (CGIAR-CSI) (http://srtm.csi.cgiar.org).

Land cover data: The Sentinel-2 10-Meter Land Use/Land Cover was accessed via ESRI's official platform (https://livingatlas.arcgis.com/landcover/).

NDVI data: The normalized difference vegetation index (NDVI) data (2013–2020) were derived from the Landsat 8 Operational Land Imager (OLI) Level-2 surface reflectance products. NDVI was calculated as (NIR – Red)/(NIR + Red) using bands 5 (NIR) and 4 (Red). The dataset has a spatial resolution of 30 m and a temporal resolution of 16 days. Landsat data were obtained from the United States Geological Survey (USGS) EarthExplorer platform (https://earthexplorer.usgs.gov/).

3.2 Distribution of forcing data

Mountainous terrain is complex, and meteorological stations are typically located at lower elevations. Directly using point-based measurement in basin-scale simulations without accounting for elevation effects can introduce biases ~~(Klemeš, 1989)~~(Klemeš, 1989). In cold mountainous regions, higher elevations typically experience lower temperatures and greater precipitation, often in the form of snow ~~(Lundquist et al., 2010; Stahl et al., 2006)~~(Lundquist et al., 2010; Stahl et al., 2006). In the study, the ~~FLEX model divides~~FLEX^{D} and FLEX^{T} models divide catchment into elevation bands and adjusts temperature and precipitation for each band using a precipitation increase rate and temperature lapse rate~~.~~ (Fig.2). This distributed input approach effectively mitigates simulation bias by better capturing altitudinal variability in meteorological conditions. In this study, due to the remoteness of the region and the sparse distribution of meteorological stations, available ground observations were limited. Satellite and reanalysis products (e.g., ERA5-Land) exhibit notable biases over complex terrain and

fail to capture local climatic variability. We therefore ~~relied on the best available in-situ data, which were subjected to rigorous quality control and spatial interpolation, and supplemented by topographic context and previous studies. While uncertainties remain, this approach provides the most reliable climate forcing achievable under current observational constraints.~~used the nearby Tsagan-Turutuin-gol catchment as a reference, which also originates in the Khangaï Mountains and shares similar topographic and climatic characteristics with the study basins (Klimek and Starkel, 1980). The model employed a precipitation increase rate of 4.2% per 100 m and a temperature lapse rate of 0.6°C per 100 m ~~(Gao et al., 2014).~~

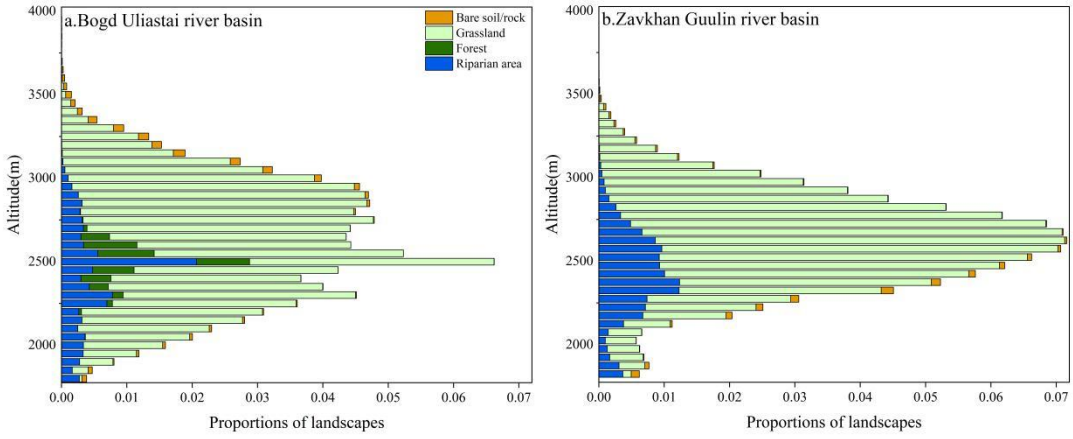


Fig.2 Area of different elevation and landscape in Bogd Uliastai and Zavkhan Guulin river basins.

4. Modelling approach

4.1 Model description

To assess the impact of topography and vegetation on hydrological processes, this study designed and tested four conceptual models with increasing complexity: $FLEX^{L}$, $FLEX^{L}$-S, $FLEX^{D}$, and $FLEX^{T}$ ~~(Fig.2).~~ The model structure and variables are shown in Fig. ~~2~~3 and Table 1, and the water balance, isotope mass balance and constitutive equations are shown in Table 2.

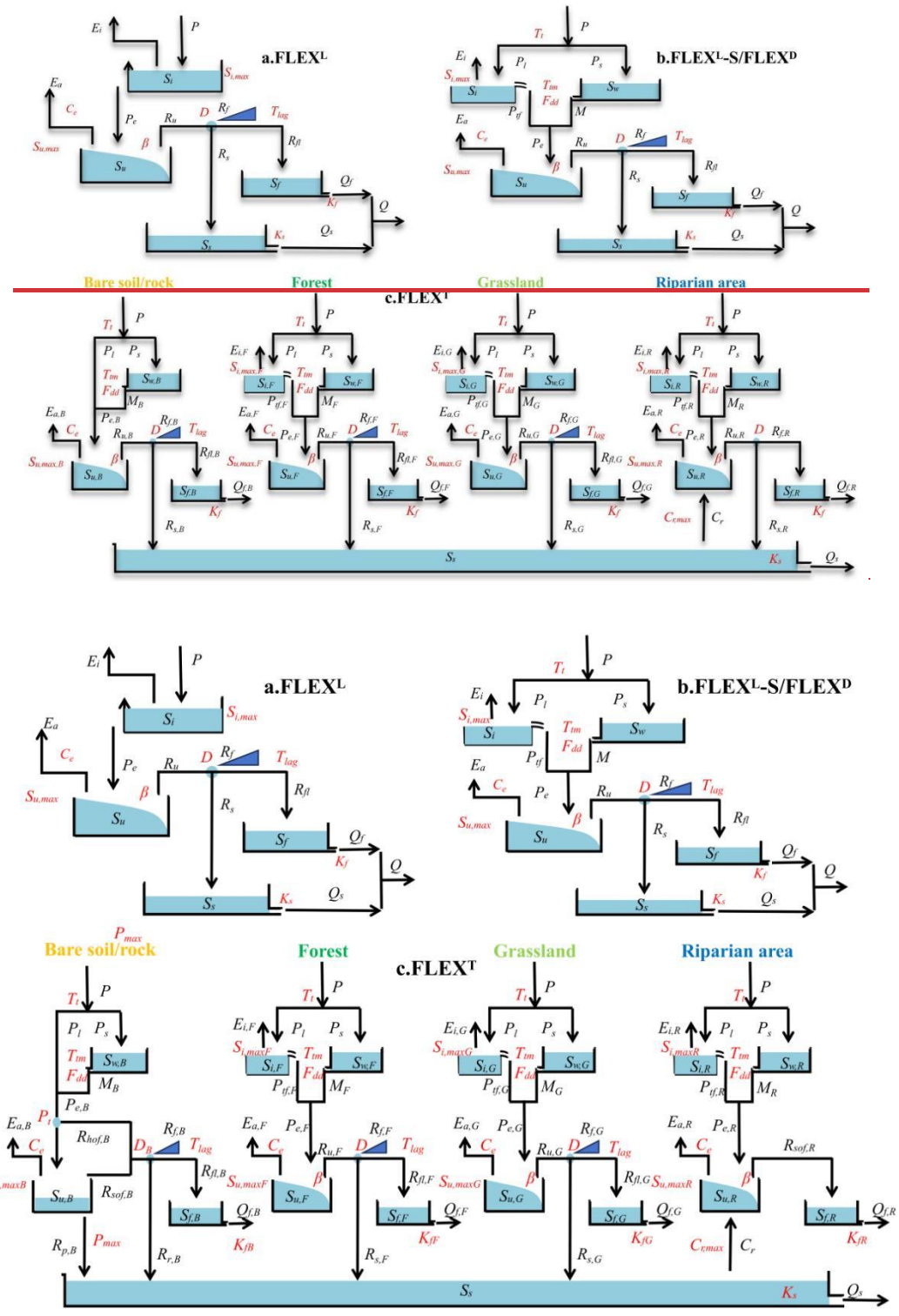


Fig.23 Stepwise modelling and the model structure of four models. (a) FLEX^{L} is a lumped model without snow module; (b) FLEX^{L}-S is a lumped model with snow module, and FLEX^{D} is a semi-distributed model with the same structure as FLEX^{L}-S. (c) FLEX^{T} is a landscape-driven semi-distributed model.

Table1. The variables of four models. In FLEX^{T} model, variables associated with various landscape categories are differentiated using specific suffixes, e.g., $E_{i,F}$, represent the interception from forest.

Variables	Meaning	Variables	Meaning
P (mm/d)	Precipitation	E_i (mm/d)	Interception
S_i (mm)	Interception reservoir	P_s (mm/d)	Snowfall
P_l (mm/d)	Rainfall	P_{tf} (mm/d)	Effective rainfall after interception
M (mm/d)	Snowmelt	P_e (mm/d)	Effective precipitation
S_u (mm)	~~Unsaturated~~Root zone reservoir	E_a (mm/d)	Actual evaporation
R_u (mm/d)	Generated runoff from the ~~unsaturated~~root zone reservoir	R_f (mm/d)	Generated fast runoff ~~in the unsaturated zone~~
R_{fl} (mm/d)	Discharge into the fast response reservoir after the convolution	R_s (mm/d)	Generated slow runoff ~~in the unsaturated zone~~
R_{hof} (mm/d)	Hortonian overland flow from bare soil/rock	R_p (mm/d)	Deep percolation from bare soil/rock
R_{sof} (mm/d)	Saturation overland flow	R_r (mm/d)	Water re-infiltrating
S_f (mm)	Fast response reservoir	S_s (mm)	Slow response reservoir
C_r (mm/d)	Capillary rise from groundwater into ~~unsaturated~~root zone reservoir on riparian area	Q_f (mm/d)	~~Subsurface~~ Surface flow /subsurface storm flow
Q_s (mm/d)	Groundwater flow	Q (mm/d)	Total runoff

Table 2. The water balance and constitutive equations used in four models. Note: FLEX^{L} model lacks the snow module, resulting in different water balance and structural equations compared to other models. For FLEX^{T} model, in Eqs~~.(4), (6),~~.7 and ~~(7),~~9, the S_i and $S_{i,max}$ represent the interception reservoir and ~~their~~its interception ~~capacities in~~capacity, respectively, for different ~~landscapes~~landscape units, including forest ($S_{i,~~max,F~~maxF}$), grassland ($S_{i,~~max,G~~maxG}$) and riparian area ($S_{i,~~max,R~~}$~~) (There is no~~$_{maxR}$). No interception ~~store in~~reservoir is defined for bare soil/rock ~~area.).~~areas. Similarly, ~~in Eqs. (8), (10), (11), and (12),~~ the S_u and $S_{u,max}$ ~~represent~~denote the root zone reservoirs and their corresponding storage capacities ~~in~~for different landscapes, ~~including bare soil/rock ($S_{u,max,B}$), forest ($S_{u,max,F}$), grassland ($S_{u,max,G}$) and riparian area ($S_{u,max,R}$).~~while K_f represents the recession coefficient of the fast response reservoir for each landscape type.

Reservoirs	Water balance equations	Constitutive equations
Interception reservoir (FLEX^{L})	$\frac{dS_i}{dt} = P - E_i - P_e$ (1)	$E_i = min\left(E_p, min\left(P, S_{i,max}\right)\right)$ (2) $P_e = max(P - E_i, 0)$ (3)
Snow reservoir (FLEX^{L}-S/FLEX^{D}/FLEX^{T})	$\frac{dS_w}{dt} = P_s - M$ (4)	$P_s = \begin{cases} P; & T < T_t \\ 0; & T \geq T_t \end{cases}$ (5) $M = \begin{cases} F_{dd}(T - T_{tm}); & T > T_{tm} \\ 0; & T \leq T_{tm} \end{cases}$ (6)
Interception reservoir (FLEX^{L}-S/FLEX^{D}/FLEX^{T})	$\frac{dS_i}{dt} = P_l - E_i - P_{tf}$ (7)	$P_l = \begin{cases} P; & T \geq T_t \\ 0; & T < T_t \end{cases}$ (8) $E_i = min\left(E_p, min\left(P_l, S_{i,max}\right)\right)$ (9) $P_{tf} = max(P_l - E_i, 0)$ (10)

		$P_e = P_{tf} + M$ (11)
~~Unsaturated root~~Root zone reservoir (All)	$\frac{dS_u}{dt} = P_e - E_a - R_u$ (12)	$E_a = (E_p - E_i) min\left(\frac{S_u}{C_e S_{u,max}}, 1\right)$ (13) $R_u = \begin{cases} P_e - S_{u,max} + S_u + S_{u,max}\left(1 - \frac{P_e + AU}{(1+\beta)S_{u,max}}\right)^{(1+\beta)}; & (1+\beta)S_{u,max} > P_e + AU \\ P_e - S_{u,max} + S_u; & (1+\beta)S_{u,max} \leq P_e + AU \end{cases}$ (14) $AU = (1+\beta)S_{u,max}\left(1 - \left(1 - \frac{S_u}{S_{u,max}}\right)^{\frac{1}{1+\beta}}\right)$ (15)
Splitter and lag function (All)		$R_f = R_u D$ (16) $R_S = R_u(1-D)$ (17) $R_{fl} = \sum_{i=1}^{T_{lag}} c(i) \cdot R_f(t-i+1)$ (18) $c(i) = i / \sum_{u=1}^{T_{lag}} u$ (19)
Fast reservoir (All)	$\frac{dS_f}{dt} = R_f - Q_f$ (20)	$Q_f = S_f / K_f$ (21)
Slow reservoir (All)	$\frac{dS_s}{dt} = R_s - Q_s$ (22)	$Q_s = S_s / K_s$ (23)

364

4.1.1 FLEX^{L}

FLEX^{L} is a lumped conceptual hydrological model composed of four reservoirs (Fig.~~2a~~3a): an interception reservoir (S_i), ~~an unsaturated~~a root zone reservoir (S_u), a fast response reservoir (S_f), and a slow response reservoir (S_s). A lag function is used to represent the lag time from storm to peak flow (T_{lag}). FLEX^{L} includes a total of 8 free calibration parameters (Table 3).

The interception reservoir was designed to simulate the process of precipitation interception by vegetation canopies or the ground surface (Eq.1). Interception evaporation (E_i) was calculated by potential evaporation (E_p) and S_i, considering the interception storage capacity ($S_{i,max}$) (Eq.2). When precipitation (P) exceeds $S_{i,max}$, the excess precipitation is routed as effective precipitation (P_e) into the ~~unsaturated~~root zone reservoir (Eq.3).

In the ~~unsaturated~~root zone reservoir, actual evaporation (E_a) was estimated based on E_p-E_i and root zone soil moisture ($S_u/S_{u,max}$) (Eq.13). The parameter C_e represents the threshold value controlling evaporation from the root zone soil moisture, and $S_{u,max}$ is root zone storage capacity. The water retention curve from the Xin'anjiang model was used to partition P_e into stored water in S_u and runoff generated from the ~~unsaturated~~ root zone (R_u) (Eqs.14 and 15) ~~(Zhao, 1992)~~(Zhao, 1992) ~~(Eqs.14 and 15).~~ .

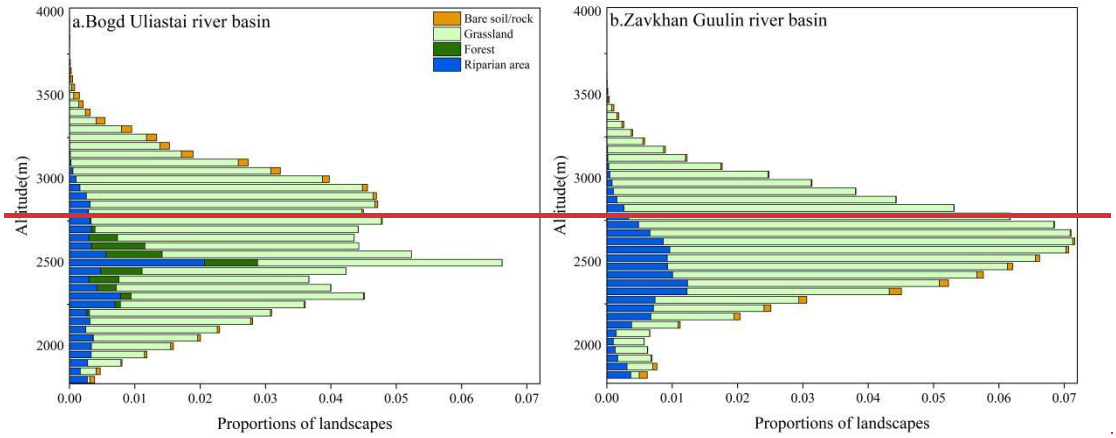
In the response reservoir, a splitter D was applied to divide the R_u into two fluxes (R_f and R_s) (Eqs.16 and 17), and Eqs (18) and (19) were used to describe the lag time between storm and peak flow. $R_f(t\text{-}i\text{+}1)$ represents the fast runoff generated in the ~~unsaturated~~root zone at time $t\text{-}i\text{+}1$, T_{lag} represents the time lag between the storm and fast runoff generation. $c(i)$ is the weight of the flow in $i\text{-}1$ days before and $R_{fl}(t)$ is the discharge into the fast response reservoir after convolution. We used two linear reservoirs to represent the response process of subsurface storm flow (Q_f) and groundwater flow (Q_s) (Eqs.21 and 23).

4.1.2 FLEX^{L}-S

FLEX^{L}-S builds upon the FLEX^{L} model by incorporating a snow reservoir (S_w) to simulate the snow accumulation and melt processes (Fig.~~2b~~3b). When the daily air temperature exceeds the threshold temperature (T_t) and there is no snowpack (typically in summer), the interception process governs the initial partitioning of precipitation (Eq.7). In contrast, when the daily mean temperature is below T_t (normally occurs in winter), precipitation is stored as snow (Eq.5). When there is snowpack and the daily air temperature is above T_t (normally prevailing in early spring and early autumn), effective precipitation (P_e) is equal to the sum of effective rainfall after interception (P_{tf}) and snowmelt (M) (Eq.11). M was calculated by the snow degree day factor (F_{dd}) and the threshold temperature for melting (T_{tm}) (Eq.6) ~~(Gao et al., 2017)~~(Gao et al., 2017). In this study, T_{tm} was set to the same value as T_t. It is important to note that meltwater is conceptualized as directly infiltrating into the soil, thereby bypassing the interception reservoir.

4.1.3 FLEX^{D}

FLEX^{D} is a semi-distributed model with the same structure and parameters as FLEX^{L}-S (Fig.~~2b~~3b). Using DEM data, the Bogd Uliastai river basin was divided into 45 elevation bands with 50 m interval, while the Zavkhan Guulin river basin was divided into 44 elevation bands as shown in Fig.~~3~~2. The FLEX^{D} model was operated with semi-distributed input data (see Sect.3.2), ensuring the integration of spatial variability into the model's processes.



~~**Fig.3** Area of different elevation and landscape in Bogd Uliastai and Zavkhan Guulin river basins.~~

4.1.4 FLEX^{T}

The FLEX^{T} model classified the Bogd Uliastai river basin into four landscape elements—bare soil/rock, forest, grassland, and riparian area—based on vegetation characteristics. In contrast, the Zavkhan Guulin river basin, which has no forest, was categorized into three landscape elements. By integrating both landscape types and elevation bands, the Bogd Uliastai river basin was further subdivided into 132 HRUs, while the Zavkhan Guulin river basin consisted of 117 HRUs (Fig.~~3~~2).

The FLEX^{T} model's structure comprised four parallel components, representing the distinct hydrological functions associated with landscape elements ~~(Savenije, 2010; Gao et al., 2014) (Fig.2c).~~(Gao et al., 2014). To capture the diverse rainfall-runoff processes in different landscape types ~~and simultaneously avoid over-parameterization, we kept the same model structure but gave different interception storage capacity ($S_{i,max}$) and root zone storage capacity ($S_{u,max}$) for all,~~ landscape elements ~~(Table 3).~~

~~For forest, due to their dense vegetation cover and the greater amount of water required to fill the root zone to meet water deficits, larger prior ranges~~ were assigned ~~to $S_{i,maxF}$~~model structures (Fig.3c) and ~~$S_{u,maxF}$.~~ parameters (Table 3) tailored to their dominant hydrological processes.

For bare soil~~/~~ and rock~~, due to no~~ areas, vegetation ~~cover, we constrained a shallower~~

~~$S_{u,maxB}$ and did not incorporate an~~ is absent; therefore, no interception ~~module.~~ occurs. Due to the low infiltration capacity of these surfaces, Hortonian overland flow ($R_{hof,B}$) dominates runoff generation when daily effective precipitation ($P_{e,B}$) exceeds the threshold parameter (P_t) (Eq. 24):

$$R_{hof,B} = max(P_{e,B} - P_t, 0) \quad (24)$$

Saturation overland flow ($R_{sof,B}$), , caused by the limited storage capacity of shallow soils, occurs when the unsaturated zone soil moisture reaches its maximum storage capacity ($S_{u,maxB}$). Deep percolation into groundwater ($R_{p,B}$) is governed by relative soil moisture ($S_{u,B}/S_{u,maxB}$) and the maximum percolation (P_{max}; Eq. 25). Surface runoff is further partitioned into re-infiltrating water ($R_{r,B}$) over high-permeability debris slopes and water routed directly to the channel ($R_{f,B}$) through a separator (D_B).

$$R_{p,B} = P_{max}\frac{S_u}{S_{u,max}} \quad (25)$$

Forest and grassland hillslopes follow the same FLEX^D model structure, with differences represented through parameters governing interception and root zone processes.

For the riparian area, which is prone to saturation due to its location, we also constrained a shallower $S_{u,maxR}$, with the effect of capillary rise (C_r) taken into account. C_r is represented by a parameter ($C_{r,max}$) indicating a constant amount of capillary rise. ~~Notably, the~~The lag time from storm to peak flow was not considered in riparian area. ~~For~~

Interception thresholds were parameterized to be highest for forest ($S_{i,maxF}$)), followed by grassland ($S_{i,maxG}$) and riparian area ($S_{i,maxR}$)), reflecting differences in canopy interception capacity.

The root zone storage capacity was assigned deepest in forests ($S_{u,maxF}$), shallower in grasslands~~, $S_{u,maxG}$ is lower~~ ($S_{u,maxG}$), and smallest in riparian areas ($S_{u,maxR}$). Bare soil and rock ($S_{u,maxB}$) were represented as belonging to the unsaturated zone rather than the

root zone, with storage capacity similar to that of ~~forest but higher than~~riparian areas. Response timescales were parameterized to be longest for groundwater (K_s), shortest for saturation-excess runoff in riparian area (K_{fR}) and surface runoff in bare soil/rock ~~and riparian area.~~

(K_{fB}), with subsurface flow from forest and grassland (K_{fF} and K_{fG}) parameterized to operate at intermediate timescales.

Table 3. Uniform prior parameter distributions of four models. ~~Note: $S_{i,max}$ and $S_{u,max}$ do not belong to the FLEX^{T} model.~~

Models			Parameter	Explanation	Prior range
FLEX^{T}	FLEX^{D}	FLEX^{L}-S	$S_{i,max}$ (mm)	Storage capacity of interception reservoir	(0.1, 2)
			$S_{u,max}$ (mm)	Root zone storage capacity	(5, 300)
			K_f (d)	Recession coefficient of fast response reservoir	(1, 10)
			C_e (-)	Threshold controls actual evaporation and transpiration	(0, 1)
			β (-)	Shape parameter of the tension water storage capacity curve	(0.1, 5)
		FLEX^{L}	D (-)	Splitter between ~~surface~~fast runoff and ~~groundwater~~slow recharge	(0, 1)
			T_{lag} (-)	Time lag between storm and fast runoff generation ~~fast runoff generation~~	(0.8, 3)
			~~K_f (d)~~	~~Recession coefficient of fast response reservoir~~	~~(1, 10)~~
			K_s (d)	Recession coefficient of slow response reservoir	(10, 200)
			T_t (°C)	Threshold temperature to split snowfall and rainfall	(-2, 2)
			T_{tm} (°C)	Threshold temperature for melting	(-2, 2)
			F_{dd} (mm(°Cd)$^{-1}$)	Snow degree day factor	(1, 6)
			P_t (mm/d)	Infiltration threshold for initiating Hortonian overland flow	(5, 35)

P_{max} (mm/d)	Maximum percolation	(0.1, 5)
D_B (-)	splitter between fast surface runoff and re-infiltration	(0, 1)
$S_{i,max}$$_{maxF}$ (mm)	Interception storage capacity of forest	(0.5, 2)
$S_{i,max}$$_{maxG}$ (mm)	Interception storage capacity of grassland	(0.1, 1)
$S_{i,max}$$_{maxR}$ (mm)	Interception storage capacity of riparian area	(0.1, 1)
$S_{u,maxB}$ (mm)	~~Root zone~~Unsaturated storage capacity of bare soil/rock	(5, 120)
$S_{u,maxF}$ (mm)	Root zone storage capacity of forest	(50, 300)
$S_{u,maxG}$ (mm)	Root zone storage capacity of grassland	(10, 300)
$S_{u,maxR}$ (mm)	Root zone storage capacity of riparian area	(5, 120)
K_{fB} (d)	Recession coefficient of the fast response reservoir for bare soil/rock	(1, 5)
K_{fF} (d)	Recession coefficient of the fast response reservoir for forest	(1, 10)
K_{fG} (d)	Recession coefficient of the fast response reservoir for grassland	(1, 10)
K_{fR} (d)	Recession coefficient of the fast response reservoir for riparian area	(1, 5)
C_{Rmax} (mm/d)	Constant amount of capillary rise	(0.1, 2)

476

4.2 ~~Snow contribution~~ The ratio of snowmelt runoff to streamflow

This study ~~tracks~~quantifies the ~~contribution~~ratio of snowmelt runoff to streamflow ~~based on~~using the FLEX^{T} model. The model assumes that snowmelt and rainfall mix rapidly and completely upon entering the model's conceptual reservoirs, thereby altering its internal composition ratios. The composition ratio of the water exiting the reservoir is identical to that within the reservoir~~. The contributions from snowmelt and rainfall represent portions of runoff generated at each time step, with some water remaining in the reservoir to participate in subsequent mixing, runoff generation, evaporation, and other hydrological processes (Liu et al., 2023)~~(Liu et al., 2023). The method enables the tracking of ~~the contribution~~ratio of snowmelt ~~to total~~ runoff ~~(C~~to streamflow ($f_{Q,snow}$) at each time step by the following equation:

$$~~C =~~ \frac{~~Q_M~~}{~~Q~~} f_{Q,snow} = \frac{Q_M}{Q} = \frac{Q_{f,M}+Q_{s,M}}{Q}$$

~~(24~~(26)

$$Q_{f,M} = \frac{\left(\frac{~~M~~}{~~P_{tf}+M~~}\right)~~S_f~~}{~~K_f~~} \frac{\left(\frac{M}{P_e}\right)S_f}{K_f}$$

(~~25~~27)

$$Q_{s,M} ~~=~~ \frac{\left(\frac{~~M~~}{~~P_{tf}+M~~}\right)~~S_s~~}{~~K_s~~} =$$

$$\frac{\left(\frac{M}{P_e}\right)S_s}{K_s}$$ (~~26~~28)

where Q is total runoff in the river channel; Q_M is snowmelt runoff in the river channel; $Q_{f,M}$ is surface flow or subsurface storm flow generated by snowmelt; $Q_{s,M}$ is groundwater flow generated by snowmelt.

4.3 Model calibration and uncertainty estimation

~~In~~For the Bogd Uliastai river basin, the model was ~~pre-~~warmed up using data from 2007~~; the years~~, calibrated during 2008–2011~~ were used for calibration~~, and validated during 2012–2015~~ for validation. In~~. For the Zavkhan Guulin river basin, 2000 was used as the warm-up year, with 2001–2010 selected for calibration and 2011–2020 for validation.

The MOSCEM-UA (Multi-objective Shuffled Complex Evolution Metropolis Algorithm) integrates multi-objective optimization and Bayesian uncertainty analysis, featuring global search capabilities that facilitate the generation of multiple Pareto optimal solutions and provide an assessment of uncertainty ~~(Vrugt et al., 2003)~~(Vrugt et al., 2003). The MOSCEM_UA was run for the optimization of parameters, with 40000 iterations for each of the four model structures. The model parameters and their prior ranges for calibration are listed in Table 3.

The Kling-Gupta Efficiency (KGE) and its logarithmic form (KGL) were used as objective functions to evaluate the simulation of daily discharge ~~(Gupta et al., 2009)~~(Gupta et al., 2009). These two metrics were chosen because each emphasizes a different portion of the hydrograph: KGE is more sensitive to high-flow dynamics, while KGL better captures low-flow conditions. In this study, to accommodate minimization-based optimization algorithms, the runoff objective functions L_1 (Eq.~~27~~29) and L_2 (Eq.~~28~~30) were formulated as one minus their respective efficiency metrics. The two objective functions were assigned equal weights during model calibration to ensure a balanced representation of both high- and low-flow regimes.

$$L_1 = 1 - KGE = \sqrt{(1-\gamma)^2 + (1-\alpha)^2 + (1-\beta)^2} \quad (~~27~~29)$$

$$L_2 = 1 - KGL = \sqrt{\left(1-\gamma_{log}\right)^2 + \left(1-\alpha_{log}\right)^2 + \left(1-\beta_{log}\right)^2} \quad (~~28~~30)$$

where, γ is the correlation coefficient between simulated and observed flows, and γ_{log} is the correlation coefficient between their logarithmic values; α is the ratio of the standard deviations of the simulated and observed flows, and α_{log} is the ratio of the standard deviations of their logarithmic transformations; β is the ratio of the mean values of the simulated and observed flows, and β_{log} is the ratio of the mean values of their logarithmic transformations.

5. Results ~~and discussion~~

5.1 Model calibration and validation

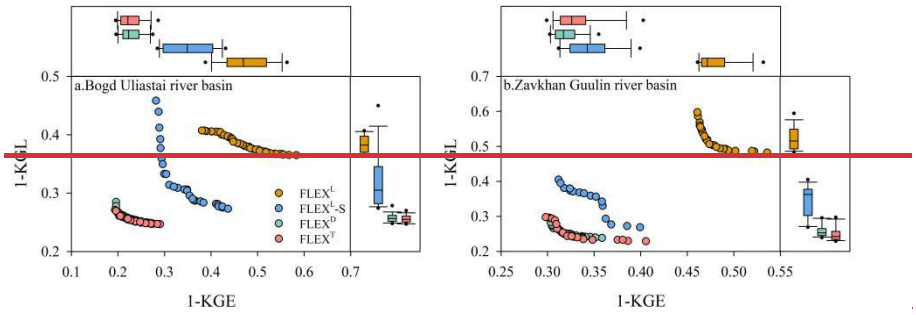
Fig.4 shows the performance of the four models during the calibration period. The Pareto-optimal front shifts progressively toward the origin, indicating that model structural modifications enhance the model's ability to capture basin runoff dynamics. The FLEX^{L}-S model (KGE: 0.65 and 0.65, with the former representing the Bogd Uliastai river basin and the latter representing the Zavkhan Guulin river basin, hereinafter referred to as the same; KGL: 0.68 and 0.66) ~~(Table 4)~~ outperforms the baseline FLEX^{L} model (KGE: 0.53 and 0.52; KGL: 0.62 and 0.48) (Table 4). This improvement highlights the importance of explicitly representing snow processes in cryospheric regions. Without accounting for snow accumulation and ablation, the model tends to overestimate ~~minor~~small peak flow events in winter, as shown in Fig.5, underscoring the critical role of snow dynamics in shaping hydrological responses.

The FLEX^{D} model (KGE: 0.77 and 0.68; KGL: 0.74 and 0.74) outperforms the FLEX^{L}-S, with the distributed precipitation and temperature inputs significantly improving the simulation of peak flow. ~~Notably,~~ FLEX^{D} does not require a more complex model structure or additional parameters compared to FLEX^{L}-S. ~~However, it allows each hydrological response unit to maintain distinct storage states in the interception, snow, and unsaturated reservoirs on any given day. This capability effectively overcomes a key limitation of lumped models, which are unable to represent the spatial variability of hydrological responses across heterogeneous landscapes.~~For hydrograph simulation, FLEX^{T} (KGE: 0.78 and 0.68; KGL: 0.75 and 0.75) performs comparably to FLEX^{D}. ~~For hydrograph simulation, FLEX^{T} (KGE: 0.77 and 0.67; KGL: 0.74 and 0.75) performs comparably to FLEX^{D}. This similarity in performance—despite FLEX^{T}'s increased model complexity and more physically interpretable parameters—may be attributed to two main factors. First, both basins are dominated by grasslands, which cover more than 80% of the area, resulting in low vegetation heterogeneity (Fig.3). Second, vegetation characteristics—such as rooting depth and interception capacity—~~

may already be implicitly represented by hydroclimatic and topographic variables (Antonelli et al., 2018; Roebroek et al., 2020), thereby diminishing the added value of explicitly incorporating vegetation information in this case.

As shown in Fig.6, the lumped model employs a spatially uniform NDVI value, which cannot reflect intra-basin vegetation variability. Nevertheless, a strong correspondence is observed between elevation and NDVI, particularly in grassland-dominated regions. NDVI values across elevation bands closely match those of the corresponding grassland zones, suggesting that vegetation distribution is strongly aligned with topographic gradients. Although NDVI differs significantly between forested and bare land areas, these land cover types occupy only a small fraction of the basin and contribute negligibly to runoff generation. In this context, elevation can serve as a reliable proxy for vegetation structure, effectively embedding vegetation-related hydrological influence within the topographic representation. These findings support the notion that hydroclimatic and terrain-based variables may indirectly encode essential vegetation processes in distributed or semi-distributed models.

Together, these results suggest that the limited vegetation heterogeneity in the study basins may constrain the potential performance gains of FLEX^{T} over the simpler FLEX^{D} model. Nonetheless, the strength of FLEX^{T} lies in its explicit representation of distinct landscape units, enabling a more physically grounded simulation of hydrological processes and underlying mechanisms. Further research is warranted to evaluate the benefits of the landscape-based modeling approach in catchments with greater ecological and topographic complexity.



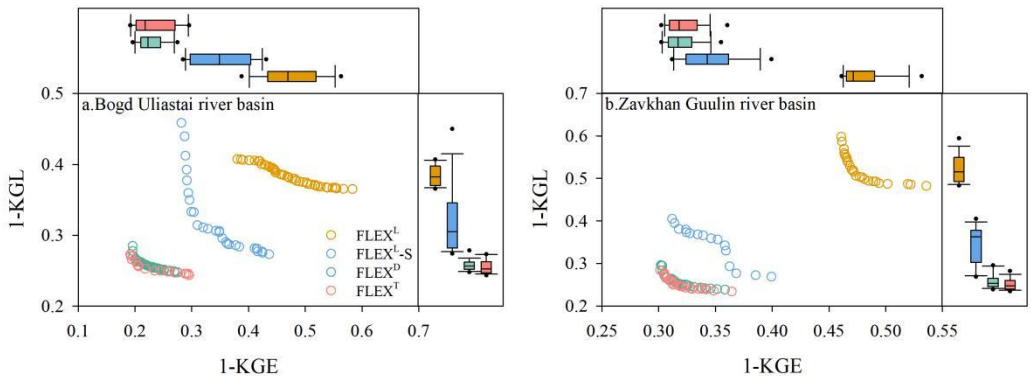
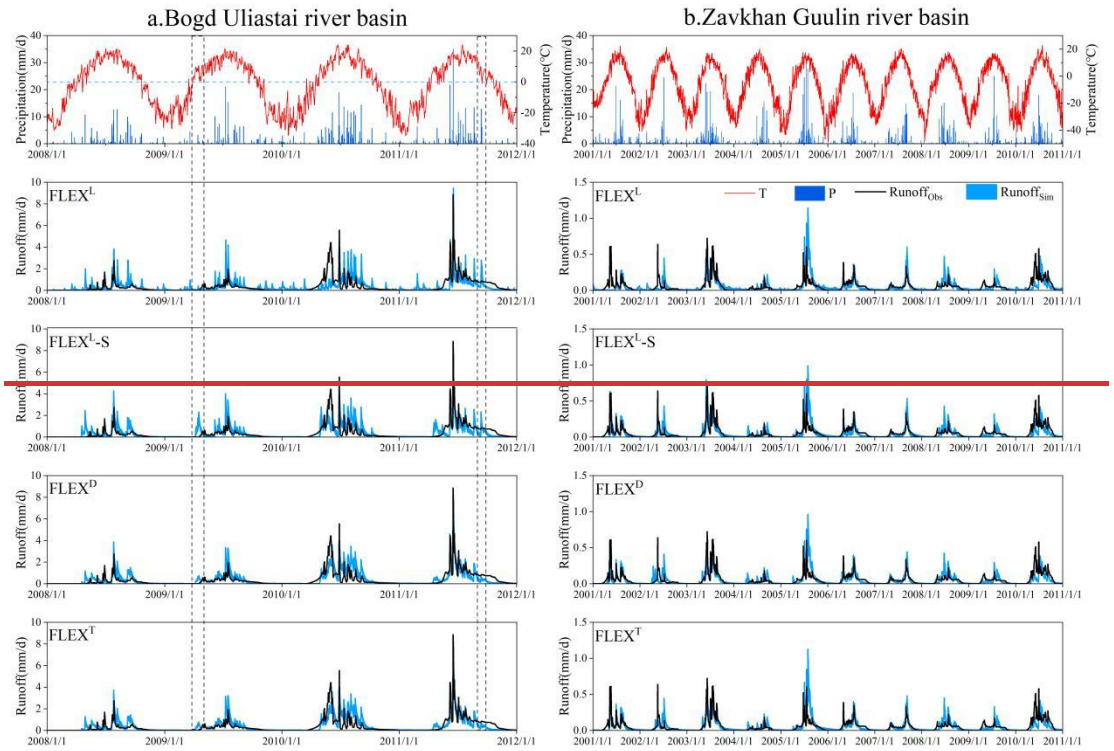


Fig.4 Performance of the FLEX^{L}, FLEX^{L}-S, FLEX^{D}, and FLEX^{T} models ~~in~~during the calibration ~~mode~~period.

Table 4 Comparison of simulation performance among different hydrological models in the two study catchments.

Basins	Evaluation indicators		Calibration				Validation			
			$FLEX^{L}$	$FLEX^{L}$-S	$FLEX^{D}$	$FLEX^{T}$	$FLEX^{L}$	$FLEX^{L}$-S	$FLEX^{D}$	$FLEX^{T}$
Bogd Uliastai river basin	KGE	Max	0.62	0.72	0.80	0.81	0.58	0.63	0.62	0.63
		Median	0.53	0.65	0.77	0.~~77~~78	0.39	0.47	0.56	0.~~57~~59
		Min	0.42	0.56	0.73	0.~~71~~70	0.16	0.29	0.52	0.~~52~~51
	KGL	Max	0.63	0.73	0.75	0.~~75~~76	0.67	0.76	0.80	0.~~80~~81
		Median	0.62	0.68	0.74	0.~~74~~75	0.64	0.71	0.78	0.78
		Min	0.59	0.54	0.72	0.73	0.61	0.61	0.75	0.75
Zavkhan Guulin river basin	KGE	Max	0.54	0.69	0.70	0.70	0.41	0.59	0.62	0.~~64~~63
		Median	0.52	0.65	0.68	0.~~67~~68	0.31	0.47	0.56	0.~~56~~59
		Min	0.46	0.60	0.64	0.~~59~~64	0.13	0.28	0.41	0.~~40~~52
	KGL	Max	0.52	0.73	0.76	0.77	0.60	0.73	0.74	0.~~76~~74
		Median	0.48	0.66	0.74	0.75	0.56	0.66	0.72	0.73
		Min	0.40	0.60	0.70	0.~~70~~72	0.47	0.61	0.70	0.~~69~~71

Some interesting rain/snowmelt-runoff events also suggest that semi-distributed models ($FLEX^D$ and $FLEX^T$) better capture basin hydrological processes. Two such events in the Bogd Uliastai river basin in April 2009 and September 2011 provide compelling evidence (Fig.5). ~~In~~On 14 April 2009, despite minimal precipitation, temperatures exceeded the melting threshold, producing only a relatively insignificant peak flow. In 12 September 2011, despite a higher daily precipitation of 12.7 mm, no runoff peak was observed within the basin. Lumped models failed to reproduce these dynamics accurately, instead simulating much larger peak flows. ~~This limitation arises because lumped models do not account for elevation-dependent variations in temperature and precipitation type. When the average daily temperature exceeds the rain-snow separation (snowmelt) threshold, lumped models treat all precipitation as rain (snowmelt is assumed to occur uniformly across the entire basin). However, snowfall may still occur at higher elevations, where temperatures are below the threshold, resulting in limited snowmelt. Similarly, rainfall (and corresponding snowmelt) may occur in lower elevations even when the basin-average temperature falls below the threshold.~~



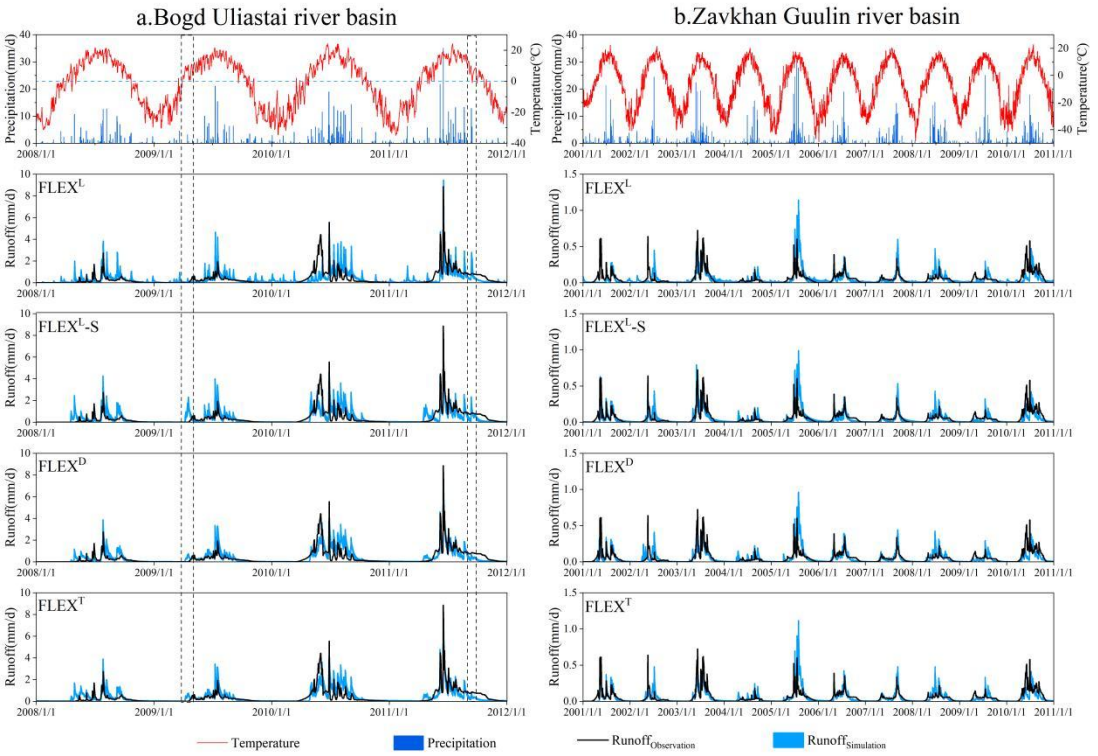
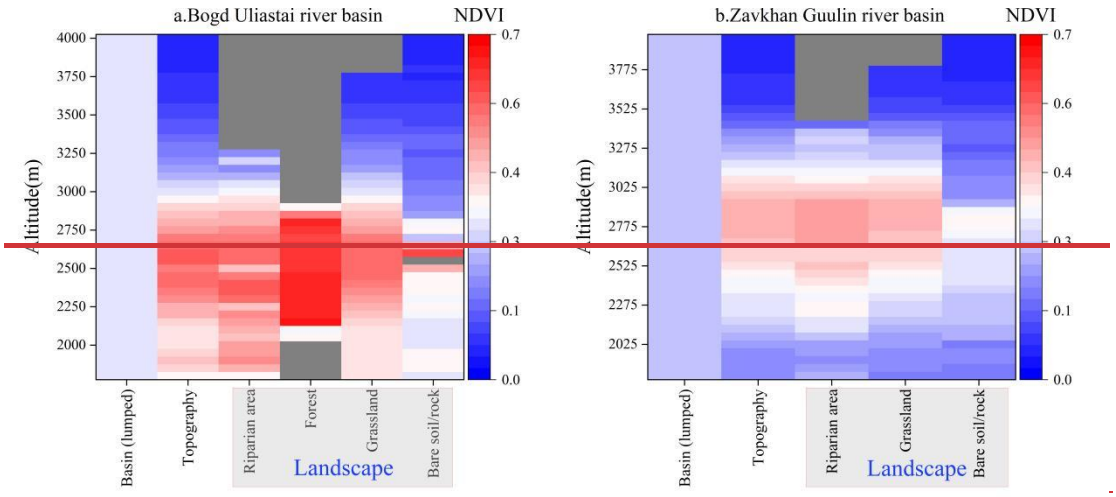


Fig.5 The daily observed and simulated hydrographs of the FLEX^{L}, FLEX^{L}-S, FLEX^{D}, and FLEX^{T} models in the calibration period. The dashed boxes represent the rainfall/snowfall-runoff events ~~in~~on 14 April 2009 and 12 September 2011 in the Bogd Uliastai river basin.

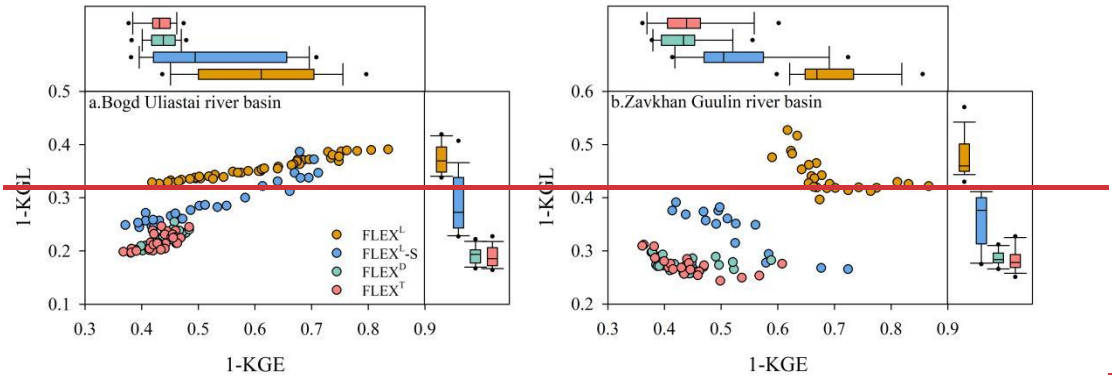


~~**Fig.6** Multi-year average NDVI variation across landscapes and its relationship with elevation in two study basins.~~

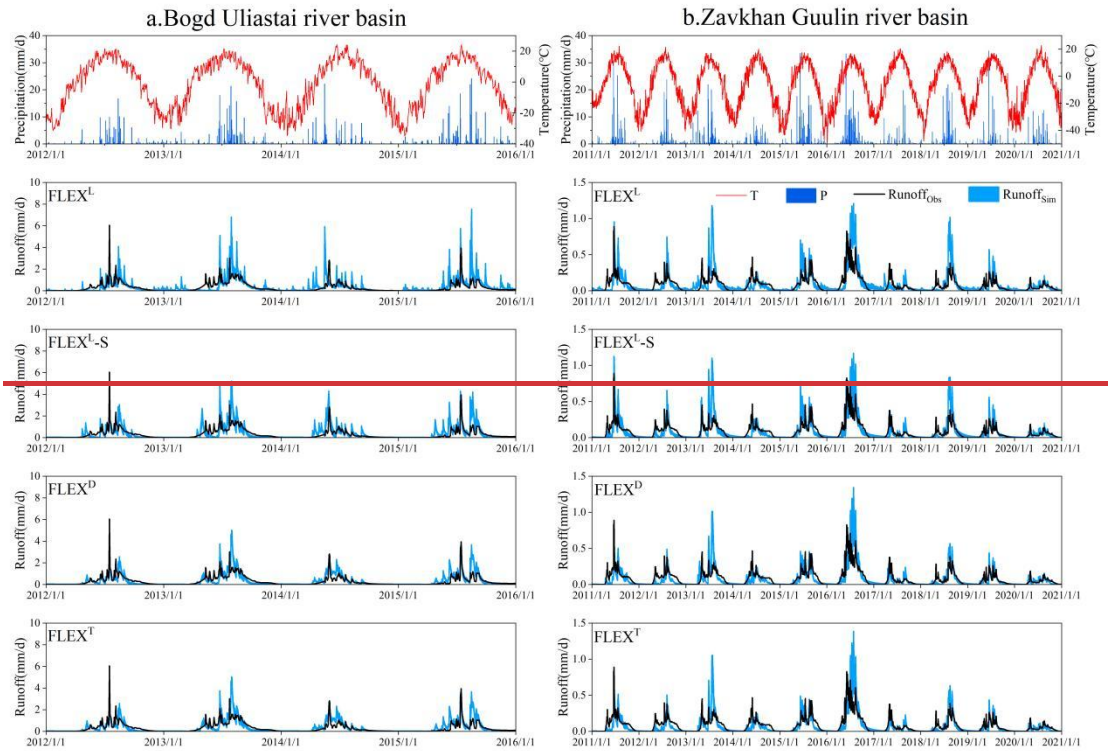
The performance and results of the four models during the validation period are shown in Figs.6 and 7~~ and 8~~. The results confirm the stepwise improvement in model

performance, as evidenced by the points corresponding to different model structures progressively shifting toward the origin. With the gradual optimization of model structure, the model's fitness has significantly improved. Unlike during calibration, the points in the validation period do not maintain the arc shape (Fig.4). ~~This discrepancy is attributed to errors present in both the model and the data, the estimation of which remains a challenging task (Fenicia et al., 2008b).~~

~~In summary, a model's ability to reproduce basin-scale hydrological responses is governed not by the complexity of its structure or the sheer number of parameters, but by the relevance and accuracy of the hydrological processes it represents, and their influence on catchment-scale dynamics.~~



~~Fig.7~~ ~~Performance of the FLEX^{L}, FLEX^{L}-S, FLEX^{D}, and FLEX^{T} models in validation mode.~~



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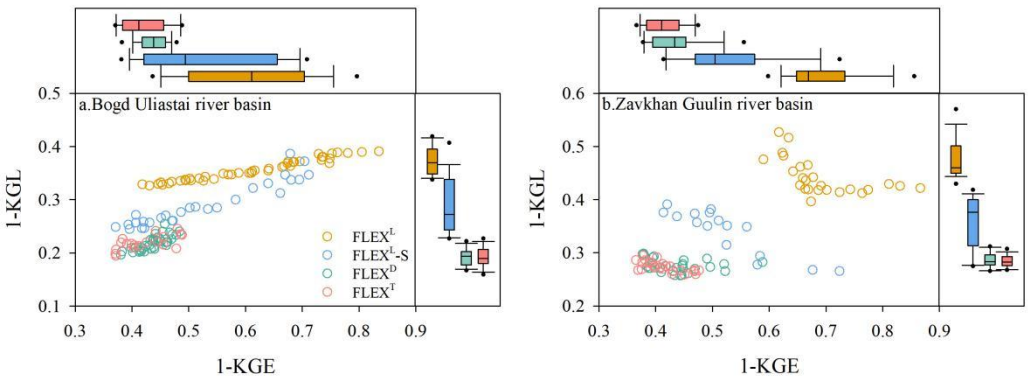
633 ~~Fig.8~~



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635 Fig.6 Performance of the FLEX^{L}, FLEX^{L}-S, FLEX^{D}, and FLEX^{T} models in validation mode.

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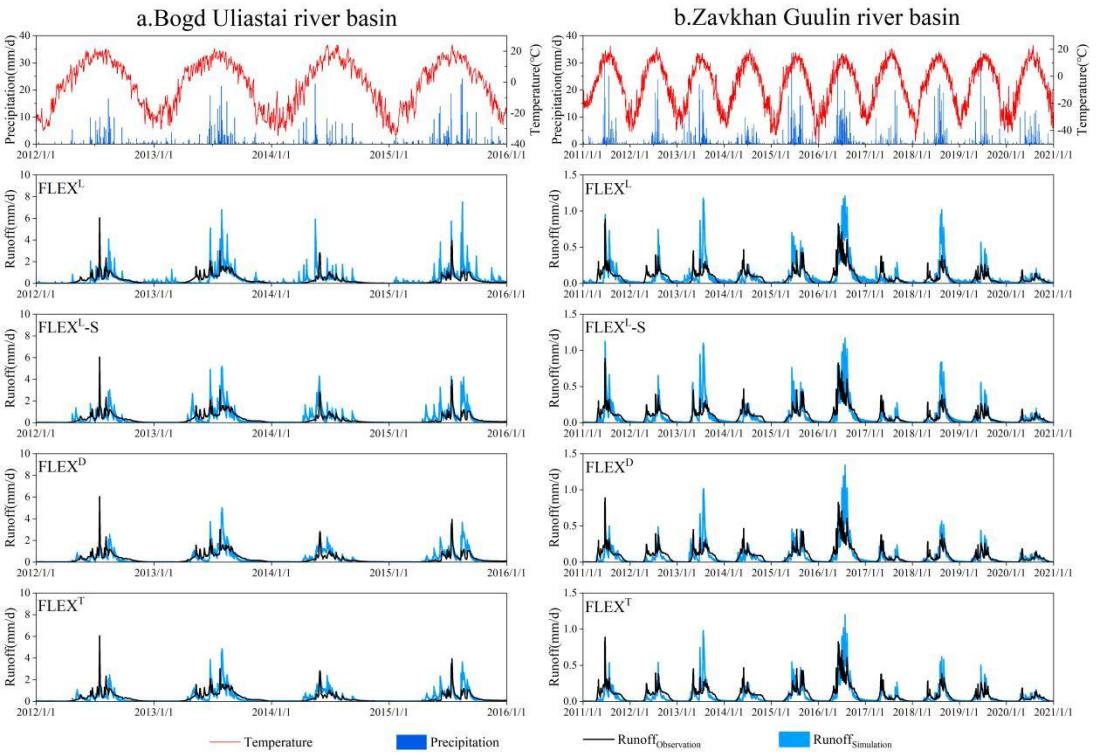


Fig.7 The daily observed and simulated hydrographs of the FLEX^{L}, FLEX^{L}-S, FLEX^{D}, and FLEX^{T} models in the validation period.

5.2 Model test by snowpack dynamics

Snow water equivalent is a crucial indicator of snowmelt dynamics and plays an essential role in hydrological ~~modeling~~modelling, serving as an additional metric for evaluating model performance and realism (Fig.~~9~~8). In the Bogd Uliastai river basin, the FLEX^{D} and FLEX^{T} models achieved KGE values of 0.61 and 0.63, respectively, for SWE simulation, indicating their ability to capture seasonal patterns and interannual variability, particularly peak values during winter and spring. The FLEX^{T} model, which incorporates vegetation effects, further improved SWE simulation accuracy and enhanced responsiveness to hydrological processes. In contrast, the FLEX^{L}-S model yielded a KGE of only 0.37, reflecting its limitations in capturing snowpack dynamics within the basin. ~~Lumped models typically simplify the spatial heterogeneity of factors such as terrain and vegetation, limiting their ability to capture local-scale features and consequently reducing accuracy in complex environments (Bormann et al., 2009).~~

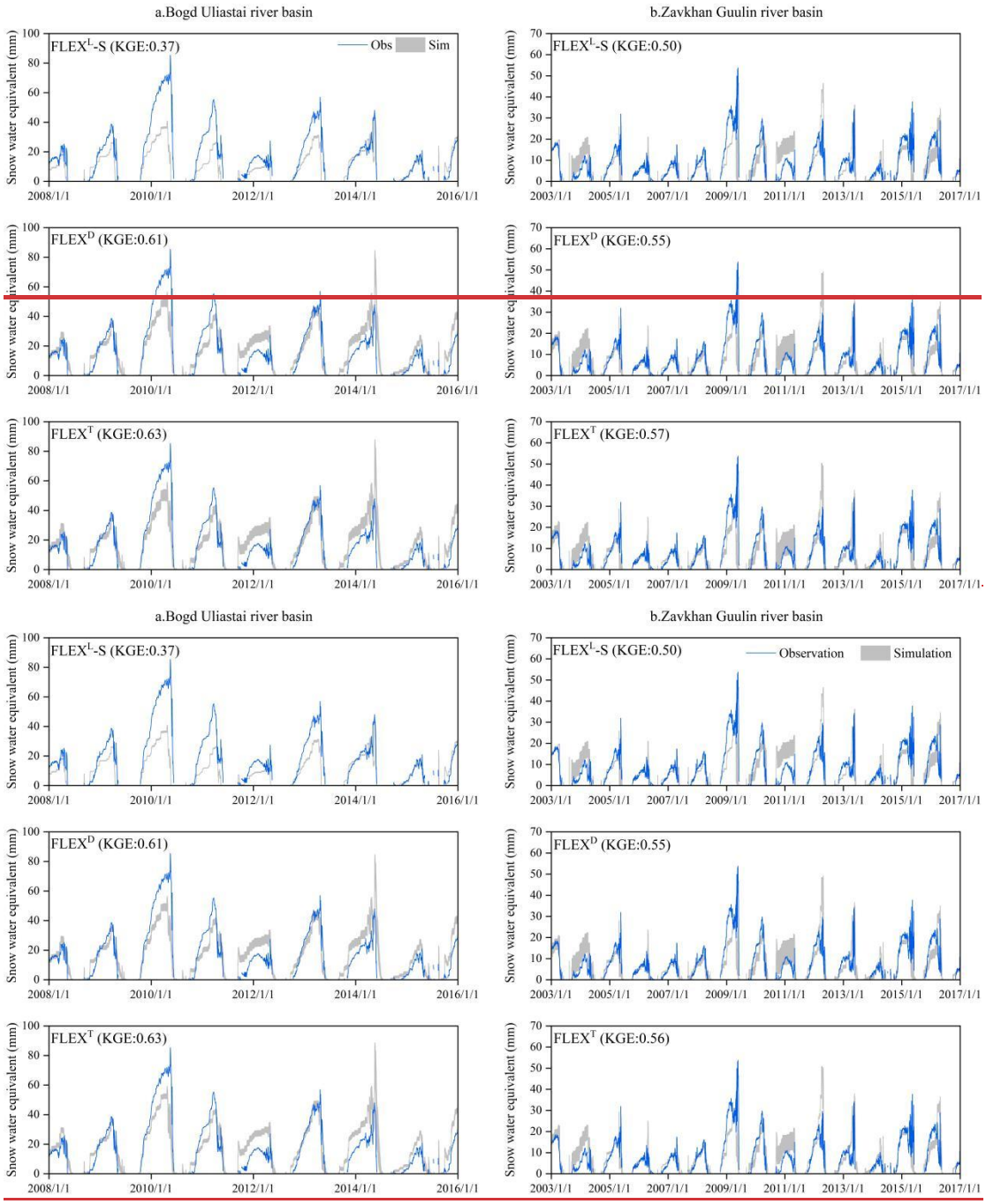


Fig.98 The observed and simulated daily snow water equivalent of the FLEX^{L}-S, FLEX^{D}, and FLEX^{T} models.

In the Zavkhan Guulin river basin, the FLEX^{L}-S model demonstrated relatively stable performance, achieving a KGE of 0.50. Although lumped models struggle to capture spatial heterogeneity, they effectively reflect seasonal precipitation and snowmelt trends. FLEX^{D} and FLEX^{T} achieved KGE values of 0.55 and 0.~~57, respectively, showed slight improvements. Model effectiveness remains strongly influenced by basin~~

~~specific climatic and landscape features—such as steep slopes, variable precipitation patterns, heterogeneous vegetation, and local climate fluctuations—all of which complicate accurate simulation of local-scale hydrological responses (Greco et al., 2023; Nippgen et al., 2011). These challenges are further amplified in data-scarce, cold regions, where disentangling the interactions among these factors is particularly difficult (Chen et al., 2017). While current models provide valuable insights, further refinement and validation are necessary to better capture dynamic local processes and microclimatic effects~~56, respectively, showed slight improvements. Overall, the semi-distributed model exhibited consistently higher SWE simulation skill across both basins.

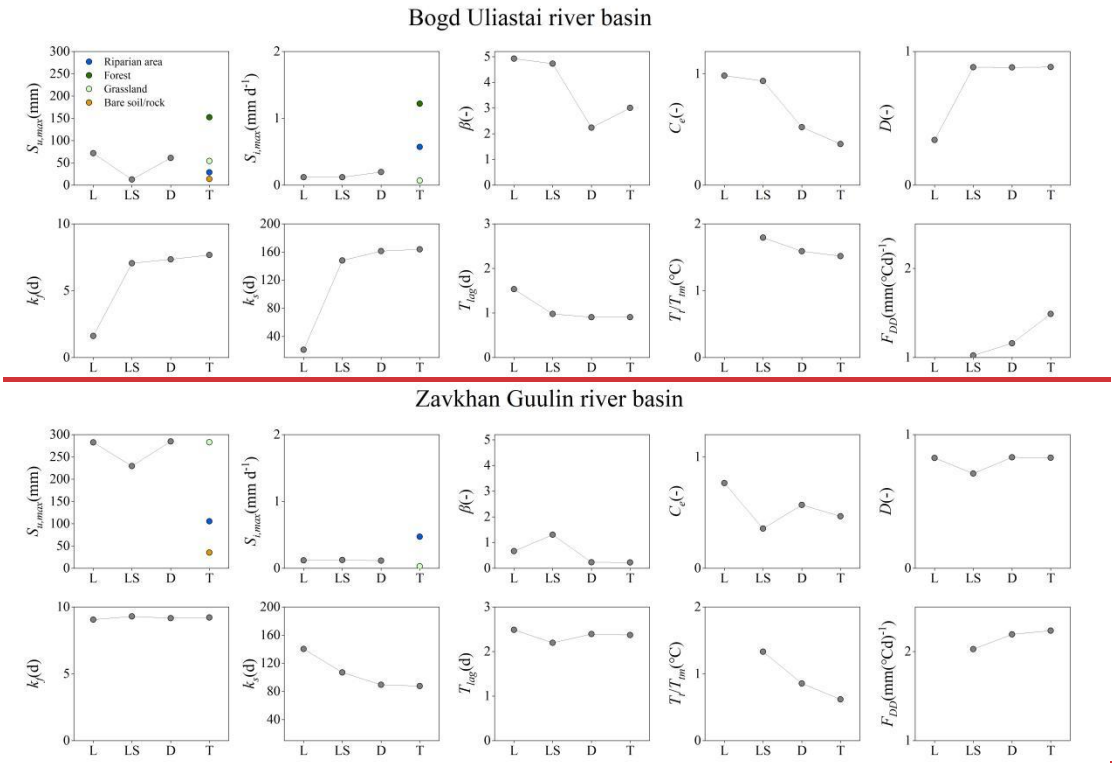
5.3 Model parameters composition

~~A key feature of the stepwise modelling framework is the progressive refinement of parameterization towards greater physical realism. As shown in~~ Fig.~~10,~~9 shows that model parameters exhibit distinct sensitivity across different structural configurations within the stepwise modelling framework. In models that do not account for vegetation effects, single parameter values are used to approximate basin-average hydrological behavior~~. By contrast, the~~, whereas FLEX^{T} ~~model incorporates landscape-specific hydrological response characteristics, resulting in~~produces spatially differentiated parameter values ~~that better reflect underlying process heterogeneity~~across landscape units.

~~Forest, characterized by dense canopies, exhibit a higher value of $S_{i,maxF}$ (1.22 mm), effectively regulating water distribution during the initial stages of rainfall events (Wang et al., 2021). In comparison, $S_{i,maxG}$ (0.07 mm and 0.03 mm for the Bogd Uliastai and Zavkhan Guulin river basins, respectively) and $S_{i,maxR}$ (0.57 mm and 0.47 mm) are lower. The riparian area, however, shows greater interception capacity than grassland, likely due to denser or more abundant vegetation cover (Gao et al., 2014). Bare soil/rock surfaces lack interception capacity altogether, with rainfall either infiltrating directly into the ground or rapidly generating surface runoff along slopes.~~

~~For root zone storage capacity, $S_{u,maxF}$ is 150 mm, consistent with the findings of Wang-Erlandsson et al. (Wang-Erlandsson et al., 2016). Notable differences are observed in $S_{u,maxG}$ (54 mm and 283 mm) and $S_{u,maxR}$ (29 mm and 105 mm) under varying climatic conditions. $S_{u,maxB}$ (14 mm and 33 mm) exhibits the lowest values due to the absence of vegetation cover and limited soil structure development (He et al., 2024).~~

~~The differences in interception and root zone storage capacity across landscapes between the two basins are primarily attributed to the more arid conditions in the Zavkhan Guulin river basin. This basin is characterized by sparse vegetation (reflected in lower $S_{i,max}$), higher evaporation losses (as suggested by greater $S_{u,max}$), and a low runoff coefficient of only 0.15.~~



Interception capacity ($S_{i,max}$) and root zone storage capacity ($S_{u,max}$) vary across landscapes. In the Bogd Uliastai river basin, forest (present only in this basin) shows the highest $S_{i,max}$ (1.19 mm), followed by riparian area (0.55 mm) and grassland (0.05 mm), while bare soil/rock has no interception storage. $S_{u,max}$ decreases from forest (145 mm) to grassland (54 mm), riparian area (29 mm), and bare soil/rock (14 mm). By comparison, in the Zavkhan Guulin river basin, $S_{i,max}$ is lower (grassland: 0.02 mm;

riparian area: 0.41 mm), whereas $S_{u,max}$ is higher (grassland: 283 mm; riparian area: 105 mm; bare soil/rock: 33 mm), reflecting the more arid conditions and associated hydrological characteristics.

—

The recession coefficient of the fast response reservoir (K_f) reflects runoff dynamics and storage across landscapes. In the Bogd Uliastai river basin, forest has the largest K_f (9.4 d), followed by grassland (7.7 d), while riparian areas (3.0 d) and bare soil/rock (2.6 d) have the smallest K_f, indicating faster runoff. In the Zavkhan Guulin river basin, K_f shows a similar pattern, with grassland (9.7 d), riparian areas (2.9 d), and bare soil/rock (2.5 d). The low K_f in bare soil/rock reflects Hortonian overland flow, whereas runoff in riparian areas is mainly governed by saturation overland flow.

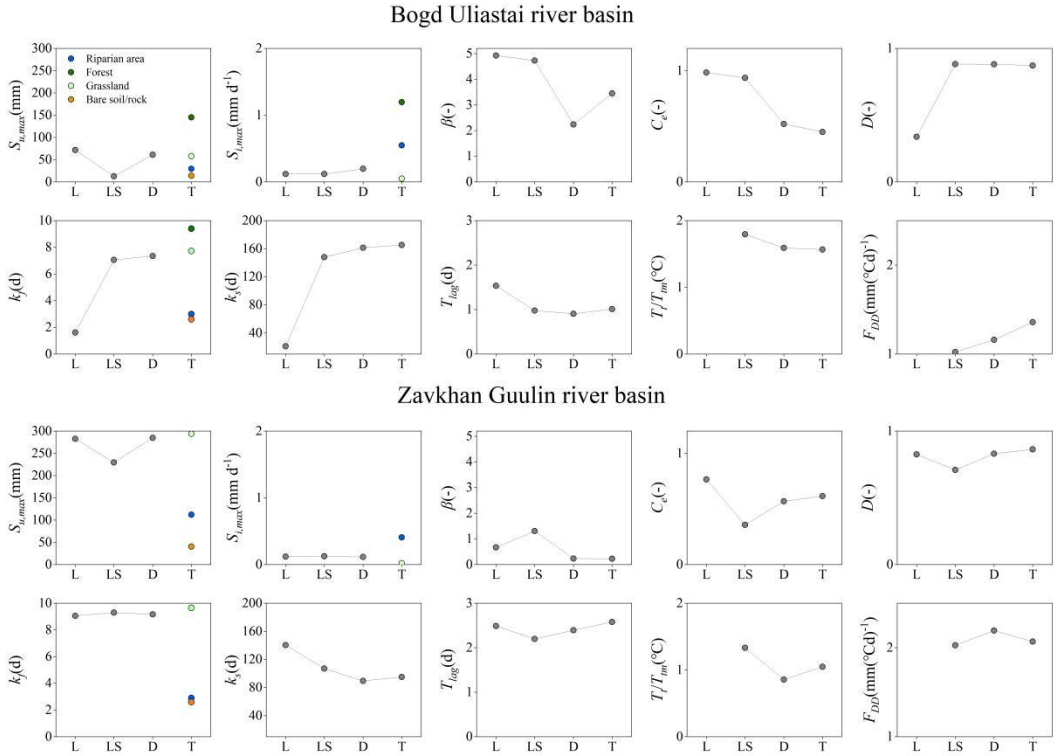


Fig.~~10~~9 The changes of averaged behavioral parameters of the FLEX^{L}, FLEX^{L}-S, FLEX^{D}, and FLEX^{T} models.

Other parameters are also refined alongside improvements in the model structure. The parameter D, which partitions generated runoff between fast and slow response reservoirs, tends to be close to 1—indicating that most runoff is routed to the fast

reservoir. ~~This aligns with the observed runoff generation mechanisms in the study basins, which are primarily driven by intense rainfall events.~~ Parameters related to energy processes, such as the T_{tm} and F_{dd}, exhibit a clear compensatory relationship: a higher T_{tm} is typically associated with a lower F_{dd}, and vice versa. ~~This reflects model calibration trade-offs aimed at maintaining energy balance. Future work should incorporate field observations to better quantify parameter heterogeneity across different landscape units. Such efforts would enhance both the physical interpretability and predictive robustness of the model.~~

5.4 ~~Snow contribution~~The ratio of snowmelt runoff to streamflow

Fig.~~11~~10 shows the annual and seasonal ~~contributions~~ratios of snowmelt runoff to streamflow in the Bogd Uliastai and Zavkhan Guulin river basins, as ~~determined~~simulated by the FLEX^{T} model. On an annual scale, snowmelt ~~contributes~~runoff accounts for 23.~~5~~6%±0.7% and 15.9%±1.3% ~~and 14.7%±1.6% to~~of streamflow in the Bogd Uliastai and Zavkhan Guulin river basins, respectively. Seasonally, snowmelt plays a dominant role in sustaining spring flows, with snowmelt runoff accounting for 70.1%±1.7% and 76.9%±3.2% of streamflow in the two basins, while its contribution is considerably lower in other seasons.

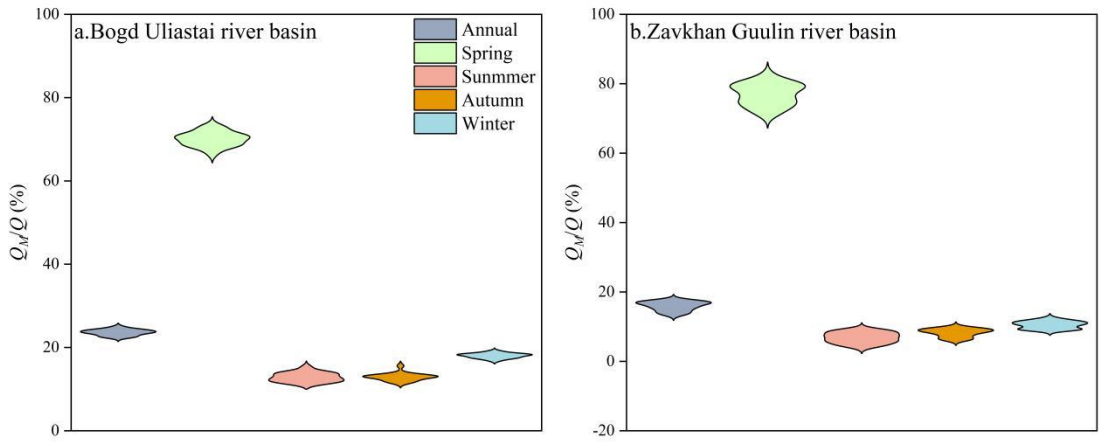


Fig.10 The ratio of snowmelt runoff to streamflow based on the FLEX^{T} model.

Fig.11 shows the snowfall-to-precipitation ratio (P_s/P) and the ratio of snowmelt runoff

to streamflow (Q_M/Q) across different elevations. The P_s/P increases with elevation ranging from 14.7% to 70.3% in the Bogd Uliastai river basin and from 12.7% to 63.2% in the Zavkhan Guulin river basin. Consistent with this pattern, the Q_M/Q also increases with elevation, from 11.8% to 57.8% and from 10.3% to 58.4% in the two basins, respectively. Overall, higher P_s/P are associated with higher Q_M/Q across elevations.

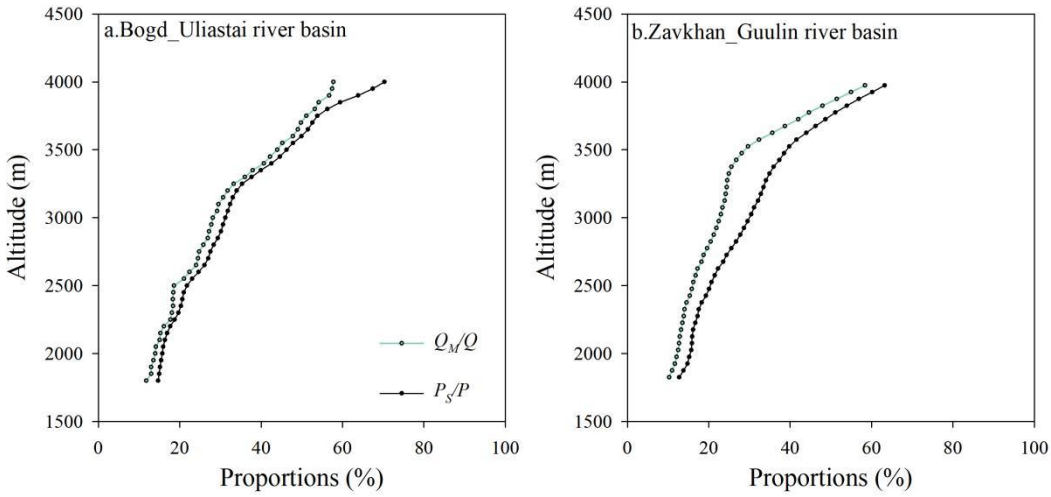


Fig.11 The ratio of snowmelt runoff to streamflow and the snowfall-to-precipitation ratio at different elevations based on FLEX^{T} model.

5.5 Runoff generation at different elevations and across landscapes

Fig.12 shows significant differences in runoff contributions across 5 equal area elevation bands. In the Bogd Uliastai and Zavkhan Guulin river basins, high elevation areas (above 2900 m in the Bogd Uliastai basin and 2825 m in the Zavkhan Guulin basin) play a dominant role in runoff generation, contributing approximately 30% of total basin runoff. This dominance is primarily attributed to orographic effect, which increase precipitation and enhance the proportion of snowmelt-derived runoff (Fig.11). In contrast, low elevation areas rely primarily on rainfall-induced runoff. ~~while its contribution is considerably lower in other seasons. Although direct observational data (e.g., stable water isotopes) for quantifying snowmelt contributions are unavailable in this study, previous research provides indirect support. For example, Wu et al. (Wu et al., 2021)~~Due to limited precipitation and higher evaporative losses, their contributions

to total runoff are comparatively smaller, with the lowest elevation band accounting for only about 15% of basin runoff.

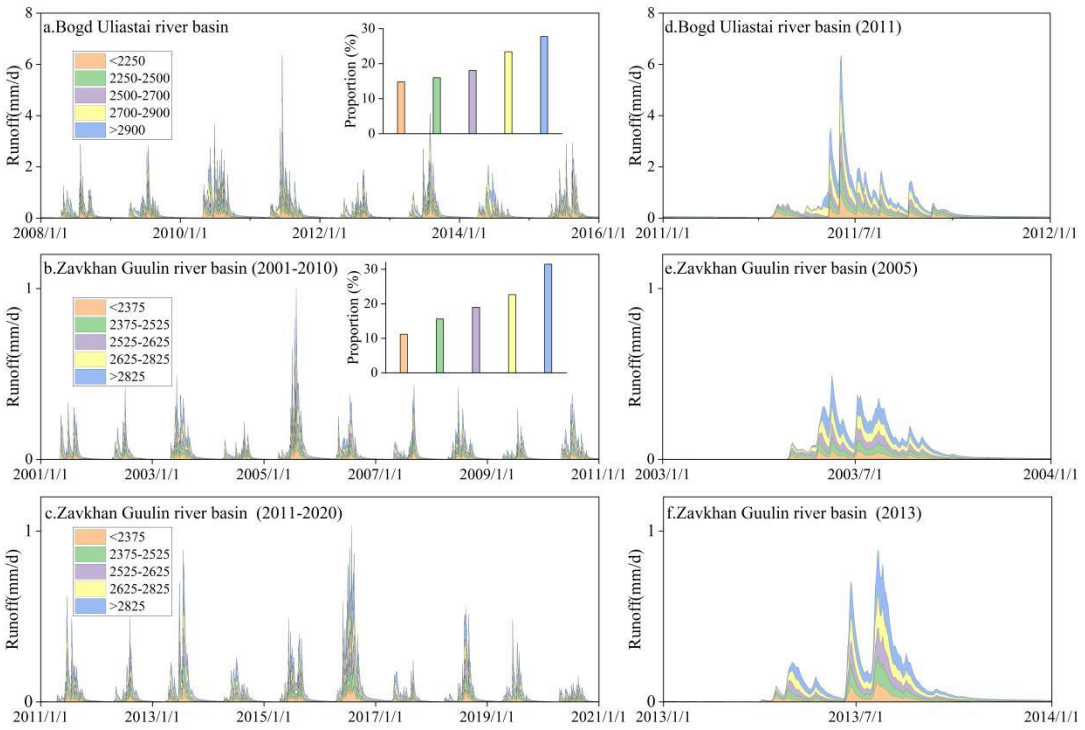


Fig.12 Runoff contribution from 5 equal area elevation bands (each representing 20% of the total catchment area) based on FLEX^{T} model.

Different landscape units also exhibit differences in their contributions to runoff (Fig. 13). Grasslands occupy the largest portion of both basins (82.8% and 85.4% in the Bogd Uliastai and Zavkhan Guulin river basins, respectively) and contribute correspondingly high shares of total runoff (80.0% and 82.0%). Forested areas, found only in the Bogd Uliastai basin, account for 4.7% of the basin area but contribute only 2.9% of the total runoff. Riparian areas occupy a relatively small fraction of the two basins (10.3% and 13.0%) but contribute a comparable or higher proportion of runoff (12.8% and 14.7%). Bare soil/rock areas generate a relatively high runoff contribution per unit area; however, their limited spatial extent (2.2% and 1.6%) constrains their total contribution to streamflow (4.3% and 3.3%).

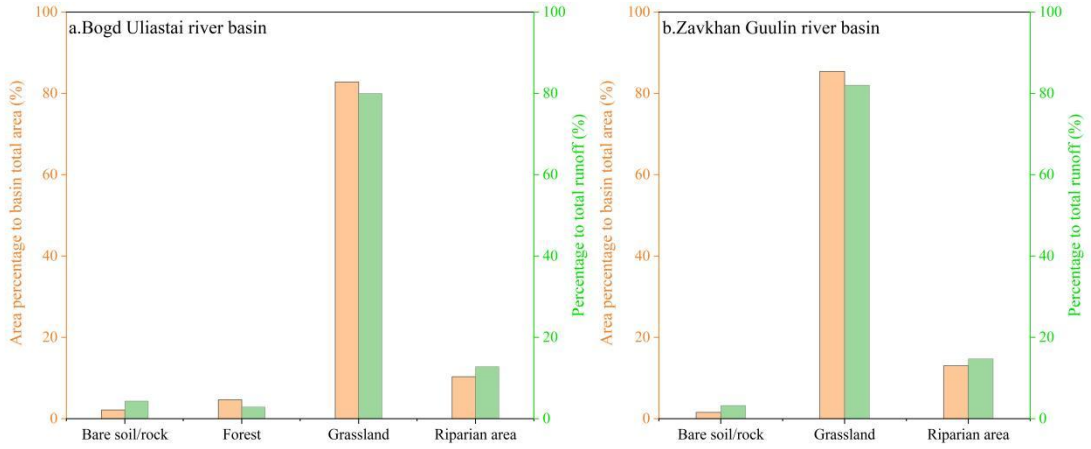


Fig.13 Runoff contribution from different landscapes based on FLEX^{T} model.

6. Discussion

6.1 The stepwise modelling framework improves the simulation of hydrological processes in cold regions

Accurately representing dominant hydrological processes and spatial heterogeneity is essential for simulating runoff dynamics in cold regions. The enhanced performance of FLEX^{L}-S relative to the FLEX^{L} model underscores the necessity of explicitly representing snow accumulation and melt, which are integral to runoff generation in cryospheric environments. Without such representation, winter runoff responses tend to be systematically mischaracterized.

The better performance of the distributed FLEX^{D} model highlights the importance of elevation-dependent variability in temperature and precipitation (Fenicia et al., 2008b). By maintaining distinct storage states across hydrological response units, FLEX^{D} captures spatial contrasts in precipitation phase and melt timing that lumped models fail to resolve, particularly during rain–snow transition events (Bormann et al., 2009).

FLEX^{T} systematically integrates topography, vegetation, and hydrological processes through the explicit representation of hydrological response units, thereby enhancing the physical consistency of the model structure and the interpretability of its parameters

(Savenije, 2010). Under the basin conditions considered in this study, FLEX^{T} exhibits a high degree of consistency with FLEX^{D} in simulating both runoff and snowpack dynamics. Although process-based discretization approaches have been shown to improve basin-scale hydrological simulations in heterogeneous cold region basins—such as the Heihe (Gao et al., 2014) and Yigong Zangbu river basins (Gao et al., 2020)—when topographic and land-cover variability are explicitly represented, the magnitude of these benefits appears to depend strongly on the degree of landscape heterogeneity.

In the studied basins, vegetation heterogeneity is limited, with grasslands covering more than 80% of the area (Fig.13), which substantially reduces contrasts in vegetation properties across the landscape. Although the lumped model applies a spatially uniform NDVI and therefore cannot explicitly resolve intra-basin vegetation variability, NDVI exhibits a strong correspondence with elevation, particularly in grassland-dominated regions. NDVI values across elevation bands closely resemble those of the corresponding grassland zones, indicating that vegetation distribution is largely structured by topographic gradients. While forested and bare land areas display distinct NDVI signatures, they occupy only a minor fraction of the basin and exert a limited influence on overall runoff generation (Fig.14).

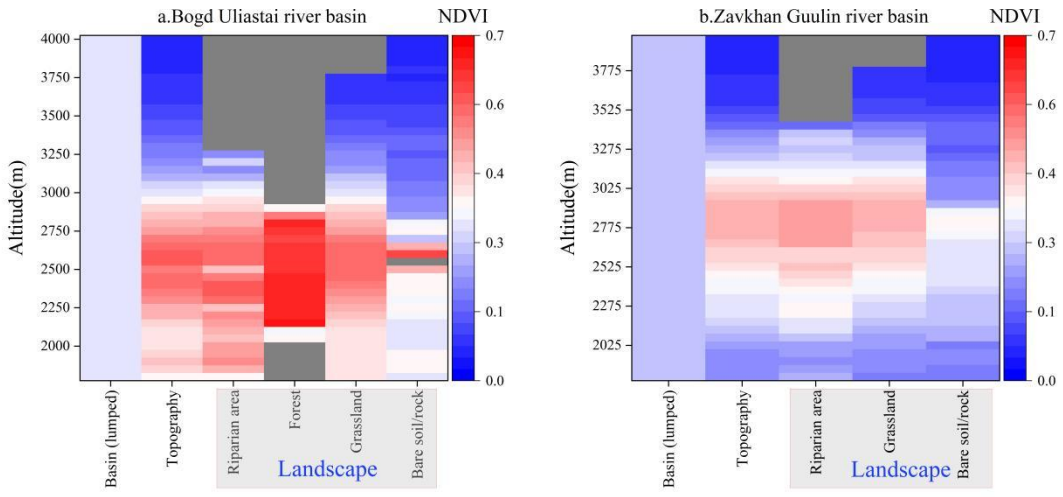


Fig.14 Multi-year average NDVI variation across landscapes and its relationship with elevation in two study basins.

Under these conditions, key vegetation-related hydrological attributes—such as root zone storage and interception capacity — can be effectively represented through hydroclimatic conditions and topographic gradients (Antonelli et al., 2018; Roebroek et al., 2020), allowing elevation to function, to some extent, as a proxy for vegetation structure. Consequently, the comparable performance of $FLEX^{T}$ and $FLEX^{D}$ in simulating runoff and snowpack processes primarily reflects the constraining influence of landscape structure in the studied basins, rather than differences in model design. Within this stepwise modelling framework, $FLEX^{T}$ employs a more physically grounded parameterization scheme and therefore offers a flexible and extensible platform for diagnosing hydrological processes in cold mountainous regions. This suggests a particular advantage for exploring hydrological responses to vegetation and climate change in basins with higher ecological or topographic complexity.

6.2 Process-based tracking of the ratio of snowmelt runoff to streamflow

Although direct observational data (e.g., stable water isotopes) for quantifying the ratio of snowmelt runoff to streamflow are unavailable in this study, previous research provides indirect support. Wu et al. (2021) applied a similar snowmelt tracking method in the Altai Mountain and reported that snowmelt accounted for 29.3% of annual streamflow. This result exceeds those observed in our study, largely due to regional differences in snowfall. In the Kayiertesi river basin of the Altai Mountain, annual average precipitation for one hydrological year (September to August) was 409.8 mm from 2011 to 2015 (observed at the Kuwei snow station), with snowfall from November to March comprising about 31% of that annual precipitation ~~(Zhang et al., 2017)~~(Zhang et al., 2017). In contrast, annual precipitation in the Bogd Uliastai and Zavkhan Guulin

basins does not exceed 200 mm, and snowfall represents less than 15% of the total observed precipitation.

This study also compared model-based snowmelt tracking with traditional indirect methods, which estimate the ratio of snowmelt ~~contributions~~ runoff to streamflow by calculating the ratio of snowfall or snowmelt to runoff over a given period ~~(Barnett et al., 2005; Immerzeel et al., 2010)~~(Barnett et al., 2005; Immerzeel et al., 2010). While these indirect approaches are computationally ~~simple and data~~ efficient~~, these methods~~ and require limited data, they implicitly assume that all meltwater ~~directly contributes~~is instantaneously converted to runoff, neglecting interactions with rainfall and losses due to infiltration, evaporation, and subsurface storage~~.~~ (Li et al., 2017).

Using the traditional indirect approach, we calculated ~~the~~ snowmelt-to-runoff ratios ~~to be 38.8%±2.~~of 41.3%±1.6% and ~~144.4%±20.1~~153%±15.5% in the two basins, respectively. These estimates are ~~significantly~~substantially higher than those obtained ~~via~~from model-based snowmelt tracking, with some values ~~even~~ exceeding 100%, indicating physical implausibility. This discrepancy highlights the methodological limitations ~~and scientific inadequacies~~ of traditional ~~methods.~~ approaches.

The overestimation ~~likely~~ inherent in traditional methods arises from ~~the~~their failure to ~~account for spatially disconnected snowmelt — specifically,~~represent snowmelt that infiltrates into the ~~root zone and is subsequently~~ soil profile, percolates to deeper layers, or is lost through evaporation~~-~~, thereby reducing the fraction of meltwater reaching the channel ~~(Liu et al., 2023)~~(Liu et al., 2023), particularly in the arid Zavkhan Guulin river basin. These findings underscore the importance of using physically based models to trace water source pathways, particularly in data-scarce and hydrologically complex regions.

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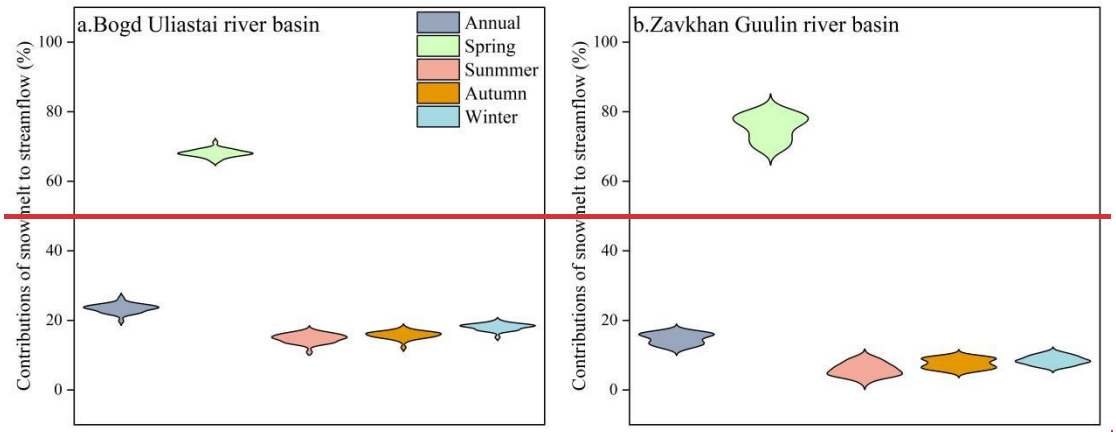


Fig.11 Contributions of snowmelt to streamflow (Q_M/Q) based on the FLEX^{T} model.

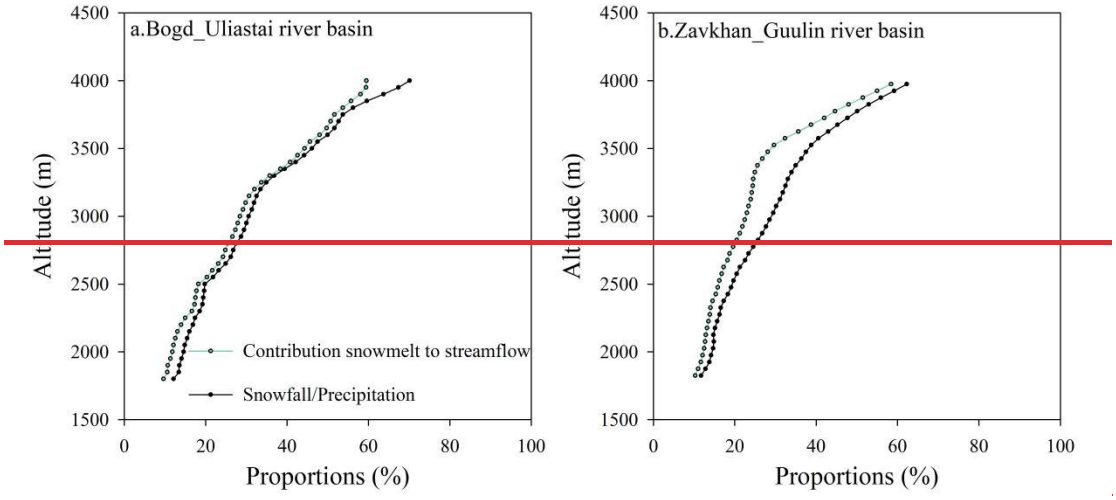
Fig.12 shows the snowmelt contribution to streamflow and the snowfall/precipitation ratio (P_s/P) across different elevations. The results indicate that the P_s/P increases significantly attributable to lower temperatures at higher altitudes that favor snowfall. Correspondingly, the contribution of snowmelt to streamflow also increases with elevation, directly linked to greater snow storage in high elevation areas, which providing a sustained water source for rivers (Sprenger et al., 2024). The finding underscores the decisive influence of snowmelt on streamflow in mountainous regions. With rising temperatures driven by climate change, low elevation areas may see more precipitation as rain, reducing snowpack, while accelerated snowmelt at higher elevations could increase the variability and instability of meltwater runoff (Kraaijenbrink et al., 2021; Li et al., 2017).

Although the two basins share similar elevation and temperature regimes, their contrasting hydrological responses primarily reflect differences in climate and vegetation cover. The Bogd Uliastai river basin, dominated by mountainous grasslands, exhibits higher vegetation density (basin-average NDVI: 0.31; grassland NDVI: 0.34), whereas the Zavkhan Guulin river basin, situated in a semi-arid region, shows lower vegetation cover (basin-average NDVI: 0.26; grassland NDVI: 0.28) (Fig.6).

These vegetation differences influence snowmelt-runoff efficiency. In Bogd Uliastai

~~river basin, the snowmelt contribution to streamflow closely matches the snowfall-to-precipitation ratio, indicating limited losses and effective runoff generation. By contrast, Zavkhan Guulin river basin experiences greater hydrological losses—primarily due to infiltration and evaporation—which cause snowmelt contributions to fall below the snowfall input, especially at higher elevations (Litaor et al., 2008).~~

~~Sparser vegetation and drier soils in Zavkhan Guulin river basin further enhance soil moisture retention, delaying runoff initiation and reducing the proportion of meltwater reaching the stream. This comparison highlights how subtle variations in vegetation structure, captured by NDVI, modulate hydrological partitioning and runoff efficiency across cold alpine landscapes (Zhong et al., 2021).~~



~~**Fig.12** Contributions of snowmelt to streamflow (Q_M/Q) and snowfall/precipitation ratio (P_s/P) at different elevations based on FLEX^{T} model.~~

~~**5.5**~~

6.3 Runoff generation mechanisms at different ~~elevation zones~~elevations and across landscapes

Elevation is a ~~key topographic factor influencing basin~~fundamental control on runoff ~~processes~~generation and ~~their~~ seasonal hydrological variability in mountainous basins,

as it ~~affects~~governs precipitation ~~patterns~~phase, snow ~~storage~~accumulation, and melt ~~rates~~timing ~~(Jenicek and Ledvinka, 2020)~~(Jenicek and Ledvinka, 2020). In the study basins, runoff contributions increase progressively with elevation. This pattern contrasts with glacierized catchments, where the largest runoff contributions do not necessarily originate from the highest elevation bands but are often dominated by glacier melt processes (Gao et al., 2020). These elevation-dependent contrasts highlight the importance of explicitly accounting for vertical heterogeneity and basin-specific cryospheric conditions in cold-region hydrological modelling.

The lag effect in ~~. Fig.13 shows significant differences in runoff contributions across 5 equal area elevation bands. High elevation areas (above 2900 m or 2825 m) play a dominant role in runoff generation, primarily due to the orographic effect, which leads to increased precipitation and a higher proportion of snowmelt contributions (Ayala et al., 2023) (Fig.12). Runoff peaks in these high elevation areas are especially pronounced in spring and summer, highlighting the critical role of seasonal snowmelt.~~snowmelt runoff across different elevations is a defining feature of hydrological processes in mountainous basins, arising from the temporal variability of snowmelt among elevation areas. In the Bogd Uliastai and Zavkhan Guulin river basins, low elevation areas contribute rapidly to runoff during the initial stages, while high elevation areas gradually augment runoff as the season progresses, reflecting the delayed response of snowmelt-dominated areas (Hajika et al., 2024). This lag is primarily governed by elevation-dependent snow accumulation and melt dynamics: under cold conditions at higher elevations, precipitation is stored as snow, and meltwater release typically occurs several weeks to a few months later than at lower elevations, with the lag being most pronounced at the onset of the melt season (Gillan et al., 2010) (Fig.12).

The lag in snowmelt runoff across different elevations has profound implications for water resources management. Snowmelt from high elevation areas prolongs the recession of basin runoff, maintaining downstream water supply and providing

buffering capacity during droughts or low-flow periods. In contrast, low elevation areas respond rapidly to extreme precipitation, generating short-term flood peaks, while delayed high elevation snowmelt can extend high flow conditions, complicating flood management (Gu et al., 2023). Effective management in mountainous basins therefore requires integrating both immediate and delayed runoff contributions across elevations to optimize water allocation, improve flood early-warning accuracy, and safeguard downstream ecological and socio-economic water demands (Li et al., 2019).

Beyond elevation controls, vegetation influences runoff generation through its direct physiological properties (e.g., interception and root zone storage). Grasslands are the dominant land-cover type in both basins and are widely distributed across different elevation zones. Their runoff-generation characteristics are relatively spatially uniform in a basin-averaged sense and thus exert a primary control on the overall runoff response. Under the semi-arid and arid climatic setting, soils in grassland areas are generally persistently dry, with a large initial soil-moisture deficit. This condition thereby enhances the infiltration demand for rainfall and snowmelt, delaying runoff generation (Xue et al., 2025). Forested areas exhibit strong regulatory functions—intercepting precipitation, enhancing infiltration, and reducing quick flow generation (Liu et al., 2018; Stocker et al., 2023). Riparian areas function as hydrologically connected source areas, rapidly transmitting rainfall and snowmelt to the channel network ~~In contrast, low elevation areas rely primarily on rainfall-induced runoff. Due to limited precipitation and higher evaporative losses, their contributions to total runoff are comparatively smaller (Sprenger et al., 2022).~~

~~The lag effect in runoff is a notable characteristic of hydrological processes in mountainous basins, reflecting the differential responses of various elevation areas to hydrological drivers. In the Bogd Uliastai river basin, low elevation areas respond rapidly to precipitation events, contributing significantly to runoff during the early stages of peak flow. As the event progresses, contributions from higher elevation areas~~

~~gradually increase, highlighting the heterogeneous influence of elevation on runoff dynamics (Hajika et al., 2024). This lag is closely associated with delayed snowmelt process in high elevation areas. where lower temperatures cause precipitation to fall as snow. Snowmelt in these areas typically occurs weeks or even months later than in lower elevations, with the delay especially evident during the initial stages of the melt season (Gillan et al., 2010). A similar pattern is observed in the Zavkhan Guulin river basin, where runoff from high elevation continues to contribute significantly during the latter part of the hydrograph, thereby prolonging the recession phase (Fig.13).~~

~~The lag effect of runoff across different elevation areas has important implications for water resource management. In cold, high-mountain basins, the delayed hydrological response of upper elevation not only sustains downstream water supply during dry periods, but also significantly influences the timing and spatial extent of flood risk (Gu et al., 2023). During extreme precipitation events, rapid runoff generation in low-elevation areas may exacerbate short-term flood hazards, while delayed snowmelt from higher elevations can prolong flood durations. Therefore, both immediate and delayed hydrological responses should be holistically considered in catchment-scale management strategies (Li et al., 2019)~~

~~Although the lag effect is particularly evident during runoff peaks, current observational and modeling data remain insufficient to accurately quantify the specific response timings and processes across elevation gradients. Future research should integrate high-resolution numerical simulations with field-based observations to better disentangle the dynamic runoff contributions from different elevation areas, thereby enhancing the predictive skill and physical realism of hydrological models.~~

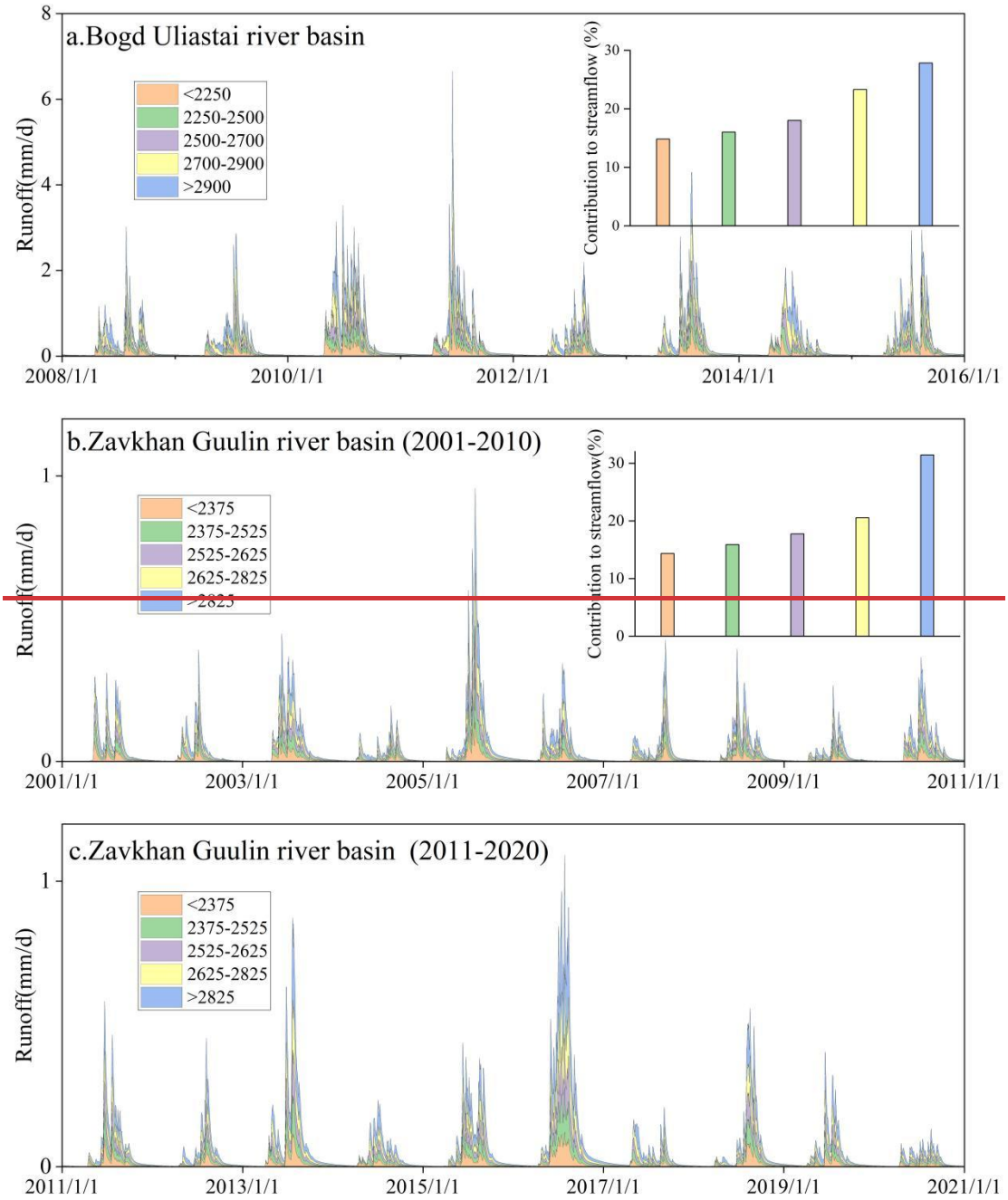


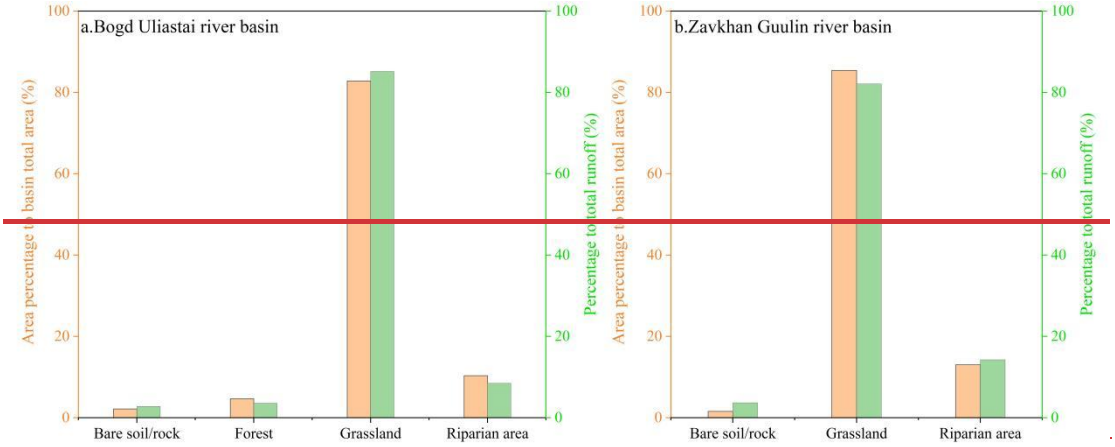
Fig.13 Runoff contribution from 5 equal area elevation bands (each representing 20% of the total catchment area) based on FLEX^{T} model.

5.6 Regulatory mechanisms of vegetation in runoff generation processes

Vegetation influences runoff generation not only through its direct physiological properties (e.g., interception, root zone storage, and transpiration), but also through its

~~spatial interactions with topography. To examine this regulatory role, we analyzed runoff responses across HRUs delineated by distinct vegetation types and elevation bands, thereby isolating process-driven variability from effects primarily driven by areal extent (Fig.14).~~

~~Despite grasslands occupying the largest portion of both basins (82.8% and 85.4%), their runoff generation capacity varies markedly with elevation and climatic context. In the more arid Zavkhan Guulin river basin, dry grassland soils exhibit high infiltration rates under unsaturated conditions, thereby reducing surface runoff. However, during peak melt or rainfall events, saturation thresholds are exceeded, triggering rapid surface runoff (Assouline et al., 2024).~~



~~Fig.14~~ ~~Runoff contribution from different landscapes based on FLEX^{T} model.~~

~~Riparian zones, although limited in area (10.3% and 13.0%), contribute disproportionately to runoff (8.5% and 14.2%) due to high soil moisture, shallow root zones, and strong hydrological connectivity. This is consistent with findings that riparian areas function as dynamic runoff buffers, responding rapidly to precipitation and snowmelt inputs (Leibowitz et al., 2023)~~(Leibowitz et al., 2023)~~.~~

~~Forested areas, found only in the Bogd Uliastai basin, exhibit strong regulatory functions—intercepting precipitation, enhancing infiltration, and reducing quick flow generation (Liu et al., 2018; Stocker et al., 2023). These effects are particularly relevant under scenarios of climate-induced vegetation change.~~

~~The runoff generation capacity of bare soi/rock is high due to the lack of vegetation and low soil permeability. After rainfall or snowmelt, water infiltrates poorly and rapidly forms overland flow (Zeng et al., 2024). However, bare surfaces cover only a small portion of the catchment (2.2% and 1.6%), so their overall contribution to streamflow remains limited (2.8% and 3.7%). Despite their distinct hydrological behavior, bare areas play a secondary but notable role in runoff dynamics.~~

~~Importantly, our simulations reveal that interactions between vegetation and topography play a critical role in shaping runoff dynamics. At higher elevations, where vegetation is sparse and terrain is steep, snowmelt is rapidly converted into surface runoff due to limited soil storage capacity. In contrast, lower elevation areas dominated by grasslands and wetlands benefit from gentler slopes and deeper root zones, which enhance infiltration and delay runoff responses (Caviedes-Voullième et al., 2021).~~

. The runoff generation capacity of bare soil/rock is high due to the lack of vegetation and low soil permeability. After rainfall or snowmelt, water infiltrates poorly and rapidly forms overland flow (Zeng et al., 2024). Although their basin-scale contribution is constrained by areal extent, these surfaces can locally intensify runoff responses and sediment transport.

These findings support the view that vegetation functions as a spatially variable regulator of runoff generation~~, contingent on topographic context and soil–plant–atmosphere interactions.~~. This regulatory effect is particularly sensitive to future changes in vegetation cover and distribution under climate and land use change scenarios. For instance, overgrazing may reduce aboveground biomass and root zone storage capacity, thereby increasing runoff and erosion risks ~~(Donovan and Monaghan, 2021)~~(Donovan and Monaghan, 2021)~~.~~, while shifts in vegetation type (e.g., shrub encroachment or forest decline) could alter hydrological partitioning along elevation gradients ~~(Hsu et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2023)~~(Hsu et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2023).

6-.4 Applicability and limitations of the modelling framework

Previous applications of the FLEX framework in alpine basins, such as the Heihe river basin, provide an important reference for interpreting the results of this study. In the Heihe river basin, FLEX^{T} was configured using terrain-driven functional units, whereby the catchment was discretized into four topographic sub-units representing distinct dominant hydrological processes. This modelling strategy primarily focused on assessing model realism and transferability across sub-basins by demonstrating the ability of FLEX^{T} to reproduce contrasting functional hydrological behaviors (Gao et al., 2014). Building on these earlier studies, the present work further demonstrates that the FLEX framework can also be adapted to colder and more semi-arid conditions using a stepwise strategy. Importantly, our emphasis extends beyond discharge performance to diagnosing runoff-generation mechanisms—specifically the snowmelt contribution to streamflow and the relative roles of elevation bands and vegetation units—thereby clarifying how topography and land cover jointly shape hydrological responses in cold alpine basins.

While the proposed modelling framework captures key hydrological processes, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, frozen soil processes were not explicitly represented in this study due to data constraints. Frozen soil is widespread across the region and can exert strong controls on hydrological processes by restricting moisture exchange between deeper soil layers and the atmosphere, reducing soil permeability, and modifying near-surface flow pathways (Li et al., 2025). These effects may influence the partitioning between surface runoff and subsurface flow, particularly in high-elevation permafrost regions with sparse vegetation (Hu et al., 2025). In this study, the elevation-dependent runoff generation patterns identified may partly reflect the integrated influence of frozen soil conditions in these regions. Future studies that explicitly incorporate frozen soil dynamics would help to further disentangle the interacting roles of topography, vegetation, and frozen ground in shaping hydrological

responses in alpine basins.

Second, regarding the assumption of complete mixing in snowmelt runoff tracking, the applied conceptual model represents storages as lumped and homogeneous reservoirs, within which incoming rainfall and snowmelt are assumed to mix instantaneously with pre-event water. Despite its limited ability to explicitly represent rapid snowmelt runoff responses and flow-path heterogeneity at the event scale (Weiler et al., 2018), this assumption is still widely applied in catchment-scale estimates of snowmelt runoff contributions and is regarded as robust at long time scales (Li et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2021). Importantly, the snowmelt tracker is designed to estimate the long-term average of the fraction of total streamflow that originates from snowmelt, rather than event-scale responses.

Finally, the use of two study basins entails both advantages and limitations. Focusing on a limited number of basins allows for detailed process interpretation and reduces confounding effects associated with excessive climatic or physiographic diversity, but it also constrains the generalization of the findings (Hrachowitz et al., 2013). The identified runoff generation mechanisms and model performance characteristics should therefore be interpreted as representative of cold, semi-arid alpine basins with similar hydroclimatic and geomorphic settings, rather than as universally applicable. Expanding the analysis to a larger set of basins would be necessary to assess model robustness and transferability more rigorously.

7. Conclusions

Hydrological modelling in cold and high-latitude regions ~~poses considerable~~remains challenges due to ~~the complexity of~~ complex cryospheric processes and limited observational data. To address these issues, this study ~~proposes~~developed and tested a stepwise modelling framework that ~~incrementally refines model structures by incorporating~~progressively incorporates key hydrological processes and landscape

characteristics, ~~thereby enhancing both the physical realism and~~ with the aim of improving both predictive performance ~~of the model~~and process interpretability.

~~Our~~The results ~~underscore the limitations of the~~demonstrate that model structure matters. The lumped models ($FLEX^{L}$ and $FLEX^{L}$-S) ~~in accurately representing~~are insufficient for capturing runoff dynamics~~, particularly~~ in ~~regions~~basins with complex topography and heterogeneous vegetation~~ cover~~. Although ~~the distributed model~~ $FLEX^{D}$ ~~improved the~~improves simulation ~~of runoff variability by incorporating~~by using spatially distributed inputs, it still lacks full physical interpretability~~ of its parameters.~~. In contrast, the landscape-based $FLEX^{T}$ model ~~explicitly~~ integrates snowpack, topography, and vegetation characteristics, ~~thereby enhancing the~~providing more physical ~~realism of~~meaningful parameterization and ~~offering~~ a more mechanistic representation of hydrological processes. ~~While $FLEX^{T}$ achieved performance comparable to $FLEX^{D}$ in simulating catchment runoff dynamics, this outcome may be attributed to the limited vegetation heterogeneity in the study basins. Nonetheless, validation~~Validation using SWE ~~confirmed~~further confirms the $FLEX^{T}$'s ~~capability~~ability to capture seasonal ~~patterns~~dynamics, interannual variability, and key hydrological mechanisms in cryospheric environments. These findings underscore the potential advantages of $FLEX^{T}$, particularly in basins with greater ecological or topographic complexity.

Results from the $FLEX^{T}$ model indicate that snowmelt ~~contributes~~runoff accounts for 23.~~5~~6%±0.7% and 15.9%±1.3% ~~and 14.7%±1.6% to~~of streamflow in the Bogd Uliastai and Zavkhan Guulin river basins, respectively. ~~Temporally, snowmelt contributions peak in~~ Snowmelt runoff dominates streamflow during spring and ~~remain minimal during other seasons. Spatially, snowmelt contributions increase~~increases with elevation, underscoring the critical role of topography in shaping ~~the spatiotemporal dynamics of~~ runoff generation. In high elevation areas, the lagged snowmelt response leads to a sustained and gradual release of runoff, whereas low~~-altitude~~ elevation areas ~~respond more rapidly to~~ dominated by rainfall ~~events. Moreover, hydrological~~

~~modelling approaches based on vegetation landscape classifications better capture spatial heterogeneity and characterize the~~generate rapid runoff. Controlled by distinct dominant hydrological mechanisms ~~across,~~ different landscape units contribute unequally to streamflow.

These findings offer valuable insights into hydrological response mechanisms in cold alpine basins ~~with limited observational data~~ on the Mongolian Plateau. The stepwise ~~modeling~~modelling framework ~~developed in this study not only improves the simulation of runoff dynamics in high-latitude regions but also~~ enhances ~~understanding of~~ model realism in cryospheric ~~hydrological responses to global climate change. Importantly, this framework holds both scientific~~environments and provides practical ~~value, providing a foundation for more effective~~support for water resource management, ecological conservation, and climate adaptation in ~~cryospheric~~ high-latitude and data-scarce regions.

Code availability

The code is available upon request to the contact author.

Data availability

All data presented in this manuscript are publicly available for download from: Hydrometeorological data (precipitation, runoff, temperature) from the Information and Research Institute of Meteorology, Hydrology, and Environment, available at ~~http://irimhe.namem.gov.mn.~~http://irimhe.namem.gov.mn. Arctic Snow Water Equivalent Grid Dataset from the National Tibetan Plateau/Third Pole Environment Data Center, available at ~~https://cstr.cn/18406.11.Snow.tpdc.271556.~~https://cstr.cn/18406.11.Snow.tpdc.271556. Shuttle Radar Topography Mission Digital Elevation Model (SRTM-DEM), available at ~~http://srtm.csi.cgiar.org.~~http://srtm.csi.cgiar.org. Sentinel-2 10-meter Land Use/Land Cover data from the ESRI Living Atlas, available at ~~https://livingatlas.arcgis.com/landcover/.~~https://livingatlas.arcgis.com/landcover/.

NDVI data were obtained from the United States Geological Survey (USGS) EarthExplorer platform. available at ~~https://earthexplorer.usgs.gov/~~https://earthexplorer.usgs.gov/.

Author contributions

LY and HG designed the study. BD provided the valuable fieldwork data. LY, YW, HG, and ZD conducted the analyses. LY wrote the paper. All authors discussed the results and the first draft and contributed to the final paper.

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1628