

Responses to RC2 (Ingmar Nitze)

(Reviewer's comments in black; authors' responses in blue)

Summary and general comments

The manuscript/preprint “Retrogressive thaw slumps along the Qinghai-Tibet Engineering Corridor: a comprehensive inventory and their distribution characteristics” by Xia et al., describes a geospatial vector dataset of retrogressive thaw slumps along the QT Engineering corridor. The dataset is an important piece in the scope of a recently started effort to create pan-arctic/global datasets and inventories of retrogressive thaw slumps (IPA action group) for the training and validation of machine/deep-learning models.

The manuscript describes the data collection, data processing and final dataset thoroughly, however with some points that can be improved. In addition to the description of the dataset and its creation, the authors present a further analysis of the dataset and its relation to geographical parameters.

The manuscript has a good quality. However, I see some potential for improvement in the language. Although I am not a native English speaker, I noticed that some paragraphs did have some language issues. Therefore, I would recommend to put some emphasis on language editing.

Please find specific comments regarding the dataset and manuscript below.

Response: Thank you, Dr. Ingmar Nitze, for your insightful, thorough, and constructive comments and detailed suggestions. We revised our manuscript accordingly as follows.

Data

The data are easily accessible through the PANGAEA data archive and are citable with a DOI. The authors are using the standard “ESRI Shapefile” format. Although this is the quasi standard, this data format has its drawbacks limiting the attribute name length or having multiple files. As this is a comparably small dataset, the authors may provide data also in OGC compatible “GeoJSON” or the more robust “geopackage/GPKG” format, which is a bit more flexible and often a bit easier to use. However, this is just a minor/optional suggestion.

Response: Thanks for the suggestion. We will use “geopackage/GPKG” as the format for the updated and our future datasets. As the Pangaea does not support “geopackage/GPKG” format, we uploaded the updated datasets to Zenodo (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6397028>).

Detailed questions and comments

Dataset

If you have the possibility to make edits to the dataset, I would be happy if you could check the following suggestions. I understand that updating a published dataset is maybe not the most straightforward task.

“Probabilit”: This manually assigned (kind of arbitrary) attribute is not very intuitive to me. I would rather understand it as a calculated output from e.g. the DL model. This is not a major point, but you may find a better naming. However, if not that is also alright.

Response: We agreed with the reviewer that ‘probability’ might not be suitable here to represent the meaning of how much we are sure about the mapped retrogressive thaw slumps. In the revised dataset, we explained the “Probabilit” in the metadata. We also changed the value to ‘high’, ‘medium’, and ‘low’ according to four criteria in the manuscript. As mentioned previously, we published the revised datasets to Zenodo.

“Source Image”: PlanetScope Scene or OrthoTile?

Response: PlanetScope Scene. We modified the metadata and manuscript accordingly.

Year-Month: I think it might be better to split this attribute into (1) Year, (2) Months. However, tracing back to the original image, before mosaicking, would be even better. If this is possible just use some standard data format, e.g. ISO format or YYYY-MM-DD, and add the original filename. If that is not possible, just leave as is.

Response: Thanks for the suggestion, but it is difficult for us to trace back to the original image because we created cloud-free mosaics using PlanetScope images acquired in July and August 2019 before DL-based mapping, assuming that the change of an RTS boundary is negligible on images. We will trace image acquisition dates in our future mapping tasks.

Do you have DL model versions? This information may help with reproducibility.

Response: We used DeepLabv3+ to obtain the results. We added the information in the metadata. We also added the GitHub link of the model version and the link of the pre-trained model in the manuscript.

Manuscript

1.35 – remove “normally”

Response: Revised.

1.66 – “lack” typo?

Response: We changed it to “lacked”.

l.68 – “combing” typo?

Response: Changed it to “combining”.

l.79ff – is the vegetation cover destruction/disturbance evenly distributed or limited to certain areas? Is that somehow linked to the presence of RTS?

Response: The vegetation cover disturbance is unevenly distributed as the disturbance is caused by various reasons, such as human activities and thermokarst landforms destruction. We don’t have a map of the vegetation cover disturbance, so the relationship with the presence of RTSs is undiscovered. We postulated potential links between vegetation type and RTS presence, then conducted a correlation analysis between them, and found that RTSs tend to develop on the land covered by alpine meadows.

L85: Figure 1a. What are the white spots? Glaciers?

Response: The white spots mean lakes or glaciers. We added the explanation in the caption of Figure 1.

Figure 1a: Perhaps you could use a different projection as EPSG:4326 often creates some distortions (squeezes Latitude). This is just a little suggestion, perhaps at ~30°N it is not too bad compared to high latitudes.

Response: We changed the projection to a widely used projection ‘EPSG:102025’, of which the full name is ‘Asia North Albers Equal Area Conic’. The latitudinal distortion of this projection is less severe than EPSG:4326.

L92: which data product (Scenes or Orthotiles)?

Response: The data are PlanetScope Scenes. We have updated the manuscript accordingly.

L95: Which DEM did you use? Absolute elevations?

Response: The DEM we used is from the Shuttle Radar Topography Mission, which used EGM96 (Earth Gravitational Model 1996) as the vertical datum. We mentioned it at L102 in the original manuscript. To make it easy to read, we have moved it to the front in the new version. The revised sentence is

“In addition to the multi-year PlanetScope images, the following supplementary data were used for reference in manual inspection: Landsat-5 and 8, Sentinel-2, unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) images, the “World Imagery” provided by Esri, and the digital elevation model (DEM) from the Shuttle Radar Topography Mission (SRTM) (Farr et al., 2007).”

1100: “in several local sites”. Can you be a bit more specific? How many, how much area? Are they representative?

Do you think these spots can be added to Fig1. without “overfilling” it. If it is not possible that’s no problem, just a suggestion.

Response: We changed it to “We used the flying platform DJI P4 Multispectral to obtain the UAV images with around 15-cm resolution in 16 near-roads sites where 23 RTS candidates are located.”

We added these sites to the figure, as shown below (new Figure 1).

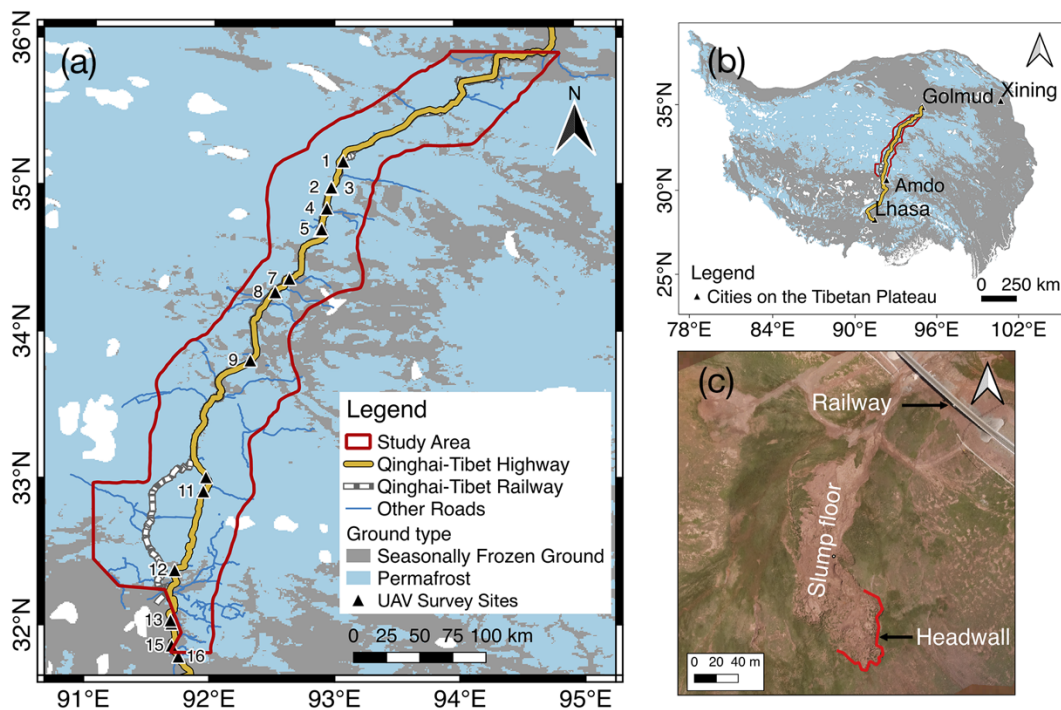


Figure 1. (a) Coverage of the study area and the permafrost distribution. The red boundary is the extent of the study area. The yellow line is the Qinghai-Tibet Highway, and the dashed line is the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, most of which runs close to the highway. Blue lines represent other national roads. The background is the permafrost distribution map produced by Zou et al. (2017), with white patches representing lakes or glaciers. The black triangles label the sites where we conducted UAV investigations. (b) The location of the study area on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. (c) A UAV photo of an RTS near the Qinghai-Tibet railway (center location: 92.883 °E, 34.709 °N).

110 ff: I understand that this is a data paper, where the processing has been done, but why did you only use RGB and not the NIR band, which from my experience helps a lot (at least in the Arctic)?

Response: The TensorFlow version of DeepLabv3+ and the corresponding pre-trained models we used only accept three bands. Huang et al. (2020) conducted the experiments by using different bands combinations to predict RTSs in the Beiluhe River Basin and concluded that the combination of red, blue, and green bands obtained the best results. Since the NIR is sensitive to vegetation type, density, and general plant health, the possible reason for the poor performance of using the NIR is that the vegetation in the study area is sparse, so the RTSs (without vegetation cover) are indistinguishable in the NIR band.

Did you test other combinations training/inference year combinations, e.g. train on 2020?

Response: No, we only used 2019 images for DL training and inference, and images in other years for manual validation. We agree that the multi-temporal data are suitable for testing the transferability of the deep learning model and will include this test in our future work.

115ff Paragraph 4.2. Did you try to add more information to the deep learning model? Which are the input bands, was it only RGB?

Response: Yes, we only inputted RGB bands to the deep learning model. The reasons are that the TensorFlow version of DeepLabv3+ and the corresponding pre-trained models we used only accept three bands, and more information such as the NIR band does not guarantee the improvement in the results (Huang et al., 2020). Also, testing the best combination of different information for the deep learning model is out of the scope of this manuscript.

134 Typo “PlanetScpoe” (Same in the flowchart, lower green parallelogram)

Response: We revised the manuscript.

137 What do you mean with sub-images? How did you create them, what is their size? Please provide more information what they are.

Response: The sizes of sub-images are the bounding boxes of every deep-learning-inferred polygon with a buffer size of 300 m. To be specific, we changed the sentence to

“To prepare the time-lapse images, we first extracted sub-images from PlanetScope images collected in 2016–2020 based on the bounding boxes of deep-learning-inferred polygons with a buffer size of 300 m.”

139 Please change “changes yearly” to “annual changes”

Response: Revised.

140 Do you automatically retrieve the headwall? This part is somehow unclear to me? I assume you are inferring the footprints, is that correct? So the headwall position is interpretation, right? Then it is logical and (1) can be omitted.

Response: No, we manually identified the headwalls based on the annual RTS retreating direction and direction of uphill. We revised the manuscript as follows:

“We manually identified the headwalls based on the annual RTS retreating direction and direction of uphill and set four criteria for improving inspection accuracy: (1) the headwall must be located at the highest elevation inside an RTS”.

160/Fig4. I think you can still add a scalebar to the World Imagery I think, it has the same extent, so we can safely assume the same scale. Alternatively you could use only one north arrow and scale bar for the entire figure, as it is the same for each map.

Response: We updated the figure with only one north arrow and one scale bar for the entire figure, as shown below.

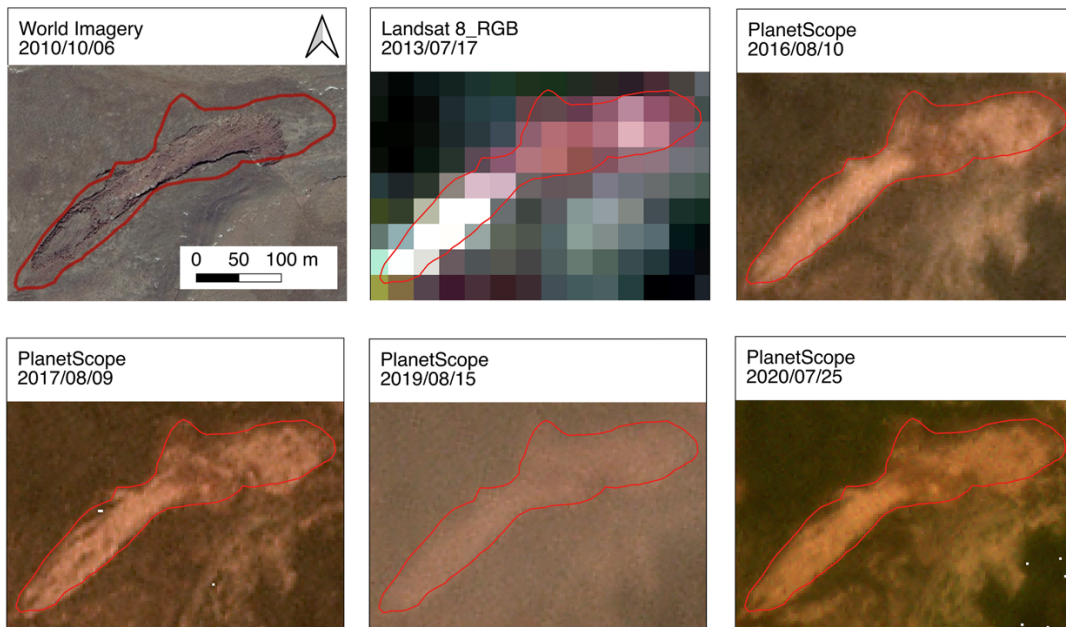


Figure 4. Temporal images of an RTS from various remote sensing data sources, including PlanetScope images (© Planet Labs Inc), Landsat images, and World Imagery (Esri Inc., 2018). The image from World Imagery cannot be downloaded, so it was a screenshot without a scale. The ID of this RTS is 166. The red polygons represent the boundaries of the RTS, based on the 2019 PlanetScope images.

165/Table1: It is not clear what “negative polygons” are for training. In a binary classification/segmentation I would assume to only have positive polygons (target class) OR a raster mask with positive and negative (background) values.

Response: Negative polygons are “negative training polygons”, which outline some non-RTS landforms or landcover that appear similar to RTSs in the PlanetScope images. Adding training data from these negative polygons is helpful to reduce false positives significantly.

We revised the caption of Table 2 to

“Summary of iterative mapping. The positive polygons are RTSs boundaries. The negative polygons outline some non-RTS landforms or landcover that appear similar to RTSs in the PlanetScope images. The deep-learning-inferred polygons are the output of the DeepLabv3+. Newly found RTSs are polygons manually selected from the deep-learning-inferred polygons. We recorded the total number of RTSs for every iteration in the ‘number of RTSs’.”

Table1: better use “Prediction” or “Inference” instead of “Predicting” as a heading

Response: Revised.

166ff: How did you handle inaccurate polygons? I sometimes experience, that thaw slumps are perhaps correctly identified, but the polygon might now outline the RTS correctly. How did you handle these cases? Please provide more information.

Response: We manually modified the boundaries for some inaccurate polygons. To make it clear, we added the sentence in the manuscript:

“Then, for some inaccurate polygons, we manually modified the boundaries.”

166ff: In the same sense, did you do some fine-tuning on the DL model output? E.g. I suppose the model has some kind of probability output, where a threshold (0-100%) can be set to (1) impact the number of detected RTS and (2) impact the polygon shape in the polygonization (raster to vector) process. Could you perhaps provide a little bit of insight either here, or even better in the detailed workflow description.

Response: No, we did not fine-tune the DL model output. In the TensorFlow version we used, the output contained two probabilities (background or slump) for each pixel. We took the class with maximum probability as DL output without setting any threshold.

175: Do you have a specific minimum mapping unit (MMU)? Is 0.05ha you MMU? If yes, please mention that.

Response: Yes, it is. According to your suggestion, we mentioned the minimum mapping unit in Section 4.2. The sentence is

“Limited by the image resolution of 3 meters, we need at least ~55 pixels to identify the features of thaw slumps, so the minimum mapping unit (MMU) we set is 0.05 ha.”

176: It would be nice if you could mention the study area size again in relation to 1700ha.

Response: We added it.

“Together they affect 1700 ha land on a 5,400,000 ha study region.”

182: Does soil texture correlate to excess ground ice in these regions or is it independent?

Response: According to Gilbert et al. (2016), the grain size distribution, particular the proportion of silt, influences the frost susceptibility of the host sediment, for example, the degree to which the soil favours the formation of segregated ice, so the soil texture correlates to the excess ground ice. We analyzed the soil texture in the Discussion section. We modified the sentence as:

“Silt fraction, which influences the frost susceptibility of the host sediment, is higher for loam than for sandy loam, and the ground consequently has a higher ice content (Gilbert et al., 2016)”.

190ff/Fig5. The red colors are really hard to pick up on all three maps. Please check if you can find a better color with a lot more contrast to the background. I guess for colorblind people, they might be just invisible.

For panel (a) you may just want to use the background of Figure 1, as the Planet Mosaic does not add significant information.

Panel (a): Please use some slightly different styling for the location indicators of b and c, e.g. letter in a box or so. At the moment it has the same styling as the main panel descriptor (a).

Response: We changed the color of the RTSs near roads to orange and the color of the other RTSs to blue. We checked the figure using the Coblis – Color Blindness Simulator, and now the figure is visible for colorblind people. For panel (a), as the mosaiced Planet image can show the data we used, we keep the background unchanged. Also, we changed the styling of b and c. We used white color for panels (b) and (c) to delineate the boundaries. The figure is shown in Figure R3.

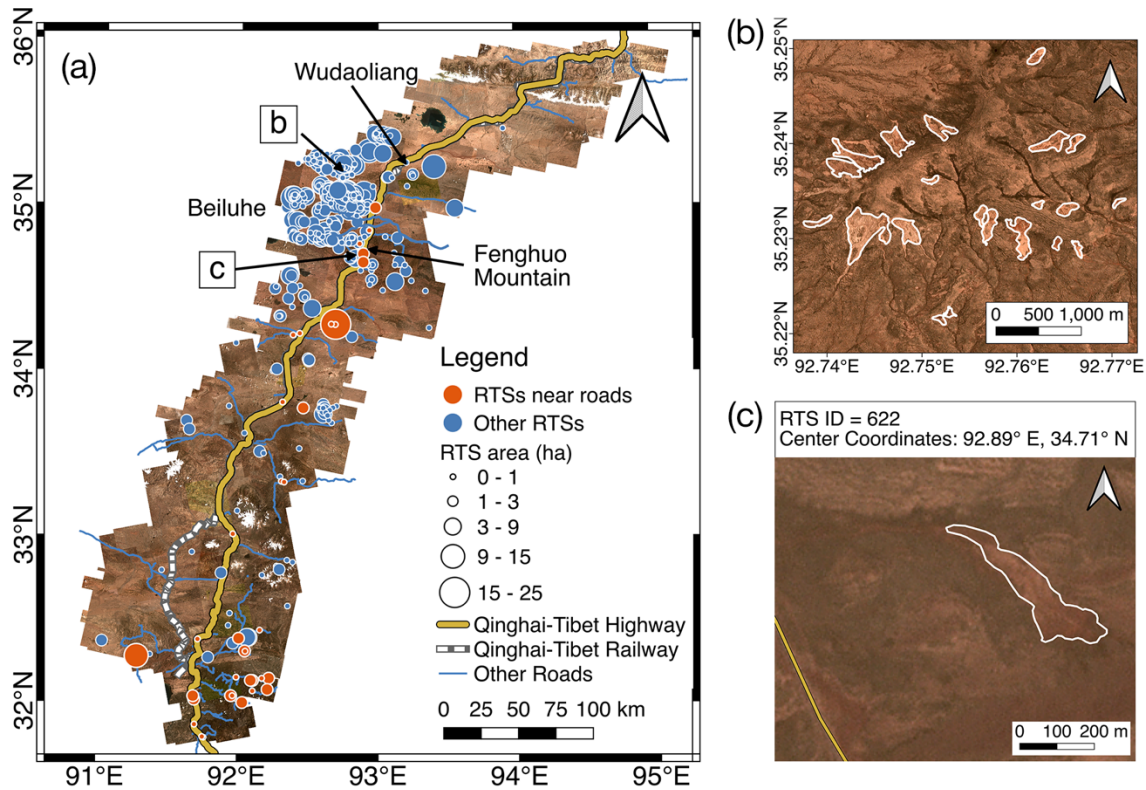


Figure 5. (a) Permafrost distribution map (Zou et al., 2017) with 875 delineated RTSs. The circle sizes indicate the RTSs' area. Orange circles are RTSs close to roads, while blue circles show other RTSs. (b) Examples of the delineated RTSs in the Beiluhe region, with the white polygons representing the boundaries of RTSs. (c) An example of an RTS adjacent to the Qinghai-Tibet Highway (yellow line). Basemap images © Planet Labs Inc.

194: Fig 6. I like the comparison of histograms (b,d,e)! It clearly shows the differences to the overall area.

Fig 6c: The red numbers are very hard to read. Please check your color scheme. Perhaps you can use lighter shades of grey for the bars. Think about changing the color of the numbers. You could provide information what the numbers mean in the caption.

Response: We changed the color of the bars to light grey and the color of the labels to black. We added information about what the numbers mean in the caption.

Fig 6f/g From looking at the diagrams it's not immediately clear which one is inside and which one outside. I recommend to use either barcharts with or keep the round diagrams but use different signatures for the inner vs outer part and add a legend. I may go with barcharts as the proportions are easier to pick up visually.

Response: Thank you! We changed them to bar charts (Figure R4).

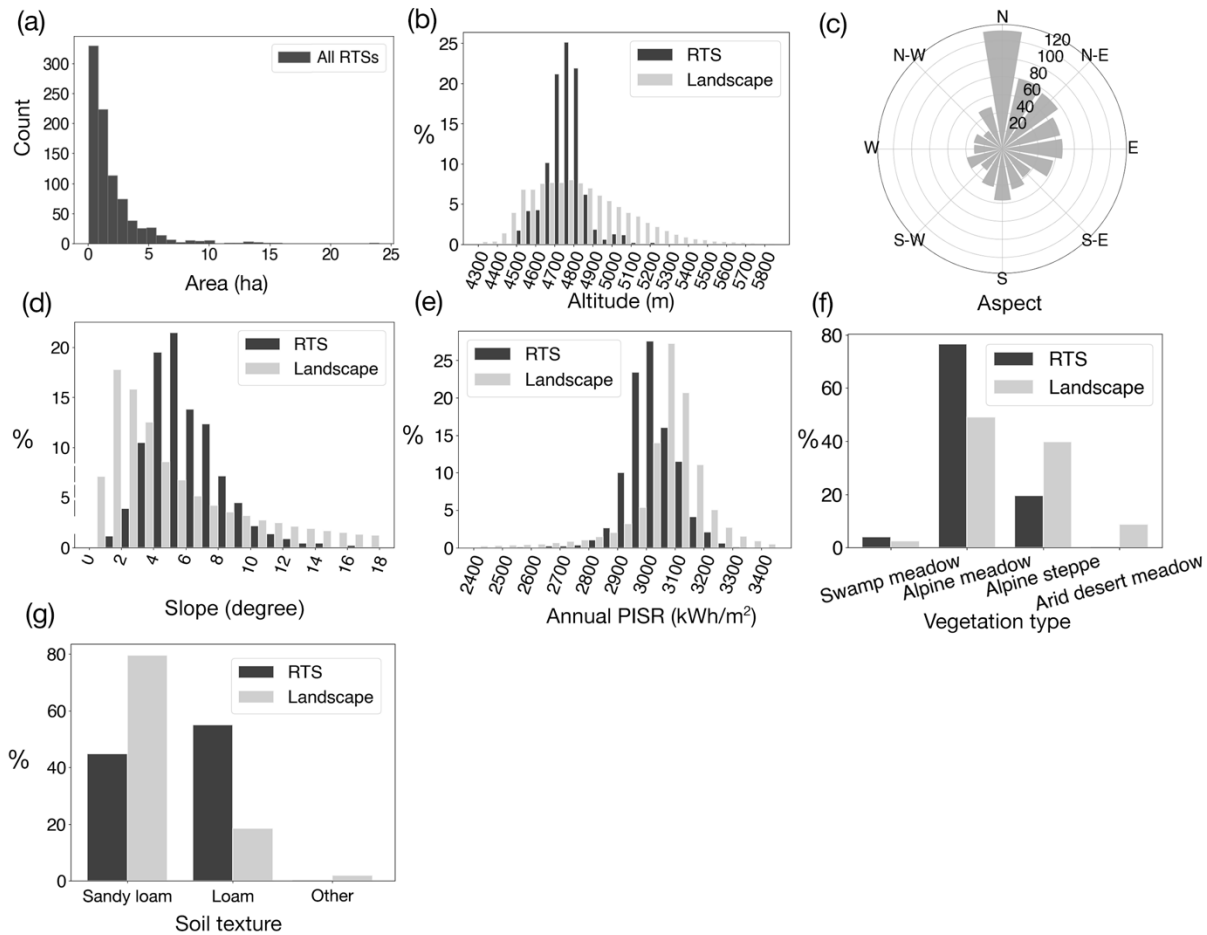


Figure 6. Statistical summaries of the RTSs’ geometric features and terrain properties. (a) The histogram shows the area of all the RTSs in the research region. (b) The elevation frequency of the landscape and RTSs. Landscape means the entire study region. (c) The slope aspects of RTSs, with radial axis representing the numbers of RTSs. (d) The slope frequencies of the landscape and RTSs. (e) The annual PISR frequencies of the landscape and RTSs. (f) The vegetation type distribution of the landscape and RTSs. (g) The soil texture distribution of the landscape and RTSs.

201: I think it would be nice to shortly repeat the “close to road” definition for better readability.

Response: Revised.

Figure 7a: It would be helpful if you could normalize the values by area. E.g. percent or ha/km². Then values become comparable to other studies.

Response: We set the grid size as 10 km × 10 km, so the values can be compared to other studies.

241ff: this paragraph may need some more language editing

Response: Revised as follows:

“Our inventory is the first comprehensive one along the entire corridor region. Compared with the existing RTS datasets in the subregions (Niu et al., 2016; Luo et al., 2019), our inventory has advantages in its comprehensiveness, novelty, and being open source. Based on manual interpretation from SPOT-5 imagery and field investigations, Niu’s results contain 42 slope failures (some are RTSs) in 2016 in a 10-km lateral zone of the Qinghai-Tibet Highway from Wudaoliang in the north to the Fenghuo Mountain pass in the south. In this same subregion, our method detected 47 RTSs in 2019, with 4 of them having low or medium probability. Luo’s 2017 results contain 438 RTSs but only covering the Beiluhe region, within which our inventory found 459 RTSs in 2019. In total, our inventory obtains 875 RTSs in the entire study area, including the part where the critical transportation infrastructure is underlain by permafrost. We also labelled RTSs near roads and provided the initiation periods, areas, probabilities, and locations of RTSs. The deep learning model and multi-source and multi-temporal images were performed in tandem to provide a more accurate inventory than the results obtained from manual inspection alone.”

243: better use “novelty” instead of newness

Response: Revised.

246 multi-time -> multi-temporal

Response: Revised.

254: “some false positives” I would use a bit stronger wording, as FP vastly outnumbered true positives.

Response: Revised.

263/264: here you mention that you have some kind of MMU, you did not state that above (see comment further above).

Response: Revised, as follows:

“Limited by the image resolution of 3 meters, we need at least 55 pixels to identify the features of thaw slumps, so the minimum mapping unit (MMU) we set is 0.05 ha.”

267 ff: in this paragraph you use the terms “thaw slumps” and “retrogressive thaw slumps”. Before you used the abbreviation RTS. Please be more consistent.

Response: We changed “thaw slumps” to “retrogressive thaw slumps”.

271: “or area receives less solar radiation”. That somehow does not read well.

Response: We changed it to “or lands receiving less solar radiation”.

Reference

G.L. Gilbert, M. Kanevskiy, J.B. Murton: Recent Advances (2008–2015) in the study of ground ice and cryostratigraphy, *Permafrost Periglac. Process.*, 27 (4), pp. 377-389, 10.1002/ppp.1912, 2016.