Assessment of rock glaciers and their water storage in Guokalariju, Tibetan Plateau

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Abstract. Rock glaciers are important hydrological reserves in arid and semi-arid regions. Rock glaciers' activity states can indicate the existence of permafrost. To help explore further the development mechanisms of rock glaciers in semi-arid and humid transition regions, this paper provides a detailed rock glacier inventory of the Guokalariju (GKLRJ) area of the Tibetan Plateau (TP) using a manual visual interpretation of Google Earth Pro

10 remote sensing imagery. We also estimated the water volume equivalent (WVEQ) in the GKLRJ for the first time. Approximately 5,057 rock glaciers were identified, covering a total area of ~404.69 km^2. Rock glaciers are unevenly distributed within the three sub-regions R1, R2, and R3 from east to west, with 80% of them concentrated in R2, where climatic and topographic conditions are most favorable. Under the same ground temperature conditions, increases in precipitation are conducive to rock glaciers forming at lower altitudes. Indeed, the lower

15 limit of rock glaciers' mean altitude decreased eastward, with increasing precipitation. Estimates of the water storage capacity of rock glaciers obtained by applying different methods varied considerably, but all showed the potential hydrological value of rock glaciers. The maximum possible water storage in the subsurface ice of rock glacier permafrost was 3.04 km^3, which is about 33% of the surface ice in local glacier storage. In R1, where the climate is the driest, the water storage capacity of rock glaciers was estimated to be up to twice as large as that of

20 the sub-region's glaciers. Changes in water resources and permafrost stability in the area where rock glaciers occur will have implications for regional water resource management, disaster prevention, and sustainable development strategies.

1 Introduction

Rock glaciers are periglacial landforms often observed above the timberline in alpine mountains. They are

25 formed by rocks and ice that move down a slope, driven by gravity (French, 2007; RGIK, 2022a). As striking features of viscous flow in perennially frozen materials, they can reflect permafrost conditions in mountainous areas. Their lowest altitudes are often considered to represent the lower limit of discontinuous regional permafrost occurrence (Giardino and Vitek, 1988; Barsch, 1992, 1996; Kääb *et al.*, 1997; Schmid *et al.*, 2015; Selley *et al.*, 2018; Baral *et al.*, 2019; Hassan *et al.*, 2021); their states (active or relict) can be used in Permafrost Zonation

30 Index (PZI) models to predict the probability of permafrost occurrence where field observation data are scarce (Cao *et al.*, 2021; Boeckli *et al.*, 2012a). The large-scale distribution of active rock glaciers is influenced by the complex interaction of climatic and topographic factors (Schrott, 1996; Millar and Westfall, 2008; Pandey, 2019). Global climate change may result in permafrost thawing and ice melting in rock glaciers, thus impacting slope stability, runoff patterns, and water quality, with possible consequences for periodic landslides, debris flows,

35 floods, and other geological disasters (Barsch, 1996; Schoeneich *et al.*, 2015; Blöthe *et al.*, 2019; Hassan *et al.*,

2021; Yao *et al*., 2022). Exploring their spatial distribution and evolution is therefore significant for paleoclimatic modeling, disaster risk assessment, and infrastructure maintenance (Arenson and Jakob, 2010; Colucci *et al.*, 2016; Selley *et al.*, 2018; Alcalá-Reygosa, 2019). Furthermore, the slow thawing process through heat diffusion with latent heat exchange at depth, combined with the cooling effect of the ventilated coarse blocks at the surface of

40   rock glaciers, make them a long-term hydrological reserve in high mountain systems (Bolch and Marchenko, 2009; Berthling, 2011; Bonnaventure and Lamoureux, 2013; Millar and Westfall, 2013). The presence and abundance of rock glaciers can therefore affect the quantities and properties of runoff from high mountain watersheds over extended time periods (Jones *et al.*, 2019b).

    The Tibetan Plateau (TP) is among the key high-altitude areas of periglacial landform worldwide and is a

45   region highly sensitive to climate change (Cui *et al.*, 2019; Yao *et al.*, 2019). Detailed rock glacier inventories have previously been constructed for the Gangdise Mountains (Zhang *et al.*, 2022), the Daxue Mountains (Ran and Liu, 2018), the Nyainqêntanglha Range (Reinosch *et al.*, 2021), and the Nepalese Himalaya (Jones *et al.*, 2018b). The Yarlung Zangbo River Basin (YZRB) is one of the regions with the highest concentrations of modern glaciers on the TP; it is experiencing rapid geomorphic evolution today (Ji *et al.*, 1999; Korup and Montgomery,

50   2008; Yu *et al.*, 2011; Long *et al.*, 2022). Although Guo (2019) characterized the spatial distribution of rock glaciers in the YZRB using manual visual interpretation, there remains a lack of any systematic and detailed rock glacier inventory, and the regional occurrence characteristics and indicative environmental significance of these rock glaciers are still unclear. Even though ground-penetrating radar (GPR), seismic refraction tomography (SRT), electrical resistivity tomography (ERT), and other geophysical techniques are widely used today and can provide

55   new insights into understanding the ice volumes of rock glaciers and permafrost (Janke *et al.*, 2015; Emmert and Kneisel, 2017; Bolch *et al.*, 2019; Buckel *et al.*, 2021; Halla *et al.*, 2021; Mathys *et al.*, 2022), it remains difficult to apply such methods to large-scale field-based research on the TP. The distribution of permafrost and the hydrological contributions made by rock glaciers on the TP need more research.

    To address this, our study aims to: (i) compile a more comprehensive and systematic inventory of rock

60   glaciers in the GLKRJ; (ii) explore the regional occurrence characteristics and indicative environmental significance of these rock glaciers; (iii) assess the regional hydrological significance of rock glaciers and glaciers; and (iv) compare the distribution of the GLKRJ's rock glaciers to the regional permafrost maps.

2 Study area
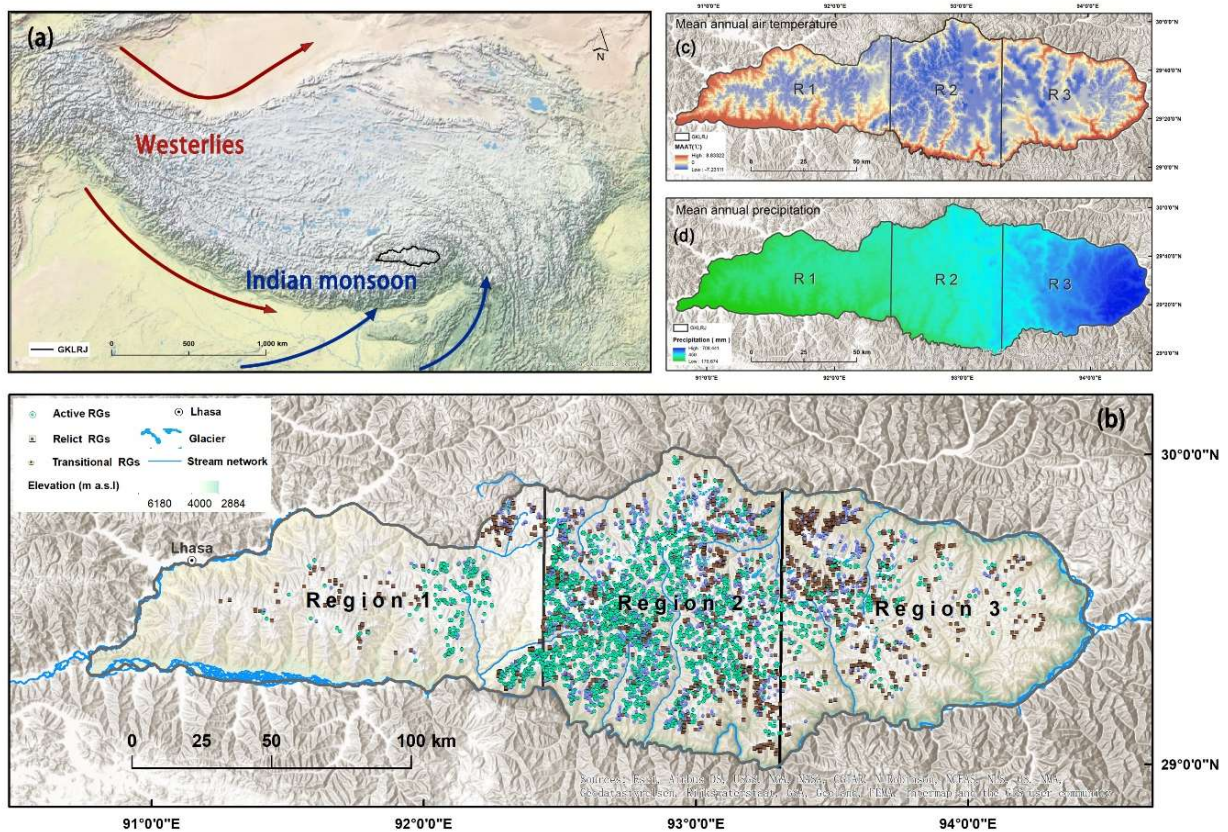
Figure 1: (a) The location of the GKLRJ on the TP; (b) The three sub-regions and the spatial distribution of streams. Rock glaciers are categorized as green (active rock glaciers), purple (transitional rock glaciers), brown (relict rock glaciers), and glaciers are shown in light blue and white; (c) Mean annual air temperature map for the GKLRJ (Du and Yi, 2019); (d) Mean annual precipitation map for the GKLRJ (Du and Yi, 2019). Maps were created using ArcGIS® software by Esri.

The GKLRJ region is located between 92.916°N – 93.276°N and 29.287°E – 29.438°E, on the southeastern TP, adjacent to the Himalayas to the south and the Nyainqêntanglha Range to the north (Fig.1a). It forms the eastern extension of the Gangdise Mountains as well as the watershed of the Yarlung Zangbo River and its tributary, the Niyang-Lhasa River, and belongs to the high mountain plateau-lake basin-wide valley area of the middle and upper reaches of the Yarlung Zangbo and Nujiang rivers (Xiang *et al.*, 2013). The region is also within the world's largest irrigated agricultural area and has a dense population (Yao *et al.*, 2022).

Tectonically, the GKLRJ is located in the eastern part of the Ladakh-Kailas-Xiachayu magmatic arc of the Gangdise-Himalayan collisional orogen; from the Late Paleozoic to the Mesozoic, it has experienced the same evolutionary tectonic processes as the Gangdise-Himalayan archipelagic arc-basin systems, *i.e.*, back-arc spreading, arc-arc collision and arc-continental collision (Pan *et al.*, 2013). The GKLRJ's main rock types include Late Cretaceous quartz monzonite, Eocene monzonite, and Eocene biotite granite. It is located in the transition belt between the TP's semi-arid and humid regions (Zheng *et al.*, 2010), mainly dominated by the Indian Summer Monsoon (ISM). The middle and western parts of the GKLRJ belong to the TP's temperate, semi-arid zone, while the eastern part belongs to the plateau's temperate humid region (Zheng *et al.*, 2010). The mean annual air temperature (MAAT) reaches from -7.2 to 8.8ºC (Du and Yi, 2019) (Table 1 and Fig.1c), and the mean annual ground temperature (MAGT) reaches from -3.2 to 4.3ºC (Ran *et al.*, 2020) (Table 1). The mean annual

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precipitation (MAP) is 177 – 708 mm, decreasing from east to west across the study area (Du and Yi, 2019) (Table 1 and Fig.1d). Changes in the imbalance between glaciers, permafrost, lakes, and rivers in this region under the influence of climate change may lead to spatial and temporal changes in local ecosystems and changes in water resources in downstream areas (Yao *et al.*, 2022).

Table 1: MAAT (Du and Yi, 2019), MAGT (Ran *et al.*, 2020), MAP (Du and Yi, 2019), mean altitude (ASTER GDEM v3), and mean glacier ELA (Liu *et al.*, 2012) for the GKLRJ and its three sub-regions.

Region	MAAT (ºC)	MAGT (ºC)	MAP (mm)	Mean altitude (m asl)	Mean glacier ELA (m asl)
All	0.69	0.53	469	4,623	5,431
R1	1.78	1.65	385	4,589	5,484
R2	-0.63	-0.06	489	4,893	5,462
R3	0.91	0.01	534	4,398	5,292

MAGT: mean annual ground temperature
MAAT: mean annual air temperature
MAP: mean annual precipitation

We divided the GKLRJ into three sub-regions: R1(east); R2 (central); and R3(west). These divisions were geospatially based (Fig.1b), where R1 and R2 are bounded by the eastern marginal rift valley of the Oiga Basin, R2 and R3 are bounded by Niang River, a tributary of the Niyang River. Each sub-region displays unique characteristics in terms of its topography and climate (Table 1). The whole of R1 is a semi-arid region, and the terrain is more complex here. The western side of R1 is composed of a deep alpine valley landscape formed by glacial-fluvial erosion cutting through the undulating terrain, while the eastern side is a basin formed by paleo-glaciation erosion and fluvial erosion cutting through less undulating mountainous hills with relatively gentle tops (Wu *et al.*, 2010). R2 is a semi-arid and semi-humid transition zone where the dividing line is located in its northeastern part; the mean altitude here is higher than in the other regions. The main peaks of glacier-carved mountains occur mostly above 5,500 m asl. R3 is located in a semi-humid zone where precipitation is more abundant and the terrain is on average ~500 m lower than that of R2.

3 Material and methods

3.1 Rock glacier inventory, classification and database

We used high-resolution ©Google Earth Pro remote sensing images from March 2004 to August 2020 to manually and visually interpret and compile a rock glaciers inventory for the GKLRJ (Selley *et al.*, 2018; Magori *et al.,* 2020; Hassan *et al.,* 2021). The inventorying strategy follows the RGI_PCv2.0 (RGIK, 2022b). According to the technical definition of rock glaciers, we conducted the detection of rock glacier landforms in the study area and confirmed the relevant landforms (system/unit). For areas with missing clear imagery and those covered by snow, we simultaneously used the ©Map World for comparison and verification, ensuring that all outline segments can be labeled with certainty. Each cataloged rock glacier system/unit was assigned a primary ID and delineated according to the extended standards, with the outline encompassing the entire rock glacier up to the rooting zone, including its external parts such as the front and lateral margins (RGIK, 2022b). We followed as closely as possible the specific rules for delineating the upper boundaries of the rock glacier. Following the baseline concepts, the rock glacier without any (significant) headwall is classified as the 'debris-mantled slope-connected' (Fig. 2a), the rock glacier unit subjacent and connected to a talus slope unit is classified as the 'talus-connected' (Fig. 2b), and the rock glacier developed within or from a (formerly) glaciated area is classified as the 'glacier forefield-

connected' (RGIK, 2022a) (Fig. 2c). In addition, any landform consisting of a single rock glacier unit or multiple spatially connected units is classified as a rock glacier system (RGIK, 2022a) (Fig. 2d). We also provided information on their morphological system and units as well as their upslope connection type in the attribute table (RGIK, 2022a, 2022b). Due to the limited availability of accurate field observations and related data on rock glacier dynamics, their activity states were determined solely based on geomorphological criteria (RGIK, 2022a). The activity type of each rock glacier was recorded in the attribute table. Furthermore, we applied One Way ANOVA in SPSS27® software based on the F-test method to analyze the differences in some characteristics between different types of rock glaciers. The significance was evaluated at the level $p < 0.05$.

Figure 2: Example images of different upslope boundary types of rock glaciers in the GKLRJ. (a) a debris-mantled slope-connected rock glacier; (b) a talus-connected rock glacier; (c) a glacier forefield-connected rock glacier; (d) a rock glacier system. Images from ©Google Earth.

3.2 Estimating hydrological stores

To calculate more accurately the water content (water volume equivalent, WVEQ [km³]) of the perennially frozen rock glaciers (including active and transitional rock glaciers) and of surface ice in glaciers in the GKLRJ (Jones *et al.*, 2018b), we chose two different methods derived from Brenning *et al.* (2005a) and Cicoira *et al.* (2021).

The method for calculating the subsurface ice volumes of rock glaciers permafrost provided by Brenning *et al.* (2005a) requires multiplying the mean thickness, surface area, and ice content of each rock glacier as in Eq. (1), then converting them to the WVEQ by assuming an ice density conversion factor of 0.9 g cm⁻³ ($\equiv$900 kg m⁻³) (Paterson, 1994; Jones *et al.*, 2018b), thus:

$$V_{RG} = \text{Area} \times \text{Mean thickness} \times \text{Ice Content} \tag{1}$$

Based on field data from Brenning *et al.* (2005a) and a rule-of-thumb given by Barsch (1977c) for the Swiss Alps, the rock glacier thickness was modeled empirically as Eq. (2), thus:

$$\text{Mean thickness [m]} = 50 \times (\text{Area [km}^2])^{0.2} \tag{2}$$

The method provided by Cicoira *et al.* (2021), based on the analysis of a dataset of 28 rock glaciers from the Alps (23) and the Andes (5), estimated rock glacier thickness using a perfectly plastic model arrived at by solving Eq. (4) for *H*, assuming a yield stress of $\tau = 92$ kPa (taking the mean driving stress from the dataset as a given), thus:

150 $$H = \frac{\tau}{\rho\, g\, sin\alpha} \pm 3.4m \qquad (3)$$

where τ is the shear stress (τ= 92 kPa), g is the gravitational acceleration, H is the thickness of the moving rock glacier, α is the angle of the surface slope and ρ is the density of the creeping material, which is given by the contribution of volumetric debris w_d and ice content w_i and the relative densities (ρ_i = 910 kg m^{-3} and ρ_d = 2700 km m^{-3}), thus:

155 $$\rho = \rho_d\, w_d + \rho_i\, w_i \qquad (4)$$

The ice content in rock glacier permafrost is spatially variable. We therefore used global estimates of ice content within rock glaciers to further calculate their lower (40%), mean (50%) and upper (60%) ice volumes (Hausmann *et al.*, 2012; Krainer and Ribis, 2012; Rangecroft *et al.*, 2015; Jones *et al.*, 2018b; Wagner *et al.*, 2021). In this study, the results of the calculations that used a 50% ice content were used for subsequent comparisons
160 with the surface ice in glaciers.

The ice volume of glacier was calculated using Eq. (5), thus:

$$V = A \times H \qquad (5)$$

where V represents ice volume, A is the glacier surface area derived from the second Chinese glacier inventory (version 1.0) (2006-2011) (Liu *et al.*, 2012), and H is the ice thickness calculated using GlabTop2 in
165 Python 3.10 (Linsbauer *et al.*, 2009). We assumed a 100% ice content by volume and applied the above ice density conversion factor to calculate the water equivalent volume of the surface ice in glaciers.

To mitigate the additional impact caused by the uneven spatial distribution of glaciers and rock glaciers in the GKLRJ, we calculated a ratio of rock glaciers (including active and transitional rock glaciers)' to glaciers' water volume equivalence (WVEQ) by using the weighted average method that employs the following equation:

170 $$\text{WVEQ ratio}_{Rg:\,Glacier} = \frac{\text{WVEQ R1}_{Rg}\times\frac{R1_{Rg}}{All_{Rg}}+\text{WVEQ R2}_{Rg}\times\frac{R2_{Rg}}{All_{Rg}}+\text{WVE   R3}_{Rg}\times\frac{R3_{Rg}}{All_{Rg}}}{\text{WVEQ R1}_{Glacier}\times\frac{R1_{Glacier}}{All_{Glacier}}+\text{WVEQ R2}_{Glacier}\times\frac{R2_{Glacier}}{All_{Glacier}}+\text{WVEQ R3}_{Glacier}\times\frac{R3_{Glacier}}{All_{Glacier}}} \qquad (6)$$

where WVEQ ratio$_{Rg:\,Glacier}$ is the ratio of rock glaciers' to glaciers' WEVQ; WVEQ Rn$_{Rg}$ (n = 1, 2, 3) are the WVEQ values for rock glaciers in R1, R2, and R3, respectively; Rn$_{Rg}$ (n = 1, 2, 3) are the numbers of rock glaciers in R1, R2, and R3, respectively; All$_{Rg}$ is the number of rock glaciers in the whole GKLRJ; WVEQ Rn$_{Glacier}$ (n = 1, 2, 3) are the WVEQ values for glaciers in R1, R2, and R3, respectively; Rn$_{Glacier}$ (n = 1, 2, 3) are the number of
175 glaciers in R1, R2, and R3, respectively; and All$_{Glacier}$ is the number of glaciers in the whole GKLRJ.

4 Results

4.1 Rock glacier inventory analysis
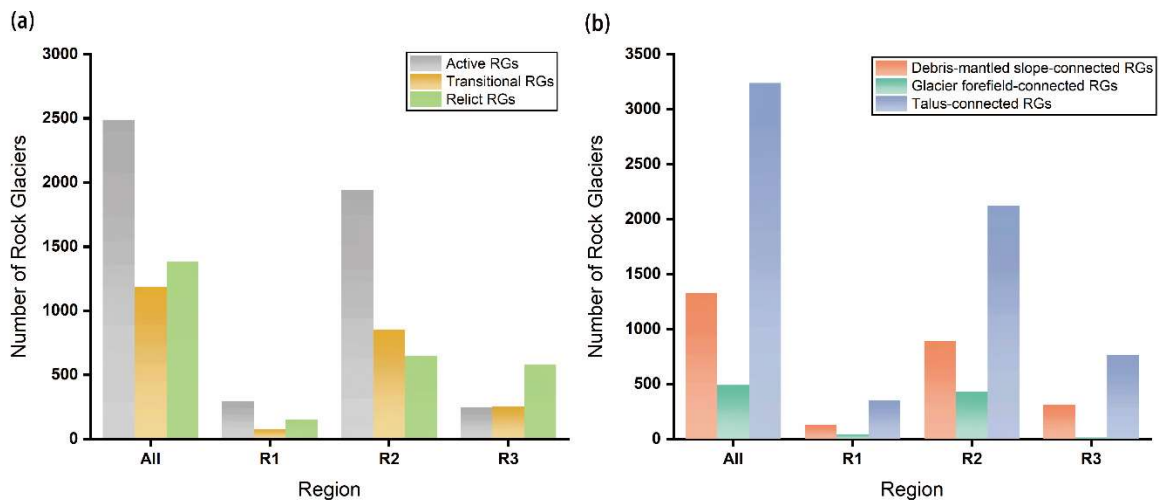
Figure 3: The number of rock glaciers categorized by different(a) activity types and (b) upper slope connection types in the entire GKRLJ and its sub-regions.

Table 2: Mean characteristics for rock glaciers.

| Type	R1	R2	R3
Number	524	3,447	1,086
Mean altitude (m asl)	5,132	5,117	4,909
Mean MEF (m asl)	5,083	5,051	4,845
Mean area (km³)	0.06	0.08	0.07
Mean slope range (°)	19.85	19.23	21.43
Mean MAGT (ºC)	-0.02	-0.6	-0.9
Mean MAAT (ºC)	-1.68	-1.94	-1.54
Mean MAP (mm)	343	392	495

MEF: minimum altitude at the rock glacier front
MAGT: mean annual ground temperature
MAAT: mean annual air temperature
MAP: mean annual precipitation

We identified a total of 5,057 rock glaciers in the GKLRJ, including 2,484 active rock glaciers (49.1%), 1,189 transitional rock glaciers (23.5%), 1,384 relict rock glaciers (27.3%). Active rock glaciers are predominant in the whole GKLRJ, with the exception of R3 where a higher proportion of relict rock glaciers can be found (Fig. 3a). Among the total rock glaciers observed, ~64% of them (n = 3,239) were classified as talus-connected, ~26% (n = 1,327) as debris-mantled slope-connected, and ~10% (n = 491) as glacier forefield-connected, this order of proportions is consistent across three subregions (Fig. 3b). On the whole, rock glaciers are unevenly distributed in R1, R2, and R3, with nearly 70% of rock glaciers (n = 3,447) distributed in R2 (Table 2).
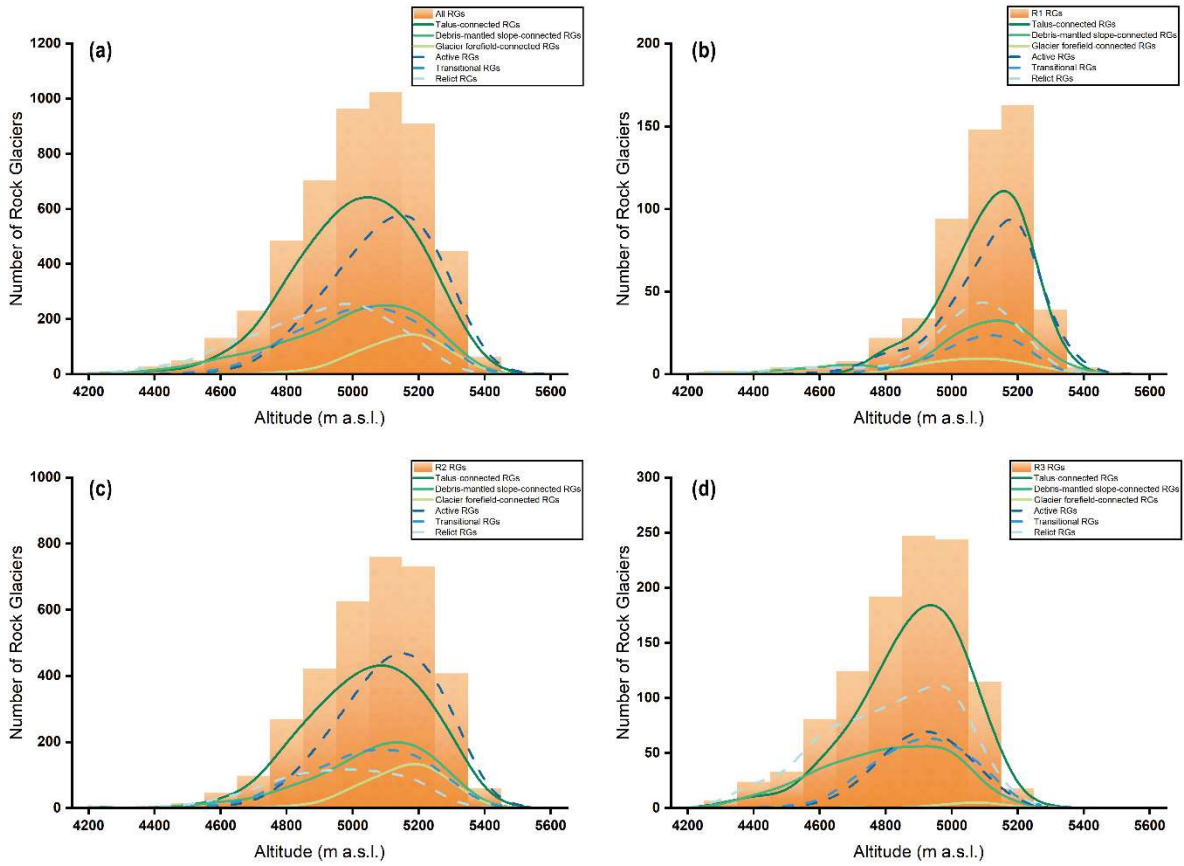
Figure 4: The mean occurrence altitude of rock glaciers categorized by different activity and upper slope connection types in (a) the whole GKLRJ and (b) R1, (c) R2, and (d) R3.

~90% of the rock glaciers are located between 4,800 and 5,400 m asl, with a mean altitude of ~5,070 m asl. Active rock glaciers are statistically distributed at higher altitudes than transitional and relict rock glaciers (Table 3), at ~76 m and ~195 m higher (Fig. 4a). The mean altitude of rock glaciers varies significantly depending on the type of spatial connection to the upper slope (Table 3). Compared to talus-connected (~5,063 m asl) and debris-mantled slope-connected rock glaciers (~5,044 m asl), glacier forefield-connected rock glaciers (~5,185 m asl) are more commonly found at higher elevations (Fig. 4a). The mean altitude of rock glaciers in R1 (~5,132 m asl) is higher than for those in R2 (~5,112 m asl) and R3 (~4,909 m asl) by ~20 m and ~223 m, respectively (Table 2 and Fig. 4b, 4c, 4d). The lower altitudinal limit of rock glaciers declines as longitude increases eastward (Fig. 5).

Table 3: The results of the One Way ANOVA.

| Independent variable	Dependent variable	*df* between groups	*df* within groups	*F*-value	*p*
activity types	mean altitude	2	5,054	544.749	0.000
upper slope connection types	mean altitude	2	5,054	102.9	0.000
upper slope connection types	mean area	2	5,054	89.814	0.000
sub-regions	mean slope range	2	4,680	81.175	0.000
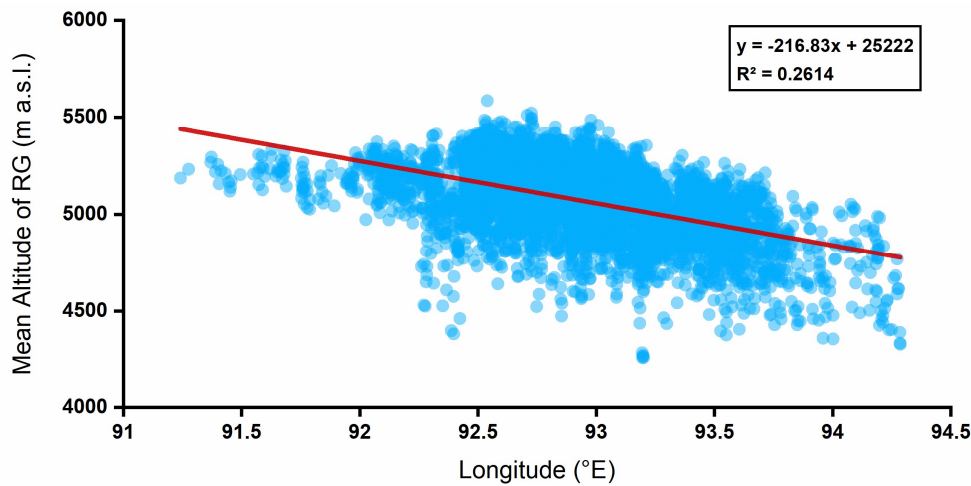
Figure 5: Scatterplots and fitted curves of the mean altitudinal distribution of rock glaciers versus longitude.

In the GKLRJ, rock glaciers cover an area of 404.69 km^2, with the mean area of each rock glacier being 0.08 km^2, the mean area of three different activity types of rock glaciers remain consistent with this value, but there are notable variations in the mean area of rock glaciers depending on their specific type of upper slope connection (Table 3). Glacier forefield-connected rock glaciers (0.12 km^2) generally have a larger mean area than the talus-connected ones (0.08 km^2) and the debris-mantled slope-connected ones (0.06 km^2). The mean area of most types of rock glaciers is the biggest in R2 and smallest in R1 (Table 2). Furthermore, the mean slope range of rock glaciers in R3 is significantly steeper compared to that in R1 and R2 (Table 3).
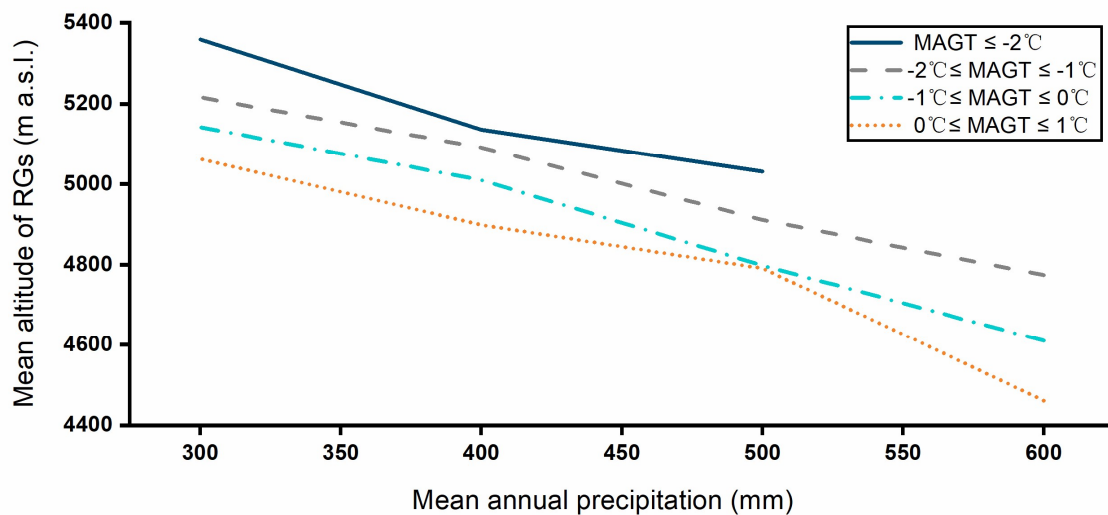

Figure 6: The variation in mean altitude of rock glacier distribution with changes in mean annual precipitation for different mean MAGT states.

Around 90% of the rock glaciers in GKLRJ are found in the region where the MAGT ranges from -2°C to 0°C. Additionally, the MAGT, MAAT, and MAP of the rock glaciers vary among the three sub-regions (Table 2). Specifically, the mean MAGT decreases gradually from R1 to R3, while the mean MAP increases gradually. The mean MAAT follows the same order as the regional mean MAAT values listed in Table 1. With the same MAGT, the mean altitude of rock glacier distribution decreases with increasing MAP. Moreover, with the same MAP, the altitude of rock glacier distribution increases with decreasing MAGT (Fig. 6).

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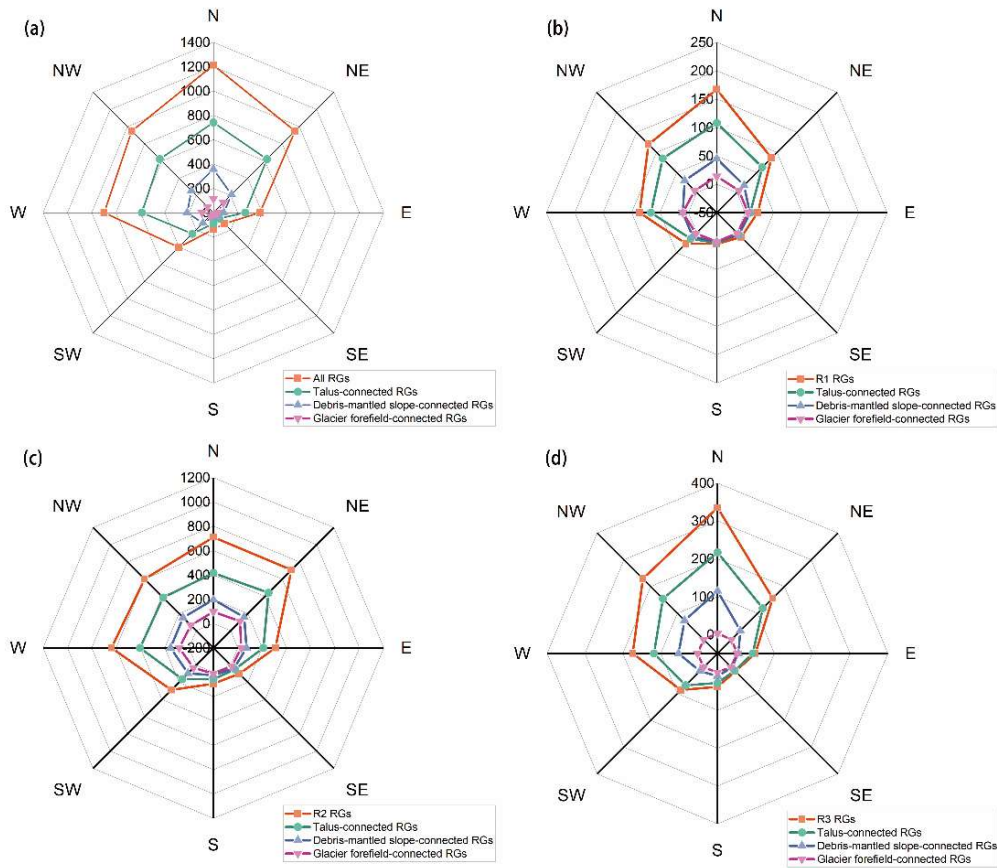
Figure 7: Analysis of abundances of rock glaciers categorized by different upper slope connection types in (a) GKLRJ, (b) R1, (c) R2, and (d) R3. The numbers of rock glaciers for each aspect on the four radar plots are shown as percentages (%).

Rock glaciers predominantly occur on north-facing slopes (N, 23.9%; NW, 18.7%; NE, 18.7%), with some distributed on the west-facing aspects (W, 17.7%), and fewest on south-facing aspects (S, 2.7%; SE, 2.5%, SW, 7.9%) (Fig. 7a). Compared with the obvious characteristics of the concentrated distribution of rock glaciers in R1 and R3 on the N aspect (Fig. 7b, 7d), rock glaciers in R2 are more evenly distributed on the N, NE, W and NW aspects (Fig. 7c).

4.2 Water equivalent volumes

Based on the second Chinese glacier inventory (Liu *et al.*, 2012), glaciers in the GKLRJ cover an area of ~372.32 km^2. GlabTop2 provided estimated clean ice glacier thicknesses ranging between ~1 and ~263 m (mean = ~18 m). We estimated the total WVEQ of the region's glaciers to be ~9.29 km^3.

Table 4: Ice volumes (km^3) and corresponding WVEQs (km^3) calculated using the empirical area-thickness formula (Brenning, 2005a) for sub-regions and GKLRJ-wide (All).

	Brenning, 2005a				
Region	Glacier - WVEQ (km^3）	RG - WVEQ (km^3)			RG: Glacier WVEQ ratio
		40%	50%	60%	
All	9.29	3.45	4.32	5.18	1:2.28
1	0.19	0.30	0.38	0.45	2:1
2	6.60	2.78	3.47	4.17	1:1.9
3	2.51	0.36	0.46	0.55	1:5.5

WVEQ = water volume equivalent

The mean thickness of rock glaciers in the GKLRJ estimated using the empirical area-thickness formula (Brenning, 2005a) is ~28.35 m. The WVEQ storage lies between 3.45 and 5.18 km^3, of which R2 stores ~80% of the water in the GKLRJ (*i.e.*, 2.78 – 4.17 km^3). R1 stores 0.30 – 0.45 km^3 of water (9% of the whole GKLRJ reserve). R3 stores ~11% of the water, or 0.36 – 0.55 km^3 (Table 4). Compared to the WVEQ of glaciers, the result calculated using the weighted method showed that the ratio was 1:2.28, indicating that glaciers stored ~2.28 times more water than rock glaciers.

Table 5: Ice volumes (km^3) and corresponding WVEQs (km^3) calculated using the perfectly plastic model (Cicoira *et al.*, 2021) for sub-regions and GKLRJ-wide (All).

Cicoira *et al.*, 2021					
Region	Glacier - WVEQ (km^3)	RG - WVEQ (km^3)			RG: Glacier WVEQ ratio
		40%	50%	60%	
All	9.29	1.31 – 2.02	1.64 – 2.53	1.97 – 3.04	1:4.66
1	0.19	0.11 – 0.17	0.14 – 0.22	0.17 – 0.26	1:1.06
2	6.60	1.08 – 1.65	1.35 – 2.06	1.62 – 2.48	1:3.86
3	2.51	0.11 – 0.19	0.14 – 0.24	0.17 – 0.29	1:13.21

WVEQ = water volume equivalent
The range of results in RG - WVEQ (km^3) (Cicoira *et al.*, 2021) corresponds to $H\pm3.4$ m.

The mean thickness of rock glaciers calculated using a perfectly plastic model (Cicoira *et al.*, 2021) is 16.39±3.4 m, 11.96 m thinner than that estimated using the empirical area-thickness formula. The mean value of the WVEQ estimated using this method is 41 – 49% of the mean value obtained using the 'Brenning' method. As the estimated WVEQ of rock glaciers decreases, the ratio of rock glaciers' to glaciers' WVEQ is also lower than that obtained using the 'Brenning' method (Brenning, 2005a), indicating that the WVEQ of glaciers is ~4.66 times that of rock glaciers (Table 5). However, the results obtained based on both methods reflect clear differences in the water storage of the three sub-regions of GKLRJ (ANOVA: F-value =27.930, df within groups = 2, between groups = 3,671, $p \leqslant 0.001$).

5 Discussion

5.1 Factors controlling rock glaciers

Rock glaciers are distributed heterogeneously throughout the GKRLJ, with most concentrated within R2. The GKLRJ spans a large area from east to west, with variations in topography and climatic conditions between the three sub-regions, thereby providing the basis for a spatially differentiated distribution of rock glaciers. The development of rock glaciers is a complex function of responses to air temperature, insolation, wind, and seasonal precipitation over a considerable time period (Humlum, 1998), with the MAAT = -2°C isotherm and the equilibrium line altitude (ELA) for local glaciers forming the lower and upper boundaries of the cryogenic belt where they have developed, respectively (Humlum, 1988; Brenning, 2005a; Rangecroft *et al.*, 2015, 2016; Jones, 2018b). Topographically, the higher terrain in R2 has accommodated the development of more rock glaciers in the area above 4,500 m asl. R2 is located in the transition zone between the TP's semi-arid and sub-humid regions, with a mean ELA of ~5,462 m asl. Compared with R3, which has a lower ELA (mean ELA = 5,292 m asl), and R1, which has a higher MAAT, R2 exhibits a broader range of the cryogenic belt to meet the development and distribution of more rock glaciers. Additionally, the widespread glacial remains in R2 and the predominance of

more easily weathered granite as bedrock in this area could also provide a richer source of material for rock glacier development (Wahrhaftig and Cox, 1959; Haeberli *et al.*, 2006).

The mean and lower altitudinal limits of the rock glacier distribution in the GKLRJ decrease from west to east, from ~5,200 m asl to ~4,900 m asl. In the Gangdise Mountains, located in the same latitudinal range on the western side of the study area, rock glaciers show a similar trend of gradually decreasing altitude in line with increased moisture; indeed, the characteristics of the changes in the two regions show an overall continuity (Zhang *et al.*, 2022). Limited by the range of the ISM, MAP gradually decreases from west to east from the Gangdise Mountains to the GKLRJ. In the alpine tundra of this region, annual precipitation is dominated by snowfall in summer and autumn. Increases in snowfall in summer and autumn could help to preserve permafrost, allowing permafrost to develop at lower altitudes under similar climatic conditions (Zhou *et al.,* 2000). Additionally, annual regional precipitation values may reflect reductions in short-wave insolation arising from cloud cover, at least to some extent (Boeckli *et al.*, 2012a). Relatively favorable hydrological conditions will be more conducive to freeze-thaw weathering, thereby increasing the generation rate of rock debris, which in turn is conducive to the development of rock glaciers (Hallet *et al.*, 1991; Haeberli *et al.*, 2006; Zhang *et al.*, 2022). Increases in MAP are therefore likely to be conducive to the expansion of the range in the distribution of rock glaciers in semi-arid to sub-humid areas, meaning that the lower altitudinal limit of rock glacier distribution decreases with increases in annual precipitation.

Glacier forefield-connected rock glaciers may have a more abundant source of materials compared to other types of rock glaciers. They occur in regions where glaciers have previously existed, and both glacial moraines and surrounding rock walls can provide debris as their materials. Therefore, they have a more diverse range of material sources, which may contribute to the development of larger-scale rock glaciers. However, debris-mantled slope-connected rock glaciers lack significant headwall, and their debris is primarily produced by in-situ bedrock weathering (RGIK, 2022a). This results in their relatively limited and homogeneous material sources, leading to slower development and smaller scale compared to other types of rock glaciers.

Rock glaciers in GKLRJ are primarily distributed on north-facing and west-facing aspects, which is remarkably similar to the distribution pattern of rock glaciers in the Himalayas (Jones *et al.*, 2018b), Gangdise Mountains (Zhang *et al.*, 2022), Tianshan Mountains (Liu *et al.*, 1995; Bolch and Marchenko, 2009) and the European Alps (Scotti *et al.*, 2013). This is mainly due to the fact that north-facing slopes receive less solar radiation as they are shaded, providing favorable conditions for the development and preservation of rock glaciers (Barsch, 1996). Additionally, the ample space and lower potential incoming solar radiation (PISR) on west-facing slopes, influenced by regional topographic conditions, also contribute to the development of rock glaciers here. This is evident in R2 where rock glaciers are more evenly distributed in the W, NW, N, and NE aspects compared to the distinct concentration of rock glaciers on the N aspect in R1 and R3.

5.2 Hydrological significance of rock glaciers

In comparison, we found that the thicknesses of rock glaciers calculated using the flow plasticity model (Cicoira *et al.*, 2021) are significantly lower than the corresponding results calculated using the empirical area-thickness formula (Brenning, 2005a). By comparing the thickness of the rock glaciers calculated by both methods with the height of the rock glacier front measured in ©Google Earth, the thickness of the rock glaciers calculated by the 'Cicoira' method (Cicoira *et al.*, 2021) seems to be closer to the real value. Therefore, we speculate that the

thickness calculated based on the 'Brenning' method (Brenning, 2005a) may be overestimated to a certain extent due to the following reasons. The applicability of different estimation methods may be different across the study area. The mean thickness of the sample rock glaciers in the study of Brenning (2005a) is about 30-50 m, which is higher than the sample of rock glaciers selected in the study of Cicoira *et al.* (2021) (15-30 m). We selected two rock glacier samples from Cicoira *et al.*'s (2021) research and used the 'Brenning' method (Brenning, 2005a) to calculate their thickness (Müller *et al.*, 2016). We observed that the calculated thickness (H=27 m) closely matched the actual thickness for the rock glacier with an area of 45,931 m^2 and a real thickness of 30 m. However, there was a significant discrepancy with the other rock glacier sample (H=25 m), which had an area of 32,356 m^2 and an actual thickness of 12 m. Therefore, the applicability of empirical formulas based on various samples may vary for estimating the thickness of rock glaciers in different areas. As the thickness of rock glaciers in GKLRJ is relatively close to the sample selected by Cicoira *et al.* (2021), the application of the 'Brenning' method (Brenning, 2005a) may lead to an overestimation of rock glacier thickness in GKLRJ.

Based on the above discussion, we choose to use the results calculated based on the 'Cicoira' method (Cicoira *et al.*, 2021), which may be closer to the actual water reserves in GKLRJ for further comparison and discussion. These estimates indicate that the amount of water stored in rock glaciers in the GKLRJ is ~2.2% of the total previously-identified rock glacier water reserves globally (94.66 Gt), and ~3.5% of the existing water reserves in rock glaciers on the TP (58.05 Gt) (Jones *et al.*, 2018a; Jones *et al.*, 2018b; Jones *et al.*, 2021). The rock glacier to glacier storage ratio in the GKJRJ of 1:4.66 is ~133 times bigger than the global ratio (1:618, excluding the Antarctic and Subantarctic and Greenland Periphery Randolph Glacier Inventory) (Randolf Glacier Inventory (RGI); Pfeffer *et al.*, 2014; Jones *et al.*, 2018a), ~5.4 times bigger than that of the Himalayas to its south (1:25) (Jones *et al.*, 2021), and much closer to that of the Andes in South America (1:3) (Azócar and Brenning, 2010), where glacier presence is also limited/absent (Brenning, 2005b; Azócar and Brenning, 2010; Jones *et al.*, 2019b; Schaffer *et al.*, 2019). In the GKLRJ, regional differences in the hydrological significance of rock glaciers under different climatic conditions also exist. In R2, which is located in the transition zone between the semi-arid and semi-humid zones, the higher topography and suitable hydrothermal conditions lead to the highest concentration of glaciers and rock glaciers in this area, with rock glaciers accounting for 82% of the rock glacier water storage in the entire study area, and glaciers accounting for ~71% of the study area's glacial water storage, with a ratio of ~1:3.86 between them. However, in terms of the ratio of rock glaciers to glacial water storage alone, rock glaciers are of greater hydrological significance in the warmer and drier R1, despite storing only 8.7% of the total water volume of all rock glaciers. In the context of drought and climate warming, rock glaciers store more than twice the water of the glaciers in R1. This partly explains why rock glaciers have a greater hydrological significance and refuge potential as long-term reservoirs in arid regions with small and rapidly vanishing glaciers. Furthermore, the relationship between the proportion of the water cycle occupied by rock glaciers and the water requirements of regional populations should be considered in more detail. More research is needed into the hydrochemical composition of the stored water in rock glaciers and whether it can be used for irrigation and drinking.

5.3 Rock glaciers and permafrost presence
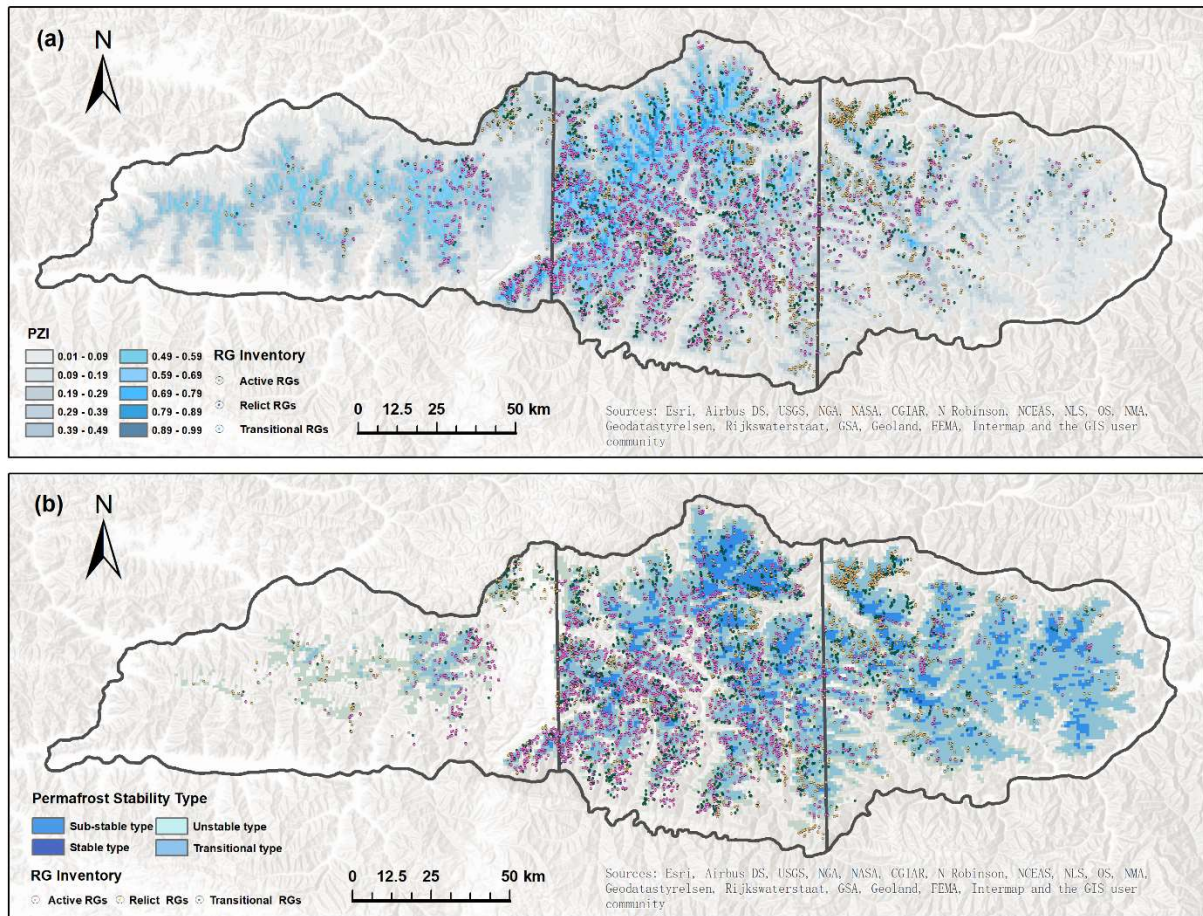
Figure 8: Spatial distribution of rock glaciers vs. (a) Gruber's (2012) Permafrost Zonation Index (PZI) in GKLRJ and (b) Map of the thermal stability of permafrost in GKLRJ (Ran *et al.*, 2020).

The MAGT in GKLRJ is relatively high (Ran *et al.*, 2020; Ni *et al.*, 2020). Approximately 90% of the rock glaciers are distributed within the MAGT range of -2°C to 0°C, which belong to the regions of sub-stable type ($-3°C <$ MAGT $< -1.5°C$), transitional type ($-1.5°C <$ MAGT $< -0.5°C$), and unstable type permafrost ($-0.5°C <$ MAGT $< 0.5°C$) (Cheng *et al.*, 2019). About 7% of the rock glaciers occur in the seasonal frozen ground area with MAGT $> 0°C$. Furthermore, we compared the spatial distribution of rock glaciers in GKLRJ to the Permafrost Zonation Index (PZI) which is based on the model of permafrost extent and mainly related to the MAAT (Gruber, 2012). At the same time, we also compared it to the thermal stability of permafrost which mainly depends on the accumulation of the MAGT measurement data and remote sensing big data (Ran *et al*., 2020). Overall, it aligns well with the regions of PZI≥0.49 (Fig. 8a) and the map of the thermal stability of permafrost (Fig. 8b), especially in R2 and the western part of R3.

In R1, the range of permafrost distribution provided by Ran *et al.* (2020) is significantly smaller than the region with PZI $\geqslant$ 0.49 in Gruber (2012), while the difference in the eastern part of R3 is larger (Fig. 8). We speculate that these differences may be attributed to variations in the data period used in these studies. When making detailed comparisons between the mean MAAT data from 1961 to 1990 used in the study of Gruber (2012) and MAAT data for the TP in 2015 provided by Du and Yi (2019), we found that, except for a few areas in the eastern part of R3, the mean MAATs of R1 and R2 increased by ~2ºC. Although there may have been some errors

in the data, the effect of temperature on the predicted permafrost distribution for the model based on the relationship between air temperature and the occurrence of permafrost may nonetheless be somewhat magnified.

Under the background of global warming, the warming rate of permafrost in the eastern part of the TP is significantly faster than that in the western part (Cheng *et al.*, 2019). This could result in rapid changes in the movement speed and surface morphology of rock glaciers in GKLRJ over a short period of time (Krainer and Mostler, 2006; Ikeda *et al.*, 2008; Janke and Bolch, 2021). However, research has shown that despite the relatively rapid increase in ground temperatures in the deep layers of permafrost, the degradation of permafrost on the Tibetan Plateau occurs at a slow pace with full consideration of deep ground temperatures, subterranean ice and geothermal gradients in permafrost (Cheng *et al.*, 2019). It may take centuries, if not millennia, for the frozen material and corresponding subsurface ice in rock glaciers and permafrost to completely thaw and melt (Krainer *et al.*, 2015).

6 Conclusions

We constructed an inventory of rock glaciers in the GKLRJ as well as illustrated their regional distribution characteristics and environmental indications. We employed two methods to estimate and compare the water storage capacity of the region's rock glaciers and map the GKLRJ's permafrost probability distribution using the logistic regression model. The results show that there are 5,057 rock glaciers in the GKLRJ, covering an area of 404.69 km^2. Over 80% of these rock glaciers are located within R2. The high altitude (~4,900 m asl), low temperatures (MAAT $\leqslant$ -2ºC), and suitable precipitation (MAP ~400 mm) in the semi-arid and semi-humid transition zone provide the widest cryogenic belt range for rock glacier distribution in the region. The lower altitudinal limit of the distribution of rock glaciers decreases gradually with increasing longitude from the western side of the study area, from the Gangdise Mountains to the interior of the GKLRJ, indicating the positive effect of increased precipitation on the preservation of permafrost. We used two methods to estimate the thickness of rock glaciers and found that the results calculated based on the perfect plasticity model were more consistent with the actual situation in GKLRJ. Based on the result, we calculated that 1.31－3.04 km^3 of water is stored in the subsurface ice of rock glacier permafrost, or ~33% of the water presently stored in the surface ice of glaciers. Despite these differences, both of these results reveal the previously neglected and important hydrological value of rock glaciers in the GKLRJ, particularly in R1, which is the drier sub-region. The WVEQ in rock glaciers and the ratio of subsurface ice in rock glacier permafrost to surface ice in glaciers may continue to increase with global warming and as glaciers retreat in the future. And the stability of permafrost in the area of rock glacier distribution is likely to decline further.

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