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Seasonal drainage of supraglacial lakes on debris-covered glaciers in the Tien Shan Mountains, Central Asia

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Abstract

Using field surveys in 2013, 2014, and 2016 plus satellite data analysis from 1999 to 2015, we analyze the seasonal drainage cycle of supraglacial lakes on seven debris-covered glaciers in central Tien Shan. This cycle is characterized by the number of lakes and by their water level. The cycle on the Southern Inylchek Glacier starts to increase in the beginning of April, reaches a maximum in May–June, and decreases sharply in June–July. The increase in April to June is because of inflow of meltwater from snow and ice, and the later decrease is caused by a greater connectivity to the englacial drainage network. For the Southern Inylchek Glacier, 94% of the supraglacial lakes that exist and appear during 2013–2015 drain for three years, indicating that most lakes could connect to englacial drainage network for three years. Concerning water levels, lakes in close proximity with the same base-level tend to synchronize their seasonal water levels through englacial channels. Although the maximum water levels of the observed lakes are the same from 2014 through 2016, their dates of maximum water level vary between mid-May and mid-June. During this period, the lifetime and size of the supraglacial lakes is controlled by the timing of their connectivity to the englacial drainage network.

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