Evaporation variability of Nam Co Lake in the Tibetan Plateau and its role in recent rapid lake expansion

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ARTICLE INFO

Article info
Received 3 January 2016
Received in revised form 17 February 2016
Accepted 15 March 2016
Available online 22 March 2016
This manuscript was handled by Geoff Syme, Editor-in-Chief

SUMMARY

Previous studies have shown that the majority of the lakes in the Tibetan Plateau (TP) started to expand rapidly since the late 1990s. However, the causes are still not well known. For Nam Co, being a closed lake with no outflow, evaporation (E L) over the lake surface is the only way water may leave the lake. Therefore, quantifying E L is key for investigating the mechanism of lake expansion in the TP. E L can be quantified by Penman- and/or bulk-transfer-type models, requiring only net radiation, temperature, humidity and wind speed for inputs. However, interpolation of wind speed data may be laden with great uncertainty due to extremely sparse ground meteorological observations, the highly heterogeneous landscape and lake-land breeze effects. Here, evaporation of Nam Co Lake was investigated within the 1979–2012 period at a monthly time-scale using the complementary relationship lake evaporation (CRLE) model which does not require wind speed data. Validations by in-situ observations of E601B pan evaporation rates at the shore of Nam Co Lake as well as measured E L over an adjacent small lake using eddy covariance technique suggest that CRLE is capable of simulating E L well since it implicitly considers wind effects on evaporation via its vapor transfer coefficient. The multi-year average of annual evaporation of Nam Co Lake is 635 mm. From 1979 to 2012, annual evaporation of Nam Co Lake expressed a very slight decreasing trend. However, a more significant decrease in E L occurred during 1998–2008 at a rate of ~12 mm yr−1. Based on water-level readings, this significant decrease in lake evaporation was found to be responsible for approximately 4% of the reported rapid water level increase and areal expansion of Nam Co Lake during the same period.

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1. Introduction

With more than a thousand lakes having a total free-water area of ca. 41,800 km2, the Tibetan Plateau (TP) boasts the greatest concentration of high-altitude inland lakes in the world (Ma et al., 2011). These lakes form the headwaters of many large river basins of Asia and present themselves as important indicators of water resource availability during the ongoing climate change. Numerous studies have shown that the lakes of the inner Tibetan Plateau (iTP) (Fig. 1) have expanded substantially since the 1990s (Wu and Zhu, 2008; Zhu et al., 2010; Meng et al., 2011; Y. Zhang et al., 2011; B. Zhang et al., 2011; G. Zhang et al., 2011; Lei et al., 2012, 2013; Song et al., 2014; Wan et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2014) in contrast to the slight decline in lake volumes in the Himalayan region of Southern TP (Lei et al., 2014; Song et al., 2014). During the same period the glaciers in the iTP have significantly retreated (Yao et al., 2012) and precipitation rates have increased to some extent (Yang et al., 2014; Gao et al., 2015). Song et al. (2014) and Lei et al. (2014) found that the spatial patterns of precipitation variability are consistent with the observed changes in lake area across the entire TP, suggesting that precipitation variations play a dominant role in lake-area changes. However, basin-scale investigations over Linggo Co (Lei et al., 2012), Nam Co (Zhu et al., 2010) and Siling Co...
Lakes (Meng et al., 2011) using a water-balance method demonstrated that the increase in glacial melt-water into these lakes is the dominant factor in the observed lake expansions of the iTP. A recent inventory of Zhang et al. (2015) using Landsat products also suggested that the spatial variation of expansion of these glacier-fed lakes corresponds well with a warming temperature trend and glacier mass-loss patterns of the TP, highlighting the role glacier melting plays in areal extent changes of these lakes. Indeed, the mechanism of lake expansion is hard to quantify with inadequate hydro-meteorological observations due to the extremely harsh environment of these alpine regions. Additionally, the hydrological processes of these lakes within the TP may be more intricate than those in low-elevation regions. For example, quantifying water release from the degradation of frozen soils (Cheng and Wu, 2007) and runoff due to glacier melting (Lei et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2015) is very challenging because of their limited accessibility. Regarding a closed lake without outflow, however, evaporation, \( E_L \), from the lake is the only sink-term in the lake water balance that determines the response of lake water storage to variabilities in surface and subsurface runoff (including groundwater discharge into the lake) from precipitation and glacier melting (Wu et al., 2014).

Global warming due to increasing concentration of atmospheric CO\(_2\) is expected to cause higher evaporation rates and thus accelerate the warming via the water vapor feedback since it is a more potent greenhouse gas than CO\(_2\) itself (Huntington, 2006). However, previous studies suggested that pan evaporation (Zhang et al., 2007; Yang et al., 2014; Xie et al., 2015) and reference evapotranspiration (Zhang et al., 2009; Yin et al., 2010; Gao et al., 2015) over the TP have decreased significantly in the past few decades. Therefore, the possible decrease of lake evaporation has been regarded as one of the reasons for recent rapid lake expansions in iTP (e.g. Lei et al., 2013; G. Zhang et al., 2011). This viewpoint, however, is built only on speculations, i.e., one would expect lake evaporation to show similar variability with pan evaporation and/or reference evapotranspiration because of the unimpeded access to water supply. In other words, quantitative evidence is needed to test this hypothesis. Besides, it is widely known that the release of sensible heat from the TP surface and the similar heat release of condensation of the evaporated water play a key role in Northern Hemisphere energy and water cycles at various temporal and spatial scales (Wu et al., 2015). Although the total lake (water) area only accounts for a small portion of the whole area of the TP, \( E_L \) is still crucial to the thermal control of the Asian monsoon system since the evaporation rate from water surfaces is usually much larger than that from the surrounding land area of the TP. Therefore, accurate estimation of \( E_L \) is not only vital to clarifying the mechanism of the reported rapid expansion of the lakes across the iTP, but it is also helpful to elucidate the role lakes play in regional climate change over this high-altitude region. Admittedly, in-situ observations are the best approach to quantifying \( E_L \). In recent years, for example, eddy covariance systems and large (surface area of 20 m\(^2\)) evaporation pans have been implemented over Ngoring Lake (Li et al., 2015) in the eastern TP, Erhai (Liu et al., 2015) and Yamdrok Yum Co (Yu et al., 2011) Lakes in the southeastern TP to more directly obtain \( E_L \). These studies helped to clarify the short-term energy and water exchange regime between the lake and the atmosphere in high-altitude regions (Biermann et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2015) and provided a basis for understanding how the land surface processes of the TP impact the variability of the Southern Asian monsoon (Wu et al., 2015). Unfortunately, such in-situ observations are limited only to a few years. Therefore, longer term (e.g. multi-year or decadal) \( E_L \) estimations are still needed over the TP.

Previous multi-year studies of \( E_L \) for this region relied mainly on two approaches, i.e. the bulk-transfer, and combination-equation (Penman, 1948) based methods (e.g. Li et al., 2001; Xu et al., 2009; Zhu et al., 2010; Yu et al., 2011; Zhou et al., 2015). It should be noted that both the Penman and bulk transfer (Brutsaert, 1982) models require wind speed as input to estimate \( E_L \). However, the heterogeneous landscape of the TP plus the site-specific lake-breeze systems that develop between the lake and its adjacent land surface (Liu et al., 2015; Gerken et al., 2014) make the spatial interpolation of the wind speed values measured by the sparse stations required in these models challenging. Therefore, alternative methods are needed to estimate \( E_L \), particularly in the iTP where the lake-breeze systems are well developed.
of the China Meteorological Administration (CMA) laden with higher uncertainty when compared with other methodological variables, e.g. air temperature and solar radiation. Consequently, lake evaporation models not requiring wind speed data may be preferable. In addition, previous studies mainly used data from meteorological stations at varying distances to the lakes to run the models. This may also lead to additional uncertainties if the estimation approach requires measurements over the lake due to the differences in surface and thermodynamic properties of the free water surface and the surrounding land (Sziklai, 2008). Therefore, application of gridded meteorological data from grid-points located right above the lakes is preferable.

With an elevation of 4724 m above sea level (asl) [2009 data based on Y. Zhang et al. (2011)], Nam Co Lake is the highest large lake in the world. Remote-sensing based studies indicated that the lake expanded substantially since the 1970s to date (e.g. Lei et al., 2013; Zhu et al., 2010; Y. Zhang et al., 2011). In addition to quantifying the contribution of glacier-melting and precipitation to such areal-extent change, a more accurate estimation of $E_t$ is still needed to an improved understanding of the mechanism of expansion. For example, Zhu et al. (2010) previously indicated that a decline of $30.7$ mm in the multi-year averaged $E_t$ value between the periods of 1992–2004 and 1971–1991 might contribute largely to the expansion of Nam Co Lake. Additionally, evaluation of an existing $E_t$ estimation model that does not require wind data may be of interest to the scientific community for revealing long-term variations and/or trends in lake evaporation rates in such a hydro-meteorologically important but sparsely populated region as the TP. In the present study, the grid-based China Meteorological Forcing Dataset (CFMD) (He and Yang, 2011) and the complementary relationship lake evaporation (CRLE) model (Morton, 1983a, 1983b, 1986) were employed to estimate $E_t$ over Nam Co Lake in the TP. The objectives of the present study are: (1) assessing the performance of the CRLE model in estimating lake evaporation of high-elevation lakes; (2) quantifying the temporal variability of $E_t$ at Nam Co Lake and its role in the recent rapid expansion of lake surface area since the late 1990s. The present research differs from previous lake evaporation studies of the TP (Li et al., 2001; Xu et al., 2009; Zhu et al., 2010; Yu et al., 2011; B. Zhang et al., 2011; Wu et al., 2014) by followings: (i) the gridded meteorological data located above the lake area was used as forcing to avoid the impact of the land environment; (ii) the CRLE model which does not need wind speed data as input was used to estimate $E_t$, thereby expected to avoid uncertainties in wind speed required by the Penman and/or bulk transfer models; (iii) the simulated $E_t$ rates were validated by observed E601B pan coefficient values on an annual scale as well as eddy-covariance-measured evaporation rates from an adjacent lake on a monthly scale.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Regional setting

Located in the northern foot of the Nyenchen Tanglha Mountain of the TP, Nam Co is a closed, semi-brackish lake (Wang et al., 2009) (Fig. 1). The lake is about 75 km long from east to west and 45 km wide from north to south. With an area of ca. 2013 km² [2009 data based on Y. Zhang et al. (2011)], it is the second largest lake in Tibet located in the Nam Co Lake Basin between 89°21’–91°23’E and 29°56’–31°70’N with a total watershed area of about 10,610 km² (B. Zhang et al., 2011). The main water supply to Nam Co Lake is precipitation and glacier meltwater. There are approximately 60 streams to flow into Nam Co Lake (Wang et al., 2009). The glacier meltwater mainly originates from the modern glacier on the Nyenchen Tanglha Mountain in the southeastern part of the basin.

With a semi-arid sub-frigid monsoon climate, the mean annual temperature of the basin is about 0 °C, and the mean annual precipitation is approximately 450 mm (Zhu et al., 2010).

2.2. Data

In this study the gridded China Meteorological Forcing Dataset (CFMD) which was developed by the Institute of Tibetan Plateau Research, Chinese Academy of Sciences (He and Yang, 2011) was employed as lake-evaporation model input. CFMD contains near-surface air temperature, air pressure, wind speed, specific humidity, precipitation, downward shortwave as well as downward longwave radiation. CFMD with a temporal resolution of 3 h covers the 1979–2012 time-period at a spatial resolution of 0.1°. It was constructed by merging direct measurements at 740 CMA meteorological stations with (a) Global Land Data Assimilation System (GLDAS); (b) GEWEX Surface Radiation Budget (GEWEX-SRB); and (c) Tropical Rainfall Measuring Mission (TRMM) precipitation data (He and Yang, 2011). In a simulation of land surface temperatures over the arid region of China, Chen et al. (2011) demonstrated that the use of CMFD as model input was able to improve the Noah land surface model (Ek et al., 2003) results by reducing the mean bias by 2 °C from validations against MODIS daytime surface temperature data. Recently, Zhou et al. (2015) compared CFMD data with in-situ measurements of the CMA meteorological stations across the ITP. They suggested the following corrections to reduce systematic errors in the CFMD values, i.e.

$$T_{CFMD-corr} = T_{CFMD} + 3 \, ^\circ C$$

(1)

$$q_{CFMD-corr} = 1.1 \cdot q_{CFMD}$$

(2)

$$S_{CFMD-corr} = 0.8654 + S_{CFMD}$$

(3)

where $T$, $q$, and $S$ are near-surface air temperature, specific humidity, and downward shortwave radiation, respectively. The subscripts CFMD and CFMD-cor denote the original and corrected CFMD data, respectively. In this study the grid points of CFMD located right above the lake area of Nam Co were extracted and the resulting $T$, $q$, and $S$ values corrected as shown above. While CRLE does not require wind speed records, such data of CFMD were also collected to analyze the relationship between simulated $E_t$ and different measured meteorological variables, including wind speed (while it may bear some uncertainties as mentioned above, we just used it for comparisons).

For comparison of the trend in simulated $E_t$ with that in pan evaporation, the daily China 20 cm diameter (D20) pan evaporation ($E_{pan}$) and precipitation data during 1979–2012 from a CMA meteorological station, Bange, in the vicinity of Nam Co Lake, were employed. The Bange station (Fig. 1) is located about 50 km to the northwest of Nam Co Lake. Partial model validation using a pan coefficient was based on daily E601B pan evaporation data of two other CMA stations, Maduo and Dali, during 2011–2012. These two stations situated in the relative vicinity of Ngoring Lake (4274 m asl) in the eastern TP and Erhai Lake (1978 m asl) in the southeastern TP, respectively (see Section 3.1).

2.3. Model description

There are numerous studies that investigated the performance of different models of open water evaporation (e.g. Winter et al., 1995; Sadek et al., 1997; Rosenberry et al., 2007; Majidi et al., 2015). While the methods that rely solely on air temperature and/or radiation data, e.g. those of Turc (1961), Hargreaves (1975) and Makkink (1957), can estimate wet surface evaporation, they primarily lack a rigorous physical basis and explicit consideration of subsurface heat storage, significant for deep lakes. The lat-
ter deficiency is also true for the widely employed physically-based Penman- and bulk-transfer-type methods, which have also been proven to be sensitive to wind speed data (Rosenberry et al., 2007; Majidi et al., 2015), hindering their applicability in the TP since the heterogeneous landscape and the sparse data collection network make it very difficult to obtain accurate wind speed data for a given lake.

The CRLE model was developed by Morton (1983a, 1983b, 1986) when he revised the symmetric complementary relationship (CR) of evaporation by Bouchet (1963) for estimating monthly $E_t$ over lakes with time-varying water-column depth. The primary advantage of CRLE is that it does not need locally calibrated coefficients nor wind speed data. In this way, it may be superior to those models that rely on detailed observational data to calibrate their parameter values. For example, while the bulk transfer-type models do not need net radiation as input, their performance depends highly on explicit parameterization of the transfer coefficients using accurate momentum and water vapor roughness lengths as well as atmospheric stability data (Verburg and Antenucci, 2010; Wang et al., 2015), a great challenge in remote areas. In addition, CRLE explicitly takes into account month-to-month changes in subsurface heat storage by linearly routing the absorbed solar radiation via a hypothetical heat reservoir with delay times and storage constants related to the depth and salinity of the lake. Tested over 30 lakes in the United States, Andersen and Jobson (1982) demonstrated that $E_t$ derived from CRLE was overall consistent with previous results of Kohler et al. (1955) who used the pan evaporation method to estimate lake evaporation. Sadek et al. (1997) evaluated the performances of the Penman, bulk transfer and CRLE models in simulating evaporation of the High Aswan Dam reservoir in Egypt and they found that the CRLE model showed the best agreement with the water budget method.

Prior to the application of the CR, originally developed for actual areal evapotranspiration estimation, one needs to determine the appropriate CR pattern (i.e. symmetric or asymmetric) (Szilagyi, 2007; Ma et al., 2015a) based on the type of potential evaporation rates applied. Such a determination may rely on calibrating either a proportionality coefficient (Kahler and Brutsaert, 2006; Szilagyi, 2015) or certain components (Ma et al., 2015a) within the CR theory. The avenue of Morton’s (1983a) method belongs to the latter approach. Specifically, by introducing the concept of “equilibrium temperature” ($T_p$) to calculate the potential evaporation ($E_{p-CRLE}$) and the wet-environment ($E_{w-CRLE}$) evaporation rates, Morton (1983a) proposed a symmetric CR model. Here, $T_p$ (°C) refers to the temperature at which Morton’s (1983a) energy budget and mass transfer methods produce the same potential evaporation rate from a small moist surface, i.e.

$$E_{p-CRLE} = \frac{1}{\lambda} \left[ Q_w - \frac{1}{4} f_1 + 4e_\sigma(T_p + 273.15)^4(T_p - T_a) \right]$$

$$E_{w-CRLE} = \frac{1}{\lambda} \left[ f_1(e_p - e_a) \right]$$

where $\lambda$ is the latent heat of vaporization (J kg$^{-1}$), $Q_w$ is the available energy at the evaporating surface at any temperature (W m$^{-2}$), $\gamma$ the psychrometric constant (kPa °C$^{-1}$), $e$ the surface emissivity (taken as 0.97), $\sigma$ the Stefan–Boltzmann constant (5.67 × 10$^{-8}$ W m$^{-2}$ K$^{-4}$), $e_a$ (kPa) the saturation vapor pressure at $T_a$, and $e_p$ (kPa) the measured actual vapor pressure at $T_p$. $f_1$ (W m$^{-2}$ kPa$^{-1}$) is the vapor transfer coefficient, which is a function of the dimensionless air stability factor, $\zeta$, i.e.

$$f_1 = (p_a/p)^{0.5}f_2/\zeta$$

where $p_a$ and $p$ are atmospheric pressure at sea and lake surface levels, respectively. $f_2$ is an empirical constant (= 250 W m$^{-2}$ kPa$^{-1}$). For the inverse of $\zeta$, Morton (1983a) derived

$$1/\zeta = 0.281(1 + e_p/e_a) + A_q |(\gamma/p_a)^{0.5} b_d f_2(e_a - e_p)|$$

where $b_d$ is another empirical constant (= 1.12), $A_q$ (kPa °C$^{-1}$) the slope of the saturation vapor pressure curve at $T_a$ and $e_a$ (kPa) the saturation vapor pressure at $T_a$. By equating (4) and (5), $T_p$ can be solved through iterations (see Morton (1983a), pages 64–65).

The wet-environment evaporation under the equilibrium temperature is then calculated as

$$E_{w-CRLE} = 1/\lambda \left[ b_1 + b_2 \frac{A_q}{\lambda} Q_{w-p} + b_3 Q_{w-p} \right]$$

where $b_1$ and $b_2$ are constants having default values of 13 W m$^{-2}$ and 1.12, respectively (Morton, 1983a). It should be noted that $b_1$ accounts for energy advection and is significant only during seasons of very low net radiation. Ma et al. (2015b) argued that it should be taken as zero in the summer season to improve the performance of Morton’s model in the TP, thus $b_1 = 0$ in the present study. $A_q$ (kPa °C$^{-1}$) is the slope of the saturation vapor pressure curve at $T_p$ and $Q_{w-p}$ (W m$^{-2}$) the available energy for an evaporating surface at $T_p$. In particular, the ultimate goal of Morton’s (1983a) “equilibrium temperature” is to build a symmetrical complementary model for estimating areal evaporation via the CR theory, and the $E_{w-CRLE}$ based on this equilibrium temperature (Eq. (8)) is regarded as the wet-surface evaporation rate (Morton, 1986). The connection of the CRLE model to the CR is via employing the $T_p$ value for the estimation of the wet-environment evaporation rate. The available energy, $Q_{w-p}$, for evaporation over the lake surface in Eq. (8), includes the heat storage change ($\Delta S_h$) of the lake calculated by a routing method (Morton, 1986). Within this procedure, the net shortwave radiation received by the lake surface in the first month of the simulation period is set as the initial value of $\Delta S_h$ to iteratively solve for consecutive $\Delta S_h$ values (see Morton (1986), page 376 for more details) for a year when the model is restarted two more times with the last value of $\Delta S_h$. While the assumption that heat storage in the first month equals the net shortwave radiation is arbitrary, the error quickly dissipates as the iteration converges in a few steps, similar to an arbitrary initial storage condition of a linear storage element employed for flow routing (Morton, 1986; Szilagyi and Szollosi-Nagy, 2010).

The CRLE model was designed for a monthly time-step. The forcing inputs are monthly mean air temperature, relative humidity (calculated via the specific humidity data) and sunshine duration hours. In the original CRLE model the downward shortwave radiation is estimated via the sunshine duration hours (McMahon et al., 2013). As CFMD contains the downward shortwave radiation data, we modified the model to use it directly. However, estimation of the net longwave radiation in the CRLE still requires sunshine durations and the actual water vapor pressure, therefore the scheme of Yin et al. (2013) was applied to calculate the sunshine durations from the measured downward shortwave radiation data of CFMD. In addition, the model also requires the mean lake depth and salinity as inputs. Based on Wang et al.’s (2009) extensive survey in Nam Co Lake, the mean lake depth in 2008 was set at 55 m. Then a monthly time series of average lake depth for 1979–2012 was constructed from relative water level changes between 1976 and 2010 as documented by Lei et al. (2013). The salinity of Nam Co Lake was set as a fixed value of 1.7 g L$^{-1}$ according to Wang et al. (2009).

Sublimation from the lake ice may be considered negligible due to very low temperatures in the winter. Lake evaporation rates were estimated for the ice-free periods which were determined with the help of the daily minimum ($T_{min}$) and maximum ($T_{max}$) air temperature values. Specifically, the 3 h temporal resolution of the CFMD’s air temperature values made it possible to consider $T_a$ at 06:00 and 15:00 to represent $T_{min}$ and $T_{max}$, respectively. When $T_{min} > 0$ °C occurred over the first consecutive three days
during the first half of the year, then the last day before this 3-day period was considered as the end of the ice-free period. Similarly, when $T_{\text{max}} < 0$ °C took place over the first consecutive three days during the second half of the year, then the last day before this 3-day period was considered as the end of the ice-free period. The so-determined ice-free periods were overall consistent with the results of Zhang et al. (2014a). For months with partial ice-free periods, the “monthly” evaporation rates were downcaled by the length of the ice-free period.

3. Results and discussions

3.1. Model validation

Zhou et al. (2013) conducted an in-situ E601B pan evaporation study at the shore of Nam Co Lake during 2007–2011. Their observations were mainly carried out from mid-May to mid-October in each year (see the Table 4 in Zhou et al. (2013) for specific dates). The E601B pan is made of fiberglass with a depth of 68.7 cm and a diameter of 61.8 cm (Ma et al., 2015a). Unlike the CMA D20 above-ground pan, the E601B pan was buried in the soil with its orifice 30 cm above the ground surface. Therefore, the E601B pan belongs to the sunken-pan category according to the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) classifications (Xiong et al., 2012). We summed the CRLE-derived $E_i$ estimates during the same period of Zhou et al.’s (2013) observations. As seen in Fig. 2, the CRLE-simulated $E_i$ values display an interannual variation similar to that of the E601B-measured $E_{\text{pan}}$ values but at a lower evaporation rate. The reason for the lower lake evaporation rates two-fold. (i) While the E601B pan was buried in the soil to reduce the solar radiation intercepted by its sidewall, the evaporating area is still only 3000 cm². Therefore, local energy advection around the pan enhanced its evaporation rate in comparison to that of the lake with a surface area several magnitudes larger (Ma et al., 2015a). (ii) The heat storage of the pan water displays greater diurnal variation, thereby affecting its evaporation rate, as was highlighted by Roderick et al. (2009).

There exists a rich literature investigating the ratio of lake evaporation to pan evaporation (called pan coefficient) since the 1950s. For instance, it is widely reported that the mean annual ratio of $E_i$ in North America to the U.S. class-A pan evaporation rate is approximately 0.7 (Kohler et al., 1955; Lapworth, 1965). From in-situ observations over Neusiedl Lake with a surface area of 320 km² in Austria, Neuwirth (1973) indicated a pan coefficient value within the range of 0.70–0.75 from May to October, with an average of 0.72, while using a class-A pan. Also, Morton (1986) compared CRLE-simulated annual $E_i$ over 16 lakes in North America and Africa with class-A pan evaporation rates and found the former 0.69 times that of the latter on average. The diameter and depth of the US class-A pan are 120.7 cm and 25.4 cm, respectively. It belongs to the above-ground pan category since it is placed on a 3–5 cm high hollow wooden platform. This way class-A pans suffer a significant sidewall effect due to solar radiation (i.e. shortwave radiation is intercepted by the side of the pan) (Riley, 1966). The energy balance experiment of Lim et al. (2013) using the class-A pan also suggested that the extra radiation at the sidewall is an important factor that affects the pan coefficient. Under the same environmental conditions, evaporation rates from an above-ground pan are expected to be larger than those from a sunken pan. Therefore, the pan coefficient of a class-A pan should be slightly lower than that of an E601B pan. Using eddy covariance instrumentation, Li et al. (2015) and Liu et al. (2015) carried out $E_i$ observations during the ice-free periods over Ngoring Lake in eastern TP (from 2011 to 2012) and Erhai Lake in southeastern TP (only in 2012), respectively. For validation, we calculated the ratio of their observed $E_i$ to the E601B pan evaporation at the corresponding nearest CMA station (i.e. Maduo station for Ngoring Lake and Dali for Erhai Lake) in the same period. The results show that the ratios are between 0.75 (2011) and 0.77 (2012) for Ngoring Lake and 0.93 (2012) for Erhai Lake, respectively. In the present study, the ratio of Nam Co Lake evaporation to that of the E601B pan of Zhou et al. (2013) ranges from 0.76 to 0.85 in Fig. 2 with an average of 0.83. Taking possible spatial differences in climate across the TP into consideration, the E601B pan coefficients obtained for Nam Co Lake indicate that the annual $E_i$ values of the CRLE of the present study are reasonable.

For validation at a monthly scale, we used data of Wang et al. (2015) who implemented eddy covariance instruments in the summer of 2012 over a small lake (surface area of ca. 1 km²) located only 1 km to the southeast of Nam Co Lake (see Fig. 1 in Wang et al. (2015) for specific location of this adjacent small lake). For July and August of 2012, they obtained monthly evaporation rates of 105.7 and 123.3 mm, respectively. During the same period, the CRLE-simulated $E_i$ rates over Nam Co Lake were 110.6 and 122.0 mm, respectively, which are very close to Wang et al. (2015)’s observed values. This comparison suggests that the CRLE model is able to simulate $E_i$ accurately over Nam Co Lake on a monthly scale.

3.2. Model sensitivity analysis

To check CRLE’s sensitivity to its input variables (i.e. downward shortwave radiation, air temperature and relative humidity), each time series was systematically disturbed by a constant ±10% while keeping the other two variables unchanged during model runs. As seen in Table 1, the CRLE is most sensitive to downward shortwave radiation, i.e. a 10% increase would lead to an about 14.6% increase in annual $E_i$. This is followed by air temperature where a 10%

![Fig. 2. Lake evaporation ($E_i$) simulated by CRLE and pan evaporation ($E_{\text{pan}}$) measured by Zhou et al. (2013) using an E601B sunken pan at the shore of Nam Co Lake. Note that $E_i$ for each year in this figure was recalculated based on the dates (mainly from mid-May to mid-October) of Zhou et al. (2013) since their dates did not cover the whole ice-free period.](image)
decrease resulted in a 2.4% decrease in annual $E_L$. CRLE is the least sensitive to the relative humidity value since a 10% variation only resulted in ~1% change of the simulated annual lake evaporation. Similar sensitivity analysis by Vallet-Coulomb et al. (2001) for the Penman model suggested that a 10% change in solar radiation, air temperature and relative humidity would lead to 11.2%, 4.8% and 2.9% variation for the simulated evaporation rates over Lake Ziway, Ethiopia, respectively, indicating an overall sensitivity larger than that of CRLE.

3.3. Evaporation variability of Nam Co Lake

From CRLE the maximum annual evaporation rate of Nam Co Lake during 1979–2012 was 719.0 mm in 1998, while the minimum of 542.8 mm took place in the previous year (Fig. 3) (see Appendix for detailed data). The multi-year (from 1979 to 2012) average of annual evaporation is 635.2 mm. Within the year, the largest monthly evaporation rates are found in August (two months after radiation peaks) with an average of about 120.6 mm (not shown), accounting for about 19% of the annual $E_L$ value. Eddy-covariance-measured evaporation rates over Ngoring Lake in eastern TP by Li et al. (2015) also indicate that monthly evaporation rates peak in August, supporting the CRLE results of the present study.

Annual evaporation of Nam Co Lake declined very slightly between 1979 and 2012 with an overall rate of ~0.03 mm yr$^{-1}$ (Fig. 3). It displays a slight increasing trend from the 1980s to the mid-1990s, followed by a significant decreasing trend with a rate of ~12.0 mm yr$^{-1}$ between 1998 and 2008, replaced by overall increased evaporation values from 2009 to 2012. Using the multi-year average of annual $E_L$ as a baseline, the decadal mean anomalies in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s were ~1.0 mm, 4.2 mm and ~19.8 mm, respectively.

Theoretically, evaporation from a natural water body is mainly controlled by three factors: available energy, aerodynamic conductance and vapor pressure deficit. Therefore, the average values of downward shortwave radiation, air temperature, wind speed and vapor pressure deficit of each year from 1979 to 2012 were standardized using the extremum standardization method (i.e. $V_{\text{std},i} = (V_i - V_{\text{min}})/(V_{\text{max}} - V_{\text{min}})$, $i = 1, 2, ..., n$, where $V_{\text{std},i}$ and $V_i$ are standardized and original values of the given variable, $V_{\text{max}}$ and $V_{\text{min}}$ are its maximum and minimum values, and $n$ the number of observations) for a comparison with the similarly standardized annual lake evaporation rates (Fig. 4). $E_L$ correlates best with wind speed (the correlation coefficient, $R$, is 0.137) among the meteorological variables (Fig. 4), suggesting to be the main driver of the observed interannual variability of lake evaporation. By the PenPan model of

3.4. Comparison with other lakes and D20 pan evaporation studies

The interannual variability of $E_L$ over Nam Co matches that of $E_{\text{pan}}$ from the D20 pan of the nearby CMA station, Bange (Fig. 6), around a mean value significantly smaller than for the pan mainly because the D20 above-ground pan was strongly influenced by evident energy advection (Ma et al., 2015a), additional radiant energy.
intercepted by the pan’s sidewall (Lim et al., 2013; Xiong et al., 2012), and diurnal variation of heat storage in the pan water (Roderick et al., 2009). Note that in addition to its obvious “sidewall effect”, the area of D20 pan is only 314.2 cm², roughly 0.1 times of the area of E601B pan, the evaporation rate of the former is therefore expected to be much larger than that of the latter, as was highlighted by Xiong et al. (2012) and also shown in Figs. 2 and 6.

Despite not using wind speed as input, the CRLE-simulated $E_L$ values overall compare well with those of the modified Penman–Monteith model (Wu et al., 2014) (Fig. 6) with $R = 0.439$. The two means are 632.3 and 655.5 mm, respectively for the common 1980–2010 period. It should be noted however that some difference in the results of the two models did occur in some years which may be caused by different model physics. Taking the $E_L$ estimates of Wu et al. (2014) during 2007–2010 as an example, its inter-annual variability in this period was obviously inconsistent with that of the E601B pan evaporation rates (see Fig. 2) at the shore of Nam Co Lake measured by Zhou et al. (2013), indicating some challenges for the Penman–Monteith model when estimating evaporation rates of Nam Co Lake.

Regarding a spatial comparison, it can be seen that annual $E_L$ values over different lakes display obvious differences due mainly to differences in elevation. That is, elevation of Yamdrok Yum Co, Siling Co, Zigetang Co, and Nam Co Lakes are 4441, 4535, 4575, and 4724 m asl, respectively. Mean annual evaporation from these lakes decrease with increasing elevation (Fig. 6). Temporal variability of $E_L$ for Zigetang Co Lake (Li et al., 2001) is similar to that of Nam Co Lake, displaying an overall increasing trend during the 1980s–1990s period. These two lakes also behaved consistently with the overall increasing evaporation trend of the D20 pan from adjacent CMA station, Bange, during the same period (Fig. 6).

Although the $E_L$ values of Siling Co Lake (Zhou et al., 2015) were only available from 2003 to 2012, it also showed similar trends with the CRLE-simulated values of Nam Co Lake. With regard to Yamdrok Yum Co Lake (Yu et al., 2011), evaporation increased slightly from the late 1970s to late 1980s, but decreased gradually afterwards. Note that Yamdrok Yum Co Lake is located in the southeastern TP, while the other three lakes are situated in the inner TP. Hence the differences in $E_L$ trends may be attributable to differences in the manifestation of local climate variability, among other possible factors.

3.5. The role of interannual $E_L$ variability in recent rapid expansion of Nam Co Lake

To investigate what possible role the modeled $E_L$ variation plays in the expansion of Nam Co Lake, a synthesis of available studies (Chen et al., 2009; Kropáček et al., 2012; Lin et al., 2012; Ma et al., 2012; Shao et al., 2007; Wan et al., 2014; Wu and Zhu, 2008; Y. Zhang et al., 2011; B. Zhang et al., 2011, 2013; Zhang et al., 2014b; Zhu et al., 2010) on recent lake-area change is presented in Fig. 7a. Despite differences in remote sensing data source and image processing applied by different studies, all research reported a rapid expansion of Nam Co Lake from the late 1990s to late 2000s (Fig. 7a). However, the contributing factors are still debated. Zhu et al. (2010) stated that glacier meltwater contributed the most to the water storage increase of the lake, whereas Ma et al. (2012) maintained that an increase in precipitation is the main reason for the expansion. While an exact determination of the water balance of Nam Co Lake is beyond the scope of the present study, the significant decrease in the annual $E_L$ values of Nam Co Lake (see Fig. 3) during this period may indeed be one of the factors contributing to this rapid expansion.

Nam Co Lake is a closed lake with no outlet (Fig. 1). As the area of Nam Co Lake is about 2000 km², the incremental increase of about 60 km² (Fig. 7a) in lake area from the late 1990s to the late 2000s only accounts for ca. 3% of the total area. Therefore, for a given relatively short time interval, $t$ (e.g. 1998–2008 as shown below), the change of water level ($H$) can be assumed as (Wu et al., 2014)

\[ H(t) = \frac{A(t) - A(0)}{2000} \]

where $A(t)$ and $A(0)$ are the lake areas at time $t$ and 0, respectively.

Fig. 6. Estimates of lake evaporation in the Tibetan Plateau. Yamdrok Yum Co Lake is from Yu et al. (2011) by a bulk transfer model. Siling Co Lake is from Zhou et al. (2015) by the Penman model. Zigetang Co Lake is from Li et al. (2001) also by the Penman model. Nam Co Lake is from (a) Wu et al. (2014) by the Penman–Monteith model; (b) CRLE model of the present study. The Bange D20 data are from the China D20 above-ground pan of CMA meteorological station and are the accumulation of daily values according to the dates of ice-periods of Nam Co Lake in every year.

Fig. 7. Annual change in (a) lake area, and; (b) water level of Nam Co Lake. The relative water level data is from Lei et al. (2013).
where \( P \) is precipitation over the lake surface, \( R_g \) glacier/snow melt-water runoff, \( R_s \) non-glacial/snow runoff, \( G \) net groundwater recharge to the lake, and \( \varepsilon \) a possible random error term. From current bathymetric investigations and information of historical shoreline positions, Lei et al. (2013) reconstructed the water level variation in Nam Co Lake from 1979 to 2010 (Fig. 7b). Similar to the changes of lake area in Fig. 7a, the water level also increased rapidly and significantly with a rate of 0.281 m yr\(^{-1}\) during the period of 1998–2008. In the same period, annual \( E_l \) of Nam Co Lake decreased with a rate of \( -12 \) mm yr\(^{-1}\) (Fig. 3), indicating that about 4% of the rapid expansion of Nam Co Lake may be contributed to the decrease of \( E_l \) during the same period.

4. Conclusions

In this paper the CRLE model was run with gridded meteorological data input to simulate the free water evaporation of Nam Co Lake during ice-free periods. Results indicate that lake evaporation in a highly heterogeneous landscape can be estimated by the model without requiring wind data. This is because CRLE implicitly considers the effect of wind on evaporation through the calculation of a vapor transfer coefficient. This property of CRLE reported here is of significance in a harsh environment (i.e. Tibetan Plateau) where ground meteorological observations are sparse and large uncertainties in spatial interpolation of the wind speed data exist. The 34-year average of free water evaporation of Nam Co Lake is 635 mm yr\(^{-1}\). Annual evaporation rates overall decreased slightly during the 1979–2012 period, while interannual variability is mainly attributed to similar variability in wind speed. A significant decrease in annual lake evaporation was witnessed for the 1998–2008 period with a rate of \(-12 \) mm yr\(^{-1}\) which is thought to be responsible for about 4% of the recent rapid expansion of Nam Co Lake.

Acknowledgements

The CFMD data is developed by Data Assimilation and Modeling Center for Tibetan Multi-spheres, Institute of Tibetan Plateau Research, Chinese Academy of Sciences and can be accessed from Cold and Arid Regions Science Data Center at Lanzhou (http://westdc.westgis.ac.cn). The D20 pan evaporation and precipitation data of Maduo and Dali stations are provided by China Meteorological Administration. We thank Dr. Murray Peel for sharing the original code of CRLE model. We also thank the three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments that lead to a much improved manuscript. This research was funded by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (41190082) and the Strategic Priority Research Program (B) of CAS (XDB03030206). The financial support from National Natural Science Foundation of China (41430748) is also acknowledged. Ning Ma thanks the funding support from China Scholarship Council (201504910657).

Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jhydrol.2016.03.030.

References


