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Impacts of tectonic subsidence and variable basin depth on delta lobe building as informed by the Selenga River delta, Lake Baikal, Russia

Tian Yang Dong¹, Jeffrey A Nittrouer², Brandee Carlson³, Brandon J McElroy⁴, Elena Il'icheva⁵, Maksim Pavlov⁵ and Hongbo Ma⁶, (1)University of Texas at Austin, Geological Sciences, Austin, TX, United States, (2)Texas Tech University, Department of Geosciences, Lubbock, TX, United States, (3)University of Colorado at Boulder, Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research, Boulder, CO, United States, (4)University of Wyoming, Geology and Geophysics, Laramie, United States, (5)V.B Sochava Institute of Geography Siberian Branch Russian Academy of Science, Laboratory of Hydrology and Climatology, Irkutsk, Russia, (6)University of California Irvine, Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, Irvine, CA, United States

Abstract Text:

River delta avulsions are a primary mechanism to distribute sediment and build coastal land. Experiments show that an avulsion can generate a new delta lobe, and subsequent avulsions yield multiple lobes that amalgamate to produce a semi-circular fan deposit. For channels that are actively building lobes, a condition of sediment transport equilibrium develops, termed alluvial grade, which is characterized by material bypassing the delta topset and dispersing to the delta foreset. Previous studies have examined alluvial grade under conditions of steady subsidence and uniform basin depth. However, on tectonically active margins, deltas are affected by punctuated subsidence and lobes prograde into basins with variable depth. Both conditions disrupt alluvial grade, which in turn affects avulsion timescales and thus delta morphology. We explore these interrelated processes using measurements of delta and basin morphology based on field surveys and remote sensing collected from the Selenga Delta, which is located along the Baikal Rift Zone. Major earthquakes, affiliated with normal faulting and possessing recurrence intervals of several millennia, lower large portions of the subaerial delta several meters below mean lake level. This results in an increased regional gradient that triggers lobe-scale avulsions. Moreover, the timescale for these events is shorter than that predicted via autogenic lobe switching. Additionally, during periods tectonic quiescence, smaller channel-scale avulsions occur every 10–90 yrs, which produces sedimentation that compensationally fills embayments located between distributary channels. This process gives rise to the delta's fan-shape morphology. Stratigraphically, tectonically driven subsidence events are expected to preserve discrete sedimentary units that represent deposition and reworking associated with short-term channel avulsions. Understanding the interplay between discrete, tectonically driven subsidence events and autogenic sediment accumulation patterns of a delta prograding into a tectonically active basin will improve interpretations of stratigraphy of ancient systems.

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Submitter's E-mail Address:

tian.tyler.dong@gmail.com

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First Presenting Author

Presenting Author

Tian Yang Dong
Primary Email: tian.tyler.dong@gmail.com

Affiliation(s):

University of Texas at Austin
Geological Sciences
Austin TX 78713 (United States)

Second Author

Jeffrey A Nittrouer
Primary Email: Jeffrey.Nittrouer@ttu.edu

Affiliation(s):

Texas Tech University
Department of Geosciences
Lubbock TX (United States)

Third Author

Brandee Carlson
Primary Email: brandee.n.carlson@vanderbilt.edu

Affiliation(s):

University of Colorado at Boulder
Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research
Boulder CO 80309 (United States)

Fourth Author

Brandon J McElroy
Primary Email: bmcelroy@uwyo.edu

Affiliation(s):

University of Wyoming
Geology and Geophysics
Laramie 82070 (United States)

Fifth Author

Elena Il'icheva
Primary Email: jnittrouer@gmail.com

Affiliation(s):

V.B Sochava Institute of Geography Siberian Branch Russian Academy of Science
Laboratory of Hydrology and Climatology
Irkutsk (Russia)

Sixth Author

Maksim Pavlov
Primary Email: td10@rice.edu

Affiliation(s):

V.B Sochava Institute of Geography Siberian Branch Russian Academy of Science
Laboratory of Hydrology and Climatology
Irkutsk (Russia)

Seventh Author

Hongbo Ma
Primary Email: hongbom1@uci.edu

Affiliation(s):

University of California Irvine
Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering
Irvine CA 92697 (United States)

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