



**HAL**  
open science

## The Mesozoic palaeorelief of the northern Tian Shan (China)

Ke Chen, Charles Gumiaux, Romain Augier, Yan Chen, Qingchen Wang, Wei  
Lin, Shengli Wang

► **To cite this version:**

Ke Chen, Charles Gumiaux, Romain Augier, Yan Chen, Qingchen Wang, et al.. The Mesozoic palaeorelief of the northern Tian Shan (China). *Terra Nova*, 2011, 23 (3), pp.195-205. 10.1111/j.1365-3121.2011.00999.x . insu-00602339

**HAL Id: insu-00602339**

**<https://insu.hal.science/insu-00602339v1>**

Submitted on 8 Feb 2013

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# The Mesozoic palaeorelief of the northern Tian Shan (China)

Ke CHEN<sup>1,2</sup>, Charles GUMIAUX<sup>1</sup>, Romain AUGIER<sup>1</sup>, Yan CHEN<sup>1</sup>, Qingchen WANG<sup>2</sup>, Wei LIN<sup>2</sup>, Shengli WANG<sup>3</sup>,

1. Institut des Sciences de la Terre d'Orléans (ISTO), Université d'Orléans, CNRS: UMR6113, Université François Rabelais - Tours, - INSU, Campus Géosciences, 1A rue de la Férollerie, 45071 Orléans cedex 2, France

2. State Key Laboratory of Lithospheric Evolution, Institute of Geology and Geophysics, Chinese Academy of Sciences, P.O. 9825, Beijing 100029, China

3. Department of Earth Sciences, Nanjing University, 210093, Nanjing, China

## ***Abstract***

The Tian Shan range offers a natural laboratory to study orogenic processes. Most of the previous studies focused on either the Paleozoic evolution of the range or its Cenozoic intracontinental evolution linked with the India-Asia collision. In this study, detailed field investigations on the relationship between sedimentary cover and basement constrain the Mesozoic evolution of the northern Tian Shan. Sedimentological observations argue for limited transport distance for Lower and Uppermost Jurassic deposits. Geological sections presented in this paper show that, in preserved locations, Triassic to Jurassic sedimentary series present a continuous onlap type sedimentary unconformity on the top of the basement. At different scales, observations clearly evidence the existence of a major palaeorelief during Mesozoic. According to the present study, the current Tian Shan range topography and the associated movements along its northern front structures cannot be considered as the consequence of Cenozoic reactivation alone.

## ***Keywords***

Tian Shan, palaeorelief, Mesozoic, regional onlap, reactivation, India-Asia collision.

## Introduction

The modern Tian Shan is one of the major mountain ranges in Central Asia. The current structure of Tian Shan mainly results from a combination of two main tectonic events: i) subductions, arc-accretions and continental collision during Paleozoic (e.g. Carroll et al., 1990; Wang et al., 1990; Windley et al., 1990; Sengör et al. 1993; Carroll et al., 1995; Gao et al., 1998; Laurent-Charvet et al., 2002; Charvet et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2007) and ii) intracontinental reactivation linked to the India-Asia collision, during Cenozoic (e.g. Tapponnier and Molnar, 1977; Avouac et al., 1993). At first order, the modern Tian Shan corresponds to a raised ~east-west trending Paleozoic 'basement' range, flanked by two closed intracontinental basins whose infill is a particularly accurate record for both tectonic and climate evolutions (Fig. 1). The present-day high topography of Tian Shan, with a mean altitude of ~2500 m and summits of more than 7000 m, is traditionally related to the latest intracontinental deformation of the range (e.g. Tapponnier and Molnar, 1977; Avouac et al., 1993; Burchfiel et al., 1999). Age constraints for the onset of this intracontinental reactivation range from 10 to 24 Ma (e.g. Avouac et al., 1993; Hendrix et al., 1994; Abdрахmatov et al., 1996; Métivier and Gaudemer, 1997; Sobel et al., 1997; Dumitru et al., 2001; Charreau et al., 2009). In spite of relative age discrepancies (mostly related to the method applied), all ages estimated for the deformation and the associated relief erosion suggest that the mountain range reactivation and relief creation began during Early Miocene at oldest.

However, recent Fission-track analyses suggest that uplifting may have existed well before the onset of the Tertiary reactivation through Tian Shan, with exhumation ages such as 160-120 Ma in central Tian Shan, 200-250 Ma detritus cooling age in the Manas River valley (Dumitru et al., 2001; Jolivet et al., 2010) or 140-120 Ma from Bayanbulak intracontinental basin, in the southern Tian Shan (Wang et al., 2009). Moreover, Triassic to Cretaceous sediments are composed of thick continental series characterized by massive coarse-grained

formations within both basins, suggesting rather high erosion rate at that time (Hendrix, 2000; Carroll et al., 2010).

This study considers the Mesozoic tectonic and morphologic evolution of Tian Shan through field structural and sedimentological analyses of Mesozoic deposits. It focuses on the northern piedmont of the range, along a ~280 km west-east trending segment (Fig. 1). Thanks to deep incisions of seasonal rivers, contacts between Paleozoic basement and Mesozoic-Cenozoic sedimentary cover are particularly well exposed along several north-south trending sections in this region (Fig. 1). Such new constraints on Mesozoic evolution of the Tian Shan area would lead to reconsider the contribution of Cenozoic tectonics in the modern mountain range building as well as to better quantify the net shortening amount during that period.

### **Stratigraphy of the Mesozoic sediments within the study area**

Sedimentary series can be extensively observed and have already been studied within the Junggar basin, as summarized below (Figs. 1 and 2; Hendrix et al., 1992 and references therein; XBGMR, 1993). Basement units of the north Tian Shan mainly consist of Paleozoic volcanic and sedimentary rocks. From bottom to top, the entire Mesozoic series is composed of ~5 km thick continental clastic deposits highlighting high sedimentation/preservation rates (Fig. 2). Thanks to numerous studies aimed at oil and gas exploration and to 1:200,000 mapping projects held in this area, ages of the Mesozoic sequences were mainly constrained by floral and sporopollen assemblage analyses (Li et al., 1978; Yang et al., 1982; Liu, 1990; XBGMR, 1993; Lu and Deng, 2005; Yang et al., 2005; Huang and Li, 2007). In the study area, the Triassic series are mostly missing along the piedmont though locally exposed (Fig. 1). Where it crops out, Triassic displays alluvial sandstones and conglomerates intercalated within and silty mudstones (red-beds). At the scale of the northern Tian Shan piedmont, Lowermost Jurassic layers indicate a change in the sedimentation as they consist in thick and

coarse conglomeratic deposits, as exposed in the south of Qingshui He (Fig. 3a). Thickness of Lower Jurassic reaches 1000 m over the area extending from Manasi to Urumqi, and decreases westwardly and eastwardly. Sediments become progressively finer upward, grading into ~3 km thick series of Lower/Middle Jurassic gray sandstones, silty shales (Fig. 2). Middle Jurassic sandstones and mudstones locally contain coal-rich layers consistent with a lacustrine depositional facies (Hendrix et al., 1992). Upper Jurassic comprises typical fine-grained red beds where conglomerates remain scarce. The transition from Jurassic to Cretaceous series is marked by up to 800 m thick sedimentary breccias (Kalaza formation – J3k; Fig. 3b) made of coarse-grained angular clasts (Fig. 3c). It rapidly dies laterally and grades to sandstones within the Junggar basin itself (XBGMR, 1978; 1993). The marked unconformity between the Kalaza formation and the underlying finer-grained Upper Jurassic red beds (Fig. 3b) suggests a short transport distance of material before deposition and nearby relief uplifting.

In this study, Mesozoic sediments have also been extensively observed within internal parts of the range, and more particularly in the eastern part of the studied area (Fig. 1). Triassic to Jurassic sediments are encountered on top of the Paleozoic basement units, at rather high altitudes (2000 to 3000 m) in comparison with the mean altitude of the foreland fold-and-thrust belts (1000 to 1500 m high). In the Houxia valley for instance – 65 km SSW of Urumqi – a Lower to Upper Jurassic continuous sedimentary series is preserved in a syncline structure (Fig. 4a). According to the geological map (Fig. 4a; XBGMR, 1977), Lower Jurassic formations – i.e. Shangonghe Fm. to the northwest and Lowermost Jurassic Badaowan Fm. to the east – directly overlie on top of Carboniferous basement units, without intercalated Triassic sediments. Besides, south and north verging thrusts developed along parts of the northern and southern limbs of the fold, respectively (Fig. 4a). A section made across the north limb of the syncline displays continuous Lower to Middle Jurassic series with

no fault contact observed (Fig. 4b). From south to north, bedding planes progressively straighten up from  $\sim 30^\circ$  south dipping to vertical, and even overturned just below the south verging thrust (Figs. 4a, 4b and 4d). From a sedimentological point of view, the upper and main part of Jurassic series is made of fine-grained sandstones and mudstones while the lowermost deposits of the series is characterized by intercalations of coarse-grained sedimentary breccias mostly made of highly angular clasts of Carboniferous tuffaceous sandstones (Fig. 4c). Local abundance of these breccias and the common lithological nature of the clasts with the adjacent basement unit strongly suggest a very short transport distance.

### **Structural analysis of the Mesozoic basal contact**

Deformation of the northern Tian Shan has already been studied through the structural analysis of sedimentary series, within the Cenozoic foreland basin (e.g. Avouac et al., 1993; Deng et al., 1996; Burchfiel et al., 1999). This part focuses on the basal contact of the Mesozoic sediments, in the northern “front” area of Tian Shan.

As shown on the map (Fig. 1), some parts of the piedmont display northward thrusts that mark out the boundary in between the Paleozoic uplifted basement units and relatively subsiding proximal foreland basin. Yet, as described above, Mesozoic series are not solely restricted to the piedmont fold-and-thrust belts but are also well preserved on top of the basement units, within the range (Fig. 1). Then, some other segments of the piedmont display perfectly continuous Mesozoic sedimentary series from basin until internal and higher parts of the range, without being strained by any faulting or folding in the range front area (Fig. 1). Structural analysis of such unstrained basal contact of Mesozoic series is presented for two of the sections constructed from field work combined with available seismic profiles and drill-holes data: the Hutubi He and the Wusu sections (Fig. 1).

At first order, to the north of the Hutubi He area, Triassic to Neogene sedimentary series form a rather simple monocline structure, dipping 15-20° to the north (Fig. 5a). The southernmost fold-and-thrust belt is composed of one gentle upright anticline and associated syncline with only very limited thrusts developed along the hinge of the fold (Fig. 5a). This belt can be regarded as a fault-propagation fold structure according to the available seismic profile (Wang et al., 2005; Fig. 5b). Further south, entering within the interior parts of the range, sub-horizontal Lower Jurassic strata lie on top of the Carboniferous units (Fig. 5b). While basement is strongly deformed, as evidenced by sub-vertical cleavage, its sedimentary cover is only gently folded as illustrated on the geological map, few kilometers west of the river (Fig. 5a; XBGMR, 1978, 1993). No décollement structure has been observed between the basement top and the sedimentary cover. Besides, a southward backthrust of basement rocks above sediments can be observed to the south of the section, but the net slip must be limited as it rapidly dies out, the fault laterally evolving to a fold toward the west (Fig. 5a). Unconformity of the basal contact of Mesozoic sediments on top of basement units is observed in the southernmost part of the section (Figs. 5a and 6a). As a whole, the successive sub-horizontal and monocline segments define a hinge fold at regional scale (Fig. 5b). Nevertheless, while ~900 m thick of Triassic sediments have been drilled along the W1 well in the basin (Fig. 5b), no Triassic series have been observed further south in the range, in the section area (Fig. 5a). Indeed, Lowermost to Middle Jurassic levels have been observed and mapped directly on top of the basement units (Fig. 5a; XBGMR, 1978, 1993). Similarly to the Houxia area, basal contact of the Mesozoic series suggests its onlap deposit, from basin to range, at least during Triassic and Lower-Middle Jurassic.

More local-scale evidences for onlap sedimentation can also be observed in the Hutubi He area. First, to the south end of the section, Lower Jurassic strata display a kilometer scale onlap type structure on top of basement units, i.e. with younger sediments progressively

covering basement, from north to south (Figs. 5a and 6a). Second, ~10 km west of the Hutubi River, subhorizontal layers of the Lower Jurassic formation, which can be continuously followed in few kilometers in this small valley, structurally onlap on the deformed Paleozoic basement units (Fig. 6b). There, stratification planes are markedly oblique with the top of the Paleozoic units and no deformation has been observed along this contact. In the landscape, younger Jurassic sediments progressively extend to the south, on top of the Carboniferous units. Sediments progressively overlie and cover a ~150 m high step of the basement top which implies that a significant relief existed during Jurassic sediments deposition.

To the north of the Wusu section, first-order structure of the Mesozoic-Cenozoic series displays a 40-45° north dipping monocline (Figs. 7a and 7b). To the south, bedding is subhorizontal and structure of the sedimentary series is marked by a large hinge fold. As drawn on the geological map, thrust faults are observed at the surface, but seismic data show that they do not extend downward into the Mesozoic series (Fig. 7b; *suppl. material*), which is compatible with the limited throw produced by these faults as deduced from map data analysis (Fig. 7a). While ~400 m of Triassic sediments have been found in a drilled well in the basin, close to this section (see W2 on Fig. 7a), Triassic series becomes much thinner to the south and Jurassic sandstones, sometimes, directly lie on top of the Carboniferous rocks with an erosional undeformed contact (Fig. 7c; XBGMR, 1973).

## **Discussion and conclusions**

In parallel to rather classical view of frontal thrust systems, this study highlights that the northern piedmont of Tian Shan also displays segments where Mesozoic series are preserved unconformably onto the basement with onlap-type relationships. Such features are pointed out along two distant cross-sections and have also been clearly shown at outcrop-scale. Sedimentary breccias, showing very limited transport distances, have been found within



Lower Jurassic sediments of the internal parts of the range. Whatever the scale, all these observations clearly show the existence of proximal relief when Triassic/Jurassic sediments were deposited. Our field observations are consistent with previously published sedimentological data – paleocurrent measurements, heavy mineral composition, sedimentological source analyses – in the Junggar and Tarim basins which suggest that Tian Shan could already have existed as a “positive” geomorphologic feature during Mesozoic times (Hendrix et al., 1992, Graham et al., 1993; Hendrix, 2000; Li et al., 2004).

In the field, the local-scale observation of onlap sedimentary architecture reveals that the paleo-altitude difference can reach 100-150 m in a hectometer horizontal distance, which highlights local steep slopes (cf. Fig. 6b). Together with the sedimentological observations in the Houxia valley, this suggests that small-scale ridges with intercalated intra-mountainous basins have probably existed during Mesozoic (Fig. 8a).

Drill wells W1 and W1' (Figs. 4a and 4b) display ~1200 m of Lower Jurassic sediments (e.g. Badaowan and Shangonghe Fm., Fig. 2). A comparable thickness for Lower Jurassic has also been observed in the Manas area, 50 km west of the Hutubi section (Fig. 2; Hendrix et al., 1992). Following the geological maps (XBGMR; 1978, 1993), Middle Jurassic series directly lie unconformably onto the Carboniferous basement, without Triassic and Lower Jurassic sediments in the southern part of the Hutubi River (see location A in Fig. 4a). The thickness difference of Jurassic sediments reaches ~1200 m between the location A and the drill well location, for a horizontal distance of about 50 km (Fig. 4a). Such thickness difference may result from subsidence mechanisms. However, whatever the scale considered in this study, Triassic and mostly Jurassic series, up to the late Jurassic Kalaza formation deposit, display parallel bedding with no growth strata observed (Figs. 5b, 6 and 7b). Such feature shows that, at the scale of the studied area, significant vertical differential movements may have hardly occurred during Triassic to Upper Jurassic sedimentation. In addition, as

described above, Jurassic strata often overlie directly on Carboniferous by onlap, without fault or syn-sedimentary deformations. Seismic profiles across the southern margin of the Junggar basin do not display major fault that could have controlled sedimentation for the Early Jurassic period (Allen et al., 1991; Wang et al., 2005). No evidence for structural control on local subsidence could thus be argued here. At larger scale, flexure – either thermal or tectonic – could also have controlled the subsidence for Mesozoic series accumulation.

If considering thermal control, the latest regional tectono-magmatic event occurring before Mesozoic in the Central Tian Shan area ended during early Permian (see compilation by Han et al., 1999), which is about 100 Ma earlier than Jurassic sedimentation. Therefore, according to Hendrix et al. (1992), it seems that thermal driving mechanism may only play a weak role for the Early and Middle Jurassic sedimentation. If considering tectonic control, compressional flexure may also be hard to explain as, for comparable vertical differential movements, buckling of a stable continental lithosphere would result in much larger wavelength (200-300 km) than observed in this study (~50 km) as shown by mechanical modelling (Martinod and Davy, 1992, 1994; Burov et al., 1993; Cloetingh et al., 1999).

At the scale of the present study, Jurassic sedimentation seems hardly controlled by either tectonic or thermal subsidence across northern Tian Shan. Accordingly, the 1200-1300 m thickness difference may be mainly produced by infilling of a long-lasting remnant relief of, at least, 1200-1300 m high at that period (i.e. from Triassic/Lowermost Jurassic; Fig. 8a). During Middle Jurassic, finer-grained sediments were conformably deposited on top of the Lower Jurassic strata within the basin, and were deposited onlap on the Paleozoic basement toward the range (Figs. 5a and 8b). Middle Jurassic sediments of the Xishanyao and Toutunhe formations extend to a larger area with respect to the Lower Jurassic and, as a whole, the paleorelief lateral extension was certainly less important during Middle Jurassic than during Triassic/Early Jurassic (Fig. 8b). During latest Jurassic to Early Cretaceous, thick

breccias were deposited onto the Middle Jurassic sediments through an angular unconformity (*cf.* Kalaza Fm.). These breccias are restricted to the front of the modern Tian Shan and change rapidly to finer-grained deposits in lateral equivalents. This configuration is reminiscent of the general architecture of current fans deposited along the modern Tian Shan range that originate from the present day high relief to the south, but show limited northward transport of sediments (Fig. 8c). In turn, location of the main morphological northern front of the paleo- Tian Shan, during Latest Jurassic to Early Cretaceous, would approximately coincide with the one of the current range front (Fig. 5). The uplift documented by these coarse-grained sedimentary breccias is also recorded by AFT chronology studies; Fission-track modeling indicates a ca. 160 and 120 Ma cooling age along a Dushanzi-Kuqa corridor, in the mountain interior (Dumitru et al., 2001; Jolivet et al., 2010). Apatite sampled from Bayanbulak area yields the earliest cooling ages of Early Cretaceous (Dumitru et al., 2001; Wang et al. 2009).

Because no major tectonic event occurred in the Northern Tian Shan during Mesozoic times (e.g. De Grave et al., 2007), the Paleozoic subduction-collision orogeny (Gao et al., 1998; Laurent-Charvet et al., 2002; Charvet et al., 2007) appears as the most probable origin of the Mesozoic paleorelief above described. In such case, the Tian Shan would persist as remnant relieves for several tens of Ma after the end of the orogenic events which are progressively and unconformably overlain by Triassic and then Jurassic sedimentation (e.g. onlap structures, mesoscale paleorelief infilling). This scenario implies extremely low erosion rates to allow the preservation of a significant relief; such feature has already been reported for other regions of Central Asia from thermochronological (AFT) and field data analyses (Jolivet et al., 2007). In parallel, Central Asia Mesozoic tectonic history is marked by the polyphased Cimmerian orogeny in Tibet area (e.g. Hendrix et al., 1992; Sobel and Dumitru, 1997; De Grave et al., 2007). Low amplitude, far-field effects can thus be recognized in the

Mesozoic northern Tian Shan: one early collision stage – Qiantang/Kunlun blocks during Late Triassic/Middle Jurassic – would correspond to the drastic coarsening of the Lower Jurassic sedimentation. In turn, a later collision stage – Lhasa/Qiantang blocks during Late Jurassic/Early Cretaceous – well corresponds to the deposits of the thick and coarse breccias of the Kalaza Fm. at that time. In this case, a tectonic origin of the relief rejuvenation is attested by a major angular unconformity observed regionally.

As unambiguously demonstrated, the physiography of the modern Tian Shan dominantly results from the recent tectonic evolution of the area (e.g. Tapponnier and Molnar, 1977; Avouac et al., 1993; Métivier and Gaudemer, 1997; Charreau et al., 2009). However, this study put forward that the current Tian Shan topography can probably not be considered as the consequence of the Cenozoic intracontinental reactivation alone, but as a combination of the Cenozoic deformations superimposed on a reminiscent Mesozoic paleo-range. These new results question on the amplitude of the movements that could be estimated along the northern front structures during Cenozoic intracontinental reactivation.

### ***Acknowledgements***

Field and laboratory work in the present study are financially supported by Chinese National 973 Program (2009CB825008) and Chinese National S&T Major Project 2011ZX05008.

Prof. A.R. Carroll, Dr. J. Charreau, and an anonymous reviewer are warmly thanked for their constructive reviews. We are also grateful for the help by Prof. Carlo Doglioni (*Editor*) and Prof. Gerhard Wörner (*Associate Editor*). Discussions on seismic profiles' interpretation with Dr. Y. Branquet have also been greatly appreciated. The first author benefices a Ph.D scholarship from French Embassy in Beijing and IGGCAS.

## ***References***

- Abdrakhmatov, K.Y., Aldazhanov, S.A., Hager, B.H., Hamburger, M.W., Herring, T.A., Kalabaev, K.B., Makarov, V.I., Molnar, P., Panasyuk, S.V., Prilepin, M.T., Reilinger, R.E., Sadybakasov, I.S., Souter, B.J., Trapeznikov, Y.A., Tsurkov, V.Y. and Zubovich, A.V., 1996. Relatively recent construction of the Tien Shan inferred from GPS measurements of present-day crustal deformation rates. *Nature*, **384**, 450-453.
- Allen, M.B., Windley, B.F., Zhang, C., Zhao, Z.Y. and Wang, G.R., 1991. Basin Evolution within and Adjacent to the Tien-Shan Range, NW China. *J. Geol. Soc. London*, **148**, 369-378.
- Avouac, J.P., Tapponnier, P., Bai, M., You, H. and Wang, G., 1993. Active Thrusting and Folding Along the Northern Tien-Shan and Late Cenozoic Rotation of the Tarim Relative to Dzungaria and Kazakhstan. *J. Geophys. Res.*, **98**, 6755-6804.
- Burchfiel, B.C., Brown, E.T., Deng, Q.D., Feng, X.Y., Li, J., Molnar, P., Shi, J.B., Wu, Z.M. and You, H.C., 1999. Crustal shortening on the margins of the Tien Shan, Xinjiang, China. *Int. Geol. Rev.*, **41**, 665-700.
- Burov, E.B., Lobkovsky, L.I., Cloetingh, S. and Nikishin, A.M., 1993. Continental lithosphere folding in Central Asia (Part II): constraints from gravity and topography. *Tectonophysics*, **226**, 73-87.
- Carroll, A.R., Liang, Y., Graham, S.A., Xiao, X., Hendrix, M.S., Chu, J., and McKnight, C.L., 1990. Junggar basin, northwest China: Trapped late Paleozoic ocean. *Tectonophysics*, **181**, 1-14.

Carroll, A. R., Graham, S.A., Hendrix, M.S., Ying, D., and Zhou, D., 1995. Late Paleozoic tectonic amalgamation of northwestern China: sedimentary record of the northern Tarim, northwestern Turpan, and southern Junggar basins. *Geol. Soc. Am. Bull.*, **107**, 571-594.

Carroll, A.R., Graham, S.A. and Smith, M.E., 2010. Walled sedimentary basins of China. *Basin Res.*, **22**, 17-32.

Charreau, J., Chen, Y., Gilder, S., Barrier, L., Dominguez, S., Augier, R., Sen, S., Avouac, J.P., Gallaud, A., Graveleau, F. and Wang, Q.C., 2009. Neogene uplift of the Tian Shan Mountains observed in the magnetic record of the Jingou River section (northwest China). *Tectonics*, **28**, TC2008, doi:10.1029/2007TC002137.

Charvet, J., Shu, L.S. and Laurent-Charvet, S., 2007. Paleozoic structural and geodynamic evolution of eastern Tianshan (NW China): welding of the Tarim and Junggar plates. *Episodes*, **30**, 162-186.

Cloetingh, S., Burov, E. and Poliakov, A., 1999. Lithosphere folding: primary response to compression? (from central Asia to Paris basin). *Tectonics*, **18**, 1064–1083.

De Grave, J., Buslov, M.M. and Van den Haute, P., 2007. Distant effects of India–Eurasia convergence and Mesozoic intracontinental deformation in Central Asia: Constraints from apatite fission-track thermochronology. *J. Asian Earth Sc.*, **29**, 188-204.

Deng, Q.D., Zhang, P.Z., Xu, X.W., Yang, X.P., Peng, S.Z., and Feng, X.Y., 1996. Paleoseismology of the northern piedmont of Tianshan Mountains, northwestern China. *J. Geophys. Res.*, **101**, 5895-5920.

Dumitru, T.A., Zhou, D., Chang, E.Z., Graham, S.A., Hendrix, M.S., Sobel, E.R., and Carroll, A.R., 2001. Uplift, exhumation, and deformation in the Chinese Tian Shan. in: Paleozoic and

Mesozoic tectonic evolution of central Asia: From continental assembly to intracontinental deformation (Hendrix, M.S., and Davis, G.A., eds). *Geol. Soc. Am. Mem.*, **194**, 71–99.

Gao, J., Li, M.S., Xiao, X.C., Tang, Y.Q. and He, G.Q., 1998. Paleozoic tectonic evolution of the Tianshan Orogen, northwestern China. *Tectonophysics*, **287**, 213-231.

Graham, S.A., Hendrix, M.S., Wang, L.B. and Carroll, A.R., 1993. Collisional successor basins of western China Impact of tectonic inheritance on sand composition. *Geol. Soc. Am. Bull.*, **105**, 323-344.

Han B.F., He, G.Q. and Wang, S., 1999. Postcollisional mantle-derived magmatism, underplating and implications for basement of the Junggar Basin. *Sci. China. Ser. D*, **42**, 113-119.

Hendrix, M.S., Graham, S.A., Carroll, A.R., Sobel, E.R., Mcknight, C.L., Schulein, B.J., and Wang, Z.X., 1992. Sedimentary Record and Climatic Implications of Recurrent Deformation in the Tian-Shan - Evidence from Mesozoic Strata of the North Tarim, South Junggar, and Turpan Basins, Northwest China. *Geol. Soc. Am. Bull.*, **104**, 53-79.

Hendrix, M.S., Dumitru, T.A. and Graham, S.A., 1994. Late Oligocene Early Miocene Unroofing in the Chinese Tien-Shan - an Early Effect of the India-Asia Collision. *Geology*, **22**, 487-490.

Hendrix, M.S., 2000. Evolution of mesozoic sandstone compositions, southern Junggar, northern Tarim, and western Turpan basins, northwest China: A detrital record of the ancestral Tian Shan. *J. Sed. Res.*, **70**, 520-532.

Huang, B. and Li, J., 2007. Sporopollen assemblages from the Xishanyao and Toutunhe formations at the Honggou section of the manasi river, xinjiang and their stratigraphical significance. *Acta Micropaleontologica Sinica*, **24**, 170-193.

Jolivet, M., Ritz, J.F., Vassalo, R., Larroque, C., Braucher, R., Todbileg, M., Chauvet, A., Sue, C., Arnaud, N., de Vicente, R., Arzhanikova, A. and Arzhanikova, S., 2007. Mongolian summits: An uplifted, flat, old but still preserved erosion surface. *Geology*, **35**, 871-874.

Jolivet, M., Dominguez J., Charreau J., Chen, Y., Farley, K.A., Li, Y.A. and Wang, Q.C., 2010. Mesozoic and Cenozoic tectonic history of the Central Chinese Tian Shan: Reactivated tectonic structures and active deformation. *Tectonics*, **29**, TC6019, doi:10.1029/2010TC002712.

Laurent-Charvet S., Charvet, J., Shu, L.S., Ma, R.S. and Lu, H.F., 2002. Late Paleozoic collisional strike-slip deformations in Tianshan and Altay, eastern Xinjiang, NW China. *Terra Nova*, **14**, 249-256.

Li Z., Zhang L., Qian C., Wang Y. and Bai G., 1978. Regional geological survey report of Geological map 1:200000, Shichang sheet. China Ministry of Geology and Mineral Resource, Beijing.

Li, Z., Song, W.J., Peng, S.T., Wang, D.X. and Zhang, Z.P., 2004. Mesozoic-Cenozoic tectonic relationships between the Kuqa subbasin and Tian Shan, northwest China: constraints from depositional records. *Sed. Geol.*, **172**, 223-249.

Liu, Z., 1990. Sporo-pollen assemblage from Middle Jurassic Xishanyao Formation of Shawan, Xinjiang, China. *Acta Palaeontologica Sinica*, **29**, 63-82.

Lu Y.Z. and Deng S.W., 2005. Triassic-Jurassic Sporopollen Assemblages on the Southern Margin of the Junggar Basin, Xinjiang and the T-J Boundary. *Acta Geologica Sinica*, **79**, 15-28.



Martinod, J., and Davy, P., 1992. Periodic instabilities during compression of the lithosphere 1. Deformation modes from an analytical perturbation method. *J. Geophys. Res.*, **92**, 1999–2014.

Martinod, J. and Davy, P., 1994. Periodic instabilities during compression of the lithosphere 2. Analogue experiments. *J. Geophys. Res.*, **99**, 12057–12069.

Métivier, F. and Gaudemer, Y., 1997. Mass transfer between eastern Tien Shan and adjacent basins (central Asia): Constraints on regional tectonics and topography. *Geophys. J. Int.*, **128**, 1-17.

Sengör, A.M.C., Natal'in, B.A., Burtman, V.S., 1993. Evolution of the Altaid tectonic collage and Paleozoic crust growth in Eurasia. *Nature*, **364**, 299-307.

Sobel, E.R. and Dumitru, T.A., 1997. Thrusting and exhumation around the margins of the western Tarim basin during the India-Asia collision. *J. Geophys. Res.*, **102**, 5043-5063.

Tapponnier, P. and Molnar, P., 1977. Active Faulting and Tectonics in China. *J. Geophys. Res.*, **82**, 2905-2930.

Wang, B. Chen, Y., Zhan, S., Shu, L.S., Faure, M., Cluzel, D., Charvet, J. and Laurent-Charvet, S., 2007. Primary Carboniferous and Permian paleomagnetic results from the Yili Block (NW China) and their implications on the geodynamic evolution of Chinese Tian Shan Belt. *Earth Planet. Sci. Lett.*, **263**, 288-308.

Wang, Q. C., Li S. J. and Du z. L., 2009. Differential uplift of the Chinese Tian Shan since the Cretaceous: constraints from sedimentary petrography and apatite fission-track dating. *Int. J. Earth Sci.*, **98**, 1341-1363.

Wang, X.W., Wang, X.W., Liu, J.P., Liu, J.P. and Ma, Y.S., 2005. Analysis of the fold-thrust zone in the southern Junggar Basin , north western China. *Earth Science Frontiers*, **12**, 411-421.

Wang, Z., Wu, J., Lu, X., Liu, C., and Zhang, J., 1990, Polycyclic tectonic evolution and metallogeny of the Tian Shan mountains. Beijing, Science Press.

Windley, B.F., Allen, M.B., Zhang, C., Zhang, C., Zhao, Z.Y. and Wang, G.R., 1990. Paleozoic accretion and Cenozoic reformation of the Chinese Tien Shan range, Central Asia. *Geology*, **18**, 128-131.

XBGMR-WUSU, 1973, Bureau of Geological and Mineral Resources of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, Geological map of Wusu Region, Scale 1:200.000, China Ministry of Geology and Mineral Resource, Beijing.

XBGMR-HOUXIA, 1977, Bureau of Geological and Mineral Resources of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, Geological map of Houxia Region, Scale 1:200.000, China Ministry of Geology and Mineral Resource, Beijing.

XBGMR-SHICHANG, 1978, Bureau of Geological and Mineral Resources of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, Geological map of Shichang Region, Scale 1:200.000, China Ministry of Geology and Mineral Resource, Beijing.

XBGMR, 1993, Regional geology of Xinjiang Uygur autonomy region.– Geological Memoirs, Ser. 1, No. 32, Map Scale 1: 1.500.000, Geological Publishing House, Beijing.

Yang, J., and Sun, S., 1982. The discovery of Early and Middle Jurassic megaspores from the Junggar Basin, Xinjiang, and their stratigraphic significance. *Acta Geologica Sinica*, **4**, 375–379.

Yang, J.L, Wang Q.F. and Lu H.N., 2005, Discovery of cretaceous and Paleocene charophyte floras from well Hu-2 in the southern edge of Junggar basin. *Acta Micropalaeontologica Sinica*, **22**, 251-268.

### ***Figure captions***

Fig. 1 Simplified geological map of the northern Tian Shan from Wusu to Urumqi areas.

Mesozoic is most exposed in the southernmost parts of the Junggar basin along the adjacent Tian Shan range, particularly to the East (Urumqi area). ‘He’ indicates river in Chinese (modified after XBGMR, 1993).

Fig. 2 Synthetic and representative stratigraphic log made in the Manasi He area, northern Tian Shan piedmont, where Cenozoic have been widely eroded (modified after Hendrix et al., 1992).

Fig. 3 Landscape pictures of representative features of the Mesozoic sedimentary series (see locations on Fig.1) (a) Coarse-grained conglomerate of lowermost Jurassic forming prominent bars in the landscape (southern Qingshui He area); (b) Uppermost Jurassic coarse-grained breccias (Kalaza Fm. - J<sub>3k</sub>) unconformably overlying the Upper Jurassic Qigu formation (J<sub>3q</sub>; Hutubi He area); (c) Close-up view of the Uppermost Jurassic Kalaza Fm. breccias (west to Hutubi He area). Note the angular shape of the clasts (locally exceeding 50 cm) and the clast-supported character of the coarser levels.

Fig. 4 Structural and sedimentological observations in the Houxia area. (a) Simplified geological map with some field structural measurements (modified after XBGMR, 1977), (b) detailed geological cross-section across the northern limb of the syncline structure (see location on Fig. 4a), (c) Close-up view of the Lower Jurassic breccias including Carboniferous basement angular clasts (see location on Fig. 4b), (d) picture of the steep bedding of Jurassic layers close to the southward thrust (see location on Fig. 4b).

Fig. 5 (a) Simplified geological map of the Hutubi He area (modified after XBGMR, 1978, 1993) with few structural measurements from field work. ‘A’ indicates location where Middle

Jurassic deposits directly and unconformity lie onto Carboniferous basement without Triassic or Lower Jurassic, (b) Geological cross-section along the Hutubi He constrained by field data, seismic profile (after Wang et al., 2005) and nearby drill wells W1 and W1'. Location of the section is indicated on Fig. 5a. Extension of the available seismic profile is indicated on the section.

Fig. 6 Examples of onlap structures of the Jurassic sediments over the Paleozoic basement units. (a) Picture and interpretation field sketch of the southern part of the Hutubi He (see location on Fig. 5a): note the overall southward onlap of the Jurassic sediments over the folded basement. To the north, a basement block is back thrust over the sediments (see Fig. 5b), (b) Picture and interpretation field sketch of a small valley, west of the Hutubi He (see location on Fig. 5a): meso-scale basement relief covered by Jurassic sandstones as evidenced by onlaps over a steep inherited ~150 m high basement paleorelief (scarp). Basement rocks are deformed with a large inclined Paleozoic fold.

Fig. 7 Structural and sedimentological observations in the Wusu area. (a) Simplified geological map (modified after XBGMR, 1973) with few structural measurements. (b) Geological cross-section constrained by field data, seismic profile and drill well W2 (see Fig. 7a for location). (c) Picture and corresponding field sketch interpretation of the unconformable contact between Jurassic layers and the Carboniferous basement (see Fig. 7a for location).

Fig. 8 Sketch views of the paleogeographic evolution of the northern piedmont of Tian Shan during Early, Middle and Upper Jurassic/Cretaceous boundary. Main observations that constrain this study are localized on the drawings as: A for Fig. 3a; B for Fig. 4c (lower Jurassic sedimentary breccias); C for Fig. 6a (onlap covering of Paleozoic basement rocks by

Jurassic sandstones) and D for Figs. 3b and 3c (thick Kalaza Fm. breccias with angular discordance at the base).

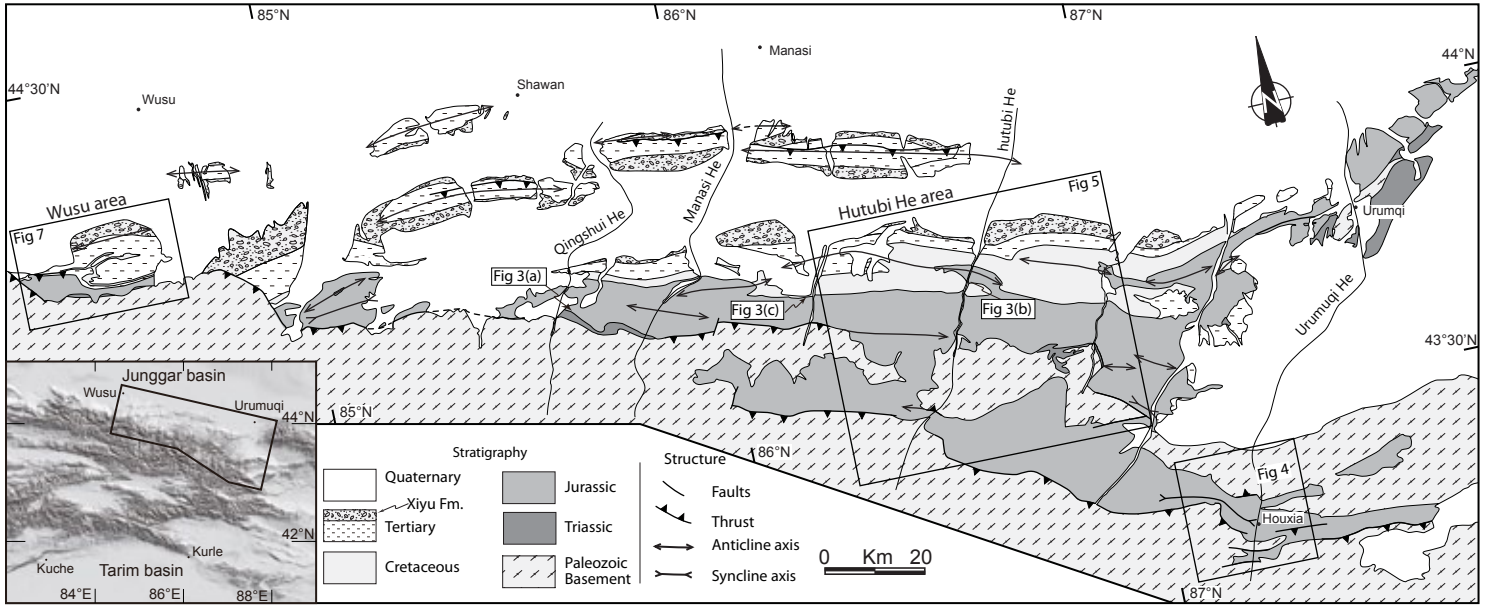


Fig 1.

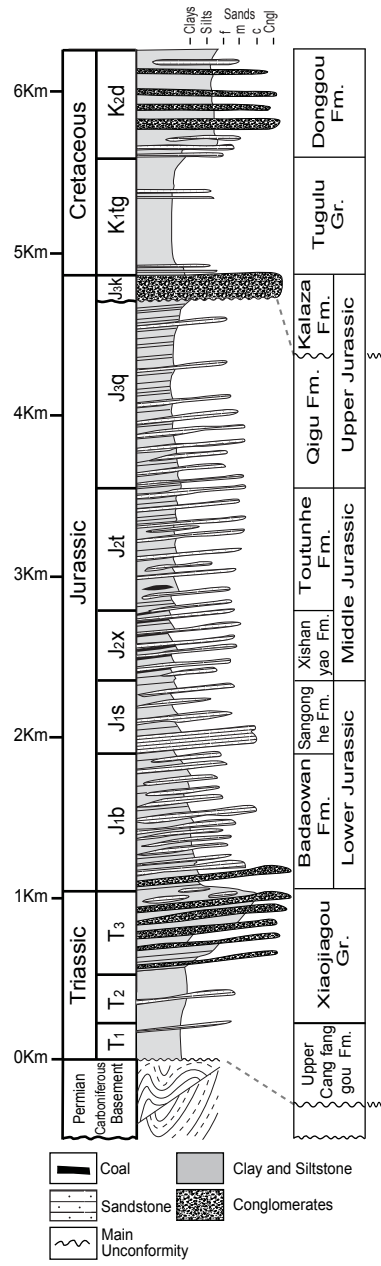


Fig 2.



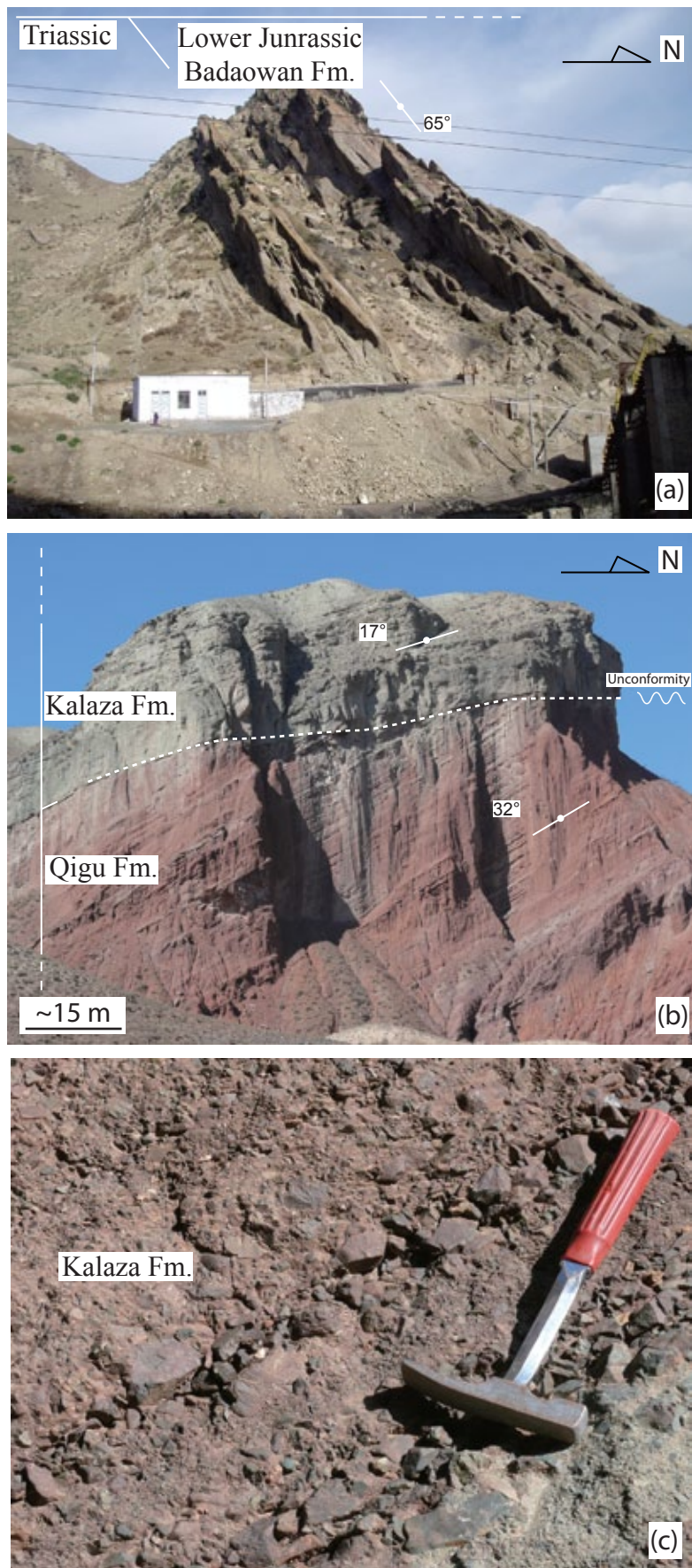


Fig 3.

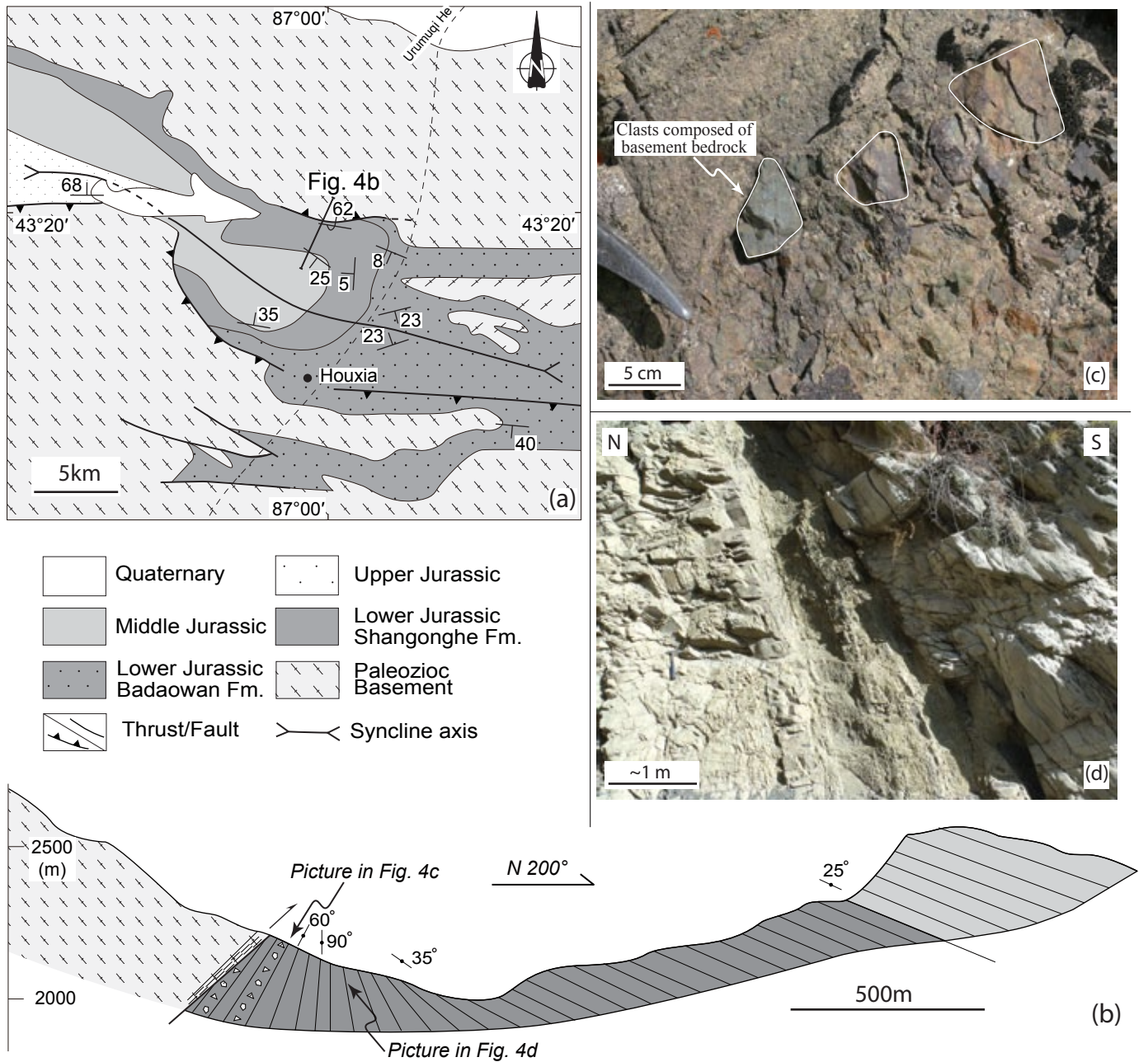


Fig 4.

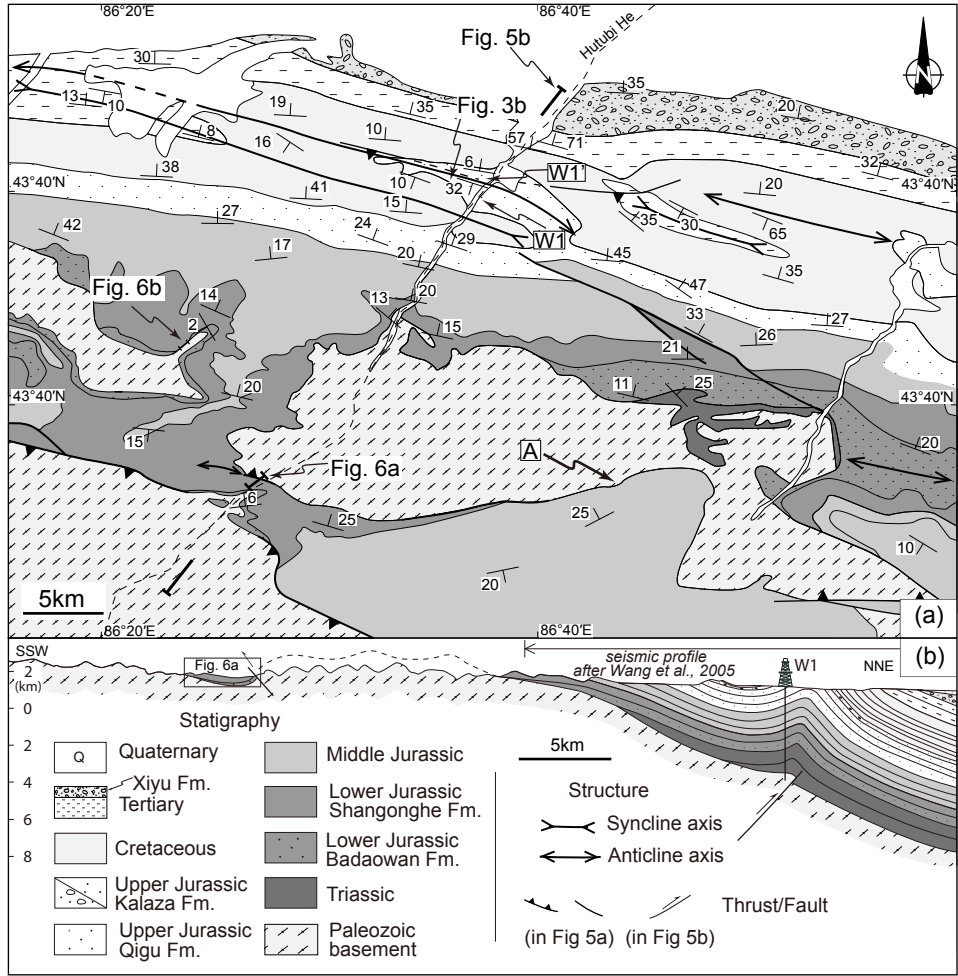


Fig 5.



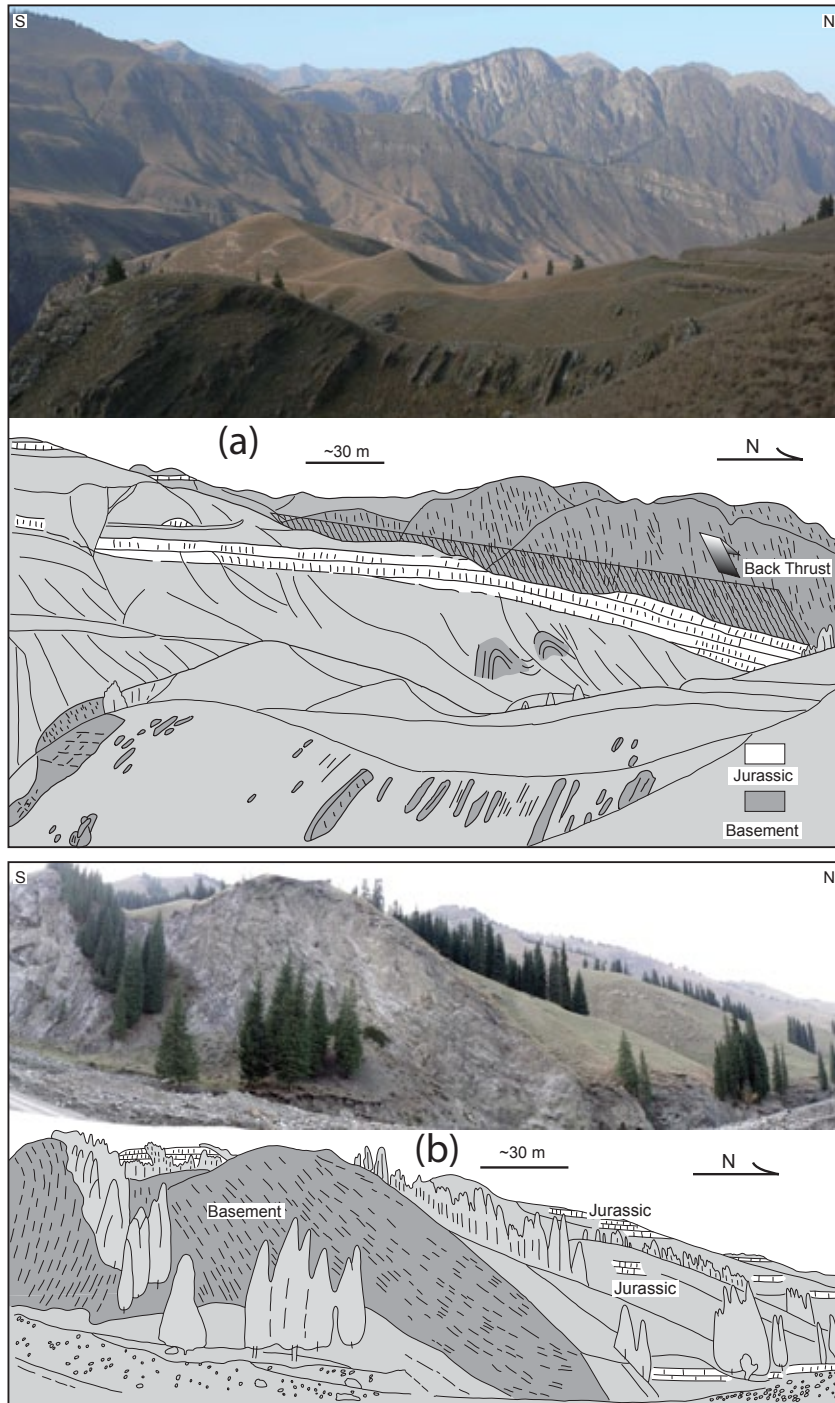


Fig 6.

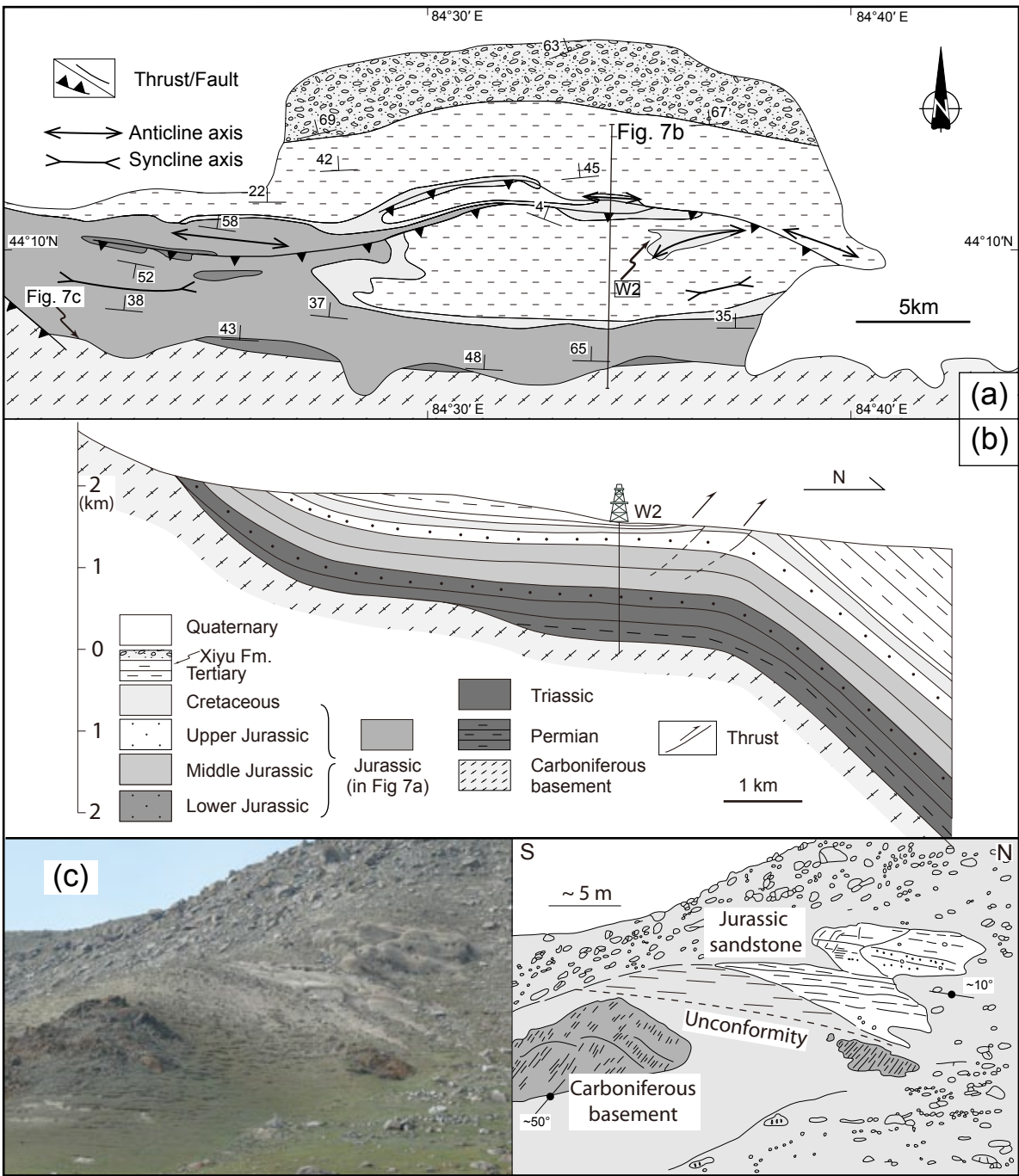


Fig 7.

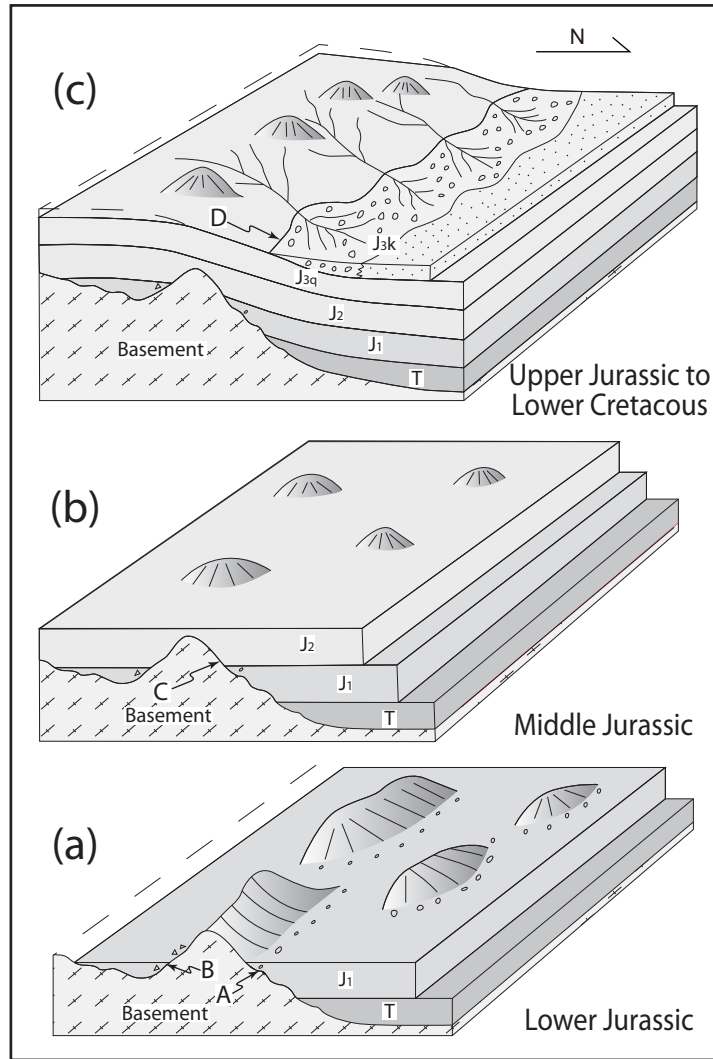


Fig 8.

# 1      **The Mesozoic paleorelief of the northern Tian Shan (China)**

2                    Ke CHEN<sup>1,2</sup>, Charles GUMIAUX<sup>1</sup>, Romain AUGIER<sup>1</sup>, Yan CHEN<sup>1</sup>, Qingchen WANG<sup>2</sup>, Wei LIN<sup>2</sup>, Shengli WANG<sup>3</sup>,

3                    1. Institut des Sciences de la Terre d'Orléans (ISTO), Université d'Orléans, CNRS: UMR6113, Université François Rabelais - Tours, - INSU,  
4                    Campus Géosciences, 1A rue de la Férollerie, 45071 Orléans cedex 2, France

5                    2. State Key Laboratory of Lithospheric Evolution, Institute of Geology and Geophysics, Chinese Academy of Sciences, P.O. 9825, Beijing  
6                    100029, China

7                    3. Department of Earth Sciences, Nanjing University, 210093, Nanjing, China

## 8      ***Abstract***

9                    The Tian Shan range offers a natural laboratory to study orogenic processes. Most of  
10                   the previous studies focused on either the Paleozoic evolution of the range or its Cenozoic  
11                   intracontinental evolution linked with the India-Asia collision. In this study, detailed field  
12                   investigations on the relationship between sedimentary cover and basement constrain the  
13                   Mesozoic evolution of the northern Tian Shan. Sedimentological observations argue for  
14                   limited transport distance for Lower and Uppermost Jurassic deposits. Geological sections  
15                   presented in this paper show that, in preserved locations, Triassic to Jurassic sedimentary  
16                   series present a continuous onlap type sedimentary unconformity on the top of the basement.  
17                   At different scales, observations clearly evidence the existence of a major paleorelief during  
18                   Mesozoic. According to the present study, the current Tian Shan range topography and the  
19                   associated movements along its northern front structures cannot be considered as the  
20                   consequence of Cenozoic reactivation alone.

## 21      ***Keywords***

22                   Tian Shan, paleorelief, Mesozoic, regional onlap, reactivation, India-Asia collision.

## 23 Introduction

24           The modern Tian Shan is one of the major mountain ranges in Central Asia. The  
25 current structure of Tian Shan mainly results from a combination of two main tectonic events:  
26 i) subductions, arc-accretions and continental collision during Paleozoic (e.g. Carroll et al.,  
27 1990; Wang et al., 1990; Windley et al., 1990; Sengör et al. 1993; Carroll et al., 1995; Gao et  
28 al., 1998; Laurent-Charvet et al., 2002; Charvet et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2007) and ii)  
29 intracontinental reactivation linked to the India-Asia collision, during Cenozoic (e.g.  
30 Tapponnier and Molnar, 1977; Avouac et al., 1993). At first order, the modern Tian Shan  
31 corresponds to a raised ~east-west trending Paleozoic ‘basement’ range, flanked by two  
32 closed intracontinental basins whose infill is a particularly accurate record for both tectonic  
33 and climate evolutions (Fig. 1). The present-day high topography of Tian Shan, with a mean  
34 altitude of ~2500 m and summits of more than 7000 m, is traditionally related to the latest  
35 intracontinental deformation of the range (e.g. Tapponnier and Molnar, 1977; Avouac et al.,  
36 1993; Burchfiel et al., 1999). Age constraints for the onset of this intracontinental reactivation  
37 range from 10 to 24 Ma (e.g. Avouac et al., 1993; Hendrix et al., 1994; Abdrakhmatov et al.,  
38 1996; Métivier and Gaudemer, 1997; Sobel et al., 1997; Dumitru et al., 2001; Charreau et al.,  
39 2009). In spite of relative age discrepancies (mostly related to the method applied), all ages  
40 estimated for the deformation and the associated relief erosion suggest that the mountain  
41 range reactivation and relief creation began during Early Miocene at oldest.

42           However, recent Fission-track analyses suggest that uplifting may have existed well  
43 before the onset of the Tertiary reactivation through Tian Shan, with exhumation ages such as  
44 160-120 Ma in central Tian Shan, 200-250 Ma detritus cooling age in the Manas River valley  
45 (Dumitru et al., 2001; Jolivet et al., 2010) or 140-120 Ma from Bayanbulak intracontinental  
46 basin, in the southern Tian Shan (Wang et al., 2009). Moreover, Triassic to Cretaceous  
47 sediments are composed of thick continental series characterized by massive coarse-grained



48 formations within both basins, suggesting rather high erosion rate at that time (Hendrix, 2000;  
49 Carroll et al., 2010).

50 This study considers the Mesozoic tectonic and morphologic evolution of Tian Shan  
51 through field structural and sedimentological analyses of Mesozoic deposits. It focuses on the  
52 northern piedmont of the range, along a ~280 km west-east trending segment (Fig. 1). Thanks  
53 to deep incisions of seasonal rivers, contacts between Paleozoic basement and Mesozoic-  
54 Cenozoic sedimentary cover are particularly well exposed along several north-south trending  
55 sections in this region (Fig. 1). Such new constraints on Mesozoic evolution of the Tian Shan  
56 area would lead to reconsider the contribution of Cenozoic tectonics in the modern mountain  
57 range building as well as to better quantify the net shortening amount during that period.

### 58 **Stratigraphy of the Mesozoic sediments within the study area**

59 Sedimentary series can be extensively observed and have already been studied within  
60 the Junggar basin, as summarized below (Figs. 1 and 2; Hendrix et al., 1992 and references  
61 therein; XBGMR, 1993). Basement units of the north Tian Shan mainly consist of Paleozoic  
62 volcanic and sedimentary rocks. From bottom to top, the entire Mesozoic series is composed  
63 of ~5 km thick continental clastic deposits highlighting high sedimentation/preservation rates  
64 (Fig. 2). Thanks to numerous studies aimed at oil and gas exploration and to 1:200.000  
65 mapping projects hold in this area, ages of the Mesozoic sequences were mainly constrained  
66 by floral and sporopollen assemblage analyses (Li et al., 1978; Yang et al., 1982; Liu, 1990;  
67 XBGMR, 1993; Lu and Deng, 2005; Yang et al., 2005; Huang and Li, 2007). In the study area,  
68 the Triassic series are mostly missing along the piedmont though locally exposed (Fig. 1).  
69 Where it crops out, Triassic displays alluvial sandstones and conglomerates intercalated  
70 within and silty mudstones (red-beds). At the scale of the northern Tian Shan piedmont,  
71 Lowermost Jurassic layers indicate a change in the sedimentation as they consist in thick and

72 coarse conglomeratic deposits, as exposed in the south of Qingshui He (Fig. 3a). Thickness of  
73 Lower Jurassic reaches 1000 m over the area extending from Manasi to Urumqi, and  
74 decreases westwardly and eastwardly. Sediments become progressively finer upward, grading  
75 into ~3 km thick series of Lower/Middle Jurassic gray sandstones, silty shales (Fig. 2).  
76 Middle Jurassic sandstones and mudstones locally contain coal-rich layers consistent with a  
77 lacustrine depositional facies (Hendrix et al., 1992). Upper Jurassic comprises typical fine-  
78 grained red beds where conglomerates remain scarce. The transition from Jurassic to  
79 Cretaceous series is marked by up to 800 m thick sedimentary breccias (Kalaza formation –  
80 J3k; Fig. 3b) made of coarse-grained angular clasts (Fig. 3c). It rapidly dies laterally and  
81 grades to sandstones within the Junggar basin itself (XBGMR, 1978; 1993). The marked  
82 unconformity between the Kalaza formation and the underlying finer-grained Upper Jurassic  
83 red beds (Fig. 3b) suggests a short transport distance of material before deposition and nearby  
84 relief uplifting.

85 In this study, Mesozoic sediments have also been extensively observed within internal  
86 parts of the range, and more particularly in the eastern part of the studied area (Fig. 1).  
87 Triassic to Jurassic sediments are encountered on top of the Paleozoic basement units, at  
88 rather high altitudes (2000 to 3000 m) in comparison with the mean altitude of the foreland  
89 fold-and-thrust belts (1000 to 1500 m high). In the Houxia valley for instance – 65 km SSW  
90 of Urumqi – a Lower to Upper Jurassic continuous sedimentary series is preserved in a  
91 syncline structure (Fig. 4a). According to the geological map (Fig. 4a; XBGMR, 1977),  
92 Lower Jurassic formations – i.e. Shangonghe Fm. to the northwest and Lowermost Jurassic  
93 Badaowan Fm. to the east – directly overlie on top of Carboniferous basement units, without  
94 intercalated Triassic sediments. Besides, south and north verging thrusts developed along  
95 parts of the northern and southern limbs of the fold, respectively (Fig. 4a). A section made  
96 across the north limb of the syncline displays continuous Lower to Middle Jurassic series with

97 no fault contact observed (Fig. 4b). From south to north, bedding planes progressively  
98 straighten up from ~30° south dipping to vertical, and even overturned just below the south  
99 verging thrust (Figs. 4a ,4b and 4d). From a sedimentological point of view, the upper and  
100 main part of Jurassic series is made of fine-grained sandstones and mudstones while the  
101 lowermost deposits of the series is characterized by intercalations of coarse-grained  
102 sedimentary breccias mostly made of highly angular clasts of Carboniferous tuffaceous  
103 sandstones (Fig. 4c). Local abundance of these breccias and the common lithological nature of  
104 the clasts with the adjacent basement unit strongly suggest a very short transport distance.

### 105 **Structural analysis of the Mesozoic basal contact**

106 Deformation of the northern Tian Shan has already been studied through the structural  
107 analysis of sedimentary series, within the Cenozoic foreland basin (e.g. Avouac et al., 1993;  
108 Deng et al., 1996; Burchfiel et al., 1999). This part focuses on the basal contact of the  
109 Mesozoic sediments, in the northern “front” area of Tian Shan.

110 As shown on the map (Fig. 1), some parts of the piedmont display northward thrusts  
111 that mark out the boundary in between the Paleozoic uplifted basement units and relatively  
112 subsiding proximal foreland basin. Yet, as described above, Mesozoic series are not solely  
113 restricted to the piedmont fold-and-thrust belts but are also well preserved on top of the  
114 basement units, within the range (Fig. 1). Then, some other segments of the piedmont display  
115 perfectly continuous Mesozoic sedimentary series from basin until internal and higher parts of  
116 the range, without being strained by any faulting or folding in the range front area (Fig. 1).  
117 Structural analysis of such unstrained basal contact of Mesozoic series is presented for two of  
118 the sections constructed from field work combined with available seismic profiles and drill-  
119 holes data: the Hutubi He and the Wusu sections (Fig. 1).

120 At first order, to the north of the Hutubi He area, Triassic to Neogene sedimentary  
121 series form a rather simple monocline structure, dipping 15-20° to the north (Fig. 5a). The  
122 southernmost fold-and-thrust belt is composed of one gentle upright anticline and associated  
123 syncline with only very limited thrusts developed along the hinge of the fold (Fig. 5a). This  
124 belt can be regarded as a fault-propagation fold structure according to the available seismic  
125 profile (Wang et al., 2005; Fig. 5b). Further south, entering within the interior parts of the  
126 range, sub-horizontal Lower Jurassic strata lie on top of the Carboniferous units (Fig. 5b).  
127 While basement is strongly deformed, as evidenced by sub-vertical cleavage, its sedimentary  
128 cover is only gently folded as illustrated on the geological map, few kilometers west of the  
129 river (Fig. 5a; XBGMR, 1978, 1993). No décollement structure has been observed between  
130 the basement top and the sedimentary cover. Besides, a southward backthrust of basement  
131 rocks above sediments can be observed to the south of the section, but the net slip must be  
132 limited as it rapidly dies out, the fault laterally evolving to a fold toward the west (Fig. 5a).  
133 Unconformity of the basal contact of Mesozoic sediments on top of basement units is  
134 observed in the southernmost part of the section (Figs. 5a and 6a). As a whole, the successive  
135 sub-horizontal and monocline segments define a hinge fold at regional scale (Fig. 5b).  
136 Nevertheless, while ~900 m thick of Triassic sediments have been drilled along the W1 well  
137 in the basin (Fig. 5b), no Triassic series have been observed further south in the range, in the  
138 section area (Fig. 5a). Indeed, Lowermost to Middle Jurassic levels have been observed and  
139 mapped directly on top of the basement units (Fig. 5a; XBGMR, 1978, 1993). Similarly to the  
140 Houxia area, basal contact of the Mesozoic series suggests its onlap deposit, from basin to  
141 range, at least during Triassic and Lower-Middle Jurassic.

142 More local-scale evidences for onlap sedimentation can also be observed in the Hutubi  
143 He area. First, to the south end of the section, Lower Jurassic strata display a kilometer scale  
144 onlap type structure on top of basement units, i.e. with younger sediments progressively

145 covering basement, from north to south (Figs. 5a and 6a). Second, ~10 km west of the Hutubi  
146 River, subhorizontal layers of the Lower Jurassic formation, which can be continuously  
147 followed in few kilometers in this small valley, structurally onlap on the deformed Paleozoic  
148 basement units (Fig. 6b). There, stratification planes are markedly oblique with the top of the  
149 Paleozoic units and no deformation has been observed along this contact. In the landscape,  
150 younger Jurassic sediments progressively extend to the south, on top of the Carboniferous  
151 units. Sediments progressively overlie and cover a ~150 m high step of the basement top  
152 which implies that a significant relief existed during Jurassic sediments deposition.

153 To the north of the Wusu section, first-order structure of the Mesozoic-Cenozoic series  
154 displays a 40-45° north dipping monocline (Figs. 7a and 7b). To the south, bedding is sub-  
155 horizontal and structure of the sedimentary series is marked by a large hinge fold. As drawn  
156 on the geological map, thrust faults are observed at the surface, but seismic data show that  
157 they do not extend downward into the Mesozoic series (Fig. 7b; *suppl. material*), which is  
158 compatible with the limited throw produced by these faults as deduced from map data  
159 analysis (Fig. 7a). While ~400 m of Triassic sediments have been found in a drilled well in  
160 the basin, close to this section (see W2 on Fig. 7a), Triassic series becomes much thinner to  
161 the south and Jurassic sandstones, sometimes, directly lie on top of the Carboniferous rocks  
162 with an erosional undeformed contact (Fig. 7c; XBGMR, 1973).

## 163 **Discussion and conclusions**

164 In parallel to rather classical view of frontal thrust systems, this study highlights that  
165 the northern piedmont of Tian Shan also displays segments where Mesozoic series are  
166 preserved unconformably onto the basement with onlap-type relationships. Such features are  
167 pointed out along two distant cross-sections and have also been clearly shown at outcrop-scale.  
168 Sedimentary breccias, showing very limited transport distances, have been found within

169 Lower Jurassic sediments of the internal parts of the range. Whatever the scale, all these  
170 observations clearly show the existence of proximal relief when Triassic/Jurassic sediments  
171 were deposited. Our field observations are consistent with previously published  
172 sedimentological data – paleocurrent measurements, heavy mineral composition,  
173 sedimentological source analyses – in the Junggar and Tarim basins which suggest that Tian  
174 Shan could already have existed as a “positive” geomorphologic feature during Mesozoic  
175 times (Hendrix et al., 1992, Graham et al., 1993; Hendrix, 2000; Li et al., 2004).

176 In the field, the local-scale observation of onlap sedimentary architecture reveals that the  
177 paleo-altitude difference can reach 100-150 m in a hectometer horizontal distance, which  
178 highlights local steep slopes (cf. Fig. 6b). Together with the sedimentological observations in  
179 the Houxia valley, this suggests that small-scale ridges with intercalated intra-mountainous  
180 basins have probably existed during Mesozoic (Fig. 8a).

181 Drill wells W1 and W1' (Figs. 4a and 4b) display ~1200 m of Lower Jurassic  
182 sediments (e.g. Badaowan and Shangonghe Fm., Fig. 2). A comparable thickness for Lower  
183 Jurassic has also been observed in the Manas area, 50 km west of the Hutubi section (Fig. 2;  
184 Hendrix et al., 1992). Following the geological maps (XBGMR; 1978, 1993), Middle Jurassic  
185 series directly lie unconformably onto the Carboniferous basement, without Triassic and  
186 Lower Jurassic sediments in the southern part of the Hutubi River (see location A in Fig. 4a).  
187 The thickness difference of Jurassic sediments reaches ~1200 m between the location A and  
188 the drill well location, for a horizontal distance of about 50 km (Fig. 4a). Such thickness  
189 difference may result from subsidence mechanisms. However, whatever the scale considered  
190 in this study, Triassic and mostly Jurassic series, up to the late Jurassic Kalaza formation  
191 deposit, display parallel bedding with no growth strata observed (Figs. 5b, 6 and 7b). Such  
192 feature shows that, at the scale of the studied area, significant vertical differential movements  
193 may have hardly occurred during Triassic to Upper Jurassic sedimentation. In addition, as

194 described above, Jurassic strata often overlie directly on Carboniferous by onlap, without fault  
195 or syn-sedimentary deformations. Seismic profiles across the southern margin of the Junggar  
196 basin do not display major fault that could have controlled sedimentation for the Early  
197 Jurassic period (Allen et al., 1991; Wang et al., 2005). No evidence for structural control on  
198 local subsidence could thus be argued here. At larger scale, flexure – either thermal or  
199 tectonic – could also have controlled the subsidence for Mesozoic series accumulation.  
200 If considering thermal control, the latest regional tectono-magmatic event occurring before  
201 Mesozoic in the Central Tian Shan area ended during early Permian (see compilation by Han  
202 et al., 1999), which is about 100 Ma earlier than Jurassic sedimentation. Therefore, according  
203 to Hendrix et al. (1992), it seems that thermal driving mechanism may only play a weak role  
204 for the Early and Middle Jurassic sedimentation. If considering tectonic control,  
205 compressional flexure may also be hard to explain as, for comparable vertical differential  
206 movements, buckling of a stable continental lithosphere would result in much larger  
207 wavelength (200-300 km) than observed in this study (~50 km) as shown by mechanical  
208 modelling (Martinod and Davy, 1992, 1994; Burov et al., 1993; Cloetingh et al., 1999).

209         At the scale of the present study, Jurassic sedimentation seems hardly controlled by  
210 either tectonic or thermal subsidence across northern Tian Shan. Accordingly, the 1200-  
211 1300 m thickness difference may be mainly produced by infilling of a long-lasting remnant  
212 relief of, at least, 1200-1300 m high at that period (i.e. from Triassic/Lowermost Jurassic; Fig.  
213 8a). During Middle Jurassic, finer-grained sediments were conformably deposited on top of  
214 the Lower Jurassic strata within the basin, and were deposited onlap on the Paleozoic  
215 basement toward the range (Figs. 5a and 8b). Middle Jurassic sediments of the Xishanyao and  
216 Toutunhe formations extend to a larger area with respect to the Lower Jurassic and, as a  
217 whole, the paleorelief lateral extension was certainly less important during Middle Jurassic  
218 than during Triassic/Early Jurassic (Fig. 8b). During latest Jurassic to Early Cretaceous, thick

219 breccias were deposited onto the Middle Jurassic sediments through an angular unconformity  
220 (*cf.* Kalaza Fm.). These breccias are restricted to the front of the modern Tian Shan and  
221 change rapidly to finer-grained deposits in lateral equivalents. This configuration is  
222 reminiscent of the general architecture of current fans deposited along the modern Tian Shan  
223 range that originate from the present day high relief to the south, but show limited northward  
224 transport of sediments (Fig. 8c). In turn, location of the main morphological northern front of  
225 the paleo- Tian Shan, during Latest Jurassic to Early Cretaceous, would approximately  
226 coincide with the one of the current range front (Fig. 5). The uplift documented by these  
227 coarse-grained sedimentary breccias is also recorded by AFT chronology studies; Fission-  
228 track modeling indicates a ca. 160 and 120 Ma cooling age along a Dushanzi-Kuqa corridor,  
229 in the mountain interior (Dumitru et al., 2001; Jolivet et al., 2010). Apatite sampled from  
230 Bayanbulak area yields the earliest cooling ages of Early Cretaceous (Dumitru et al., 2001;  
231 Wang et al. 2009).

232         Because no major tectonic event occurred in the Northern Tian Shan during Mesozoic  
233 times (e.g. De Grave et al., 2007), the Paleozoic subduction-collision orogeny (Gao et al.,  
234 1998; Laurent-Charvet et al., 2002; Charvet et al., 2007) appears as the most probable origin  
235 of the Mesozoic paleorelief above described. In such case, the Tian Shan would persist as  
236 remnant relieves for several tens of Ma after the end of the orogenic events which are  
237 progressively and unconformably overlain by Triassic and then Jurassic sedimentation (e.g.  
238 onlap structures, mesoscale paleorelief infilling). This scenario implies extremely low erosion  
239 rates to allow the preservation of a significant relief; such feature has already been reported  
240 for other regions of Central Asia from thermochronological (AFT) and field data analyses  
241 (Jolivet et al., 2007). In parallel, Central Asia Mesozoic tectonic history is marked by the  
242 polyphased Cimmerian orogeny in Tibet area (e.g. Hendrix et al., 1992; Sobel and Dumitru,  
243 1997; De Grave et al., 2007). Low amplitude, far-field effects can thus be recognized in the



244 Mesozoic northern Tian Shan: one early collision stage – Qiantang/Kunlun blocks during Late  
245 Triassic/Middle Jurassic – would correspond to the drastic coarsening of the Lower Jurassic  
246 sedimentation. In turn, a later collision stage – Lhasa/Qiantang blocks during Late  
247 Jurassic/Early Cretaceous – well corresponds to the deposits of the thick and coarse breccias  
248 of the Kalaza Fm. at that time. In this case, a tectonic origin of the relief rejuvenation is  
249 attested by a major angular unconformity observed regionally.

250 As unambiguously demonstrated, the physiography of the modern Tian Shan  
251 dominantly results from the recent tectonic evolution of the area (e.g. Tapponnier and Molnar,  
252 1977; Avouac et al., 1993; Métivier and Gaudemer, 1997; Charreau et al., 2009). However,  
253 this study put forward that the current Tian Shan topography can probably not be considered  
254 as the consequence of the Cenozoic intracontinental reactivation alone, but as a combination  
255 of the Cenozoic deformations superimposed on a reminiscent Mesozoic paleo-range. These  
256 new results question on the amplitude of the movements that could be estimated along the  
257 northern front structures during Cenozoic intracontinental reactivation.

## 258 *Acknowledgements*

259 Field and laboratory work in the present study are financially supported by Chinese National  
260 973 Program (2009CB825008) and Chinese National S&T Major Project 2011ZX05008.  
261 Prof. A.R. Carroll, Dr. J. Charreau, and an anonymous reviewer are warmly thanked for their  
262 constructive reviews. We are also grateful for the help by Prof. Carlo Doglioni (*Editor*) and  
263 Prof. Gerhard Wörner (*Associate Editor*). Discussions on seismic profiles' interpretation with  
264 Dr. Y. Branquet have also been greatly appreciated. The first author benefices a Ph.D  
265 scholarship from French Embassy in Beijing and IGGCAS.

266 **References**

- 267 Abdrakhmatov, K.Y., Aldazhanov, S.A., Hager, B.H., Hamburger, M.W., Herring, T.A.,  
268 Kalabaev, K.B., Makarov, V.I., Molnar, P., Panasyuk, S.V., Prilepin, M.T., Reilinger, R.E.,  
269 Sadybakasov, I.S., Souter, B.J., Trapeznikov, Y.A., Tsurkov, V.Y. and Zubovich, A.V., 1996.  
270 Relatively recent construction of the Tien Shan inferred from GPS measurements of present-  
271 day crustal deformation rates. *Nature*, **384**, 450-453.
- 272 Allen, M.B., Windley, B.F., Zhang, C., Zhao, Z.Y. and Wang, G.R., 1991. Basin Evolution  
273 within and Adjacent to the Tien-Shan Range, NW China. *J. Geol. Soc. London*, **148**, 369-378.
- 274 Avouac, J.P., Tapponnier, P., Bai, M., You, H. and Wang, G., 1993. Active Thrusting and  
275 Folding Along the Northern Tien-Shan and Late Cenozoic Rotation of the Tarim Relative to  
276 Dzungaria and Kazakhstan. *J. Geophys. Res.*, **98**, 6755-6804.
- 277 Burchfiel, B.C., Brown, E.T., Deng, Q.D., Feng, X.Y., Li, J., Molnar, P., Shi, J.B., Wu, Z.M.  
278 and You, H.C., 1999. Crustal shortening on the margins of the Tien Shan, Xinjiang, China. *Int.*  
279 *Geol. Rev.*, **41**, 665-700.
- 280 Burov, E.B., Lobkovsky, L.I., Cloetingh, S. and Nikishin, A.M., 1993. Continental  
281 lithosphere folding in Central Asia (Part II): constraints from gravity and topography.  
282 *Tectonophysics*, **226**, 73-87.
- 283 Carroll, A.R., Liang, Y., Graham, S.A., Xiao, X., Hendrix, M.S., Chu, J., and McKnight, C.L.,  
284 1990. Junggar basin, northwest China: Trapped late Paleozoic ocean. *Tectonophysics*, **181**, 1-  
285 14.

- 286 Carroll, A. R., Graham, S.A., Hendrix, M.S., Ying, D., and Zhou, D., 1995. Late Paleozoic  
287 tectonic amalgamation of northwestern China: sedimentary record of the northern Tarim,  
288 northwestern Turpan, and southern Junggar basins. *Geol. Soc. Am. Bull.*, **107**, 571-594.
- 289 Carroll, A.R., Graham, S.A. and Smith, M.E., 2010. Walled sedimentary basins of China.  
290 *Basin Res.*, **22**, 17-32.
- 291 Charreau, J., Chen, Y., Gilder, S., Barrier, L., Dominguez, S., Augier, R., Sen, S., Avouac,  
292 J.P., Gallaud, A., Graveleau, F. and Wang, Q.C., 2009. Neogene uplift of the Tian Shan  
293 Mountains observed in the magnetic record of the Jingou River section (northwest China).  
294 *Tectonics*, **28**, TC2008, doi:10.1029/2007TC002137.
- 295 Charvet, J., Shu, L.S. and Laurent-Charvet, S., 2007. Paleozoic structural and geodynamic  
296 evolution of eastern Tianshan (NW China): welding of the Tarim and Junggar plates.  
297 *Episodes*, **30**, 162-186.
- 298 Cloetingh, S., Burov, E. and Poliakov, A., 1999. Lithosphere folding: primary response to  
299 compression? (from central Asia to Paris basin). *Tectonics*, **18**, 1064–1083.
- 300 De Grave, J., Buslov, M.M. and Van den Haute, P., 2007. Distant effects of India–Eurasia  
301 convergence and Mesozoic intracontinental deformation in Central Asia: Constraints from  
302 apatite fission-track thermochronology. *J. Asian Earth Sc.*, **29**, 188-204.
- 303 Deng, Q.D., Zhang, P.Z., Xu, X.W., Yang, X.P., Peng, S.Z., and Feng, X.Y., 1996.  
304 Paleoseismology of the northern piedmont of Tianshan Mountains, northwestern China. *J.*  
305 *Geophys. Res.*, **101**, 5895-5920.
- 306 Dumitru, T.A., Zhou, D., Chang, E.Z., Graham, S.A., Hendrix, M.S., Sobel, E.R., and Carroll,  
307 A.R., 2001. Uplift, exhumation, and deformation in the Chinese Tian Shan. in: Paleozoic and

- 308 Mesozoic tectonic evolution of central Asia: From continental assembly to intracontinental  
309 deformation (Hendrix, M.S., and Davis, G.A., eds). *Geol. Soc. Am. Mem.*, **194**, 71–99.
- 310 Gao, J., Li, M.S., Xiao, X.C., Tang, Y.Q. and He, G.Q., 1998. Paleozoic tectonic evolution of  
311 the Tianshan Orogen, northwestern China. *Tectonophysics*, **287**, 213-231.
- 312 Graham, S.A., Hendrix, M.S., Wang, L.B. and Carroll, A.R., 1993. Collisional successor  
313 basins of western China Impact of tectonic inheritance on sand composition. *Geol. Soc. Am.*  
314 *Bull.*, **105**, 323-344.
- 315 Han B.F., He, G.Q. and Wang, S., 1999. Postcollisional mantle-derived magmatism,  
316 underplating and implications for basement of the Junggar Basin. *Sci. China. Ser. D*, **42**, 113-  
317 119.
- 318 Hendrix, M.S., Graham, S.A., Carroll, A.R., Sobel, E.R., Mcknight, C.L., Schulein, B.J., and  
319 Wang, Z.X., 1992. Sedimentary Record and Climatic Implications of Recurrent Deformation  
320 in the Tian-Shan - Evidence from Mesozoic Strata of the North Tarim, South Junggar, and  
321 Turpan Basins, Northwest China. *Geol. Soc. Am. Bull.*, **104**, 53-79.
- 322 Hendrix, M.S., Dumitru, T.A. and Graham, S.A., 1994. Late Oligocene Early Miocene  
323 Unroofing in the Chinese Tien-Shan - an Early Effect of the India-Asia Collision. *Geology*, **22**,  
324 487-490.
- 325 Hendrix, M.S., 2000. Evolution of mesozoic sandstone compositions, southern Junggar,  
326 northern Tarim, and western Turpan basins, northwest China: A detrital record of the  
327 ancestral Tian Shan. *J. Sed. Res.*, **70**, 520-532.
- 328 Huang, B. and Li, J., 2007. Sporopollen assemblages from the Xishanyao and Toutunhe  
329 formations at the Honggou section of the manasi river, xinjiang and their stratigraphical  
330 significance. *Acta Micropaleontologica Sinica*, **24**, 170-193.

- 331 Jolivet, M., Ritz, J.F., Vassalo, R., Larroque, C., Braucher, R., Todbileg, M., Chauvet, A., Sue,  
332 C., Arnaud, N., de Vicente, R., Arzhanikova, A. and Arzhanikova, S., 2007. Mongolian  
333 summits: An uplifted, flat, old but still preserved erosion surface. *Geology*, **35**, 871-874.
- 334 Jolivet, M., Dominguez J., Charreau J., Chen, Y., Farley, K.A., Li, Y.A. and Wang, Q.C.,  
335 2010. Mesozoic and Cenozoic tectonic history of the Central Chinese Tian Shan: Reactivated  
336 tectonic structures and active deformation. *Tectonics*, **29**, TC6019,  
337 doi:10.1029/2010TC002712.
- 338 Laurent-Charvet S., Charvet, J., Shu, L.S., Ma, R.S. and Lu, H.F., 2002. Late Paleozoic  
339 collisional strike-slip deformations in Tianshan and Altay, eastern Xinjiang, NW China. *Terra*  
340 *Nova*, **14**, 249-256.
- 341 Li Z., Zhang L., Qian C., Wang Y. and Bai G., 1978. Regional geological survey report of  
342 Geological map 1:200000, Shichang sheet. China Ministry of Geology and Mineral Resource,  
343 Beijing.
- 344 Li, Z., Song, W.J., Peng, S.T., Wang, D.X. and Zhang, Z.P., 2004. Mesozoic-Cenozoic  
345 tectonic relationships between the Kuqa subbasin and Tian Shan, northwest China: constraints  
346 from depositional records. *Sed. Geol.*, **172**, 223-249.
- 347 Liu, Z., 1990. Sporo-pollen assemblage from Middle Jurassic Xishanyao Formation of  
348 Shawan, Xinjiang, China. *Acta Palaeontologica Sinica*, **29**, 63-82.
- 349 Lu Y.Z. and Deng S.W., 2005. Triassic-Jurassic Sporopollen Assemblages on the Southern  
350 Margin of the Junggar Basin, Xinjiang and the T-J Boundary. *Acta Geologica Sinica*, **79**, 15-  
351 28.

- 352 Martinod, J., and Davy, P., 1992. Periodic instabilities during compression of the lithosphere  
353 1. Deformation modes from an analytical perturbation method. *J. Geophys. Res.*, **92**, 1999–  
354 2014.
- 355 Martinod, J. and Davy, P., 1994. Periodic instabilities during compression of the lithosphere 2.  
356 Analogue experiments. *J. Geophys. Res.*, **99**, 12057–12069.
- 357 Métivier, F. and Gaudemer, Y., 1997. Mass transfer between eastern Tien Shan and adjacent  
358 basins (central Asia): Constraints on regional tectonics and topography. *Geophys. J. Int.*, **128**,  
359 1-17.
- 360 Sengör, A.M.C., Natal'in, B.A., Burtman, V.S., 1993. Evolution of the Altaid tectonic collage  
361 and Paleozoic crust growth in Eurasia. *Nature*, **364**, 299-307.
- 362 Sobel, E.R. and Dumitru, T.A., 1997. Thrusting and exhumation around the margins of the  
363 western Tarim basin during the India-Asia collision. *J. Geophys. Res.*, **102**, 5043-5063.
- 364 Tapponnier, P. and Molnar, P., 1977. Active Faulting and Tectonics in China. *J. Geophys.*  
365 *Res.*, **82**, 2905-2930.
- 366 Wang, B. Chen, Y., Zhan, S., Shu, L.S., Faure, M., Cluzel, D., Charvet, J. and Laurent-  
367 Charvet, S., 2007. Primary Carboniferous and Permian paleomagnetic results from the Yili  
368 Block (NW China) and their implications on the geodynamic evolution of Chinese Tian Shan  
369 Belt. *Earth Planet. Sci. Lett.*, **263**, 288-308.
- 370 Wang, Q. C., Li S. J. and Du z. L., 2009. Differential uplift of the Chinese Tian Shan since the  
371 Cretaceous: constraints from sedimentary petrography and apatite fission-track dating. *Int. J.*  
372 *Earth Sci.*, **98**, 1341-1363.

- 373 Wang, X.W., Wang, X.W., Liu, J.P., Liu, J.P. and Ma, Y.S., 2005. Analysis of the fold-thrust  
374 zone in the southern Junggar Basin , north western China. *Earth Science Frontiers*, **12**, 411-  
375 421.
- 376 Wang, Z., Wu, J., Lu, X., Liu, C., and Zhang, J., 1990, Polycyclic tectonic evolution and  
377 metallogeny of the Tian Shan mountains. Beijing, Science Press.
- 378 Windley, B.F., Allen, M.B., Zhang, C., Zhang, C., Zhao, Z.Y. and Wang, G.R., 1990.  
379 Paleozoic accretion and Cenozoic reformation of the Chinese Tien Shan range, Central Asia.  
380 *Geology*, **18**, 128-131.
- 381 XBGMR-WUSU, 1973, Bureau of Geological and Mineral Resources of Xinjiang Uygur  
382 Autonomous Region, Geological map of Wusu Region, Scale 1:200.000, China Ministry of  
383 Geology and Mineral Resource, Beijing.
- 384 XBGMR-HOUXIA, 1977, Bureau of Geological and Mineral Resources of Xinjiang Uygur  
385 Autonomous Region, Geological map of Houxia Region, Scale 1:200.000, China Ministry of  
386 Geology and Mineral Resource, Beijing.
- 387 XBGMR-SHICHANG, 1978, Bureau of Geological and Mineral Resources of Xinjiang  
388 Uygur Autonomous Region, Geological map of Shichang Region, Scale 1:200.000, China  
389 Ministry of Geology and Mineral Resource, Beijing.
- 390 XBGMR, 1993, Regional geology of Xinjiang Uygur autonomy region.– Geological Memoirs,  
391 Ser. 1, No. 32, Map Scale 1: 1.500.000, Geological Publishing House, Beijing.
- 392 Yang, J., and Sun, S., 1982. The discovery of Early and Middle Jurassic megaspores from the  
393 Junggar Basin, Xinjiang, and their stratigraphic significance. *Acta Geologica Sinica*, **4**, 375–  
394 379.

395 Yang, J.L, Wang Q.F. and Lu H.N., 2005, Discovery of cretaceous and Paleocene charophyte  
396 floras from well Hu-2 in the southern edge of Junggar basin. *Acta Micropalaeontologica*  
397 *Sinica*, **22**, 251-268.



398 *Figure captions*

399 Fig. 1 Simplified geological map of the northern Tian Shan from Wusu to Urumqi areas.

400 Mesozoic is most exposed in the southernmost parts of the Junggar basin along the adjacent

401 Tian Shan range, particularly to the East (Urumqi area). 'He' indicates river in Chinese

402 (modified after XBGMR, 1993).

403 Fig. 2 Synthetic and representative stratigraphic log made in the Manasi He area, northern

404 Tian Shan piedmont, where Cenozoic have been widely eroded (modified after Hendrix et al.,

405 1992).

406 Fig. 3 Landscape pictures of representative features of the Mesozoic sedimentary series (see

407 locations on Fig.1) (a) Coarse-grained conglomerate of lowermost Jurassic forming prominent

408 bars in the landscape (southern Qingshui He area); (b) Uppermost Jurassic coarse-grained

409 breccias (Kalaza Fm. - J<sub>3k</sub>) unconformably overlying the Upper Jurassic Qigu formation (J<sub>3q</sub> ;

410 Hutubi He area); (c) Close-up view of the Uppermost Jurassic Kalaza Fm. breccias (west to

411 Hutubi He area). Note the angular shape of the clasts (locally exceeding 50 cm) and the clast-

412 supported character of the coarser levels.

413 Fig. 4 Structural and sedimentological observations in the Houxia area. (a) Simplified

414 geological map with some field structural measurements (modified after XBGMR, 1977), (b)

415 detailed geological cross-section across the northern limb of the syncline structure (see

416 location on Fig. 4a), (c) Close-up view of the Lower Jurassic breccias including

417 Carboniferous basement angular clasts (see location on Fig. 4b), (d) picture of the steep

418 bedding of Jurassic layers close to the southward thrust (see location on Fig. 4b).

419 Fig. 5 (a) Simplified geological map of the Hutubi He area (modified after XBGMR, 1978,

420 1993) with few structural measurements from field work. 'A' indicates location where Middle

421 Jurassic deposits directly and unconformity lie onto Carboniferous basement without Triassic  
422 or Lower Jurassic, (b) Geological cross-section along the Hutubi He constrained by field data,  
423 seismic profile (after Wang et al., 2005) and nearby drill wells W1 and W1'. Location of the  
424 section is indicated on Fig. 5a. Extension of the available seismic profile is indicated on the  
425 section.

426 Fig. 6 Examples of onlap structures of the Jurassic sediments over the Paleozoic basement  
427 units. (a) Picture and interpretation field sketch of the southern part of the Hutubi He (see  
428 location on Fig. 5a): note the overall southward onlap of the Jurassic sediments over the  
429 folded basement. To the north, a basement block is back thrust over the sediments (see Fig.  
430 5b), (b) Picture and interpretation field sketch of a small valley, west of the Hutubi He (see  
431 location on Fig. 5a): meso-scale basement relief covered by Jurassic sandstones as evidenced  
432 by onlaps over a steep inherited ~150 m high basement paleorelief (scarp). Basement rocks  
433 are deformed with a large inclined Paleozoic fold.

434 Fig. 7 Structural and sedimentological observations in the Wusu area. (a) Simplified  
435 geological map (modified after XBGMR, 1973) with few structural measurements. (b)  
436 Geological cross-section constrained by field data, seismic profile and drill well W2 (see Fig.  
437 7a for location). (c) Picture and corresponding field sketch interpretation of the  
438 unconformable contact between Jurassic layers and the Carboniferous basement (see Fig. 7a  
439 for location).

440 Fig. 8 Sketch views of the paleogeographic evolution of the northern piedmont of Tian Shan  
441 during Early, Middle and Upper Jurassic/Cretaceous boundary. Main observations that  
442 constrain this study are localized on the drawings as: A for Fig. 3a; B for Fig. 4c (lower  
443 Jurassic sedimentary breccias); C for Fig. 6a (onlap covering of Paleozoic basement rocks by

444 Jurassic sandstones) and D for Figs. 3b and 3c (thick Kalaza Fm. breccias with angular  
445 discordance at the base).

# 1      **The Mesozoic paleorelief of the northern Tian Shan (China)**

2                    Ke CHEN<sup>1,2</sup>, Charles GUMIAUX<sup>1</sup>, Romain AUGIER<sup>1</sup>, Yan CHEN<sup>1</sup>, Qingchen WANG<sup>2</sup>, Wei LIN<sup>2</sup>, Shengli WANG<sup>3</sup>,

3      1. Institut des Sciences de la Terre d'Orléans (ISTO), Université d'Orléans, CNRS: UMR6113, Université François Rabelais - Tours, - INSU,  
4      Campus Géosciences, 1A rue de la Férollerie, 45071 Orléans cedex 2, France

5      2. State Key Laboratory of Lithospheric Evolution, Institute of Geology and Geophysics, Chinese Academy of Sciences, P.O. 9825, Beijing  
6      100029, China

7      3. Department of Earth Sciences, Nanjing University, 210093, Nanjing, China

## 8      ***Abstract***

9                    The Tian Shan range offers a natural laboratory to study orogenic processes. Most of  
10      the previous studies focused on either the Paleozoic evolution of the range or its Cenozoic  
11      intracontinental evolution linked with the India-Asia collision. In this study, detailed field  
12      investigations on the relationship between sedimentary cover and basement constrain the  
13      Mesozoic evolution of the northern Tian Shan. Sedimentological observations argue for  
14      limited transport distance for Lower and Uppermost Jurassic deposits. Geological sections  
15      presented in this paper show that, in preserved locations, Triassic to Jurassic sedimentary  
16      series present a continuous onlap type sedimentary unconformity on the top of the basement.  
17      At different scales, observations clearly evidence the existence of a major paleorelief during  
18      Mesozoic. According to the present study, the current Tian Shan range topography and the  
19      associated movements along its northern front structures cannot be considered as the  
20      consequence of Cenozoic reactivation alone.

## 21      ***Keywords***

22      Tian Shan, paleorelief, Mesozoic, regional onlap, reactivation, India-Asia collision.

## 23 Introduction

24           The modern Tian Shan is one of the major mountain ranges in Central Asia. The  
25 current structure of Tian Shan mainly results from a combination of two main tectonic events:  
26 i) subductions, arc-accretions and continental collision during Paleozoic (e.g. Carroll et al.,  
27 1990; Wang et al., 1990; Windley et al., 1990; Sengör et al. 1993; Carroll et al., 1995; Gao et  
28 al., 1998; Laurent-Charvet et al., 2002; Charvet et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2007) and ii)  
29 intracontinental reactivation linked to the India-Asia collision, during Cenozoic (e.g.  
30 Tapponnier and Molnar, 1977; Avouac et al., 1993). At first order, the modern Tian Shan  
31 corresponds to a raised ~east-west trending Paleozoic ‘basement’ range, flanked by two  
32 closed intracontinental basins whose infill is a particularly accurate record for both tectonic  
33 and climate evolutions (Fig. 1). The present-day high topography of Tian Shan, with a mean  
34 altitude of ~2500 m and summits of more than 7000 m, is traditionally related to the latest  
35 intracontinental deformation of the range (e.g. Tapponnier and Molnar, 1977; Avouac et al.,  
36 1993; Burchfiel et al., 1999). Age constraints for the onset of this intracontinental reactivation  
37 range from 10 to 24 Ma (e.g. Avouac et al., 1993; Hendrix et al., 1994; Abdrakhmatov et al.,  
38 1996; Métivier and Gaudemer, 1997; Sobel et al., 1997; Dumitru et al., 2001; Charreau et al.,  
39 2009). In spite of relative age discrepancies (mostly related to the method applied), all ages  
40 estimated for the deformation and the associated relief erosion suggest that the mountain  
41 range reactivation and relief creation began during Early Miocene at oldest.

42           However, recent Fission-track analyses suggest that uplifting may have existed well  
43 before the onset of the Tertiary reactivation through Tian Shan, with exhumation ages such as  
44 160-120 Ma in central Tian Shan, 200-250 Ma detritus cooling age in the Manas River valley  
45 (Dumitru et al., 2001; Jolivet et al., 2010) or 140-120 Ma from Bayanbulak intracontinental  
46 basin, in the southern Tian Shan (Wang et al., 2009). Moreover, Triassic to Cretaceous  
47 sediments are composed of thick continental series characterized by massive coarse-grained

48 formations within both basins, suggesting rather high erosion rate at that time (Hendrix, 2000;  
49 Carroll et al., 2010).

50 This study considers the Mesozoic tectonic and morphologic evolution of Tian Shan  
51 through field structural and sedimentological analyses of Mesozoic deposits. It focuses on the  
52 northern piedmont of the range, along a ~280 km west-east trending segment (Fig. 1). Thanks  
53 to deep incisions of seasonal rivers, contacts between Paleozoic basement and Mesozoic-  
54 Cenozoic sedimentary cover are particularly well exposed along several north-south trending  
55 sections in this region (Fig. 1). Such new constraints on Mesozoic evolution of the Tian Shan  
56 area would lead to reconsider the contribution of Cenozoic tectonics in the modern mountain  
57 range building as well as to better quantify the net shortening amount during that period.

## 58 **Stratigraphy of the Mesozoic sediments within the study area**

59 Sedimentary series can be extensively observed and have already been studied within  
60 the Junggar basin, as summarized below (Figs. 1 and 2; Hendrix et al., 1992 and references  
61 therein; XBGMR, 1993). Basement units of the north Tian Shan mainly consist of Paleozoic  
62 volcanic and sedimentary rocks. From bottom to top, the entire Mesozoic series is composed  
63 of ~5 km thick continental clastic deposits highlighting high sedimentation/preservation rates  
64 (Fig. 2). Thanks to numerous studies aimed at oil and gas exploration and to 1:200.000  
65 mapping projects hold in this area, ages of the Mesozoic sequences were mainly constrained  
66 by floral and sporopollen assemblage analyses (Li et al., 1978; Yang et al., 1982; Liu, 1990;  
67 XBGMR, 1993; Lu and Deng, 2005; Yang et al., 2005; Huang and Li, 2007). In the study area,  
68 the Triassic series are mostly missing along the piedmont though locally exposed (Fig. 1).  
69 Where it crops out, Triassic displays alluvial sandstones and conglomerates intercalated  
70 within and silty mudstones (red-beds). At the scale of the northern Tian Shan piedmont,  
71 Lowermost Jurassic layers indicate a change in the sedimentation as they consist in thick and

72 coarse conglomeratic deposits, as exposed in the south of Qingshui He (Fig. 3a). Thickness of  
73 Lower Jurassic reaches 1000 m over the area extending from Manasi to Urumqi, and  
74 decreases westwardly and eastwardly. Sediments become progressively finer upward, grading  
75 into ~3 km thick series of Lower/Middle Jurassic gray sandstones, silty shales (Fig. 2).  
76 Middle Jurassic sandstones and mudstones locally contain coal-rich layers consistent with a  
77 lacustrine depositional facies (Hendrix et al., 1992). Upper Jurassic comprises typical fine-  
78 grained red beds where conglomerates remain scarce. The transition from Jurassic to  
79 Cretaceous series is marked by up to 800 m thick sedimentary breccias (Kalaza formation –  
80 J3k; Fig. 3b) made of coarse-grained angular clasts (Fig. 3c). It rapidly dies laterally and  
81 grades to sandstones within the Junggar basin itself (XBGMR, 1978; 1993). The marked  
82 unconformity between the Kalaza formation and the underlying finer-grained Upper Jurassic  
83 red beds (Fig. 3b) suggests a short transport distance of material before deposition and nearby  
84 relief uplifting.

85 In this study, Mesozoic sediments have also been extensively observed within internal  
86 parts of the range, and more particularly in the eastern part of the studied area (Fig. 1).  
87 Triassic to Jurassic sediments are encountered on top of the Paleozoic basement units, at  
88 rather high altitudes (2000 to 3000 m) in comparison with the mean altitude of the foreland  
89 fold-and-thrust belts (1000 to 1500 m high). In the Houxia valley for instance – 65 km SSW  
90 of Urumqi – a Lower to Upper Jurassic continuous sedimentary series is preserved in a  
91 syncline structure (Fig. 4a). According to the geological map (Fig. 4a; XBGMR, 1977),  
92 Lower Jurassic formations – i.e. Shangonghe Fm. to the northwest and Lowermost Jurassic  
93 Badaowan Fm. to the east – directly overlie on top of Carboniferous basement units, without  
94 intercalated Triassic sediments. Besides, south and north verging thrusts developed along  
95 parts of the northern and southern limbs of the fold, respectively (Fig. 4a). A section made  
96 across the north limb of the syncline displays continuous Lower to Middle Jurassic series with

97 no fault contact observed (Fig. 4b). From south to north, bedding planes progressively  
98 straighten up from ~30° south dipping to vertical, and even overturned just below the south  
99 verging thrust (Figs. 4a ,4b and 4d). From a sedimentological point of view, the upper and  
100 main part of Jurassic series is made of fine-grained sandstones and mudstones while the  
101 lowermost deposits of the series is characterized by intercalations of coarse-grained  
102 sedimentary breccias mostly made of highly angular clasts of Carboniferous tuffaceous  
103 sandstones (Fig. 4c). Local abundance of these breccias and the common lithological nature of  
104 the clasts with the adjacent basement unit strongly suggest a very short transport distance.

### 105 **Structural analysis of the Mesozoic basal contact**

106 Deformation of the northern Tian Shan has already been studied through the structural  
107 analysis of sedimentary series, within the Cenozoic foreland basin (e.g. Avouac et al., 1993;  
108 Deng et al., 1996; Burchfiel et al., 1999). This part **focuses** on the basal contact of the  
109 Mesozoic sediments, in the northern “front” area of Tian Shan.

110 As shown on the map (Fig. 1), some parts of the piedmont display northward thrusts  
111 that mark out the boundary in between the Paleozoic uplifted basement units and relatively  
112 subsiding proximal foreland basin. Yet, as described above, Mesozoic series are not solely  
113 restricted to the piedmont fold-and-thrust belts but are also well preserved on top of the  
114 basement units, within the range (Fig. 1). Then, some other segments of the piedmont display  
115 perfectly continuous Mesozoic sedimentary series from basin until internal and higher parts of  
116 the range, without being strained by any faulting or folding in the range front area (Fig. 1).  
117 Structural analysis of such unstrained basal contact of Mesozoic series is presented for two of  
118 the sections constructed from field work combined with available seismic profiles and drill-  
119 holes data: the Hutubi He and the Wusu sections (Fig. 1).



120           At first order, to the north of the Hutubi He area, Triassic to Neogene sedimentary  
121 series form a rather simple monocline structure, dipping 15-20° to the north (Fig. 5a). The  
122 southernmost fold-and-thrust belt is composed of one gentle upright anticline and associated  
123 syncline with only very limited thrusts developed along the hinge of the fold (Fig. 5a). This  
124 belt can be regarded as a fault-propagation fold structure according to the available seismic  
125 profile (Wang et al., 2005; Fig. 5b). Further south, entering within the interior parts of the  
126 range, sub-horizontal Lower Jurassic strata lie on top of the Carboniferous units (Fig. 5b).  
127 While basement is strongly deformed, as evidenced by sub-vertical cleavage, its sedimentary  
128 cover is only gently folded **as illustrated on the** geological map, few kilometers west of **the**  
129 **river** (Fig. 5a; XBGMR, 1978, 1993). No décollement structure has been observed between  
130 the basement top and the sedimentary cover. Besides, a southward backthrust of basement  
131 rocks above sediments can be observed to the south of the section, but the net slip must be  
132 limited as it rapidly dies out, the fault laterally evolving to a fold toward the west (Fig. 5a).  
133 Unconformity of the basal contact of Mesozoic sediments on top of basement units is  
134 observed in the southernmost part of the section (Figs. 5a and 6a). As a whole, the successive  
135 sub-horizontal and monocline segments **define** a hinge fold at regional scale (Fig. 5b).  
136 Nevertheless, while **~900 m** thick of Triassic sediments have been drilled along the W1 well  
137 in the basin (Fig. 5b), no Triassic series have been observed further south in the range, in the  
138 section area (Fig. 5a). Indeed, **Lowermost to Middle Jurassic levels have** been observed and  
139 mapped directly on top of the basement units (Fig. 5a; XBGMR, 1978, 1993). Similarly to the  
140 Houxia area, basal contact of the Mesozoic series suggests its onlap deposit, from basin to  
141 range, at least during Triassic and Lower-Middle Jurassic.

142           More local-scale evidences for onlap sedimentation can also be observed in the Hutubi  
143 He area. First, to the south end of the section, Lower Jurassic strata display a kilometer scale  
144 onlap type structure on top of basement units, i.e. with younger sediments progressively

145 covering basement, from north to south (Figs. 5a and 6a). Second, ~10 km west of the Hutubi  
146 River, subhorizontal layers of the Lower Jurassic formation, which can be continuously  
147 followed in few kilometers in this small valley, structurally onlap on the deformed Paleozoic  
148 basement units (Fig. 6b). There, stratification planes are markedly oblique with the top of the  
149 Paleozoic units and no deformation has been observed along this contact. In the landscape,  
150 younger Jurassic sediments progressively extend to the south, on top of the Carboniferous  
151 units. Sediments progressively overlie and cover a ~150 m high step of the basement top  
152 which implies that a significant relief existed during Jurassic sediments deposition.

153 To the north of the Wusu section, first-order structure of the Mesozoic-Cenozoic series  
154 displays a 40-45° north dipping monocline (Figs. 7a and 7b). To the south, bedding is sub-  
155 horizontal and structure of the sedimentary series is marked by a large hinge fold. As drawn  
156 on the geological map, thrust faults are observed at the surface, but seismic data show that  
157 they do not extend downward into the Mesozoic series (Fig. 7b; *suppl. material*), which is  
158 compatible with the limited throw produced by these faults as deduced from map data  
159 analysis (Fig. 7a). While ~400 m of Triassic sediments have been found in a drilled well in  
160 the basin, close to this section (see W2 on Fig. 7a), Triassic series becomes much thinner to  
161 the south and Jurassic sandstones, sometimes, directly lie on top of the Carboniferous rocks  
162 with an erosional undeformed contact (Fig. 7c; XBGMR, 1973).

## 163 **Discussion and conclusions**

164 In parallel to rather classical view of frontal thrust systems, this study highlights that  
165 the northern piedmont of Tian Shan also displays segments where Mesozoic series are  
166 preserved unconformably onto the basement with onlap-type relationships. Such features are  
167 pointed out along two distant cross-sections and have also been clearly shown at outcrop-scale.  
168 Sedimentary breccias, showing very limited transport distances, have been found within

169 Lower Jurassic sediments of the internal parts of the range. Whatever the scale, all these  
170 observations clearly show the existence of proximal relief when Triassic/Jurassic sediments  
171 were deposited. Our field observations are consistent with previously published  
172 sedimentological data – paleocurrent measurements, heavy mineral composition,  
173 sedimentological source analyses – in the Junggar and Tarim basins which suggest that Tian  
174 Shan could already have existed as a “positive” geomorphologic feature during Mesozoic  
175 times (Hendrix et al., 1992, Graham et al., 1993; Hendrix, 2000; Li et al., 2004).

176 In the field, the local-scale observation of onlap sedimentary architecture reveals that the  
177 paleo-altitude difference can reach 100-150 m in a hectometer horizontal distance, which  
178 highlights local steep slopes (cf. Fig. 6b). Together with the sedimentological observations in  
179 the Houxia valley, this suggests that small-scale ridges with intercalated intra-mountainous  
180 basins have probably existed during Mesozoic (Fig. 8a).

181 Drill wells W1 and W1' (Figs. 4a and 4b) display ~1200 m of Lower Jurassic  
182 sediments (e.g. Badaowan and Shangonghe Fm., Fig. 2). A comparable thickness for Lower  
183 Jurassic has also been observed in the Manas area, 50 km west of the Hutubi section (Fig. 2;  
184 Hendrix et al., 1992). Following the geological maps (XBGMR; 1978, 1993), Middle Jurassic  
185 series directly lie unconformably onto the Carboniferous basement, without Triassic and  
186 Lower Jurassic sediments in the southern part of the Hutubi River (see location A in Fig. 4a).  
187 The thickness difference of Jurassic sediments reaches ~1200 m between the location A and  
188 the drill well location, for a horizontal distance of about 50 km (Fig. 4a). Such thickness  
189 difference may result from subsidence mechanisms. However, whatever the scale considered  
190 in this study, Triassic and mostly Jurassic series, up to the late Jurassic Kalaza formation  
191 deposit, display parallel bedding with no growth strata observed (Figs. 5b, 6 and 7b). Such  
192 feature shows that, at the scale of the studied area, significant vertical differential movements  
193 may have hardly occurred during Triassic to Upper Jurassic sedimentation. In addition, as

194 described above, Jurassic strata often overlie directly on Carboniferous by onlap, without fault  
195 or syn-sedimentary deformations. Seismic profiles across the southern margin of the Junggar  
196 basin do not display major fault that could have controlled sedimentation for the Early  
197 Jurassic period (Allen et al., 1991; Wang et al., 2005). No evidence for structural control on  
198 local subsidence could thus be argued here. At larger scale, flexure – either thermal or  
199 tectonic – could also have controlled the subsidence for Mesozoic series accumulation.  
200 If considering thermal control, the latest regional tectono-magmatic event occurring before  
201 Mesozoic in the Central Tian Shan area ended during early Permian (see compilation by Han  
202 et al., 1999), which is about 100 Ma earlier than Jurassic sedimentation. Therefore, according  
203 to Hendrix et al. (1992), it seems that thermal driving mechanism may only play a weak role  
204 for the Early and Middle Jurassic sedimentation. If considering tectonic control,  
205 compressional flexure may also be hard to explain as, for comparable vertical differential  
206 movements, buckling of a stable continental lithosphere would result in much larger  
207 wavelength (200-300 km) than observed in this study (~50 km) as shown by mechanical  
208 modelling (Martinod and Davy, 1992, 1994; Burov et al., 1993; Cloetingh et al., 1999).

209 At the scale of the present study, Jurassic sedimentation seems hardly controlled by  
210 either tectonic or thermal subsidence across northern Tian Shan. Accordingly, the 1200-  
211 1300 m thickness difference may be mainly produced by infilling of a long-lasting remnant  
212 relief of, at least, 1200-1300 m high at that period (i.e. from Triassic/Lowermost Jurassic; Fig.  
213 8a). During Middle Jurassic, finer-grained sediments were conformably deposited on top of  
214 the Lower Jurassic strata within the basin, and were deposited onlap on the Paleozoic  
215 basement toward the range (Figs. 5a and 8b). Middle Jurassic sediments of the Xishanyao and  
216 Toutunhe formations extend to a larger area with respect to the Lower Jurassic and, as a  
217 whole, the paleorelief lateral extension was certainly less important during Middle Jurassic  
218 than during Triassic/Early Jurassic (Fig. 8b). During latest Jurassic to Early Cretaceous, thick

219 breccias were deposited onto the Middle Jurassic sediments through an angular unconformity  
220 (*cf.* Kalaza Fm.). These breccias are restricted to the front of the modern Tian Shan and  
221 **change rapidly to finer-grained deposits in lateral equivalents.** This configuration **is**  
222 **reminiscent of the general** architecture of current fans deposited along the modern Tian Shan  
223 range **that originate from the present day high relief to the south, but show** limited northward  
224 transport of sediments (Fig. 8c). In turn, location of the main morphological northern front of  
225 the paleo- Tian Shan, during Latest Jurassic to Early Cretaceous, would approximately  
226 coincide with the one of the current range front (Fig. 5). The uplift **documented** by these  
227 coarse-grained sedimentary breccias is also recorded by AFT chronology studies; **Fission-**  
228 **track** modeling indicates **a ca. 160 and 120 Ma** cooling age along a Dushanzi-Kuqa corridor,  
229 in the mountain interior (Dumitru et al., 2001; Jolivet et al., 2010). Apatite sampled from  
230 Bayanbulak area yields the earliest cooling ages of Early Cretaceous (Dumitru et al., 2001;  
231 Wang et al. 2009).

232         Because no major tectonic event occurred in the Northern Tian Shan during Mesozoic  
233 times (e.g. De Grave et al., 2007), the Paleozoic subduction-collision orogeny (Gao et al.,  
234 1998; Laurent-Charvet et al., 2002; Charvet et al., 2007) appears as the most probable origin  
235 of the Mesozoic paleorelief above described. In such case, the Tian Shan would persist as  
236 remnant relieves for several tens of Ma after the end of the orogenic events which are  
237 progressively **and** unconformably overlain by Triassic and then Jurassic sedimentation (e.g.  
238 onlap structures, mesoscale paleorelief infilling). This scenario implies extremely low erosion  
239 rates to allow the preservation of a significant relief; such feature **has** already been reported  
240 for other regions of Central Asia from thermochronological (AFT) and field data analyses  
241 (Jolivet et al., 2007). In parallel, Central Asia Mesozoic tectonic history is marked by the  
242 polyphased Cimmerian orogeny in Tibet area (e.g. Hendrix et al., 1992; Sobel and Dumitru,  
243 1997; De Grave et al., 2007). Low amplitude, far-field effects can thus be recognized in the

244 Mesozoic northern Tian Shan: one early collision stage – Qiantang/Kunlun blocks during Late  
245 Triassic/Middle Jurassic – would correspond to the drastic coarsening of the Lower Jurassic  
246 sedimentation. In turn, a later collision stage – Lhasa/Qiantang blocks during Late  
247 Jurassic/Early Cretaceous – well corresponds to the deposits of the thick and coarse breccias  
248 of the Kalaza Fm. at that time. In this case, a tectonic origin of the relief rejuvenation is  
249 attested by a major angular unconformity observed regionally.

250 As unambiguously demonstrated, the physiography of the modern Tian Shan  
251 dominantly results from the recent tectonic evolution of the area (e.g. Tapponnier and Molnar,  
252 1977; Avouac et al., 1993; Métivier and Gaudemer, 1997; Charreau et al., 2009). However,  
253 this study put forward that the current Tian Shan topography can probably not be considered  
254 as the consequence of the Cenozoic intracontinental reactivation alone, but as a combination  
255 of the Cenozoic deformations superimposed on a reminiscent Mesozoic paleo-range. These  
256 new results question on the amplitude of the movements that could be estimated along the  
257 northern front structures during Cenozoic intracontinental reactivation.

### 258 *Acknowledgements*

259 Field and laboratory work in the present study are financially supported by Chinese National  
260 973 Program (2009CB825008) and Chinese National S&T Major Project 2011ZX05008.  
261 Prof. A.R. Carroll, Dr. J. Charreau, and an anonymous reviewer are warmly thanked for their  
262 constructive reviews. We are also grateful for the help by Prof. Carlo Doglioni (*Editor*) and  
263 Prof. Gerhard Wörner (*Associate Editor*). Discussions on seismic profiles' interpretation with  
264 Dr. Y. Branquet have also been greatly appreciated. The first author benefices a Ph.D  
265 scholarship from French Embassy in Beijing and IGGCAS.

266 **References**

- 267 Abdrakhmatov, K.Y., Aldazhanov, S.A., Hager, B.H., Hamburger, M.W., Herring, T.A.,  
268 Kalabaev, K.B., Makarov, V.I., Molnar, P., Panasyuk, S.V., Prilepin, M.T., Reilinger, R.E.,  
269 Sadybakasov, I.S., Souter, B.J., Trapeznikov, Y.A., Tsurkov, V.Y. and Zubovich, A.V., 1996.  
270 Relatively recent construction of the Tien Shan inferred from GPS measurements of present-  
271 day crustal deformation rates. *Nature*, **384**, 450-453.
- 272 Allen, M.B., Windley, B.F., Zhang, C., Zhao, Z.Y. and Wang, G.R., 1991. Basin Evolution  
273 within and Adjacent to the Tien-Shan Range, NW China. *J. Geol. Soc. London*, **148**, 369-378.
- 274 Avouac, J.P., Tapponnier, P., Bai, M., You, H. and Wang, G., 1993. Active Thrusting and  
275 Folding Along the Northern Tien-Shan and Late Cenozoic Rotation of the Tarim Relative to  
276 Dzungaria and Kazakhstan. *J. Geophys. Res.*, **98**, 6755-6804.
- 277 Burchfiel, B.C., Brown, E.T., Deng, Q.D., Feng, X.Y., Li, J., Molnar, P., Shi, J.B., Wu, Z.M.  
278 and You, H.C., 1999. Crustal shortening on the margins of the Tien Shan, Xinjiang, China. *Int.*  
279 *Geol. Rev.*, **41**, 665-700.
- 280 Burov, E.B., Lobkovsky, L.I., Cloetingh, S. and Nikishin, A.M., 1993. Continental  
281 lithosphere folding in Central Asia (Part II): constraints from gravity and topography.  
282 *Tectonophysics*, **226**, 73-87.
- 283 Carroll, A.R., Liang, Y., Graham, S.A., Xiao, X., Hendrix, M.S., Chu, J., and McKnight, C.L.,  
284 1990. Junggar basin, northwest China: Trapped late Paleozoic ocean. *Tectonophysics*, **181**, 1-  
285 14.

- 286 Carroll, A. R., Graham, S.A., Hendrix, M.S., Ying, D., and Zhou, D., 1995. Late Paleozoic  
287 tectonic amalgamation of northwestern China: sedimentary record of the northern Tarim,  
288 northwestern Turpan, and southern Junggar basins. *Geol. Soc. Am. Bull.*, **107**, 571-594.
- 289 Carroll, A.R., Graham, S.A. and Smith, M.E., 2010. Walled sedimentary basins of China.  
290 *Basin Res.*, **22**, 17-32.
- 291 Charreau, J., Chen, Y., Gilder, S., Barrier, L., Dominguez, S., Augier, R., Sen, S., Avouac,  
292 J.P., Gallaud, A., Graveleau, F. and Wang, Q.C., 2009. Neogene uplift of the Tian Shan  
293 Mountains observed in the magnetic record of the Jingou River section (northwest China).  
294 *Tectonics*, **28**, TC2008, doi:10.1029/2007TC002137.
- 295 Charvet, J., Shu, L.S. and Laurent-Charvet, S., 2007. Paleozoic structural and geodynamic  
296 evolution of eastern Tianshan (NW China): welding of the Tarim and Junggar plates.  
297 *Episodes*, **30**, 162-186.
- 298 Cloetingh, S., Burov, E. and Poliakov, A., 1999. Lithosphere folding: primary response to  
299 compression? (from central Asia to Paris basin). *Tectonics*, **18**, 1064–1083.
- 300 De Grave, J., Buslov, M.M. and Van den Haute, P., 2007. Distant effects of India–Eurasia  
301 convergence and Mesozoic intracontinental deformation in Central Asia: Constraints from  
302 apatite fission-track thermochronology. *J. Asian Earth Sc.*, **29**, 188-204.
- 303 Deng, Q.D., Zhang, P.Z., Xu, X.W., Yang, X.P., Peng, S.Z., and Feng, X.Y., 1996.  
304 Paleoseismology of the northern piedmont of Tianshan Mountains, northwestern China. *J.*  
305 *Geophys. Res.*, **101**, 5895-5920.
- 306 Dumitru, T.A., Zhou, D., Chang, E.Z., Graham, S.A., Hendrix, M.S., Sobel, E.R., and Carroll,  
307 A.R., 2001. Uplift, exhumation, and deformation in the Chinese Tian Shan. in: Paleozoic and



- 308 Mesozoic tectonic evolution of central Asia: From continental assembly to intracontinental  
309 deformation (Hendrix, M.S., and Davis, G.A., eds). *Geol. Soc. Am. Mem.*, **194**, 71–99.
- 310 Gao, J., Li, M.S., Xiao, X.C., Tang, Y.Q. and He, G.Q., 1998. Paleozoic tectonic evolution of  
311 the Tianshan Orogen, northwestern China. *Tectonophysics*, **287**, 213-231.
- 312 Graham, S.A., Hendrix, M.S., Wang, L.B. and Carroll, A.R., 1993. Collisional successor  
313 basins of western China Impact of tectonic inheritance on sand composition. *Geol. Soc. Am.*  
314 *Bull.*, **105**, 323-344.
- 315 Han B.F., He, G.Q. and Wang, S., 1999. Postcollisional mantle-derived magmatism,  
316 underplating and implications for basement of the Junggar Basin. *Sci. China. Ser. D*, **42**, 113-  
317 119.
- 318 Hendrix, M.S., Graham, S.A., Carroll, A.R., Sobel, E.R., Mcknight, C.L., Schulein, B.J., and  
319 Wang, Z.X., 1992. Sedimentary Record and Climatic Implications of Recurrent Deformation  
320 in the Tian-Shan - Evidence from Mesozoic Strata of the North Tarim, South Junggar, and  
321 Turpan Basins, Northwest China. *Geol. Soc. Am. Bull.*, **104**, 53-79.
- 322 Hendrix, M.S., Dumitru, T.A. and Graham, S.A., 1994. Late Oligocene Early Miocene  
323 Unroofing in the Chinese Tien-Shan - an Early Effect of the India-Asia Collision. *Geology*, **22**,  
324 487-490.
- 325 Hendrix, M.S., 2000. Evolution of mesozoic sandstone compositions, southern Junggar,  
326 northern Tarim, and western Turpan basins, northwest China: A detrital record of the  
327 ancestral Tian Shan. *J. Sed. Res.*, **70**, 520-532.
- 328 Huang, B. and Li, J., 2007. Sporopollen assemblages from the Xishanyao and Toutunhe  
329 formations at the Honggou section of the manasi river, xinjiang and their stratigraphical  
330 significance. *Acta Micropaleontologica Sinica*, **24**, 170-193.

- 331 Jolivet, M., Ritz, J.F., Vassalo, R., Larroque, C., Braucher, R., Todbileg, M., Chauvet, A., Sue,  
332 C., Arnaud, N., de Vicente, R., Arzhanikova, A. and Arzhanikova, S., 2007. Mongolian  
333 summits: An uplifted, flat, old but still preserved erosion surface. *Geology*, **35**, 871-874.
- 334 Jolivet, M., Dominguez J., Charreau J., Chen, Y., Farley, K.A., Li, Y.A. and Wang, Q.C.,  
335 2010. Mesozoic and Cenozoic tectonic history of the Central Chinese Tian Shan: Reactivated  
336 tectonic structures and active deformation. *Tectonics*, **29**, TC6019,  
337 doi:10.1029/2010TC002712.
- 338 Laurent-Charvet S., Charvet, J., Shu, L.S., Ma, R.S. and Lu, H.F., 2002. Late Paleozoic  
339 collisional strike-slip deformations in Tianshan and Altay, eastern Xinjiang, NW China. *Terra*  
340 *Nova*, **14**, 249-256.
- 341 Li Z., Zhang L., Qian C., Wang Y. and Bai G., 1978. Regional geological survey report of  
342 Geological map 1:200000, Shichang sheet. China Ministry of Geology and Mineral Resource,  
343 Beijing.
- 344 Li, Z., Song, W.J., Peng, S.T., Wang, D.X. and Zhang, Z.P., 2004. Mesozoic-Cenozoic  
345 tectonic relationships between the Kuqa subbasin and Tian Shan, northwest China: constraints  
346 from depositional records. *Sed. Geol.*, **172**, 223-249.
- 347 Liu, Z., 1990. Sporo-pollen assemblage from Middle Jurassic Xishanyao Formation of  
348 Shawan, Xinjiang, China. *Acta Palaeontologica Sinica*, **29**, 63-82.
- 349 Lu Y.Z. and Deng S.W., 2005. Triassic-Jurassic Sporopollen Assemblages on the Southern  
350 Margin of the Junggar Basin, Xinjiang and the T-J Boundary. *Acta Geologica Sinica*, **79**, 15-  
351 28.

- 352 Martinod, J., and Davy, P., 1992. Periodic instabilities during compression of the lithosphere  
353 1. Deformation modes from an analytical perturbation method. *J. Geophys. Res.*, **92**, 1999–  
354 2014.
- 355 Martinod, J. and Davy, P., 1994. Periodic instabilities during compression of the lithosphere 2.  
356 Analogue experiments. *J. Geophys. Res.*, **99**, 12057–12069.
- 357 Métivier, F. and Gaudemer, Y., 1997. Mass transfer between eastern Tien Shan and adjacent  
358 basins (central Asia): Constraints on regional tectonics and topography. *Geophys. J. Int.*, **128**,  
359 1-17.
- 360 Sengör, A.M.C., Natal'in, B.A., Burtman, V.S., 1993. Evolution of the Altaid tectonic collage  
361 and Paleozoic crust growth in Eurasia. *Nature*, **364**, 299-307.
- 362 Sobel, E.R. and Dumitru, T.A., 1997. Thrusting and exhumation around the margins of the  
363 western Tarim basin during the India-Asia collision. *J. Geophys. Res.*, **102**, 5043-5063.
- 364 Tapponnier, P. and Molnar, P., 1977. Active Faulting and Tectonics in China. *J. Geophys.*  
365 *Res.*, **82**, 2905-2930.
- 366 Wang, B. Chen, Y., Zhan, S., Shu, L.S., Faure, M., Cluzel, D., Charvet, J. and Laurent-  
367 Charvet, S., 2007. Primary Carboniferous and Permian paleomagnetic results from the Yili  
368 Block (NW China) and their implications on the geodynamic evolution of Chinese Tian Shan  
369 Belt. *Earth Planet. Sci. Lett.*, **263**, 288-308.
- 370 Wang, Q. C., Li S. J. and Du z. L., 2009. Differential uplift of the Chinese Tian Shan since the  
371 Cretaceous: constraints from sedimentary petrography and apatite fission-track dating. *Int. J.*  
372 *Earth Sci.*, **98**, 1341-1363.

- 373 Wang, X.W., Wang, X.W., Liu, J.P., Liu, J.P. and Ma, Y.S., 2005. Analysis of the fold-thrust  
374 zone in the southern Junggar Basin , north western China. *Earth Science Frontiers*, **12**, 411-  
375 421.
- 376 Wang, Z., Wu, J., Lu, X., Liu, C., and Zhang, J., 1990, Polycyclic tectonic evolution and  
377 metallogeny of the Tian Shan mountains. Beijing, Science Press.
- 378 Windley, B.F., Allen, M.B., Zhang, C., Zhang, C., Zhao, Z.Y. and Wang, G.R., 1990.  
379 Paleozoic accretion and Cenozoic reformation of the Chinese Tien Shan range, Central Asia.  
380 *Geology*, **18**, 128-131.
- 381 XBGMR-WUSU, 1973, Bureau of Geological and Mineral Resources of Xinjiang Uygur  
382 Autonomous Region, Geological map of Wusu Region, Scale 1:200.000, China Ministry of  
383 Geology and Mineral Resource, Beijing.
- 384 XBGMR-HOUXIA, 1977, Bureau of Geological and Mineral Resources of Xinjiang Uygur  
385 Autonomous Region, Geological map of Houxia Region, Scale 1:200.000, China Ministry of  
386 Geology and Mineral Resource, Beijing.
- 387 XBGMR-SHICHANG, 1978, Bureau of Geological and Mineral Resources of Xinjiang  
388 Uygur Autonomous Region, Geological map of Shichang Region, Scale 1:200.000, China  
389 Ministry of Geology and Mineral Resource, Beijing.
- 390 XBGMR, 1993, Regional geology of Xinjiang Uygur autonomy region.– Geological Memoirs,  
391 Ser. 1, No. 32, Map Scale 1: 1.500.000, Geological Publishing House, Beijing.
- 392 Yang, J., and Sun, S., 1982. The discovery of Early and Middle Jurassic megaspores from the  
393 Junggar Basin, Xinjiang, and their stratigraphic significance. *Acta Geologica Sinica*, **4**, 375–  
394 379.

395 Yang, J.L, Wang Q.F. and Lu H.N., 2005, Discovery of cretaceous and Paleocene charophyte  
396 floras from well Hu-2 in the southern edge of Junggar basin. *Acta Micropalaeontologica*  
397 *Sinica*, **22**, 251-268.

398 *Figure captions*

399 Fig. 1 Simplified geological map of the northern Tian Shan from Wusu to Urumqi areas.

400 Mesozoic is most exposed in the southernmost parts of the Junggar basin along the adjacent  
401 Tian Shan range, particularly to the East (Urumqi area). ‘He’ indicates river in Chinese  
402 (modified after XBGMR, 1993).

403 Fig. 2 Synthetic and representative stratigraphic log made in the Manasi He area, northern  
404 Tian Shan piedmont, where Cenozoic have been widely eroded (modified after Hendrix et al.,  
405 1992).

406 Fig. 3 Landscape pictures of representative features of the Mesozoic sedimentary series (see  
407 locations on Fig.1) (a) Coarse-grained conglomerate of lowermost Jurassic forming prominent  
408 bars in the landscape (southern Qingshui He area); (b) Uppermost Jurassic coarse-grained  
409 breccias (Kalaza Fm. - J<sub>3k</sub>) unconformably overlying the Upper Jurassic Qigu formation (J<sub>3q</sub> ;  
410 Hutubi He area); (c) Close-up view of the Uppermost Jurassic Kalaza Fm. breccias (west to  
411 Hutubi He area). Note the angular shape of the clasts (locally exceeding 50 cm) and the clast-  
412 supported character of the coarser levels.

413 Fig. 4 Structural and sedimentological observations in the Houxia area. (a) Simplified  
414 geological map with some field structural measurements (modified after XBGMR, 1977), (b)  
415 detailed geological cross-section across the northern limb of the syncline structure (see  
416 location on Fig. 4a), (c) Close-up view of the Lower Jurassic breccias including  
417 Carboniferous basement angular clasts (see location on Fig. 4b), (d) picture of the steep  
418 bedding of Jurassic layers close to the southward thrust (see location on Fig. 4b).

419 Fig. 5 (a) Simplified geological map of the Hutubi He area (modified after XBGMR, 1978,  
420 1993) with few structural measurements from field work. ‘A’ indicates location where Middle

421 Jurassic deposits directly and unconformity lie onto Carboniferous basement without Triassic  
422 or Lower Jurassic, (b) Geological cross-section along the Hutubi He constrained by field data,  
423 seismic profile (after Wang et al., 2005) and nearby drill wells W1 and W1'. Location of the  
424 section is indicated on Fig. 5a. Extension of the available seismic profile is indicated on the  
425 section.

426 Fig. 6 Examples of onlap structures of the Jurassic sediments over the Paleozoic basement  
427 units. (a) Picture and interpretation field sketch of the southern part of the Hutubi He (see  
428 location on Fig. 5a): note the overall southward onlap of the Jurassic sediments over the  
429 folded basement. To the north, a basement block is back thrust over the sediments (see Fig.  
430 5b), (b) Picture and interpretation field sketch of a small valley, west of the Hutubi He (see  
431 location on Fig. 5a): meso-scale basement relief covered by Jurassic sandstones as evidenced  
432 by onlaps over a steep inherited ~150 m high basement paleorelief (scarp). Basement rocks  
433 are deformed with a large inclined Paleozoic fold.

434 Fig. 7 Structural and sedimentological observations in the Wusu area. (a) Simplified  
435 geological map (modified after XBGMR, 1973) with few structural measurements. (b)  
436 Geological cross-section constrained by field data, seismic profile and drill well W2 (see Fig.  
437 7a for location). (c) Picture and corresponding field sketch interpretation of the  
438 unconformable contact between Jurassic layers and the Carboniferous basement (see Fig. 7a  
439 for location).

440 Fig. 8 Sketch views of the paleogeographic evolution of the northern piedmont of Tian Shan  
441 during Early, Middle and Upper Jurassic/Cretaceous boundary. Main observations that  
442 constrain this study are localized on the drawings as: A for Fig. 3a; B for Fig. 4c (lower  
443 Jurassic sedimentary breccias); C for Fig. 6a (onlap covering of Paleozoic basement rocks by

444 Jurassic sandstones) and D for Figs. 3b and 3c (thick Kalaza Fm. breccias with angular  
445 discordance at the base).