COMPUTATIONAL APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING SURFACE HEAT FLOW, THE METAMORPHIC ROCK RECORD, AND SUBDUCTION GEODYNAMICS

by

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The following individuals read and discussed the dissertation submitted by student Buchanan C. Kerswell, and they evaluated the student's presentation and response to questions during the final oral examination. They found that the student passed the final oral examination.

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DEDICATION

To my mentors, colleagues, friends, and loved ones who take special interests in my life.

This work is yours as much as it is mine.

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ABSTRACT

Pressure-temperature-time (PTt) estimates from high-pressure (HP) metamorphic rocks and global surface heat flow (SHF) rates evidently encode information about pressure, temperature, and strain fields deep in subduction zones (SZs). Previous work demonstrates the possibility of decoding such geodynamic information by comparing physics-based numerical models with empirical observations of SHF and the metamorphic rock record. However, antithetical interpretations of (non)uniformity with respect to PT-strain fields are emerging from this line of inquiry. For example, while mechanical coupling depths inverted from SHF are narrowly distributed among SZs, maximum PT conditions inverted from exhumed metamorphic rocks are relatively wide-ranging, and yet also uniformly distributed across pressures up to 2.4 GPa. This dissertation scrutinizes (dis)similarities among SZs inferred from large numerical and empirical datasets by applying a variety of computational techniques. First, coupling depths for 13 modern SZs are predicted after observing coupling in 64 numerical geodynamic simulations. Second, spatial patterns of SHF are assessed in two-dimensions by interpolating thousands of SHF observations near several SZ segments. Third, PTt distributions of over one million markers traced from the previous set of 64 SZ simulations are compared with hundreds of empirical PTt estimates from the rock record to assess the effects of thermo-kinematic boundary conditions on deep mechanical processing of rock in SZs. These studies conclude the following. Mechanical coupling between plates is primarily controlled by the upper plate lithospheric thickness, with marginal responses to other thermo-kinematic boundary conditions. Surface heat flow interpolations show high variance within and among SZ segments, suggesting local, rather than widespread, continuity of PT-strain fields deep within SZs. Computed marker recovery rates correlate with thermo-kinematic boundary conditions, and are therefore expected to vary among SZs. Finally, computed PTt distributions of markers show patterns consistent with transient, localized recovery from a cooling, serpentinizing plate interface. Together, this work encourages more antireductionist and diversified views of subduction geodynamics until SHF and PTt datasets can more precisely distinguish (dis)similarities in PT-strain fields within and among SZs. Strategically scaling PTt and SHF datasets in the future will improve computational precision and confidence, and thus will advance subduction zone research.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER 1:

HEAT FLOW STUFF

First chapter goes like this (**?**)

1.1 Subheading

Some details on one aspect of the chapter (**?**)

1.1.1 Sub-subheading

some small details (**?**)

CHAPTER 2:

METAMORPHIC STUFF

2.1 About chpt2

2.2 More about chpt2

Some details on chapter two

APPENDIX A:

A.1 some things

$a + b = c$

APPENDIX B:

B.1 some other things

This is an appendix page