The physico-chemical properties and structural characteristics of artificial soil for cut slope restoration in Southwestern China

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Cut slopes are frequently generated by construction work in hilly areas, and artificial soil is often sprayed onto them to promote ecological rehabilitation. The artificial soil properties are very important for effective management of the slopes. This paper uses fractal and moment methods to characterize soil particle size distribution (PSD) and aggregates composition. The fractal dimension (D) showed linear relationships between clay, silt, and sand contents, with coefficients of determination from 0.843 to 0.875, suggesting that using of D to evaluate the PSD of artificial soils is reasonable. The bias (CS) and peak convex (CE) coefficients showed significant correlations with structure failure rate, moisture content, and total porosity, which validated the moment method to quantitatively describe soil structure. Railway slope (RS) soil has lower organic carbon and soil moisture, and higher pH than natural slope soil. Overall, RS exhibited poor soil structure and physicochemical properties, increasing the risk of soil erosion. Hence, more effective management measures should be adopted to promote the restoration of cut slopes.

Large numbers of cut slopes are produced in the process of building transport infrastructure, which have severe impact on ecosystems. Soil properties at cut slopes are changed, since the topsoil and vegetation were destroyed. Natural succession processes are time consuming, and significant soil erosion, combined with adverse soil properties, make revegetation difficult. Hence, measuring the slope characteristics is essential when considering slope stability, environmental protection, and aesthetics, to promote vegetation restoration1–3. Numerous techniques have been attempted to provide an ecologically sustainable and socio-economic method for restoring cut slopes4–6. Hydro-seeding, for example, sprays an artificial soil mixture onto cut slopes to supply root anchorage and nutrient sources for vegetation. The depth of the artificial soil is approximately 10 cm, and the backfill soil is an important component of the artificial mixture. Restoration practitioners have begun to use rock fragments obtained from the cut slope surface after crushing and passing through 2 mm sieves to replace agricultural soil as backfill. This method is commonly used to restore cut slopes in southwest China, because it is very convenient and economical. However, rock fragments have not undergone adequate soil forming processes, and it is unclear if this contributes to establishing vegetation and slope stability. Hence, the edaphic characteristics of this artificial system must be evaluated and monitored.

Soil quality influences its basic functions, such as retaining water, promoting biodiversity, supporting agriculture, and resisting flooding, erosion, and landslides7. Maintenance of soil quality is critical for ensuring the sustainability of the environment and the biosphere. Previous soil research has been largely concentrated on agricultural8–10, forest11–13, and typical grassland14,15 soils. Recently, ecological restoration has been widely discussed with increasing awareness of environmental conservation issues, and considerable documentation produced regarding slope soil, particularly slope restoration and stabilization16–18. Katz et al. (2011) used numerical modeling to assess rock fall hazards and associated risk in the Soreq and Refaim valleys, and showed that rock falls induced by earthquakes can damage the road network. Chirico et al. (2013), amongst others, examined the role...
of vegetation in the unsaturated region for stability of shallow soils, and found that vegetation helps to control soil loss and stabilize cut slopes, because vegetation soil systems enhance the soil shear strength\(^\text{19,20}\). However, recent studies have shown that vegetation degeneration and soil erosion may occur several years after artificial revegetation\(^\text{21–23}\). To achieve successful long term restoration of cut slopes, artificial soil must be studied and understood.

Railways are the most effective overland transport in China, and the protection of rock cut slopes during railway construction is very important for local railroad safety\(^\text{24}\). However, there is little available information about the edaphic characteristics of this artificial system. In this study, the physicochemical characteristics of artificial soil were measured, as well as their interrelationships. Soil properties, such as bulk density, porosity, pH value, cationic exchange capacity (CEC), soil organic carbon (SOC), and moisture content are closely related to soil quality. We chose edaphic properties (physical, chemical, and biochemical properties) to assess soil quality. Our main objectives were to better understand the characteristics of artificial soil on rock cut slopes through chemical and physical characteristics, to assess the sustainability of artificial soil applied to cut slopes, and provide a theoretical and practical basis for artificial soil restoration.

**Materials and Methods**

**Study site.** The study site was located in the vicinity of Suining railway station, Suining, Sichuan Province, China (lat. 30°32’N, long. 105°32’E). This area has humid subtropical monsoonal climate, mean annual temperature 17.4 °C, average annual precipitation 927.6 mm, and average annual wind velocity 0.7 m/s. The soil at the study site was classified as Eutric Cambisol using the FAO-UNESCO system. Geographically, the area is characterized by uneven topographic profile with many hills, and many cut slopes formed during railway construction and subsequently hydro-seeded. Artificial soil used in hydro-seeding included rock fragments obtained from the cut slope surface.

We selected three similar slopes with different land uses, as shown in Fig. 1:

1. Rock-cut slope (RS). Excavated for railway construction in 2003, and hydro-seeded in September 2004;
2. Natural slope (NS) without human disturbance;
3. Agricultural slope (AS) under conventional tillage.

RS was the main study object, with NS and AS providing references. All the slopes are approximately 45 m high with approximately 40° gradient.

**Sample collection and determination.** Data collection was by randomized sampling followed an experimental design with three treatments and four replicates per treatment. Twenty-five actual soil samples comprised an individual analysis sample, from which four duplicate samples were drawn and fully mixed before analysis. The samples were obtained from 5–8 cm beneath the soil surface, as the backfill soil cover was less than 10 cm. Soil moisture and bulk density were determined immediately after sampling using the oven dry and cutting ring
methods, respectively. After plant tissues and gravel were removed, soil samples were air dried in the laboratory. Aggregate stability was measured by Yoder’s method, incorporating dry and wet sieving. Small particles percentages (<0.002, 0.002–0.02, 0.02–0.05, and 0.05–0.25 mm) were measured by the pipette method. Each air dried sample was finely ground and passed through a 1 mm sieve then measured for total porosity, CEC, SOC, and pH. The activities of Catalase, Urease, and Sucrase were measured following Singh et al. Microbial biomass C and N were measured following Xue et al.

**Determination of soil structure parameters.** Soil textural class was identified following the ISSS soil texture classification system. The proportions of clay (<0.002 mm), silt (0.002–0.02 mm), and sand (0.02–2 mm) were used to characterize particle size distribution (PSD). The fractal dimension (D) was used to express mass PSD fractal dimensions. All analyses were conducted using SPSS software (19.0).

**Spearman’s test** was used to determine correlations between soil properties, and linear regression was used for the contributing to the soil formation and stability. NS stable structure enhances finer particle fractions, providing

| Slope patterns | PSD | Textural class | Fractal dimension |
|----------------|-----|----------------|------------------|
|                | Sand % | Silt % | Clay % |                |                  |
| RS             | 85.94 ± 1.31 | 13.68 ± 1.21 | 4.93 ± 0.72 | Loamy Sand | 2.61 ± 0.01 |
| NS             | 59.53 ± 0.98  | 42.85 ± 0.87  | 12.14 ± 0.48  | Sandy Loam | 2.72 ± 0.003 |
| AS             | 71.46 ± 4.16  | 26.91 ± 4.61  | 9.47 ± 1.10   | Sandy Loam | 2.70 ± 0.02 |

Table 1. Soil texture and particle size distribution. Notes: RS = cut slopes reconstructed from rock fragments. AS = agricultural slope. NS = natural slopes. Values in each column with the same letter are not significantly different (p > 0.05, LSD) among the slope patterns. **Significant at the 0.01 level.”

The destruction rate of soil aggregates (P) is an important index for evaluating erosion durability, with higher P values implying lower soil aggregate stability.
increasing pH. Therefore, controlling soil pH is very important in controlling the dispersion of clay within the RS and AS, which do not differ significantly. Particle repulsion clay particles has been shown to increase with increases. The coefficients of determination for the linear regressions range from 0.843 to 0.875, indicating that it is reasonable to use fractal models to evaluate the PSD of this artificial backfill soil.

Figure 2 shows that D has a positive correlation with fine particle content, i.e., D increases as clay and silt content increases. However, D correlates negatively with coarse particle content, i.e., D decreases as sand content increases. The coefficients of determination for the linear regressions range from 0.843 to 0.875, indicating that it is reasonable to use fractal models to evaluate the PSD of this artificial backfill soil.

The PSD fractal dimension (D) ranges from 2.61 (RS) to 2.72 (NS), and the differences among the three different land uses are significant (Table 1). The variations in the trend of D are consistent with the soil's clay and silt contents. The fractal dimension of RS is significantly lower AS, indicating that RS has lost micro-particles and is less viscous than AS. RS texture is harsher than NS and is more susceptible to erosion after rainfall, which may have caused the fine particles to be removed, leaving the coarser ones, and indirectly led to the lack of water and nutrient supply for plants on the slope. RS texture is harsher than NS for slope revegetation. Consequently, two soil improvement treatments should be actioned: increase the viscosity between the artificial soil and rock, and improve the long term availability of nutrients and water.

The fundamental physical and chemical properties of the three soils are shown in Table 2. The three soils are slightly alkaline, with pH from 7.83 to 7.94. NS has significantly lower soil pH than AS, indicating that NS has lost micro-particles and is less viscous than AS. RS has undergone adequate field management and soil improvement treatments, and so has proportionally more micro-particles. The fractal dimension of NS is significantly larger than AS, because the removal of human disturbance (tillage), is advantageous for forming favorable soil structurers, retaining finer particles and enhancing the fractal dimension.

The PSD fractal dimension (D) ranges from 2.61 (RS) to 2.72 (NS), and the differences among the three different land uses are significant (Table 1). The variations in the trend of D are consistent with the soil's clay and silt contents. The fractal dimension of RS is significantly lower AS, indicating that RS has lost micro-particles and is less viscous than AS. RS texture is harsher than NS and is more susceptible to erosion after rainfall, which may have caused the fine particles to be removed, leaving the coarser ones, and indirectly led to the lack of water and nutrient supply for plants on the slope. RS texture is harsher than NS for slope revegetation. Consequently, two soil improvement treatments should be actioned: increase the viscosity between the artificial soil and rock, and improve the long term availability of nutrients and water.

Table 2. Fundamental physical and chemical properties of slope soils. Notes: SOC = soil organic carbon. CEC = cation exchange capacity. Values in each column with the same letter are not significantly different (p > 0.05, LSD) among the slope patterns. **Significant at the 0.01 level.
Table 3. Pearson correlation coefficients for characteristic parameters and selected soil properties. Notes: P = structure failure rate (%). D = Fractal dimension. SOC = soil organic carbon (g·kg⁻¹). MC = moisture content (%). BD = bulk density (g·cm⁻³). TP = total porosity (%). CEC = cation exchange capacity (cmol·kg⁻¹). Significant differences, *P < 0.05 and **P < 0.01.

| Slope patterns | Catalase (ml·g⁻¹) | Urease (mg·g⁻¹) | Sucrase (mg·g⁻¹) | Microbial biomass C (mg·kg⁻¹) | Microbial biomass N (mg·kg⁻¹) |
|----------------|-------------------|----------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| RS             | 1.42 ± 0.04ᵇ      | 31.23 ± 0.95ᵃ  | 1.76 ± 0.15ᵇ    | 135.94 ± 6.67ᵇ               | 27.77 ± 1.90ᵇ              |
| NS             | 2.01 ± 0.08ᵇ      | 41.05 ± 0.41ᵃ  | 8.29 ± 0.57ᵇ    | 194.03 ± 5.12ᵇ               | 54.65 ± 1.17ᵇ              |
| AS             | 1.71 ± 0.03ᵇ      | 38.39 ± 1.40ᵇ  | 7.19 ± 0.93ᵇ    | 176.44 ± 1.48ᵇ               | 45.79 ± 2.62ᵇ              |
| F value        | 112.17ᵇ           | 76.41ᵇ         | 89.91ᵇ          | 159.24ᵇ                      | 166.96ᵇ                    |

Table 4. Biochemical parameters of slope soils. Notes: Values in each column with the same letter are not significantly different (p > 0.05, LSD) among the slope patterns. Significant differences, *P < 0.05 and **P < 0.01.

- Stability of soil aggregates and aggregate size distribution. The status of soil dry aggregates and water-stable aggregates not only reflect soil structure, but also soil fertility. Table 5 shows significantly differences in the water stable aggregates (>0.25 mm) among the three land uses. Aggregate content of NS is significantly higher than AS and RS, from both dry and wet sieving. The water stable aggregate content of RS is significantly higher than AS, with AS < RS < NS. There are no significant differences between dry aggregates and water-stable aggregates.
(<0.25 mm) for RS and AS. Thus, large aggregate content (<0.25 mm) in AS and RS are similar, without rain washing, whereas water stable aggregate content is significantly different. RS shows greater soil destruction rates of soil aggregates than NS, with AS > RS > NS. This may be due to human disturbance and the absence of effective protection causing structure degradation, and clay and organic matter loss, so soil aggregates collapse more easily, and consequently produce higher destruction rates.

Soil aggregate stability an important factor for soil structure. Figure 2 shows the cumulative distribution of soil aggregate weights after dry and wet sieving for the three land-uses. The area difference (ΔS) between the dry and wet sieved curves reflects aggregate stability (Fig. 3), where stability is decreased for larger areas, the area differences (Fig. 3) ranged from 2.334 (AS) to 0.392 (NS), i.e., aggregate stability of AS is significantly less than NS. This is consistent with the structure failure rate (Table 5), which follow NS > RS > AS. NS has significantly more aggregate stability than RS. RS is artificial rock fragments with additional supplements, such as humus and water retention agents, but its eluviation, deposition, transport, and biological cycles are acutely deficient, which make it vulnerable to rainfall and wind erosion. Soil erosion resistance weaker composition of the material, is caused by soil erosion particularly serious underlying causes. We suggest using soil that has undergone sufficient long

Table 5. Aggregate stability and characteristic parameters of size distribution. Notes: Cₘ = bias coefficient. Cₑ = peak convex coefficient. Values in each column with the same letter are not significantly different (p > 0.05, LSD) among the slope patterns. **Significant at the 0.01 level.

| Slope patterns | Sieving method | >0.25 mm (%) | Structure failure rate (%) | Cₘ | Cₑ |
|----------------|----------------|--------------|---------------------------|-----|-----|
| RS             | Dry-sieving method       | 90.65 ± 0.74³ | 28.06 ± 2.23³ | 0.95 ± 0.11³ | 50.52 ± 0.08³ |
|                | Wet-sieving method       | 65.21 ± 1.77³ | 19.32 ± 1.29³ | 1.49 ± 0.06³ | 0.86 ± 0.04³ |
|                | Dry-sieving method       | 96.46 ± 0.53³ | 62.61 ± 2.17³ | −0.39 ± 0.04³ | −0.66 ± 0.05³ |
| NS             | Wet-sieving method       | 77.82 ± 0.99³ | 19.32 ± 1.29³ | 1.49 ± 0.06³ | 0.86 ± 0.04³ |
|                | Dry-sieving method       | 90.16 ± 2.06³ | 19.32 ± 1.29³ | 1.49 ± 0.06³ | 0.86 ± 0.04³ |
| AS             | Wet-sieving method       | 33.67 ± 1.31³ | 21.70³          | 50.52 ± 0.08³ | 0.52 ± 0.08³ |

F value | 796.04** | 416.21** | 510.94** | 575.31** |

Table 5. Aggregate stability and characteristic parameters of size distribution. Notes: CS = bias coefficient. CE = peak convex coefficient. Values in each column with the same letter are not significantly different (p > 0.05, LSD) among the slope patterns. **Significant at the 0.01 level.

Figure 3. Cumulative distribution of soil aggregate weights after dry and wet sieving. Notes: (a) AS = Agricultural slope; (b) RS = rock-cut slope; (c) NS = natural slope. ΔS = area difference between the dry and wet sieve aggregate cumulative distributions.
term soil forming processes for repairing cut slopes, to increase soil erosion resistance and reduce the risk of slope protection failure.

Table 5 shows the characteristic parameters for soil aggregate size distributions. There are significant differences among the three land uses. $C_v$ decreases from NS to AS, with AS being negative. A similar trend is evident for $C_p$. This shows NS has good aggregate stability, resistance to dispersion, and larger aggregates have numerical advantage. RS has weaker aggregate stability, aggregate size is smaller, and resistance to mechanical crushing was poor. This may be because the soil sprayed onto rock cut slopes has little viscosity on the rocks and/or lack of water and nutrient supply for plants. Therefore, RS has poorer soil erosion resistance than NS. Long term continuous cultivation can degrade soil due to erosion, organic matter loss, and destruction of soil structure. Hence, AS aggregate stability is poorer NS. $C_v$ and $C_p$ both show significant negative correlations with structure failure rate ($R = -0.992$ and $R = -0.994$, respectively, Table 3), and significant correlation with moisture content and total porosity. Thus, $C_v$ and $C_p$ can be used to quantitatively describe soil structure. The moment method utilizes all information about aggregate analysis, and may be a useful tool to evaluate soil structure development during slope restoration.

Conclusions

This study investigated the physical chemical properties of artificial soil on cut slopes formed during railroad construction.

RS shows poorer quality characterized by significant loss of fine particles; lower soil moisture, CEC, and organic carbon content; weaker structural stability; higher soil structure failure and pH, compared with NS. Thus, RS texture was harsh for slope revegetation and has high risk of surface runoff and soil erosion due to insufficient soil forming processes.

More effective protection measures should be taken to promote restoration of cut slopes: Increase viscosity between artificial soil and rock surfaces to reduce soil erosion and the risk of slope protection failure; decrease artificial soil pH with to provide a more suitable soil environment for ecological restoration; and increase soil nutrients available to vegetation by adding organic fertilizer and biochar. Further research is needed regarding practical application methods.

Fractal dimension is sensitive to the increased coarse particle content, is linearly related to selected physical chemical properties of the soil. On the other hand, the moment method utilizes all the soil aggregate information. Therefore, the fractal and moment methods can be considered appropriate indexes to evaluate overall quality of synthetic soil used for revegetation of a cut slope.

This study has highlighted that poor physical chemical properties of artificial soil lack the necessary conditions for vegetation recovery and the slope surface lacks supporting stability. These will cause landslides, with consequential impacts on transportation and safety. Ecological rehabilitation of railway slopes is imperative. Future study should extend this work to provide better understanding of the requirements for artificial soil used in ecological restoration of cut slopes.

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Acknowledgements
Financial support from the National Science Foundation of China (No. 41501112 and No. 41171175), and the Key Technology R&D Program of Sichuan Province, China (2016FZ0056) is acknowledged. The authors thank all the supporters of this project and the referees for their constructive comments.

Author Contributions
All authors were involved in the study design and contributed to the writing of the manuscript. Y.A. (Yingwei Ai) and S.C. (Shunan Chen) designed the research; S.C., T.D. (Tengyun Dong), B.L. (Binbin Li) and C.L. (Chuanren Li) performed field experiments and sample collection; S.C., R.L. (Ruifong Luo), X.A. (Xiaoyan Ai) and Z.C. (Zhaoqiong Chen) performed laboratory and other experiments; S.C. analyzed the data and, along with Y.A., led the writing of the manuscript.

Additional Information
Competing financial interests: The authors declare no competing financial interests.

How to cite this article: Chen, S. et al. The physico-chemical properties and structural characteristics of artificial soil for cut slope restoration in Southwestern China. Sci. Rep. 6, 20565; doi: 10.1038/srep20565 (2016).

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