Measurement report: Characteristics of nitrogen-containing organics in PM$_{2.5}$ in Urumqi, northwest China: differential impacts of combustion of fresh and old-age biomass materials

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Abstract: Nitrogen-containing organic compounds (NOCs) are abundant and important aerosol components deeply involved in the global nitrogen cycle. However, the sources and formation processes of NOCs remain largely unknown, particularly in the city (Urumqi, China) farthest from the ocean worldwide. Here, NOCs in $PM_{2.5}$ collected in Urumqi over a one-year period were characterized by ultrahigh-resolution mass spectrometry. The abundance of CHON compounds (mainly oxygen-poor unsaturated aliphatic-like species) in the positive ion mode was higher in the warm period than in the cold period, which was largely attributed to the contribution of fresh biomass material combustion (e.g., forest fires) associated with amidation of unsaturated fatty acids in the warm period, rather than the oxidation processes. However, CHON compounds (mainly nitro-aromatic species) in the negative ion mode increased significantly in the cold period, which was tightly related to old-age biomass combustion (e.g., dry straws) in wintertime Urumqi. For CHN compounds, alkyl nitriles and aromatic species showed higher abundance in the warm and cold periods, respectively. Alkyl nitriles can be derived from fresh biomass material combustion associated with the dehydration of amides (the main CHON compounds in the warm period). In contrast, aromatic species were tightly related to old-age biomass burning. These findings further suggested different impacts of the combustion of fresh- and old-age biomass materials on NOC compositions in different seasons. The overall results shed light on the mechanisms by which fresh and old-age biomass materials release different NOCs during combustion.

Keywords: Aerosols, Organic nitrogen, Molecular composition, Fresh biomass, Old-

47   age biomass

1. Introduction

50   Fine particulate matter ($PM_{2.5}$) is a typical atmospheric pollutant that can affect the

51   global climate system, as well as urban air quality and human health (Seinfeld et al.,

52   2016; Wang et al., 2021a). Organic aerosol (OA) contributes significantly (20–90%) to

53    $PM_{2.5}$ mass concentration in most polluted areas worldwide (Zhang et al., 2007; Han et

54   al., 2023). Up to 77% of molecules in OA include nitrogen-containing functional groups

55   (Ditto et al., 2020; Kenagy et al., 2021), which have been suggested to play important

56   roles in the formation, transformation, acidity, and hygroscopicity of OA (Xu et al.,

57   2020; Wang et al., 2017b; Laskin et al., 2009). Moreover, the further oxidation or

58   nitrification of some nitrogen-containing organic compounds (NOCs) and volatile

59   organic compounds (VOCs) by ozone (O_3), hydroxyl radical (•OH), and nitrogen oxides

60   (NO_x) can lead to an increase in the health hazards of OA (Franze et al., 2005; Bandowe

61   and Meusel, 2017). Nitrated amino acids and nitrated PAHs are two representative

62   hazard NOCs (Franze et al., 2005; Bandowe and Meusel, 2017). Thus, the identification

63   of aerosol NOCs at the molecular level is important for improving our understanding

64   of the precursors, sources, and formation processes of nitrogen-containing OA.

65   Previous observations in urban, rural, marine, and forest areas have suggested that

66   the molecular composition and relative abundance of aerosol NOCs were spatially

67   different (Samy and Hays, 2013; Jiang et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2012; Xu et al., 2023;

68   Zeng et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022; Zeng et al., 2020). These differences can be mainly

69   attributed to the diverse sources and formation mechanisms of aerosol NOCs.

70   Commonly reported primary sources include combustion process releases and natural

71   emissions (e.g., soils, plant debris, pollen, and ocean) (Song et al., 2022; Wang et al.,

72   2017b; Cape et al., 2011; Lin et al., 2023). In addition, aerosol NOCs can also be tightly

73   associated with secondary formation processes involving the reactions of reactive

74   nitrogen with VOCs or particle-phase CHO compounds (Bandowe and Meusel, 2017;

75   Zarzana et al., 2012; Laskin et al., 2014). For example, laboratory experiments have

76   found that the oxidation of isoprene and α-/β-pinene in the presence of NO_x can result

77   in the formation of organic nitrates (e.g., methacryloyl peroxynitrate, dihydroxynitrates,

78   and monohydroxynitrates) (Surratt et al., 2010; Rollins et al., 2012; Nguyen et al., 2015).

79   The reduced nitrogen species (e.g., NH_3, NH_4^+, and organic amines) have been

80   demonstrated to contribute to the formation of NOCs through "carbonyl-to-imine"

81   transformations in the laboratory experiments (Zarzana et al., 2012; Laskin et al., 2014).

82   In the field observation studies, NOCs in particulate matter were analyzed at the

83   molecular level to indicate their sources and formation mechanisms (Jiang et al., 2022;

84   Lin et al., 2012; Zhong et al., 2023). Xu et al. (2023) characterized the variations of

85   molecular compositions in urban road $PM_{2.5}$, suggesting that organic nitrates increased

86   largely through the interactions of atmospheric oxidants, reactive gas-phase organics,

87   and aerosol liquid water. Several field studies conducted in Beijing (China) and

88   Guangzhou (China) also suggested that the molecular compositions and formation of

89   NOCs were tightly associated with environmental conditions (Jiang et al., 2022; Lin et

90   al., 2012; Xie et al., 2020). Generally, most studies on aerosol NOCs were performed

91   in economically developed regions, as well as in forest and marine areas (Jiang et al.,

92   2022; Wang et al., 2017a; Ditto et al., 2022b; Altieri et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2020; Liu et

93   al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2022; Zeng et al., 2020).In contrast, few studies have

94   investigated the sources and atmospheric transformation of NOCs in the northwest

95   border urban of China (e.g., Urumqi) with fragile ecology and harsh environmental

96   conditions (e.g., cold winter and dry summer), which may hinder our comprehensive

97   and in-depth understanding of the formation process of NOCs in ambient aerosols.

98   Biomass burning emissions were widely reported in the source identification of

99   aerosol NOCs in northern and southwestern China because of heating and cooking

100   needs (Zhong et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2021c; Chen et al., 2017). A recent observation

101   study in urban Tianjin suggested that most CHON compounds in wintertime $PM_{2.5}$

102   originated from biomass burning (Zhong et al., 2023). The CHN_2 compounds have been

103   identified in biomass burning OA (BBOA) (Laskin et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2017b).

104   Moreover, the high temperature generated by biomass burning can facilitate the release

105   of ammonia, a process that caused the reaction of carboxylic acids (e.g., oleic acid) with

106   ammonia to form amides and alkyl nitriles (Radzi Bin Abas et al., 2004; Simoneit et al.,

107   2003). Interestingly, we found that biomass burning in rural China typically includes

108   fresh biomass materials (e.g., forest fires) and old-age biomass materials (e.g., straw

109   after autumn harvest, fallen leaf, and deadwood). Fresh biomass is rich in oils and

110   proteins, whereas old-age biomass materials are usually oligotrophic due to the transfer

111   of nutrients to tender tissues or fruits (Jian et al., 2016; Xu and Xiao, 2017). Thus, NOCs

112   released from different types of biomass combustion may vary in molecular

113   compositions. However, there are large gaps in our current knowledge about the

114   impacts of fresh and old-age biomass burning on NOCs in ambient aerosols.

115   Urumqi (northwest China) is the largest inland city farthest from the ocean in the

116   world, which is becoming increasingly prominent due to the national strategy of the

117   "One Belt, One Road." The city and neighboring countries have a dry summer that can

118   easily trigger forest fires (Bátori et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2021), while the winter is

119   freezing with intensive old-age biomass and fuel combustion for heating (Ren et al.,

120   2017). In this study, we presented one-year ambient measurements of the chemical

121   compositions in $PM_{2.5}$ collected from Urumqi. The specific aims of this study are (1) to

122   investigate the molecular-level speciation of functionalized organic nitrogen

123   compounds via high-resolution mass spectrometry with positive (ESI+) and negative

124   (ESI−) ionizations and (2) to investigate the potential sources and formation processes

125   for NOCs with a special focus on the relative influences of fresh and old-age biomass

126   burning in different seasons.

127

128   **2. Materials and methods**

129   **2.1. Study site description and sample collection**

130   The study was conducted in Urumqi city, which has an average altitude of 800 m.

131   The region has an arid temperate continental climate with an annual mean temperature

132   of 7.4 ± 13.9 °C and an annual mean rainfall of 27.8 mm. The sampling site is located

133   in the suburban area (Boda campus of Xinjiang University) of the city (87.75°E,

134   43.86°N) (**Figure S1**), which is characterized by low population and traffic density.

This is because Urumqi is relatively vast and sparsely populated compared to developed coastal cities in China (Qizhi et al., 2016). Additionally, the area is surrounded by mountains on three sides, resulting in the difficulty in diffusing air pollutants. The dominant forest trees in this area are *Picea schrenkiana*, *Betula tianschanica* Rupr., *Populus talassica* Kom., and *Ulmus pumila* L.. The dry climate and strong sunlight in the warm period (18.81 ± 6.4°C, **Table S1**) would be the main culprits of forest fires in the local and nearby areas. In the cold period (−1.96 ± 11.26°C) (**Table S1**), the centralized heating and old-age biomass burning may be the main contributors to local air pollution. Thus, it provides an unexpected opportunity to investigate the potentially differential impacts of fresh and old-age biomass burning on aerosol NOCs.

A high-volume air sampler (Series 2031, Laoying, China) was set up on the rooftop of a building (School of Geology and Mining Engineering, Xinjiang University). $PM_{2.5}$ samples (n = 73) were collected every five days with a duration of ∼24 h onto prebaked (450 °C for ∼ 10 h) quartz fiber filters (Pallflex, Pall Corporation, USA) from 1 March 2018 to 26 February 2019. One blank filter was collected every month (n = 12). All filter samples were stored at −30°C until further analysis. During the sampling campaigns, the meteorological data (e.g., temperature and relative humidity) and the concentrations of O_3 and NO_x were recorded hourly from the adjacent environmental monitoring station. These hourly data were then averaged to obtain daily values to match the sampling time of $PM_{2.5}$. In addition, the trajectories (72 h) of air masses arriving at the sampling site at each sampling event were calculated to investigate the potential influence of pollutant transport on aerosol NOCs.

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2.2. Chemical analysis

A portion of each filter sample was extracted twice using 3 mL methanol (LC-MS grade, CNW Technologies Ltd.) under sonication in a chilled ice slurry (~4 °C). The extracted solutions were filtered through a polytetrafluoroethylene syringe filter (0.22 μm, CNW Technologies GmbH). Subsequently, the extracts were concentrated to 300 μL with a gentle stream of gaseous nitrogen (Shanghai Likang Gas Co., Ltd). The final extracts were analyzed using an ultra-performance liquid chromatography quadrupole time-of-flight mass spectrometry equipped with an electrospray ionization (ESI) source (UPLC-ESI-QToFMS, Waters Acquity Xevo G2-XS) in both ESI+ and ESI− modes (Wang et al., 2021b). It should be pointed out that UPLC-ESI-MS (i.e., TOF-only) was used to identify molecular formulas of organic matter, while the functional groups of the target molecule formulas were deciphered by UPLC-ESI-MS/MS (i.e., tandem mass spectrometry). Ions obtained from m/z 50–700 were assigned molecule formulas by assuming hydrogen or sodium adducts in ESI+ mode and deprotonation in ESI− mode. Detailed chromatographic conditions, parameter selection, and quality control were displayed in the Supplement (**Sect. S1**). Notably, there may be differences in ionization efficiencies between compound types. However, the exact impacts of ionization efficiency on multifunctional compounds in a complex mixture are uncertain and difficult to evaluate (Ditto et al., 2022b; Yang et al., 2023). Thus, the intercomparison across compound relative abundance without considering potentially differentiated ionization efficiency was conducted in this study, which was similar to many previous

179   studies (Xu et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2022).

180   For the measurement of inorganic ions, a portion of each filter sample was

181   ultrasonically extracted with Milli-Q water (18 MΩ cm) (3 mL) in an ice-water bath

182   (~4 °C). The extract solutions were then filtered via a polytetrafluoroethylene syringe

183   filter (0.22 μm, Millipore, Billerica, MA). The concentrations of water-soluble

184   inorganic ions, including NO_3^-, SO_4^{2-}, Cl^-, Ca^{2+}, Mg^{2+}, Na^+, and NH_4^+ in the samples

185   were determined using an ion chromatograph system (Dionex Aquion, Thermo

186   Scientific, USA) (Xu et al., 2022a; Lin et al., 2023).

187

188   **2.3. Compound categorization and predictions of ALW, pH, and hydroxyl radical**

189   The molecular formulas identified by UPLC-ESI-QToFMS were classified into

190   several major compound classes based on their elemental compositions (i.e., C, H, O,

191   and N), primarily including CHO, CHON, and CHN groups in the ESI+ mode and CHO,

192   CHON, CHOS and CHONS groups in the ESI– mode (Wang et al., 2017b). CHOS and

193   CHONS compounds were also detected in the ESI– mode, with numbers of 398 and

194   112, respectively (**Table S2**). As this study focused mainly on NOCs, sulfur-containing

195   species were not discussed. Unless stated otherwise, all of the detected molecules were

196   reported as neutral molecules. The double-bond equivalent (DBE) and carbon oxidation

197   state (OS_C) were calculated to reflect the unsaturation degree of the organics and the

198   composition evolution of organics that underwent oxidation processes, respectively

199   (details in **Sect. S2**) (Kroll et al., 2011; Xu et al., 2023). The identified compounds can

200   be further classified into four subgroups based on the number of carbon atoms and OS_C

201 value (Kroll et al., 2011; Xu et al., 2023). Briefly, semi-volatile oxidized organic aerosol

202 (SV-OOA) and low-volatility oxidized organic aerosol (LV-OOA) were associated with

203 multi-step oxidation reactions, with OS_C values between -1 and $+1$ and molecular

204 formulas less than 13 carbon atoms. BBOA has OS_C values ranging from -0.5 to -1.5

205 and more than seven carbon atmos. Compounds with OS_C values less than -1 and

206 carbon atoms above 20 may be related to hydrocarbon-like organic aerosol (HOA).

207 Additionally, the modified aromaticity index (AI_{mod}) was also calculated to indicate the

208 aromaticity of organic compounds (details in **Sect. S2**) (Koch and Dittmar, 2006). The

209 van Krevelen diagrams and AI_{mod} values have been proposed to further classify organic

210 matter categories (Xu et al., 2023; Su et al., 2021), according to which the identified

211 five subgroups included saturated-like molecules (Sa, $H/C \geq 2.0$), unsaturated aliphatic-

212 like molecules (UA, $1.5 \leq H/C < 2.0$), highly unsaturated-like molecules (HU, $AI_{mod} \leq$

213 0.5 and $H/C < 1.5$), highly aromatic-like molecules (HA, $0.5 < AI_{mod} \leq 0.66$), and

214 polycyclic aromatic-like molecules (PA, $AI_{mod} > 0.66$). Furthermore, it has been

215 suggested that the above subgroups can be subdivided into O-poor and O-rich

216 compounds depending on their O/C ratio (**Table S8**) (Merder et al., 2020; Zhong et al.,

217 2023).

218   A thermodynamic model (ISORROPIA-II) was applied to predict the mass

219 concentration of aerosol liquid water (ALW) and the value of pH with particle-phase

220 ion concentrations as well as ambient temperature and relative humidity as the inputs,

221 as detailed in our previous publications (Xu et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2023; Xu et al.,

222 2022b). The model output results based on our data set showed that 94% and 90% of

223   NO_3^- were in the aerosol phase in the cold and warm periods, respectively. Hence, the

224   predictions of pH and ALW were conducted without considering gaseous nitric acid

225   (Guo et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2021c). 78% and 21% of NH_4^+ were in the aerosol phase

226   in the cold and warm periods, respectively. Moreover, it is important to note that

227   gaseous NH_3 measurements were not conducted and ammonia partitioning was not

228   considered in this study. Thus, a bias correction of 1 pH unit was applied to calculate

229   the aerosol pH values (Guo et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2021c). The concentrations of

230   ambient •OH were predicted using empirical formula (Ehhalt and Rohrer, 2000; Wang

231   et al., 2020).

232

233   **3. Results and discussion**

234   **3.1. Overall molecular characterization of organic aerosols**

235   **Figures 1a** and **1c** show the mass spectra of organic compounds detected in ESI+

236   and ESI−, respectively. More compounds were identified in ESI+ (1885 molecular

237   formulas) than in ESI− (1091 molecular formulas) (**Table S2**), which was similar to

238   previous reports about the molecular characteristic of biomass burning aerosols and

239   urban aerosols (Jiang et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2017b). The molecular weights of the

240   compounds with relatively high signal intensity mainly ranged from 100 Da to 500 Da

241   in ESI+, which was larger than those (100–300 Da) observed in the urban (Changchun,

242   Guangzhou, and Shanghai) (Wang et al., 2021a) and agriculture (Suixi) (Wang et al.,

243   2017b) regions of China. In contrast, the species with the strong signal intensity fell

244   between 100 Da and 300 Da in ESI−. This mass range detected in Urumqi organic

245   aerosols was comparable to previous observations in urban (Xi'an) aerosols (Han et

246   al., 2023) but significantly lower than that in firework-related urban (Beijing) aerosols

247   (300–400 Da) (Xie et al., 2020). On average, the molecular number and relative

248   abundance of CHON compounds (150–500 Da) were dominant in ESI+, accounting

249   for 45.57% of the total molecular number and 62.70 ± 6.83% of the total signal

250   intensity (**Figures 1a** and **Table S2**). CHO compounds were the second most abundant

251   categories (28.76 ± 4.75% of the total signal intensity), followed by CHN compounds.

252   However, previous observations conducted in Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Changchun

253   suggested that the compounds in ESI+ were dominated by CHN and CHON species

254   (Wang et al., 2021a). In ESI−, although the number of CHON compounds was less

255   than CHO, the relative abundance of CHON compounds (150–250 Da) was higher

256   (**Figures 1d** and **Table S2**). The finding was consistent with the results obtained in

257   Shanghai and Changchun but different from the case in Guangzhou (Wang et al.,

258   2021a). The average H/C ratios of CHO (1.62−1.66) and CHON (1.79−1.83)

259   compounds in ESI+ mode (**Table S3**) were higher than those (0.94−1.13 for CHO and

260   1.27−1.47 for CHON) in Changchun, Shanghai, and Guangzhou (Wang et al., 2021a).

261   However, the average O/C ratios of CHO (0.25−0.3) and CHON (0.22−0.3)

262   compounds in ESI+ mode (**Table S3**) were less than those (0.42−0.43 for CHO and

263   0.27−0.45 for CHON) in the urban areas (Shanghai and Guangzhou) (Wang et al.,

264   2021a). Overall, these dissimilarities in molecular characteristics of organic aerosols

265   between Urumqi and other areas may be attributed to their different sources and

266   formation mechanisms.

267   **Figures 1b** and **1d** show the time series of the fractional distributions of various

268   organic matter categories in different ion modes. The abundance of CHO compounds

269   in ESI+ exhibited a temporal variation similar to that of CHON compounds ($r = 0.51$,

270    $P < 0.01$), with increased levels in the warm period. This indicated that CHO

271   compounds may be important precursors for the formation of NOCs (via reactions in

272   the gas- and/or particle-phases) or that they have similar origins. Previous simulation

273   experiments have demonstrated that higher temperatures increase the concentration of

274   oxygenated organic molecules, while lower temperatures can allow less oxidized

275   species to condense (Stolzenburg et al., 2018; Frege et al., 2018). In addition, solar

276   radiation and atmospheric oxidation capacity are also important factors promoting the

277   formation of more oxygenated organic molecules (Li et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2022). Air

278   temperature, radiation, and atmospheric oxidation capacity were much higher in the

279   warm period than in the cold period in Urumqi (**Table S1**) (Wan et al., 2021), which

280   may be partly responsible for increased abundances of CHO and CHON compounds in

281   the warm period. However, the abundance of CHN compounds tended to increase from

282   the warm period to the cold period. Since the ESI+ mode is highly sensitive to

283   protonatable species, organic amines were expected to predominate the CHN

284   compounds (Han et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2021a). It is well documented that the

285   formation of amine salt in the particle phase is tightly associated with aerosol acidity

286   and water (Liu et al., 2023). Thus, the reduced pH value and increased ALW level in

287   the cold period (**Table S1**) provided greater potential for converting gaseous amines

288   into particles.

289   In ESI− mode, the abundances of CHON and CHO compounds exhibited a

290   significantly increased level in the cold period (**Figure 1d**), a variation pattern which

291   was completely opposite to the case in ESI+ mode. The ESI− mode is more sensitive

292   to deprotonatable compounds like nitrophenols, organic nitrates, organosulfates, and

293   organic acids (Jiang et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2012). The formations of these compounds

294   were highly impacted by ALW and aerosol acidity (Ma et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2014;

295   Zhou et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2023). However, Urumqi has dry and dusty weather,

296   particularly in warm period, resulting in a quite low ALW concentration (1.86 ± 1.90

297    $\mu g\ m^{-3}$) in the warm period (**Table S1**). Moreover, the calculated mean pH value was

298   6.86 ± 1.71 (**Table S1**) during the warm period, which implies that the fine aerosol

299   particles in the warm period in Urumqi was neutral or slightly alkaline. Obviously, the

300   aerosol characteristics of the warm period in Urumqi may hinder the formation of these

301   organic compounds measured in ESI− mode. In contrast, the increased ALW

302   concentration and decreased pH value during the cold period can facilitate the

303   formation of CHO and CHON compounds through the partitioning of gas-phase species

304   to the particles and subsequent aqueous phase reactions (Xu et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2023).

305   Furthermore, the total signal intensity of CHO compounds was significantly correlated

306   with that of CHON ($r = 0.62$, $P < 0.01$), indicating that they may have similar origins

307   or that CHO compounds may serve as important precursors for CHON compound

308   formation. In general, the differentiated seasonal variation patterns for the different

309   types of NOCs measured here can be attributed to the unique meteorological conditions

310   in Urumqi and different ionization mechanisms in ESI+ and ESI− modes. The sources

311   and formation mechanisms of NOCs will be further discussed in the following sections.

312

3.2. Seasonally differential sources and formation mechanisms of CHON

compounds

315   CHON compounds can be derived from the reactions between CHO species and

316   reactive nitrogen species (NO_x, NH_3, and NH_4^+) (Lee et al., 2016; De Haan et al., 2017),

317   as also partly implied by significant positive correlations (r = 0.51–0.62, P < 0.01)

318   between total signal intensity of CHO and CHON compounds in both ESI+ and ESI−

319   modes. Thus, CHO compounds were further classified based on their OS_C values to

320   preliminarily explore their origins and linkages with CHON compound formation

321   (**Figures 2a** and **2b**). In ESI+ mode, the OS_C values of the detected CHO compounds

322   (−1.75 to 0.5) were higher than those of primary vehicle exhausts (−2.0 to −1.9) (Aiken

323   et al., 2008), likely indicating a weak (or indirect) contribution of primary vehicle

324   exhausts to CHO molecules in Urumqi. The signal intensity of BBOA dominated the

325   total OA signal intensity and was higher in the warm period than in the cold period

326   (**Figure 2e**). However, previous studies conducted in China (e.g., Beijing, Xi'an,

327   Shanghai, and Liaocheng) suggested that biomass burning was more significant in the

328   cold seasons (Li et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2017a; Chen et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2009;

329   Wang et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2022). Furthermore, we found that the oxygen-poor

330   unsaturated aliphatic compounds showed a high signal intensity in the warm period and

331   that the signal intensities of all categories of compounds in the warm period were

332   weakly correlated with atmospheric oxidants (i.e., O_3 and •OH) (r < 0.1, P > 0.05).

333 Thus, the formation or source of CHO compounds in the warm period may not be

334 mainly controlled by high atmospheric oxidation but rather by biomass burning, which

335 was distinguished from previous reports (Duan et al., 2020; Kondo et al., 2007; Zhang

336 et al., 2023). This consideration was also supported by the fact that there were

337 significantly more fire spots in the warm period than in the cold period (**Figure 3**). It

338 should be noted that the materials used for biomass burning in the cold period in rural

339 China are typically old-age plant tissues, such as dead branches of pine trees, dead

340 branches of shrubs, corn straw, and rice straw (**Figure S3**), while biomass burning in

341 the warm season is mainly attributed to forest fires or wildfires (relatively fresh

342 biomass). Accordingly, a large number of fresh biomass material burning occurred from

343 April to October each year in the neighboring countries (e.g., Kazakhstan) (Xu et al.,

344 2021) or regions of Urumqi (due to drought) (**Figure 3**) may be largely responsible for

345 high CHO compound abundance in the warm period.

346 The CHO species in ESI− had higher OS_C (−1.85 to 1.1) than those in ESI+ (−1.85

347 to 0.25) (**Figures 2c** and **2d**), which was consistent with a recent study conducted in

348 Guangzhou, China (Zou et al., 2023). The predominant subgroups of CHO in ESI−

349 were BBOA (66.4% of total signal intensity) and SV-OOA (23.1% of total signal

350 intensity), which was different from the observation in Shanghai (dominated by SV-

351 OOA and LV-OOA) (Wang et al., 2017a). Additionally, some specific saturated and

352 unsaturated aliphatic CHO substances (i.e., $C_{12-18}H_nO_2$) in ESI− showed higher

353 abundance in the warm season than in the cold season, which was contrary to the

354 variation pattern of other CHO compounds. These $C_{12-18}H_nO_2$ compounds were found

to be mainly fatty acids, such as stearic acid ($C_{18}H_{36}O_2$), oleic acid ($C_{18}H_{34}O_2$),

linolelaidic acid ($C_{18}H_{32}O_2$), palmitic acid ($C_{16}H_{32}O_2$), and palmitoleic acid ($C_{16}H_{30}O_2$)

(**Figure S4**), all of which usually accumulate in plants, particularly *Suaeda*

aralocaspica (W. Hogg and T. Gillan, 1984; Wang et al., 2011). Interestingly, this plant

was widely distributed in Central Asia as well as on the southern edge of the Junggar

Basin in Xinjiang, China (Wang et al., 2011). Although fatty acids can also originate

from food cooking (Zhao et al., 2007), there seem to be no seasonal differences in

cooking behavior locally. Thus, these results further confirmed our consideration that

the abundance of CHO compounds in the warm period was highly impacted by fresh

biomass material burning (e.g., forest fires or wildfires).

CHON molecules in ESI+ were mainly identified as unsaturated aliphatic-like

compounds that are oxygen poor (**Figures 4a** and **4b**), accounting for more than 70%

of the total signal intensities of CHON species (**Figure S5**). The signal intensity of

CHON species in ESI+ was greater in the warm period than in the cold period (**Figure

4e**). Moreover, BBOA contributed to 56.9 % of the total CHON signal intensity in the

warm period (**Figure S6**). These characteristics of CHON compounds were similar to

those of CHO. Considering a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.62$, $P < 0.01$)

between the total signal intensity of CHO and CHON compounds in ESI+, we thus

concluded that primary sources (i.e., fresh biomass material burning) were also one of

the main sources of CHON compounds. In this study, CHON compounds with O/N <

3 contributed $76.48 \pm 1.11\%$ of total CHON species in ESI+ (**Figure S7**), which was

much larger than the results observed in urban Tianjin in winter (less than 20%) (Zhong

et al., 2023). In particular, $C_{16}H_{33}ON$, $C_{18}H_{37}ON$, $C_{18}H_{35}ON$, $C_{18}H_{33}ON$, $C_{18}H_{31}ON$, and $C_{20}H_{33}ON$ showed a high abundance, together accounting for 55.04 ± 7.09 % of the total CHON abundance (**Table S4**). The carbon number of these compounds was consistent with that of fatty acids mentioned above; moreover, their abundances showed a positive correlation ($r = 0.43–0.81$, $P < 0.01$) with the abundances of corresponding fatty acids in the warm period. In contrast, these CHON compounds only showed a weak correlation ($r = -0.24 \sim 0.33$) with atmospheric oxidants (e.g., •OH, O_3, and NO_x). Thus, the formation mechanism of biomass burning-related NOCs in Urumqi during the warm period may be the interaction between fatty acids and reduced nitrogen species (e.g., NH_3) rather than the oxidation pathway involving CHO compounds and NO_x.

A recent laboratory study has suggested that NH_3 produced during the thermal degradation of amino acids can react with oleic acid from the pyrolysis of triglycerides to form amides (R1) (Ditto et al., 2022a). As discussed above, the combustion of fresh biomass materials (e.g., forest fires or wildfires) can release abundant fatty acids. In addition, wildfires can also emit large amounts of NH_3, with an average emission factor more than twice the NH_3 emission factor of agricultural fires (Tomsche et al., 2023). According to MS/MS analysis (**Table S5**), potential fatty acid-derived NOCs were indeed identified as amides. Thus, we proposed that the high temperature generated during wildfires or forest fires provides suitable conditions for the reaction of carboxylic acids and NH_3 to form amides. The specific process was presented in **Figure 5** (Pathway 1). It has been suggested that atmospheric oxidants can oxidize olefins (R2

399 and R3) to form hydroxyl nitrates and carbonyl nitrates (Perring et al., 2013). Therefore,

400 fatty acids (oleic acid as a representative) released from fresh biomass material burning

401 may also rely on oxidation pathways to form NOCs (**Figure 5**, Pathway 2). It is worth

402 noting that some products with double bonds after the amidation of unsaturated fatty

403 acids can continue to undergo the reactions of R2 and R3 in the atmosphere, resulting

404 in the formation of nitrooxy amides (**Figure 5**, Pathway 3). However, we found that the

405 abundance of oleic acid-derived amides via Pathway 1 in the warm period was more

406 than 100 times higher than that of NOCs with $-ONH_2$ (thus, the impact of ionization

407 efficiency is expected to be less than 100 times) from Pathways 3. In the cold period,

408 the abundance of fatty acids-derived amides decreased dramatically (**Figure 5** and

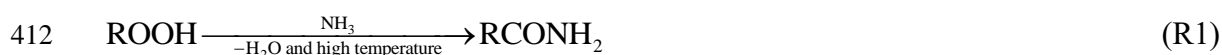
409 **Figure S8**). Thus, the overall results demonstrated that the combustion of fresh biomass

410 materials indeed contributed significantly to aerosol NOCs (e.g., amides) in the warm

411 period in Urumqi.

412 $$ ROOH \xrightarrow[\text{$-H_2O$ and high temperature}]{\text{NH_3}} RCONH_2 \tag{R1} $$

413 $$ RH \xrightarrow{\text{$\cdot OH$}} R\cdot \xrightarrow{O_2} RO_2\cdot \xrightarrow{NO} RONO_2 \tag{R2} $$

414 $$ R_1=R_2 \xrightarrow{NO_3\cdot} R_1(ONO_2)\text{-}R_2\cdot \xrightarrow{O_2} R_1(ONO_2)\text{-}R_2O_2\cdot \xrightarrow{RO_2\cdot,\ NO_3\cdot} R_1(ONO_2)\text{-}R_2(O) \tag{R3} $$

415 The CHON species detected in ESI− were mainly aromatic-like compounds,

416 whose signal intensities were significantly greater in the cold period than in the warm

417 period (**Figures 4c,4e** and **Figure S5**). Moreover, we found that several nitro-aromatic

418 compounds, including $C_6H_5O_3N$, $C_6H_5O_4N$, $C_7H_7O_3N$, $C_7H_7O_4N$, $C_7H_5O_5N$, and

419 $C_8H_9O_3N$ (confirmed by their authentic standards in the LC/MS analysis), contributed

420   up to 50% of the total CHON (ESI− mode) intensity (**Table S6**). Other NOCs with

421   relatively high signal intensity were mainly $O_{4-6}N_2$ species (contributed up to 25%),

422   such as $C_6H_4O_5N_2$, $C_7H_4O_7N_2$, $C_7H_6O_5N_2$, and $C_7H_6O_6N_2$, which have been suggested

423   to be associated with secondary photochemical or multiphase chemical processes

424   (Harrison et al., 2005; Cecinato et al., 2005; Salvador et al., 2021). However, the

425   abovementioned nitro-aromatic compounds including $C_6H_5O_3N$ (nitrophenol),

426    $C_6H_5O_4N$ (nitrocatechol), $C_7H_7O_3N$ (methyl-nitrophenol), and $C_7H_7O_4N$ (methyl-

427   nitrocatechol) were primarily identified as tracers of straw and wood burning (old-age

428   biomass materials commonly used in suburban and rural China) (Iinuma et al., 2010;

429   Kourtchev et al., 2016). A study about molecular characterization (ESI− mode) of

430   water-soluble aerosols emitted from the combustion of old-age biomass materials (i.e.,

431   dry corn straw, rice straw, and pine branches) and coal showed that OA from old-age

432   biomass burning typically contained much more nitro compounds and/or organonitrates

433   than that from coal, while OA from coal-smoke contained more sulfur-containing

434   compounds (Song et al., 2018). Thus, the old-age biomass burning associated with

435   winter heating rather than coal combustion may contribute a significant amount of

436   aerosol NOCs (e.g., nitrophenols) in wintertime Urumqi. However, it does not

437   necessarily suggest that the importance of multiphase chemistry in the formation of

438   NOCs was ignorable, as indicated by relatively high signal intensity of $O_{4-6}N_2$ species.

439   In general, the differential molecular characteristics of CHON species in different

440   seasons in Urumqi can largely attributed to different impacts of the combustion of fresh-

441   and old-age biomass materials.

442

3.3. CHN molecule evidence of fresh and old-age biomass burning in different periods.

Figures 6a and **6b** present the van Krevelen diagram of CHN compounds in the cold and warm periods. The CHN_1 compounds with relatively high signal intensity mainly contained 7–20 carbon atoms, among which $C_5H_5N(CH_2)_n$, $C_9H_7N(CH_2)_n$, and $C_{13}H_9N(CH_2)_n$ were dominant (78.68 ± 7.59 % of the total signal intensity of CHN_1 compounds in the cold period, **Table S7**). $C_5H_5N(CH_2)_n$ could be identified as pyridine and its homologues, which have been detected in freshly discharged BBOA (Dou et al., 2015). Additionally, the abundance of $C_5H_5N(CH_2)_n$ was positively correlated with that of $C_9H_7N(CH_2)_n$, $C_{13}H_9N(CH_2)_n$, and nitro-aromatic compounds mentioned above ($r = 0.46-0.81$, $P < 0.01$), particularly in the cold period with old-age biomass burning for heating. We further found that both the total signal intensity and aromaticity of CHN_1 species were much higher in the cold period (AI_{mod} of 0.52) than in the warm period (AI_{mod} of 0.35) (**Figure 6** and **Figure S9**). It has been suggested that old-age leaves contain more aromatic compounds compared to fresh leaves (Jian et al., 2016). Thus, the overall results implied that old-age biomass burning had an important contribution to the variation of CHN_1 compounds. In particular, the intensity of CHN_1 compounds was significantly negatively correlated with the concentration of O_3 and $\cdot OH$ ($r = -0.44 \sim -0.53$, $P < 0.01$), suggesting that atmospheric oxidation processes were the potential pathway for amine removal rather than the sources of particle amine salts (Zahardis et al., 2008; Qiu and Zhang, 2013). This result differed from the previous case, which

464   showed that the formation processes of CHN_1 and its homologs in Guangzhou (South

465   China) were tightly related to photo-oxidation processes (Jiang et al., 2022). The CHN_2

466   species showed a similar temporal variation pattern to the CHN_1 species. Moreover, the

467   abundances of total CHN_2 and major components ($C_{8-11}H_8N_2(CH_2)_n$, $C_{10}H_{14}N_2(CH_2)_n$,

468    $C_{10}H_{16}N_2(CH_2)_n$ and $C_5H_8N_2(CH_2)_n$) were positively correlated with that of total CHN_1

469   ($r = 0.55{-}0.90$, $P < 0.01$), but negatively correlated with the concentration of O_3

470   and $\cdot$OH ($r = -0.43 \sim -0.60$, $P < 0.01$). Clearly, old-age biomass burning, particularly

471   in the cold period, also exerted significant impacts on the abundance of CHN_2

472   compounds, which was also supported by several previous studies (Laskin et al., 2009;

473   Wang et al., 2017b; Song et al., 2022). A study about molecular characterization (ESI+

474   mode) of humic-like substances emitted from the combustion of old-age biomass

475   materials (i.e., dry corn straw, rice straw, and pine branches) and coals showed that OA

476   from old-age biomass burning typically contained much more CHN_2 compounds (55–

477   64%) than that from coal (20–37%), while OA from coal-smoke showed more CHN_1

478   compounds (78–84%) compared to that from old-age biomass materials (15–22%)

479   (Song et al., 2022). In this study, the signal intensity of CHN_1 compounds in the cold

480   period was about 40% higher than that in the warm period, while that of CHN_2

481   compounds showed a 160% increase from the warm period to the cold period. Thus,

482   although the contribution of fossil fuel (e.g., coal) combustion to NOCs in the cold

483   period cannot be ignored, our results at least suggested that the biomass burning-derived

484   CHN compounds showed a more significant increase compared to coal combustion-

485   derived compounds from the warm period to the cold period in Urumqi.

486   Interestingly, we found some CHN species with 16–20 carbon atoms showed

487   higher abundance in the warm period than in the cold period, a pattern opposite to that

488   of all other CNH compounds (**Figure 6c**). These $C_{16-20}N_1H_x$ compounds were further

489   identified as alkyl nitriles (**Table S5**) (Simoneit et al., 2003). In addition, the carbon

490   number of the identified alkyl nitriles was consistent with those of amides previously

491   proposed to be produced by fresh biomass burning. Thus, we proposed that fresh

492   biomass material burning in the warm period may provide a continuous high-

493   temperature environment to promote the dehydration of amides (**Figure 5**, Pathway 4).

494   These alkyl nitriles with double bonds can continue to undergo the reactions of R2 and

495   R3 **(Figure 5**, Pathway 5**)**. However, the signal intensity of the nitrooxy products in the

496   warm period was insignificantly correlated with the concentration of O_3, ·OH, and NO_x

497   ($P > 0.05$), likely indicating a weak influence of atmospheric oxidation on alkyl nitrile

498   removal in this site. The high-temperature dehydration of amides (e.g., erucamide) to

499   form alkyl nitriles (e.g., erucyl nitrile) has been demonstrated by Simoneit et al. (2003)

500   in a laboratory simulation experiment. A study on BBOA also showed that alkyl nitriles

501   can be serve as indicators of biomass burning in the ambient atmosphere (Radzi Bin

502   Abas et al., 2004). Furthermore, the abundance of identified alkyl nitriles initially

503   increased from March and peaked in September and October (**Figure S10**), a pattern

504   which was consistent with the interannual variation in wildfire areas (more in the warm

505   period) in Central Asian countries (Xu et al., 2021). Although cooking is also a potential

506   source of alkyl nitriles (Schauer et al., 1999), this activity does not have seasonal

507   differences. In contrast, the dramatically increased abundance of aromatic CNH

508 compounds in the cold period (**Figure S9**) can be attributed to the aqueous reactions of

509 amines emitted from old-age biomass material and coal combustion with acidic

510 substances, as indicated by significant correlations ($r = 0.61-0.95$, $P < 0.01$) between

511 total CHN abundance and SO_4^{2-} and NO_3^- concentrations. These findings further

512 confirmed that the NOCs from the combustion of fresh biomass materials in the warm

513 period in suburban Urumqi were compositionally different from those from old-age

514 biomass burning in the cold period.

515

516 **4. Conclusions**

517   The complexity of NOCs restricts our understanding of its sources and formation

518 processes. In this study, the molecular compositions of organic aerosols in $PM_{2.5}$

519 collected in Urumqi over a one-year period were systematically characterized in both

520 ESI− and ESI+ modes, with a major focus on NOCs. A large amount of NOCs were

521 identified, showing that NOCs in relatively highly oxidative and reduced forms can be

522 roughly distinguished via these two ionization modes. Based on the identification of

523 molecular markers of amides and alkyl nitriles (much higher in the warm period) and

524 the analysis of their formation mechanisms (less contribution of atmospheric oxidation),

525 we highlighted the important contribution of combustion of fresh biomass materials

526 such as forest fires and wildfires to NOCs in the warm season in Urumqi. In contrast,

527 the dramatically increased abundances of aromatic CNH compounds and nitro-aromatic

528 CHON compounds (mainly nitrophenols) in the cold period were tightly associated

529 with the impacts of old-age biomass material burning. These results were illustrated in

530   a diagram (**Figure 7**).

531   Biomass materials in rural China were typically old-age plant tissues, as

532   mentioned above. Fresh biomass materials (e.g., green vegetation) with the enrichment

533   of oils and proteins can exist in forest fires or wildfires. Indeed, previous studies have

534   suggested that biomass burning can lead to the formation of aerosol amines and nitriles.

535   However, field observation studies have yet to pay attention to the differences in aerosol

536   NOCs emitted from the combustion of fresh and old-age biomass materials. For the

537   first time, our results reveal that fresh biomass material combustion can contribute more

538   amines and nitriles than old-age biomass material combustion. Generally, this study

539   provides field evidence on the differential impacts of the combustion of fresh and old-

540   age biomass materials on aerosol NOCs, improving our current understanding of the

541   molecular compositions of organic nitrogen aerosols in a vast territory with a sparse

542   population in Northwest China. Moreover, according to the fact that the studied site is

543   highly affected by combustion emissions of different types of biomass materials, future

544   work is needed to deeply understand the quantitative contributions of different types of

545   biomass burning to OA in China.

546

547   **Data availability.** The data in this study are available at

548   https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10453929

549

550   **Competing interests.** The authors declare no conflicts of interest relevant to this study.

551

552 **Supplement.** Details of chemical analysis and data processing, eight tables (Tables

553 S1−S8), and ten extensive figures (Figures S1−S10).

554

555 **Author contributions.** YX designed the study. YJM, TY, and HWX performed field

556 measurements and sample collection; YJM and TY performed chemical analysis; YX

557 and YJM performed data analysis; YX and YJM wrote the original manuscript; and YX,

558 YJM, HWX, and HYX reviewed and edited the manuscript.

559

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564

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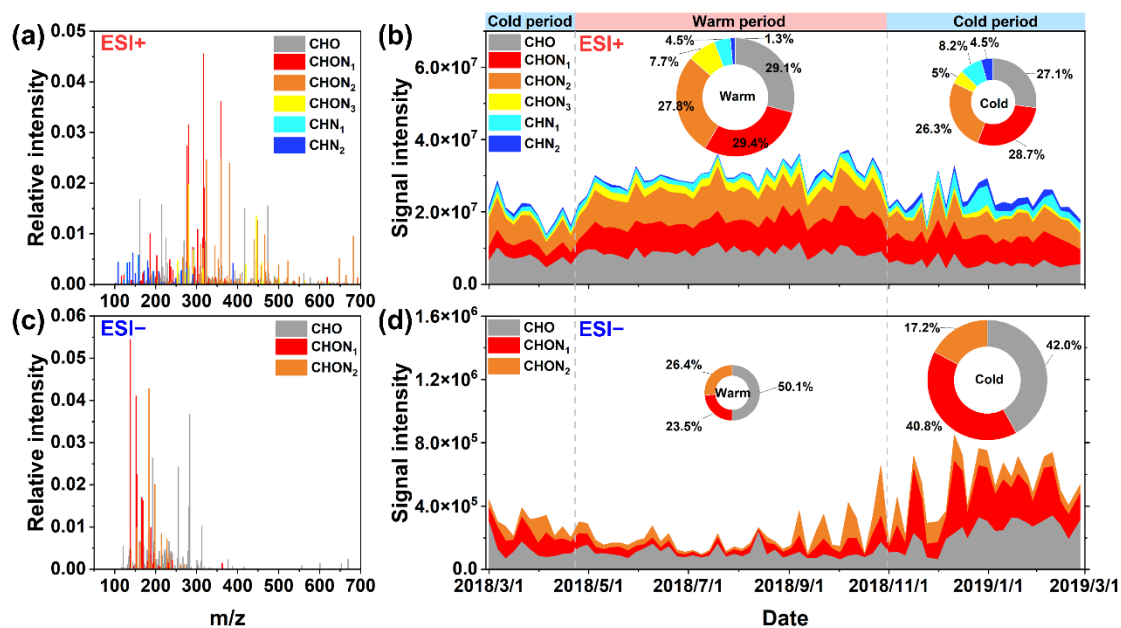
958   **Figure 1.**

959

960   **Figure 1.** The reconstructed mass spectrum distribution of the detected species in PM$_{2.5}$

961   in (**a**) ESI+ and (**c**) ESI− modes during the whole campaign. Temporal variations in the

962   fractional distribution of classified compounds in (**b**) ESI+ and (**d**) ESI− modes. The

963   ring diagrams inside the panel show the signal intensity fractions of classified

964   compounds, the size of which is proportional to the total signal intensity of all species

965   detected in PM$_{2.5}$ in different periods.

966

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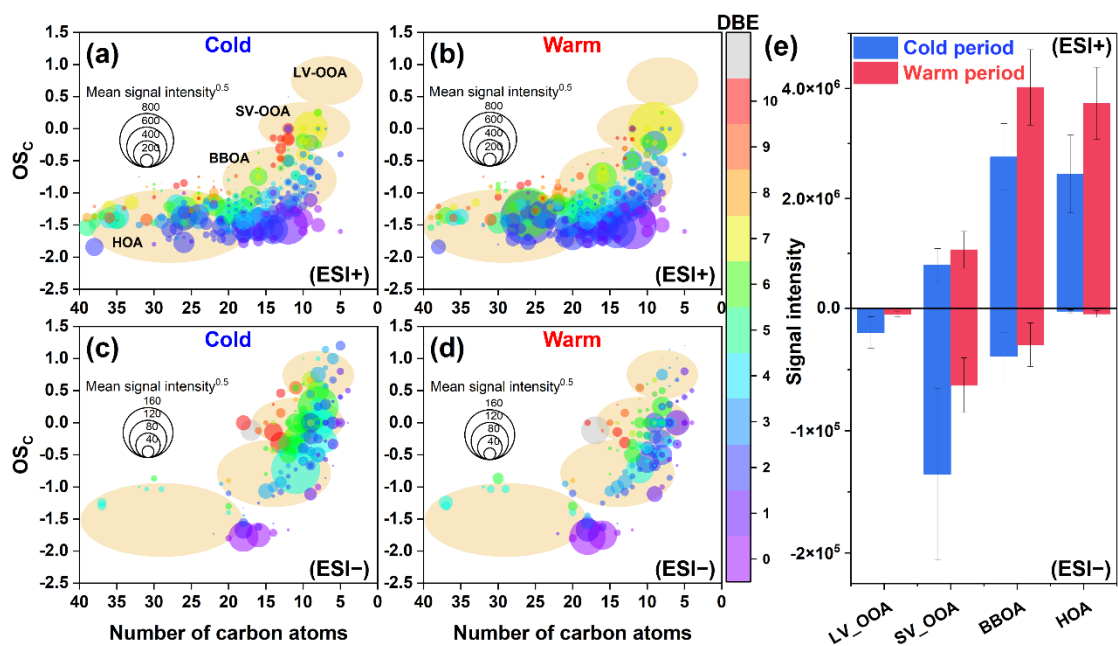
969 **Figure 2.**

970

971 **Figure 2.** OSc values of CHO molecules detected in (**a** and **b**) ESI+ and (**c** and **d**) ESI−

972 modes in PM$_{2.5}$ collected from different periods (cold vs. warm). The size and color of

973 the circle indicate the mean signal intensity and DBE value of compounds, respectively.

974 The light-orange background indicates the areas of LV-OOA, SV-OOA, BBOA, and

975 HOA (Kroll et al., 2011), according to which (**e**) the mean signal intensity of classified

976 compounds was calculated for samples from different periods.

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980

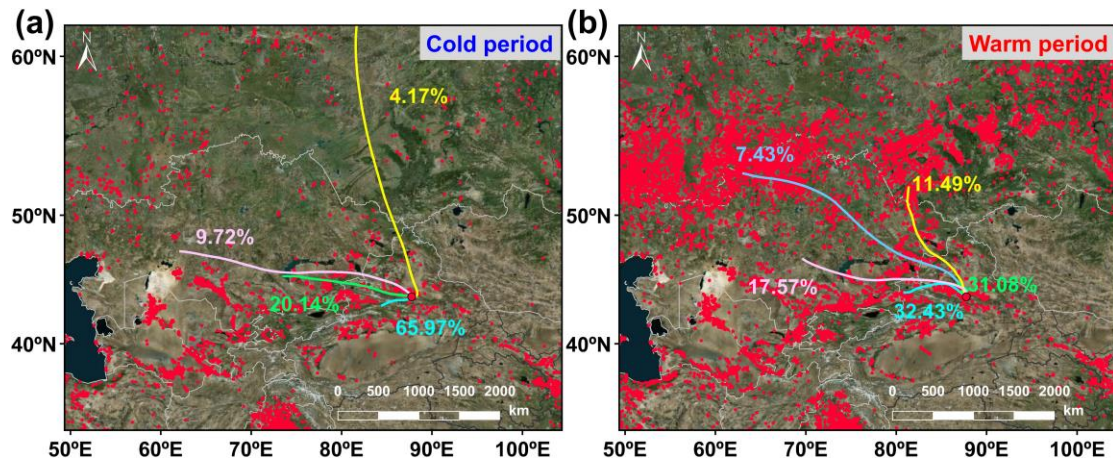



Figure 3

Figure 3. The 3-day (72 h) back trajectories illustrating the typical air mass flows to the study site during the (a) warm and (b) cool periods. Fire spots were shown in red, which was created based on NASA active fire data (VIIRS 375 m, https://firms.modaps.eosdis.nasa.gov/active_fire/). The map was derived from ©MeteoInfoMap (version 3.6.2) (Chinese Academy of Meteorological Sciences, China).

992 **Figure 4.**

993

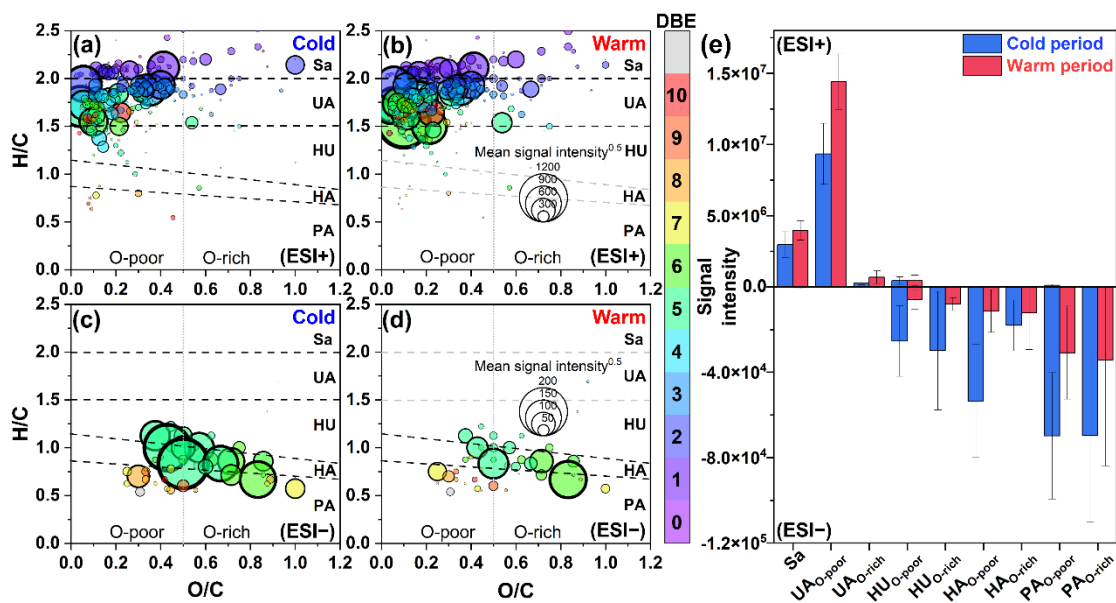



Figure 4. Van Krevelen diagrams of CHON molecules detected in (**a** and **b**) ESI+ and

(**c** and **d**) ESI− modes in PM$_{2.5}$ collected from different periods (cold vs. warm). The

subgroups in the panel include saturated-like (Sa), unsaturated aliphatic-like (UA),

highly unsaturated-like (HU), highly aromatic-like (HA), and polycyclic aromatic-like

(PA) compounds, further distinguishing between oxygen-poor and oxygen-rich

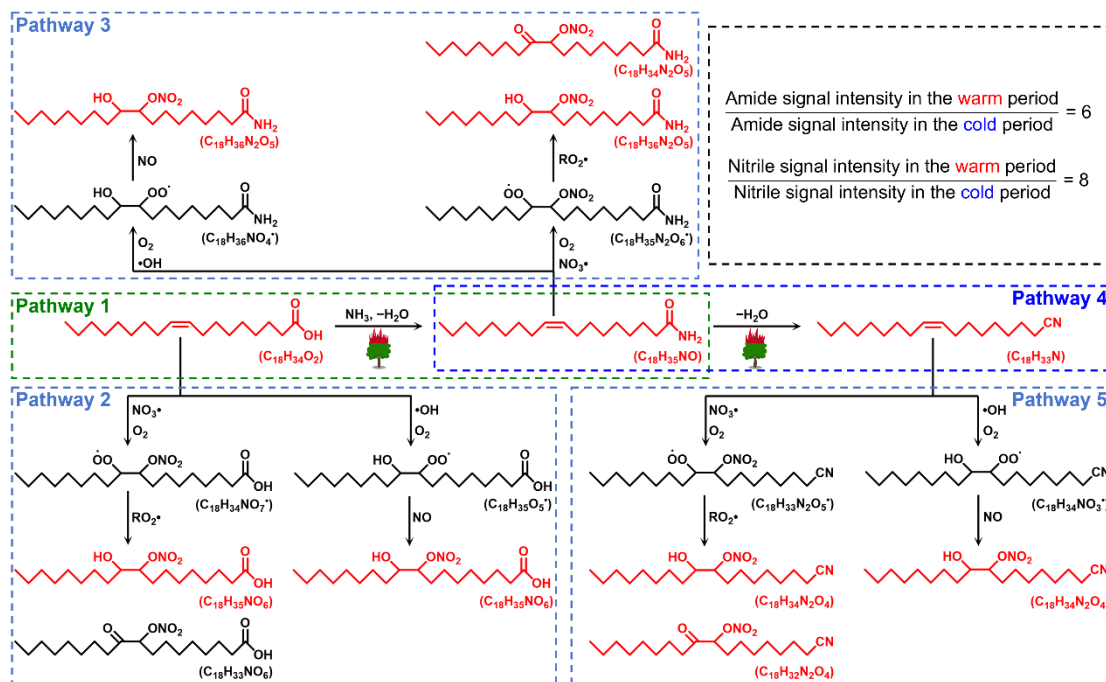
compounds with an oxygen to carbon ratio of 0.5. The size and color of the circle

indicate the mean signal intensity and DBE value of compounds, respectively. The (**e**)

mean signal intensity of classified compounds was calculated for samples from

different periods.

1007 **Figure 5.**

1008

1009 **Figure 5.** Proposed pathways for the reactions of carboxylic acids (oleic acid as a

1010 representative) with reactive nitrogen and atmospheric oxides to form the observed

1011 NOCs in PM$_{2.5}$ under the influence of the high temperature generated during wildfires

1012 or forest fires. Compounds observed in PM$_{2.5}$ were shown in red.

1013

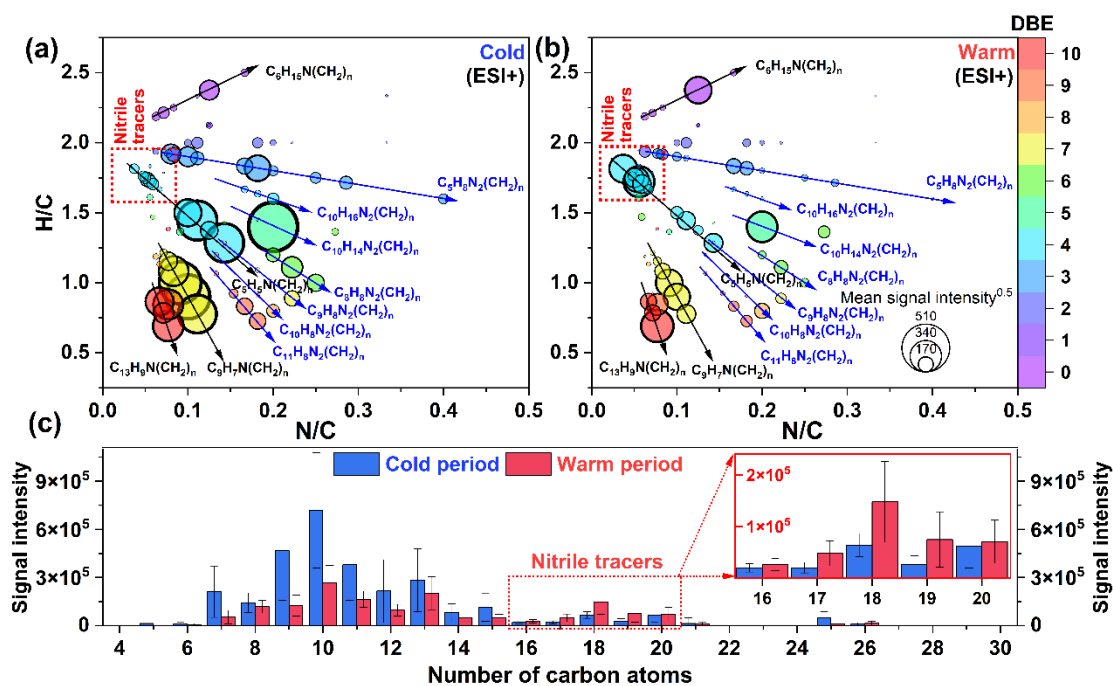



Figure 6.

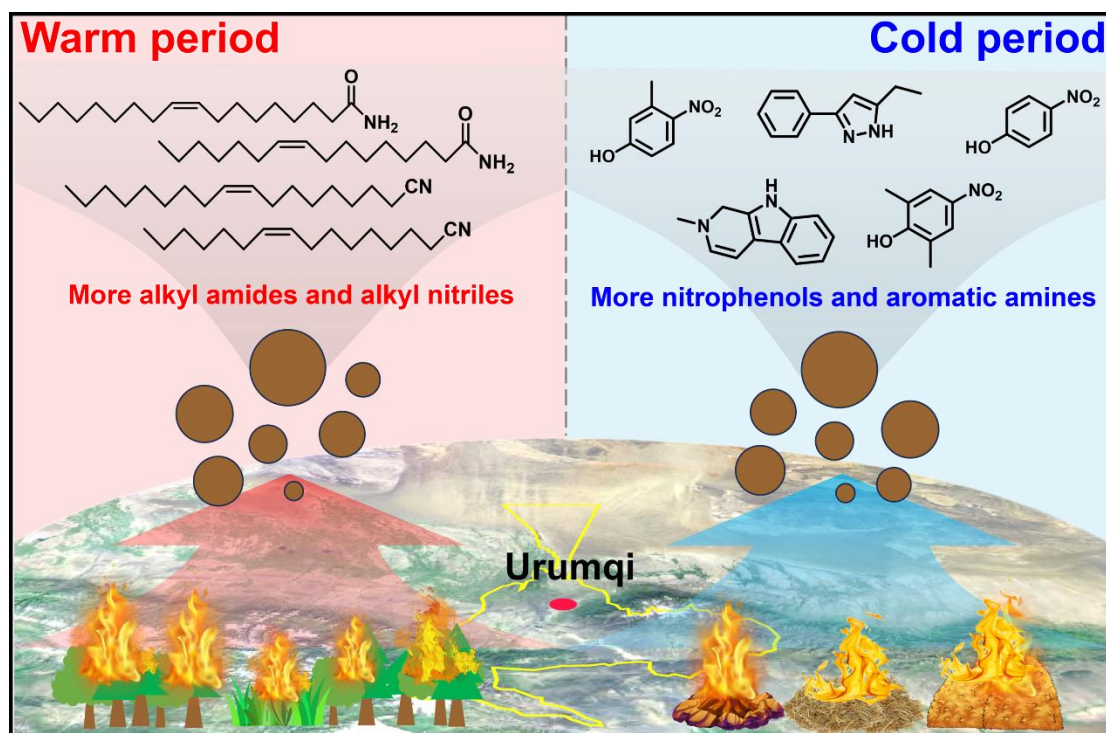
Figure 6. Van Krevelen diagrams of CHN molecules detected in $PM_{2.5}$ collected from

the (**a**) cold and (**b**) warm periods. The size and color of the circle indicate the mean

signal intensity and DBE value of compounds, respectively. The mean signal intensity

distributions of (**c**) carbon atoms in CHN molecules detected in $PM_{2.5}$ collected from

the cold and warm periods

1022 **Figure 7.**

1023

1024 **Figure 7.** Conceptual picture showing the differential impacts of combustion of fresh

1025 and old-age biomass materials on aerosol NOCs in suburban Urumqi. The map was

1026 derived from [©]Baidu Maps (BIDU, China).