

1 **The water-insoluble organic carbon in PM_{2.5} of typical Chinese urban areas: light-**
2 **absorbing properties, potential sources, radiative forcing effects and possible light-**
3 **absorbing continuum**

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19
20 **Abstract**

21 Water-insoluble organic carbon (WIOC) constitutes a substantial portion of organic carbon (OC) and
22 contributes significantly to light absorption by brown carbon (BrC), playing pivotal roles in climate forcing.
23 China as hotspots regions with high level of OC and BrC, information regarding the sources and light-
24 absorbing properties of WIOC on national scale remains scarce. Here, we investigated the light-absorbing
25 properties and sources of WIOC in ten representative urban cities in China. **On average, WIOC made up**
26 **33.4 ± 7.66% and 40.5 ± 9.73% of concentrations and light absorption at 365 nm (Abs₃₆₅) of extractable**
27 **OC (EX-OC), which includes relatively hydrophobic OC (WIOC and humic-like substances: HULIS-C)**
28 **and hydrophilic OC (non-humic-like substances: non-HULIS-C).** The mass absorption efficiency of WIOC

29 at 365 nm (MAE_{365}) was ($1.59 \pm 0.55 \text{ m}^2/\text{gC}$) comparable to that of HULIS ($1.54 \pm 0.57 \text{ m}^2/\text{gC}$) but
30 significantly higher than non-HULIS ($0.71 \pm 0.28 \text{ m}^2/\text{gC}$), indicating that hydrophobic OC possesses a
31 stronger light-absorbing capacity than hydrophilic OC. Biomass burning (31.0%) and coal combustion
32 (31.1%) were the dominant sources of WIOC, with coal combustion sources exhibited the strongest light-
33 absorbing capacity. Moreover, employing the simple forcing efficiency ($SFE_{300-700\text{nm}}$) method, we observed
34 that WIOC exhibited the highest $SFE_{300-700\text{nm}}$ ($6.57 \pm 5.37 \text{ W/g}$) among the EX-OC fractions. The radiative
35 forcing of EX-OC was predominantly contributed by hydrophobic OC (WIOC: $39.4 \pm 15.5\%$ and HULIS:
36 $39.5 \pm 12.1\%$). Considering the aromaticity, sources, and atmospheric processes of different carbonaceous
37 components, we propose a light-absorbing carbonaceous continuum, revealing that components enriched
38 with fossil sources tend to possess stronger light-absorbing capacity, higher aromatic levels, increased
39 molecular weights, and greater recalcitrance in the atmosphere. Reducing fossil fuel emissions emerges as
40 an effective means of mitigating both gaseous (CO_2) and particulate light-absorbing carbonaceous warming
41 components.

42

43 **Highlights**

- 44 • WIOC contributed significantly to both concentrations and the light absorption efficiency of
45 extractable organic carbon.
- 46 • WIOC is primarily originated from biomass burning and coal combustion in China.
- 47 • WIOC displayed the highest radiative forcing among the extractable organic fractions.
- 48 • Carbonaceous components that are more enriched with fossil sources tend to exhibit stronger light-
49 absorbing capacity, higher aromatic levels and molecular weight, and enhanced recalcitrance

50

51 **1. Introduction**

52 Organic carbon (OC) constitutes a substantial fraction (20 to 90%) of carbonaceous aerosols, playing
53 an important role in human health, air quality and climate change (Jimenez et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2007).
54 Recent studies have shown that specific organic compounds could efficiently absorb radiation in near-
55 ultraviolet (UV) and visible spectral regions, exhibiting a strong wavelength dependence (Laskin et al.,
56 2015; Andreae and Gelencser, 2006). Due to its brownish or yellowish visible appearance, the light-

57 absorbing OC is term as brown carbon (BrC) (Sun et al., 2007; Saleh, 2020). Currently, model studies
58 showed that the BrC account for ~20 to 40% of the light absorption of total carbonaceous aerosols
59 absorption globally, hence, BrC has the potential to counteract the cooling effects of OC, introducing
60 considerable uncertainty into climate models (Bahadur et al., 2012; Feng et al., 2013; Saleh et al., 2015).
61 Moreover, BrC may contribute to the generation of reactive oxygen species (ROS) in ambient aerosols,
62 posing potential adverse effects on human health (Verma et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2023). To
63 comprehensively understand and address the climate and health impacts of BrC, there is a critical need for
64 thorough investigations into the sources and light-absorbing properties of OC.

65

66 According to water solubility, OC can be classified into two main categories: water-soluble OC
67 (WSOC) and water-insoluble OC (WIOC). While WSOC has been extensively studied over the past
68 decades, with investigations focusing on its sources, light-absorbing properties, and atmospheric processes
69 (Bosch et al., 2014; Dasari et al., 2019; Mo et al., 2021; Wozniak et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2020). WIOC,
70 which makes up large fraction of OC (~up to 80%) and a substantial portion of light absorption by BrC,
71 has received comparatively less attention. WIOC exhibits a significantly higher light-absorbing capacity
72 compared to WSOC, attributed to the enrichment of strong light-absorbing BrC chromophores in WIOC.
73 For instance, certain strong BrC chromophores like polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) and their
74 derivatives, as well as high-molecular-weight oligomers, are water-insoluble (Huang et al., 2020; Xie et al.,
75 2017; Kalberer et al., 2006). Indeed, Zhang et al. (2013) reported that the light absorption by methanol-
76 extracted OC in Los Angeles was approximately 3 and 21 times higher than that by WSOC. Moreover, field
77 observations indicate that WIOC exhibits greater recalcitrance during long-range transport processes
78 compared to WSOC, leading to a longer lifetime for WIOC (Wozniak et al., 2012; Fellman et al., 2015;
79 Kirillova et al., 2014). Given that WIOC represents a relatively long-lived OC component with a higher
80 light-absorbing capacity, a comprehensive understanding of its sources and light-absorbing properties is
81 imperative.

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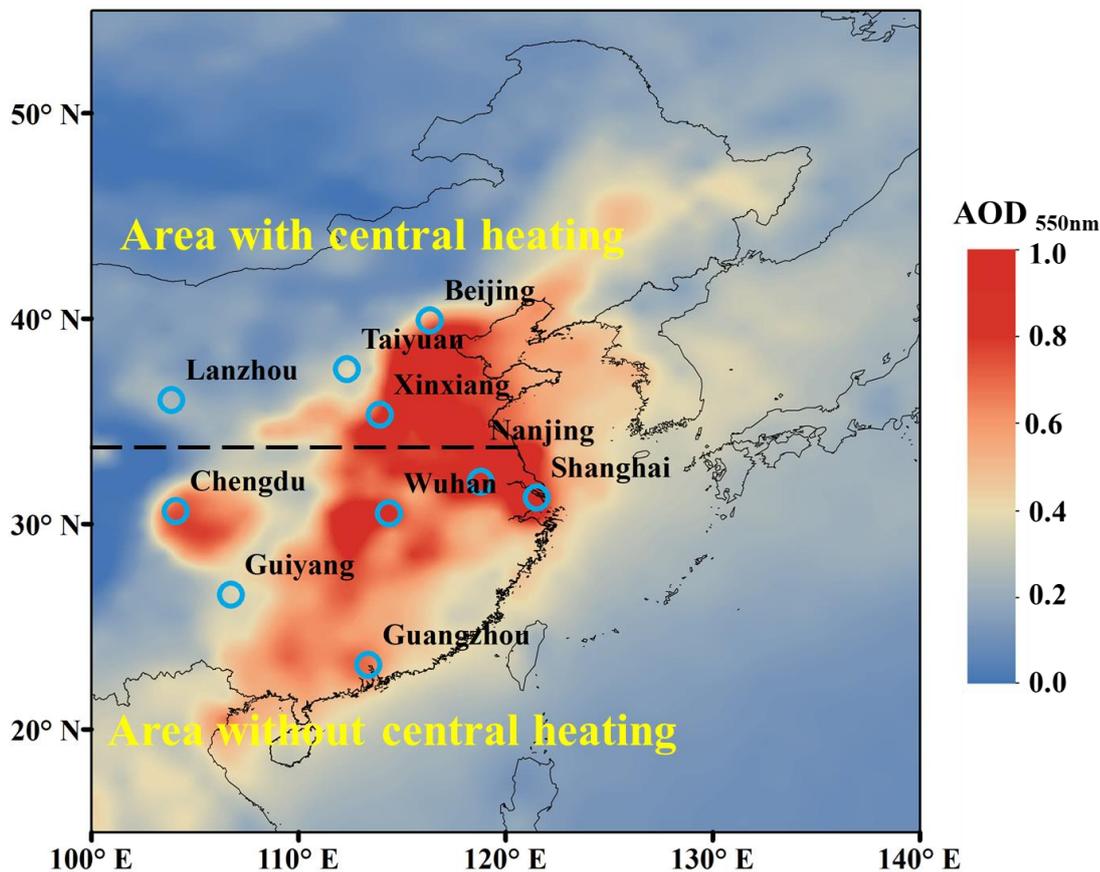
83 China as the hotspot regions of OC, the columnar mass concentration of BrC in China (4.4 to 92 mg/m²)
84 is much higher than those in Europe and U.S.A (~5 mg/m²) (Arola et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2017). While
85 the sources and light-absorbing properties of WSOC have been extensively investigated in China (Huang
86 et al., 2020; Jiang et al., 2020b; Wang et al., 2023; Cheng et al., 2016; Yan et al., 2017; Mo et al., 2021),
87 corresponding information on WIOC remains limited, especially on a national scale. In this study, we

88 selected ten representative Chinese cities with urbanization rates ranging from 37.8% to 88.0% to represent
89 the regions with different developed levels. The primary objectives are to explore the spatiotemporal
90 variations in concentrations, light absorption properties, sources, and radiative effects of WIOC across these
91 urban areas. Additionally, we integrate and make a comparison of light-absorbing properties data (mass
92 absorption efficiency [MAE] and absorption Ångström exponent [AAE]) of OC with different polarities
93 and BC from previous studies (Mo et al., 2021; Mo et al., 2024). This includes hydrophobic WSOC isolated
94 by solid-phase extraction (SPE) referred to as humic-like substances (HULIS) and the hydrophilic WSOC
95 referred to as non-HULIS. Finally, we propose a continuum concept of light-absorbing carbonaceous
96 aerosols linked to aromaticity, sources, and atmospheric processes. This study provides insights into light-
97 absorbing properties and sources of WIOC, contributing essential knowledge for a comprehensive
98 understanding the role of WIOC in climate forcing and developing strategies to mitigate its climate impact.
99

100 **2. Materials and Methods**

101 **2.1 Sampling**

102 PM_{2.5} samples were collected across four seasons in ten cities in China. These cities included four with
103 central heating systems (Beijing, Xinxiang, Lanzhou, and Taiyuan) and six without central heating
104 (Shanghai, Nanjing, Chengdu, Guiyang, Wuhan, and Guangzhou), as shown in Figure 1. All the filter
105 samples were collected on pre-combusted (450°C, 6h) quartz-fiber filter (Pall, England) from 2013 to 2014,
106 use a high-volume sampler at a flow rate of ~ 1000L/min. Detailed information about the sampling methods
107 can be found in our previous study (Mo et al., 2021; Mo et al., 2024). In brief, each sampling campaign
108 spanned approximately 30 days for fall, winter, spring, and summer, respectively. Subsequently, a 20 mm
109 diameter sample was excised from each filter during every season, and these were amalgamated into a
110 single sample, with the exception of Guiyang, where only fall and winter samples were available. A total
111 of 38 pooled samples were utilized in subsequent experiments. For each location, one pooled sample was
112 obtained for each season, thus providing analytical results representing seasonal averages.
113



114
 115 **Figure 1.** The average aerosol optical depth (AOD) at 550 nm retrieved from satellite (Terra/MODIS)
 116 observations over East Asia during October 2013 to August 2014. The locations of ten Chinese cities are
 117 shown in the map. Beijing, Xinxian, Lanzhou and Taiyuan located in the areas with central heating in cold
 118 seasons (fall and winter). Shanghai, Nanjing, Chengdu, Guiyang, Wuhan and Guangzhou located in the
 119 areas without central heating. The average annual temperature of with central heating the area with is
 120 usually below 15 °C, while the areas without central heating is usually higher than 15 °C.

122 2.2 Chemical analysis

123 For water-soluble inorganic ions analysis, the filters were ultrasonically extracted with ultrapure water
 124 (18.2 MΩ cm) in a polypropylene vial for 30 min. Extracts were filtered through polytetrafluoroethylene
 125 (PTFE) syringe filters (Jinteng Ltd., Tianjin, China) of 0.22 μm pore size to remove particles and filter
 126 debris. Seven water soluble inorganic ions (Na⁺, NH₄⁺, K⁺, Ca²⁺, Cl⁻, SO₄²⁻, and NO₃⁻) were determined by
 127 ion-chromatography (761 Compact IC, Metrohm, Switzerland, Text S1). The detection limit was below
 128 0.05 mg/L for all ions.

129
 130 For the solvent extraction, the water-soluble organic carbon (WSOC) in the pooled sample was

131 extracted with 100 mL ultrapure water (18.2 M Ω , Sartorius) under ultrasonication (30 min \times 3 times).
132 Following previous studies demonstrating that most water-insoluble organic carbon (WIOC) can be
133 extracted in methanol ($>$ 90%) (Chen and Bond, 2010; Chen et al., 2017; Cheng et al., 2016), the same
134 sample underwent drip drying, and the WIOC was re-extracted methanol (OCEANPAK, HPLC-Grade, 30
135 min \times 3 times) using the same procedure. Both the methanol and water extracts were filtered through a 0.22
136 μ m PTFE membrane to remove insoluble particles. Both the methanol and water extracts were filtered
137 through a 0.22 μ m PTFE membrane to remove insoluble particles. The WSOC further separated into a
138 relatively hydrophobic (humic-like substance, HULIS) and hydrophilic (non-HULIS) fraction (Lin et al.,
139 2010a; Fan et al., 2012). HULIS are operationally defined by the procedure used for isolation from bulk
140 WSOC by removing low molecular weight organic acids and inorganic ions. The HLB (Oasis, 30 μ m, 60
141 mg/cartridge, Waters, USA)-SPE method is most widely used to isolate HULIS due to its excellent
142 reproducibility and high recovery yield (Fan et al., 2012; Lin et al., 2010b). Therefore, we used an HLB-
143 SPE column to isolate the HULIS.

144
145 The WSOC and HULIS-C content was determined using a TOC analyzer equipped with a
146 nondispersive infrared (NDIR) detector (Shimadzu TOC-VCPH, Japan). The non-HULIS-C was estimated
147 by the difference between WSOC and HULIS-C (non-HULIS-C = WSOC - HULIS-C). For WIOC
148 measurement, 40 mL methanol extracts were evaporated to dryness under a nitrogen stream and re-
149 dissolved with 1.0 mL methanol. A 20 μ L aliquot of extracts was slowly spiked onto a 1.5 cm² prebaked
150 quartz filter. After methanol evaporation, carbon on the quartz filter was quantified with an OC/EC analyzer
151 (Sunset Laboratory Inc). The carbon contents of WIOC were determined by an OC/EC analyzer with
152 standard deviation of reproducibility test less than 3%. The analysis mechanism of OC/EC analyzers and
153 TOC analyzers differ, including the different catalysts and detectors they employ. However, it is important
154 to note that both OC involve converting carbon in the sample to CO₂ and detecting CO₂ using a
155 nondispersive infrared detector (NDIR) or a flame ionization detector (FID) after CO₂ conversion to
156 methane. Thus, the analytical mechanisms are similar. Indeed, previous studies have systematically
157 compared these two methods for determining WSOC in aerosols (Yu et al., 2002). The results have
158 demonstrated no significant differences between the measurements obtained from the two methods.
159 Therefore, the carbon content of various carbonaceous components determined by these two methods
160 should be comparable. Based on extractable OC (EX-OC) polarity, the EX-OC was separated into WIOC,
161 HULIS-C, and non-HULIS-C. All WSOC, HULIS-C, and WIOC concentrations presented in this study

were corrected with field blanks (0.39 ± 0.16 , 0.66 ± 0.21 , and $1.75 \pm 0.48 \mu\text{gC}/\text{cm}^2$, respectively).

2.3 Light absorption spectra measurement

The absorption spectra of sloven extracted fractions were recorded from 200 to 800 nm relative to ultrapure water by a UV-visible spectrophotometer (UV-4802, Unico, China). The light absorption coefficient was calculated according to following equation (Hecobian et al., 2010; Kirillova et al., 2014):

$$\text{Abs}_\lambda = (A_\lambda - A_{700}) \frac{V_l}{V_a \times l} \times \ln(10) \quad (1)$$

where Abs_λ is the light absorption coefficient (Mm^{-1}), V_l is the volume of solvent for extraction (ml), V_a is the volume of sampled air (m^3), l is the optical path length (in this case, 0.01 m), and A_λ is the absorption of the solution at a given wavelength. The average light absorption between 695 and 705 nm (A_{700}) was used to account for baseline drift during analysis. The mass absorption coefficient (MAE, m^2/gC) of sloven extracted OC fractions at wavelength of λ can be calculated as:

$$\text{MAE}_\lambda = \frac{\text{Abs}_\lambda}{C_i} \quad (2)$$

Where C_i is the corresponding concentration of WIOC, HULIS-C and non-HULIS-C in the air ($\mu\text{gC}/\text{m}^3$).

The wavelength dependence of different OC fraction can be investigated by fitting the absorption Ångström exponent (AAE) by the following relation:

$$\text{Abs}_\lambda = K \times \lambda^{-\text{AAE}} \quad (3)$$

The AAE is calculated by a linear regression of $\ln(\text{Abs}_\lambda)$ on $\ln(\lambda)$ within the range 330-400 nm for the avoidance of interference by non-organic species (e.g., NO_3^-). The ratio of light absorption at 250 and 365 nm (E2/E3), which is negatively correlated with aromaticity and molecular weight of organics was also calculated (Peuravuori and Pihlaja, 1997; Baduel et al., 2010).

2.4 Positive matrix factorization (PMF) source apportionment

We applied U.S EPA PMF 5.0 model to qualitatively and quantitatively identify sources of WIOC and Abs_{365} , WIOC in this study. The principle and detailed process of this model could be found in Paterson (1999) and EPA 5.0 Fundamentals & User Guide. PMF model is a commonly used mathematical approach for the apportionment of $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ sources abase on the characteristic chemical compositions or fingerprints in each source. The model decomposes the concentrations of the chemical species of samples (X) into sets of

191 contributions (G), factor profiles (F), and residuals (E):

$$192 \quad X = G \times F + E \quad (4)$$

193 During the model calculation, factor contributions and profiles were derived by minimizing the objective
194 function Q in PMF model:

$$195 \quad Q = \sum_{i=1}^m \sum_{j=1}^n \left(\frac{E_{ij}}{\sigma_{ij}} \right)^2 \quad (5)$$

196 where E_{ij} is the residual of each sample, and σ_{ij} is the uncertainty in the j th species for the sample i .

197
198 The measurement uncertainties were used for the error estimates of the measured concentrations. Data
199 values below the method detection limit (MDL) were substituted with MDL/2. Missing data values were
200 substituted with median concentrations. If the concentration is less than or equal to the MDL, the
201 corresponding uncertainty (Unc) is 5/6 MDL. Otherwise, the uncertainty is calculated following equation:

$$202 \quad \text{Unc} = \sqrt{(\text{error fraction} \times \text{concentration})^2 + (0.5 \times \text{MDL})^2} \quad (6)$$

203 We performed 100 random runs and retained the runs that produced minimum Q values for 3 to 10
204 factors in base runs, five factors were obtained as the optimal solution as the source profiles in this study
205 (Figure S1). The errors associated with both random and rotational ambiguity in the PMF solution were
206 assessed using the bootstrap (BS) model and the displacement (DISP) model. The BS model involves
207 estimating errors by resampling data matrices, with the resulting BS factors being aligned with the base run
208 factors to gauge the reproducibility of different factors amidst random errors. Analysis using a 4-factor BS
209 model indicated a factor mapping exceeding 85%, suggesting both the suitability of the number of factors
210 and the presence of uncertainties. On the other hand, DISP primarily investigates rotational ambiguity
211 within the PMF outcomes. Notably, in the context of a 4-factor PMF model, no swaps were identified in
212 the DISP analysis.

214 2.5 Radiative effect calculation

215 The “simple forcing efficiency” (SFE, W/g) proposed by Bond and Bergstrom (2006) was used to
216 estimate the potential direct radiative effects caused by light-absorbing OC. The SFE was originally used
217 to represent the normalization of the particle mass (Chylek and Wong, 1995). Here, we focused on the light
218 absorption effect of OC without the scattering effect. A wavelength-dependent SFE of light-absorbing OC
219 as follows (Chen and Bond, 2010) :

$$\frac{dSFE_{abs}}{d\lambda} = D \frac{dS(\lambda)}{d\lambda} \tau_{atm}^2 (1 - F_c) \times 2\alpha_s \times MAC_i \quad (7)$$

where S and τ_{atm} refer to solar irradiance and atmospheric transmission, respectively, with both being from ASTM G173–03 reference spectra (W/m^2). D is the daytime fraction (0.5), F_c is the cloud fraction (0.6), and α_s is the surface albedo (0.19 for Earth average). MAC_i is mass absorption cross section of sloven extracted OC (e.g., WIOC, HULIS and non-HULIS). Note that MAC refers to the particulate absorption per mass, while MAE is derived from absorption of the aqueous extracts. MAC can be compared with MAE only after considering the particulate effect (Sun et al., 2007) (Text S2). And then, the fraction of solar radiation absorbed by OC component with different polarity relative to total EX-OC is calculated as:

$$f_{OC_i/EX_OC} = \frac{\sum_{\lambda=300}^{700} SFE_{OC_i}(\lambda) \times C_i \times \left(\frac{OA}{OC}\right)}{\sum \sum_{\lambda=300}^{700} SFE_{OC_i}(\lambda) \times C_i \times \left(\frac{OA}{OC}\right)} \quad (8)$$

Here, the integrated SFE is the sum of the SFE from 300 to 700 nm; C_i is the corresponding concentration of WIOC, HULIS-C and non-HULIS-C in the air ($\mu gC/m^3$). The OA/OC ratios are 1.51, 1.91, 2.30 for WIOC, HULIS and non-HULIS, respectively (Kiss et al., 2002).

3. Results and Discussion

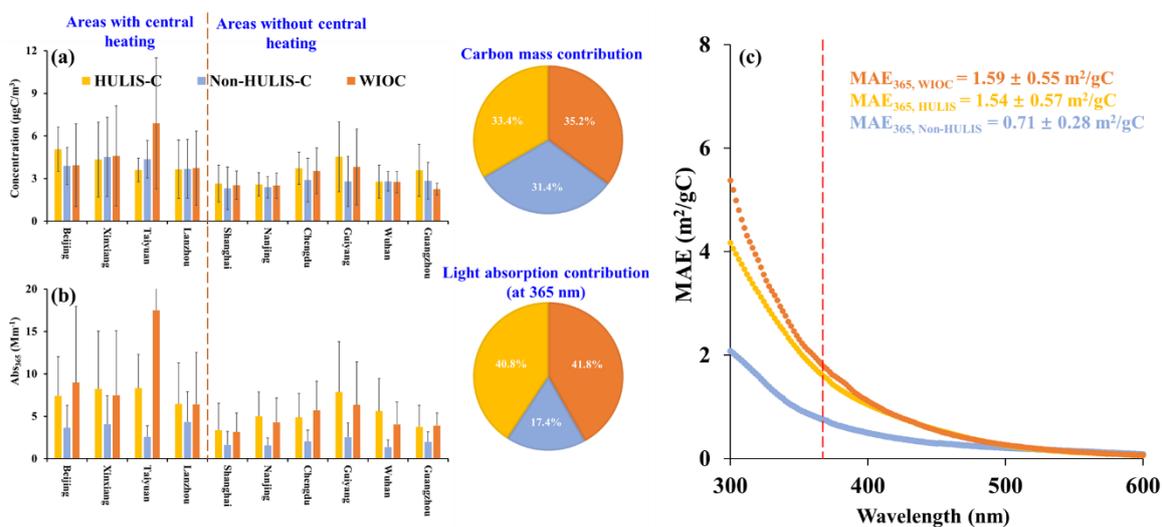
3.1 Spatiotemporal variations in WIOC concentration and light-absorbing properties

In this study, water-insoluble organic carbon (WIOC) is defined as the residual OC re-extracted by methanol after water extraction, representing the OC only soluble in methanol. We define the OC extracted by water from the aerosol filter sample as WSOC, the WSOC is further separated into hydrophobic fraction (HULIS-C) and hydrophilic fraction (non-HULIS-C). The combined sum of WSOC and WIOC is defined as extractable OC (EX-OC). Figures 2 shows the spatial variation of concentration and Abs_{365} of separated EX-OC fractions across ten Chinese. The concentrations of WIOC ranged from 1.45 to 12.95 $\mu gC/m^3$, with an average of $3.64 \pm 2.53 \mu gC/m^3$ (average \pm one standard deviation) among the 10 cities (Figure 2a). Specifically, the areas with central heating exhibited significantly higher average WIOC concentrations compared to areas without central heating ($4.79 \pm 3.39 \mu gC/m^3$ vs. $2.81 \pm 1.16 \mu gC/m^3$, $p < 0.01$), likely attributed to coal and biofuel combustion for domestic/central heating during the cooler period (Wang et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2020). Despite substantial spatial variation in WIOC concentration, its contribution

248 to EX-OC remained consistent at $33.4 \pm 7.6\%$, showing no significant spatial or temporal variations.
 249 Furthermore, the fractional carbon mass contributions of WIOC ($33.4 \pm 7.6\%$), HULIS-C ($35.2 \pm 5.8\%$),
 250 and non-HULIS-C ($31.4 \pm 5.2\%$) to EX-OC were similar (Figure 2 and Table S1).

251

252 Consistent with spatial variation in WIOC concentration, the Abs_{365} of WIOC ($Abs_{365, WIOC}$) serving
 253 as a proxy for BrC were significantly higher in areas with central heating compared to those without central
 254 heating ($10.1 \pm 10.3 \text{ Mm}^{-1}$ vs. $4.41 \pm 2.68 \text{ Mm}^{-1}$, $p < 0.01$). Notably, the light absorbing contribution of
 255 WIOC ($40.5 \pm 9.73\%$) to EX-OC exceeded its corresponding carbon mass contribution ($33.4 \pm 7.55\%$).
 256 Actually, the light absorbing contribution of EX-OC are largely contributed by relatively hydrophobic OC
 257 components: the WIOC ($40.5 \pm 9.73\%$) and HULIS ($41.6 \pm 7.28\%$). In contrast, the non-HULIS fraction,
 258 being the most polar, contributed only $17.5 \pm 5.02\%$ to $Abs_{365, EX-OC}$ (Table S1). This suggests that the
 259 majority of light-absorbing organic compounds were enriched in the WIOC and HULIS fractions. Therefore,
 260 the mean mass absorption efficiency (MAE) spectra of WIOC and HULIS, representing the light-absorbing
 261 capacity per unit carbon mass, were higher than those of non-HULIS (Figure 2c).



262

263

264 **Figure 2.** The spatial variation of concentration and light absorption of extractable OC from ten Chinese
 265 cities. (a) The spatial variations of concentration of WIOC, HULIS-C and non-HULIS-C in PM_{2.5} from ten
 266 Chinese cities; (b) The spatial variations of light absorption coefficients of WIOC, HULIS-C and non-
 267 HULIS-C at 365 nm (Abs_{365}) in PM_{2.5} from ten Chinese cities; The pie charts in the left of panel (a) and (b)
 268 represent the carbon mass contribution and light absorption contribution, respectively. (c) The mean of mass
 269 absorption efficient (MAE) of WIOC, HULIS and non-HULIS from 300 nm to 600 nm; The red dash line
 270 represents the MAE₃₆₅.

271

272 The MAE at 365 nm (MAE_{365}) is commonly used to reflect the light-absorbing capacity of solvent
273 extracted-BrC. Among the extractable OC components, the MAE_{365} of WIOC is the highest, with average
274 of $1.59 \pm 0.55 \text{ m}^2/\text{gC}$. This value is comparable to the WIOC in Xi'an ($1.5 \pm 0.5 \text{ m}^2/\text{gC}$) and Beijing ($1.5 \pm$
275 $0.4 \text{ m}^2/\text{gC}$) (Huang et al., 2020), but ~5 times higher than values reported in Nagoya, Japan (0.2 to 0.4
276 m^2/gC) (Chen et al., 2016). The MAE_{365} of WIOC is comparable to HULIS ($1.54 \pm 0.57 \text{ m}^2/\text{gC}$), however,
277 higher than the non-HULIS as relatively polar water-soluble fraction ($0.71 \pm 0.28 \text{ m}^2/\text{gC}$). This discrepancy
278 is likely attributed to the non-HULIS fraction mainly comprising highly oxidized organic matter lacking
279 long aromatic conjugated systems (Chen et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2016). It should be noted that light
280 absorption of BrC, as measured by solvent extraction, appears to be underestimated compared to under
281 ambient aerosol conditions. To accurately derive the corresponding BrC absorption in ambient aerosols, it
282 is necessary to calibrate the absorption determined in solvent extracts using a correction factor. Presently,
283 the correction factor proposed by Liu et al. (2013), typically set at 2, is widely employed for this purpose.
284 Despite WIOC being recognized as the most light-absorbing OC component, even after applying this
285 correction factor, we observed that the MAE of WIOC at 550 nm ($0.28 \pm 0.09 \text{ m}^2/\text{gC}$) remains an order of
286 magnitude lower than that of amorphous tar ball BrC (approximately 3.6 to $4.1 \text{ m}^2/\text{g}$) and unextractable
287 "dark BrC" (approximately $1.2 \text{ m}^2/\text{g}$) as determined by transmission electron microscopy (Alexander et al.,
288 2008; Chakrabarty et al., 2023), indicating the light-absorbing capacity of the extractable OC is relatively
289 weakly.

290

291 The MAE_{365} of WIOC exhibited significant seasonal variation, with higher values in cold seasons
292 ($1.74 \pm 0.64 \text{ m}^2/\text{gC}$, fall and winter) than in warm seasons ($1.48 \pm 0.46 \text{ m}^2/\text{gC}$, spring and summer, Figure
293 3a). This variation is likely linked to changes in sources and atmospheric processes influencing the light-
294 absorbing compounds within the WIOC fraction. During cold seasons, large usage of coal combustion and
295 biomass burning (BB) for central/domestic heating may elevate the emission of the WIOC with high
296 MAE_{365} (Tang et al., 2020; Song et al., 2019), consequently enhancing the overall MAE_{365} of WIOC.
297 Conversely, stronger photobleaching effects and lower emissions from coal combustion and BB during
298 warm seasons may contribute to a decrease of MAE_{365} of WIOC (Saleh et al., 2013; Wong et al., 2017).
299 Interestingly, all extractable OC components exhibit a consistent seasonal pattern (cold > warm) in their
300 MAE_{365} , indicating similar influences of sources and atmospheric processes on the light-absorbing capacity
301 of these components irrespective of polarity. Spatially, the MAE_{365} of WIOC was significantly higher in

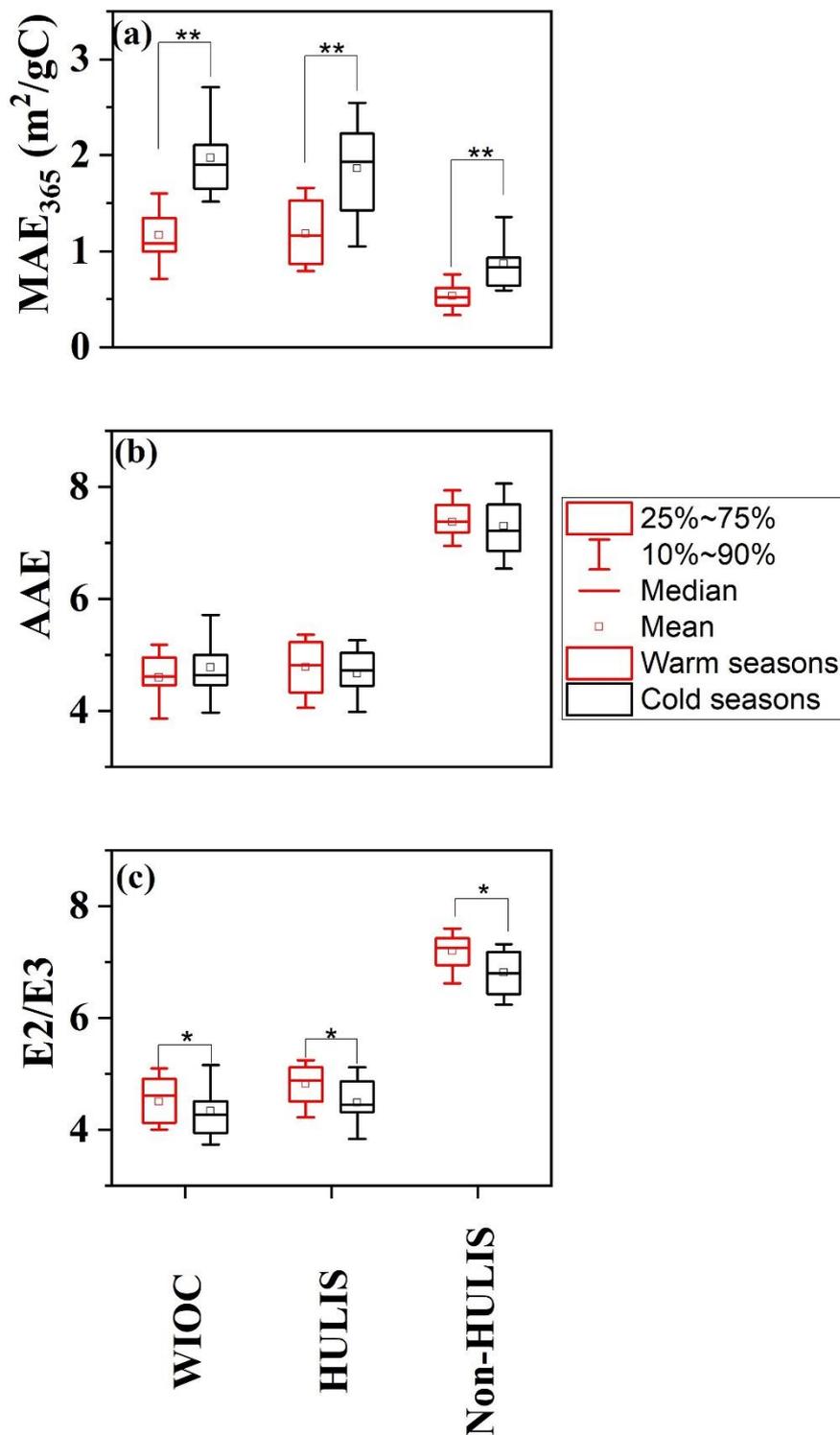
302 areas with central heating than without central heating ($1.75 \pm 0.64 \text{ m}^2/\text{gC}$ vs. $1.48 \pm 0.46 \text{ m}^2/\text{gC}$, $p < 0.01$).
303 The difference in MAE_{365} of WIOC between the areas with and without central heating was more
304 pronounced during colder seasons ($2.20 \pm 0.51 \text{ m}^2/\text{gC}$ vs. $1.81 \pm 0.28 \text{ m}^2/\text{gC}$, 21.5% difference) than
305 warmer seasons ($1.29 \pm 0.37 \text{ m}^2/\text{gC}$ vs. $1.17 \pm 0.26 \text{ m}^2/\text{gC}$, 10.3% difference). Given that coal consumption
306 for central/domestic heating is considerably higher in areas with central heating compared to those without,
307 it is plausible that the spatial variability in MAE_{365} of WIOC is predominantly influenced by coal
308 combustion.

309
310 The distinct seasonal variation of light-absorbing capacity of WIOC may be affected by the structure
311 of light-absorbing compounds within WIOC. AAE reflects both the wavelength dependent light absorption
312 and aromaticity of the carbonaceous aerosols, and the AAE usually negatively related with the aromaticity
313 (Chen et al., 2017; Mo et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2013). BC as most condensed aromatic and strongest light-
314 absorbing carbonaceous, exhibits an AAE of ~ 1 (Bond, 2001; Kirchstetter et al., 2004). In the case of BrC
315 in solvent extracts, AAE values typically vary from ~ 3 to 16 (Hecobian et al., 2010; Mo et al., 2021; Chen
316 and Bond, 2010). Generally, During photobleaching aging processes, the MAE of BrC in solvent extracts
317 tends to decrease with increasing AAE values, indicative of a reduction in aromaticity (Dasari et al., 2019).
318 Despite the stronger radiation and lower MAE_{365} of WIOC in warm seasons, AAE values did not exhibit
319 seasonal variation (4.59 ± 0.52 vs. 4.77 ± 0.65 , $p > 0.05$, Figure 3b). This may be due to the more complex
320 factors affecting the AAE values, which are not only affected by sources and atmospheric processes (Saleh
321 et al., 2013; Tang et al., 2020; Dasari et al., 2019), but also by the solvents and the pH of water extracts
322 applied in the determination (Chen et al., 2016; Mo et al., 2017; Phillips et al., 2017). However, the AAE
323 values for WIOC (4.69 ± 0.59) were comparable to those of HULIS (4.72 ± 0.53) but lower than those of
324 non-HULIS (7.33 ± 2.56). This suggests a tendency for AAE to increase with the polarity of OC
325 components, in agreement with findings from Los Angeles and Nagoya (Chen et al., 2016; Zhang et al.,
326 2013). This indicated that relatively hydrophobic fractions (e.g., WIOC and HULIS) contain more aromatic
327 light-absorbing compounds than non-HULIS.

328
329 In contrast, the seasonal variation is more pronounced for the ratio of light absorption at 250 and 365
330 nm (E2/E3), inversely proportional to the molecular weight (MW) and aromaticity of natural organic matter
331 (Baduel et al., 2010; Peuravuori and Pihlaja, 1997). The E2/E3 of WIOC was lower in cold seasons
332 compared to warm seasons (4.33 ± 0.49 vs. 4.51 ± 0.048 , $p < 0.01$, Figure 3c), suggesting the WIOC

333 exhibited greater conjugations and aromaticity in cold seasons. Notably, the E2/E3 ratio exhibits a stronger
334 correlation with combustion source tracers (e.g., K^+ and Cl^-) during cold seasons (K^+ : $r = 0.37$, $p = 0.02$ vs.
335 $r = 0.34$, $p > 0.1$; Cl^- : $r = 0.56$, $p = 0.011$ vs. $r = 0.16$, $p > 0.1$) than in warm seasons, indicating that coal
336 combustion and BB contribute to higher aromaticity of WIOC during cold seasons (Duarte et al., 2005; Fan
337 et al., 2016). Indeed, coal combustion and BB are important sources of OC with high level aromatic
338 compounds (e.g., PAHs). Additionally, the slower photo-degradation and volatilizations of aromatic
339 compounds in lower temperature also enhanced the aromatic level of WIOC in cold seasons (Samburova
340 et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2020b). Similar to AAE, the E2/E3 of extractable OC components exhibited a
341 consistent trend of increasing with the polarity of OC (WIOC: $4.41 \pm 0.49 < HULIS: 4.93 \pm 0.50 < non-$
342 $HULIS: 7.00 \pm 0.42$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that less polar organics likely have higher aromaticity and higher
343 MW. However, in contrast to AAE, all E2/E3 ratios of the EX-OC components exhibited the same seasonal
344 variation (cold > warm, Figure 3c). This implies that the E2/E3 ratio, calculated using two wavelengths,
345 maybe more effective than the AAE calculated using multiple wavelengths when reflecting changes in the
346 structure of organic components. The seasonal variation in the structure and light-absorbing properties of
347 WIOC is largely influenced by sources, we further explore the source of WIOC, as discussed below.

348



349 **Figure 3.** The seasonal variations of (a) AAE, (b) E2/E3 and (c) MAE₃₆₅ for the WIOC, HULIS and
 350 WSOC. “*” indicates the difference at $p < 0.05$ level; “**” indicates the difference at $p < 0.01$ level
 351
 352

353 **3.2 The sources of WIOC: coal combustion exhibited the strongest light-absorbing** 354 **capacity**

355 In order to better understand the source of WIOC and BrC in WIOC fraction, correlation of WIOC and

356 Abs_{365, WIOC} to water-soluble ions were investigated. Although the WIOC exhibited strong correlation with
357 Abs_{365, WIOC} ($r = 0.97, p < 0.01$) for the entire year, as listed in Table S2, the correlations between WIOC
358 and Abs_{365, WIOC}, as well as WIOC and water-soluble ions, differed notably between warm and cold seasons.
359 This discrepancy suggests differences in sources and formation processes of WIOC and light-absorbing
360 compounds between warm and cold season. During cold seasons, both WIOC and Abs_{365, WIOC} exhibited
361 good relationship with most of the water-soluble ions (Table S2). Conversely, in warm seasons, WIOC
362 showed poor correlation with most water-soluble ions, except for NH₄⁺ ($r = 0.51, p < 0.05$). Compared with
363 the WIOC, the Abs_{365, WIOC} correlated well with most water-soluble ions ($r = 0.63, 0.53, 0.51$ and 0.59 for
364 Cl⁻, NO₃⁻, SO₄²⁻, and NH₄⁺, respectively, $p < 0.05$, Table S2), except the K⁺ ($r = 0.25, p > 0.05$), in warm
365 seasons. This suggests that the difference in sources and formation processes in WIOC and light-absorbing
366 compounds in warm seasons.

367
368 To better quantify the seasonal variation of the sources of WIOC and BrC in WIOC fraction, we
369 quantified the sources for both WIOC concentrations and light absorption of WIOC (Abs_{365, WIOC}) using the
370 PMF receptor model in this study. The model identified five factors with uncertainties below 12%, and their
371 profiles are presented in Figure S1. Factor 1 exhibited a high Cl⁻ loading (57.0%), which a typical tracer
372 for BB, coal combustion and sea-salt aerosols. Sea-salt derived Cl⁻ is considered as a significant source of
373 Cl⁻ in PM_{2.5} in coastal cities. In this study, we assessed the contribution of sea-salt Cl⁻ ([ss-Cl⁻] = [ss-
374 Cl⁻] = $1.17 \times [\text{Na}^+]$) to the total Cl⁻. We found that even in the coastal cities, such as Guangzhou and
375 Shanghai, the contribution of sea-salt Cl⁻ to total Cl⁻ was generally below ~7%. Thus, the high loading of
376 Cl⁻ is not likely caused by the sea-salt aerosols. K⁺ as typical tracer for BB, the loading of K⁺ (11.7%) was
377 relatively low in Factor 1. Further, Factor 1 displayed a ratio of Abs_{365, WIOC} to WIOC (2.46 m²/gC)
378 comparable to the MAE₃₆₅ of WIOC from coal combustion (Tang et al., 2020). Consequently, Factor 1 was
379 classified as a source related to coal combustion. Factor 2 was characterized by the highest loading of K⁺
380 (45.8%) and HULIS-C (44.1%), thus, this factor was identified as BB. Factor 3 exhibited enrichment in
381 SO₄²⁻ (46.0%) and non-HULIS-C (18.2%), both recognized as key components in atmospheric aging
382 processes (Du et al., 2014). Notably, the ratio of Abs_{365, WIOC} to WIOC in Factor 3 was the lowest (0.55
383 m²/gC) among the identified factors. This observation suggests a probable loss of light-absorbing capacity
384 during aging/bleaching processes. Thus, Factor 3 is interpreted as the source associated with aging
385 processes. Factor 4 is related to high loading of NO₃⁻ (56.2%) and NH₄⁺ (34.8%). Given that SOA formed
386 under high NO_x/NH₃ conditions often exhibits high light-absorbing capacity (Xie et al., 2017; Lin et al.,

387 2018), and considering the relatively high ratio of $Ab_{s365, WIOC}$ to WIOC ($2.13 \text{ m}^2/\text{gC}$) observed in Factor 4,
388 we attribute Factor 4 to be a source related to nitrogen-induced SOA formation. Factor 5, characterized by
389 the highest loading of Ca^{2+} (65.7%). Ca is identified as tracer of fugitive dust (Han et al., 2007). The
390 predominance of Ca in Factor5, which points to sources such as resuspended dust and soil sources. Both
391 the predicted WIOC concentrations ($R^2 = 0.92$) and $Abs_{365, WIOC}$ ($R^2 = 0.91$, Figure S2) correlated well with
392 the corresponding measured values, confirming the reliability of PMF solution.

393

394 Figure 4a shows the annual average contributions of the identified sources to WIOC resolved by PMF
395 model. The primary sources of WIOC were combustion sources, with coal combustion and BB averagely
396 account for 31.1% and 31.0% of the WIOC, respectively. Although the contribution of coal combustion to
397 WIOC was comparable to that of BB, both exhibited distinct spatial and seasonal variations (Figure 4a).
398 Specifically, during winter, coal combustion emerged as the dominant source of WIOC, accounting for 48.4%
399 of the total, likely driven by increased coal usage in areas with central heating. Indeed, coal combustion
400 constituted the primary source of WIOC in areas with central heating during cold seasons (56.2%). In
401 contrast, in areas without central heating, the contribution of BB surpassed that of coal combustion
402 significantly (54.2% vs. 17.3%). Therefore, coal combustion and BB were identified as the predominant
403 sources of WIOC in areas with and without central heating, respectively, during cold seasons. Compared to
404 primary emissions sources, the contributions of the sources related to aging processes and nitrogen-induced
405 secondary formation were relatively lower, accounting for 18.2% and 5.2% of the WIOC, respectively. That
406 may be due to these two secondary sources are more enriched in water-soluble components (HULIS-C +
407 non-HULIS-C). Actually, although the uncertainties of sources contribution of HULIS-C and non-HULIS-
408 C resolved by PMF model may be high, the aging processes and nitrogen-related secondary formation
409 contributed 10.1% and 20.2% to HULIS-C, and 18.3% and 21.6% to non-HULIS-C, respectively. In
410 addition, during the summer, when both temperature and solar radiation intensity rise, the contributions
411 from aging processes and BB increased to 39.3% and 41.3%, respectively. In spring, a significant fraction
412 of WIOC was associated with dust/soil, reaching up to 28.8%. Specially, the dust/soil contribution was
413 much higher in the aeras with central hearing than those without central heating. This is consistent with the
414 fact that sandstorms from the Gobi desert that borders China and Mongolia ride springtime winds to affect
415 the air quality of Northern China (Filonchik et al., 2024).

416

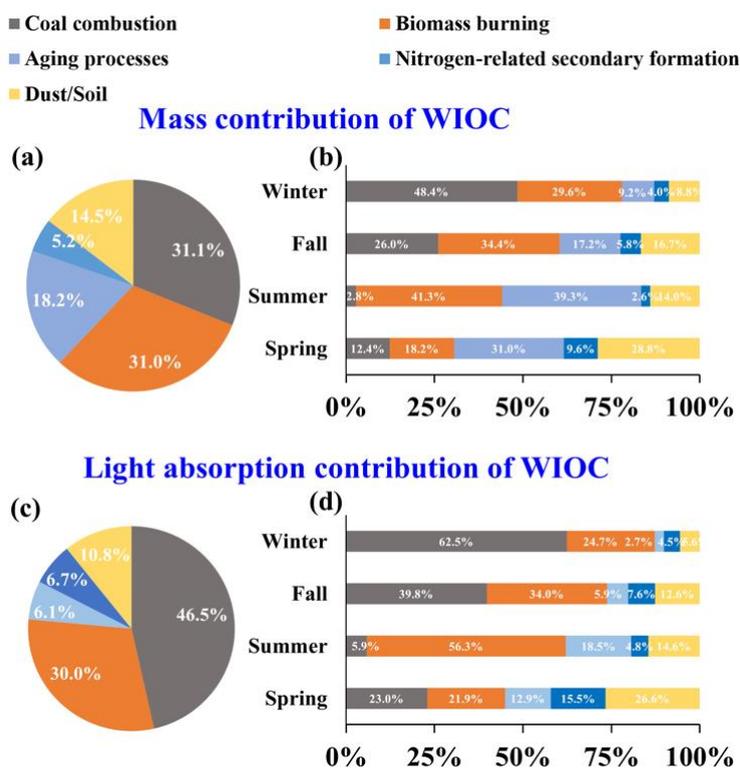
417 Figure 4c shows the contributions of sources identified by PMF model to the $Abs_{365, WIOC}$. Generally,

418 coal combustion (46.5%) and BB (30.0%) dominate $Abs_{365, WIOC}$, while other sources just contribute 23.8%
419 (aging processes: 6.1%, nitrogen-related secondary formation: 6.7%, and dust/soil: 10.8%) of $Abs_{365, WIOC}$.
420 Annually, even though the mass contributions of coal combustion and BB to WIOC are comparable, coal
421 combustion is the largest contributor to $Abs_{365, WIOC}$, surpassing BB. This difference is likely because coal-
422 derived WIOC has a stronger light-absorbing capacity than BB. The seasonal variation of sources
423 contribution of $Abs_{365, WIOC}$ is similar to that of carbon mass contribution. Coal combustion is the dominant
424 contributor to $Abs_{365, WIOC}$ in winter (62.5%), but its contribution diminishes in other seasons, suggesting
425 that the enhanced light absorption of WIOC in winter is driven by coal combustion. In summer, the elevated
426 solar radiation and temperatures can promote the secondary generation of BrC, with secondary BrC being
427 more enriched in the WSOC. Previous studies have observed a significant contribution of secondary sources
428 to WSB_{BrC} during summer (Yan et al., 2017; Du et al., 2014). However, the BrC within WIOC tends to be
429 more enriched with primary sources such as BB and coal combustion (Figure 4c). As temperatures rise in
430 summer, coal consumption typically declines. Consequently, during summer, $Abs_{365, WIOC}$ is predominantly
431 contributed by BB (Figure 4d). In spring, the contribution of dust/soil to $Abs_{365, WIOC}$ reaches up to 26.6%,
432 likely due to the presence of humic substances with strong light-absorbing capacity in dust/soil (Andreae
433 and Gelencser, 2006).

434

435 The source of BrC significantly influences its light absorption capacity. For WIOC, the contribution
436 from aging processes shows a negative correlation with the MAE_{365} of WIOC ($r = -0.61$, $p < 0.01$, Figure
437 S3a), indicating that the chromophores in WIOC were bleached during aging processes. Both BB and coal
438 combustion are recognized as the sources of BrC with strong light-absorbing capacity. We found that
439 contribution of BB exhibited a negative correlation with $MAE_{365, WIOC}$ ($r = -0.34$, $p = 0.46$, Figure S3b),
440 whereas a strong positive correlation was observed for coal combustion ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.01$, Figure S3a).
441 These suggest that the light-absorbing compounds derived from coal combustion have a stronger light-
442 absorbing capacity than BB, and enhanced the overall $MAE_{365, WIOC}$. Moreover, the contribution from coal
443 combustion is also significantly positively correlated with the light absorption contribution of WIOC to
444 EX-OC ($Abs_{365, WIOC}/Abs_{365, EX-OC}$, $r = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$, Figure S3c). This implies that the strong light-
445 absorbing compounds emitted from coal combustion tend to be water-insoluble. It is noteworthy that, based
446 on carbon isotopes ($\delta^{13}C$ and $\Delta^{14}C$), coal combustion is identified as the major source of strong light-
447 absorbing components in the water-soluble fraction in China (Mo et al., 2021; Mo et al., 2024). Therefore,
448 coal combustion is the dominant source of EX-OC with strong light-absorbing capacity in China, which

449 enhances the overall color of EX-OC.



450

451 **Figure 4.** (a) Annual and (b) seasonal sources apportionments result of WIOC mass concentration.

452 Annual and (d) seasonal sources apportionments of WIOC light absorption at 365 nm.

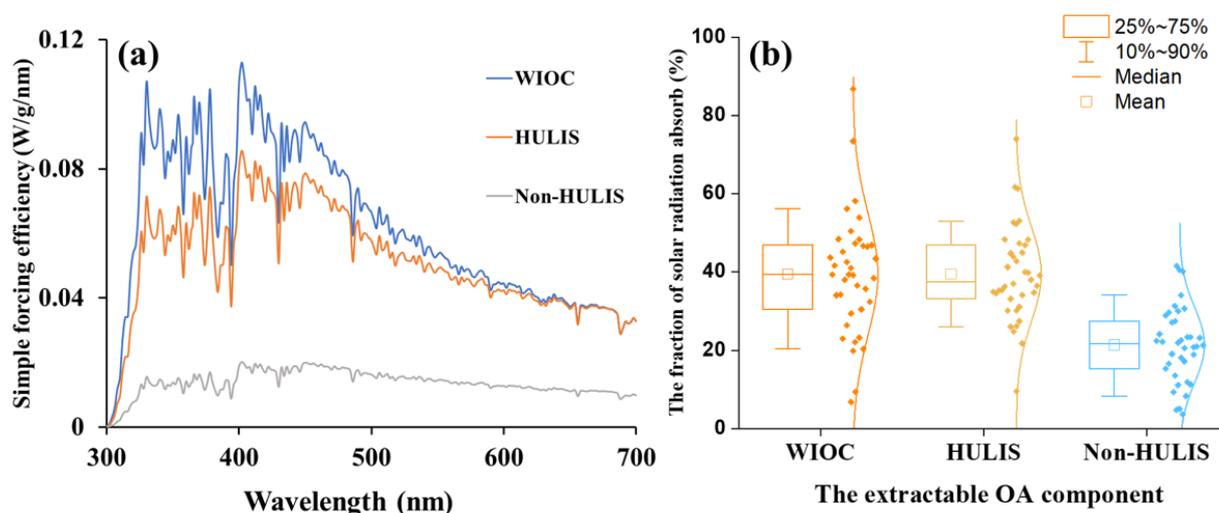
453

454 3.3 Radiative forcing of WIOC

455 The potential radiative of WIOC was estimated by a “simple forcing efficiency” (SFE) method, as
456 described in section 2.5 (Bond and Bergstrom, 2006; Chylek and Wong, 1995). The wavelength-dependent
457 absorption SFE from 300 to 700 nm for WIOC, HULIS and non-HULIS are shown in Figure 5a. The
458 integrated mean SFE from 300 to 700 nm ($SFE_{300-700}$) is highest for WIOC (6.57 ± 5.37 W/g), followed by
459 HULIS (4.39 ± 1.79 W/g) and non-HULIS (1.23 ± 1.03 W/g). This order is consistent with the MAE_{365} of
460 these three fractions (Figure 2c). Comparing the SFE values with previous reports in Chinese cities, the
461 values for WIOC and HULIS fall within the reported range (Hong Kong: 4.40 W/g, Tianjin: 6.30 ± 2.30
462 W/g, Xi’an: 3.51 ± 2.36 W/g, all for WSOC)(Deng et al., 2022; Li et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2020a), but
463 lower than that in Kanpur, India (19.2 W/g, for WSOC) (Choudhary et al., 2021). It is important to note
464 that the SFE values presented here are calculated from bulk light absorbance measurements of the extracts,
465 which tend to be lower than corresponding values from filter-based optical transmission measurements (Li
466 et al., 2020).

467

468 The radiative effect of light-absorbing OC is generally related to its atmospheric concentration. In
 469 equation (8), the concentrations of WIOC, HULIS, and non-HULIS were further taken into account and
 470 used to estimate their relative contributions to the solar radiation absorbed by EX-OC (Figure 5b). The
 471 fraction of radiative forcing by WIOC ($39.4 \pm 15.5\%$) was almost equal to that of HULIS ($39.5 \pm 12.1\%$),
 472 but much higher than non-HULIS ($21.1 \pm 10.2\%$). This result suggests that the radiative forcing of EX-OC
 473 is dominantly contributed by the relatively hydrophobic OC fractions, making them efficient radiative-
 474 forcing agents. In contrast, consistent with previous studies, the radiative effects of oxidized OC fractions
 475 are relatively limited (Tian et al., 2023). Overall, the radiative forcing of different components of OC is
 476 highly inhomogeneous, likely associated with their sources and atmospheric processes.
 477
 478



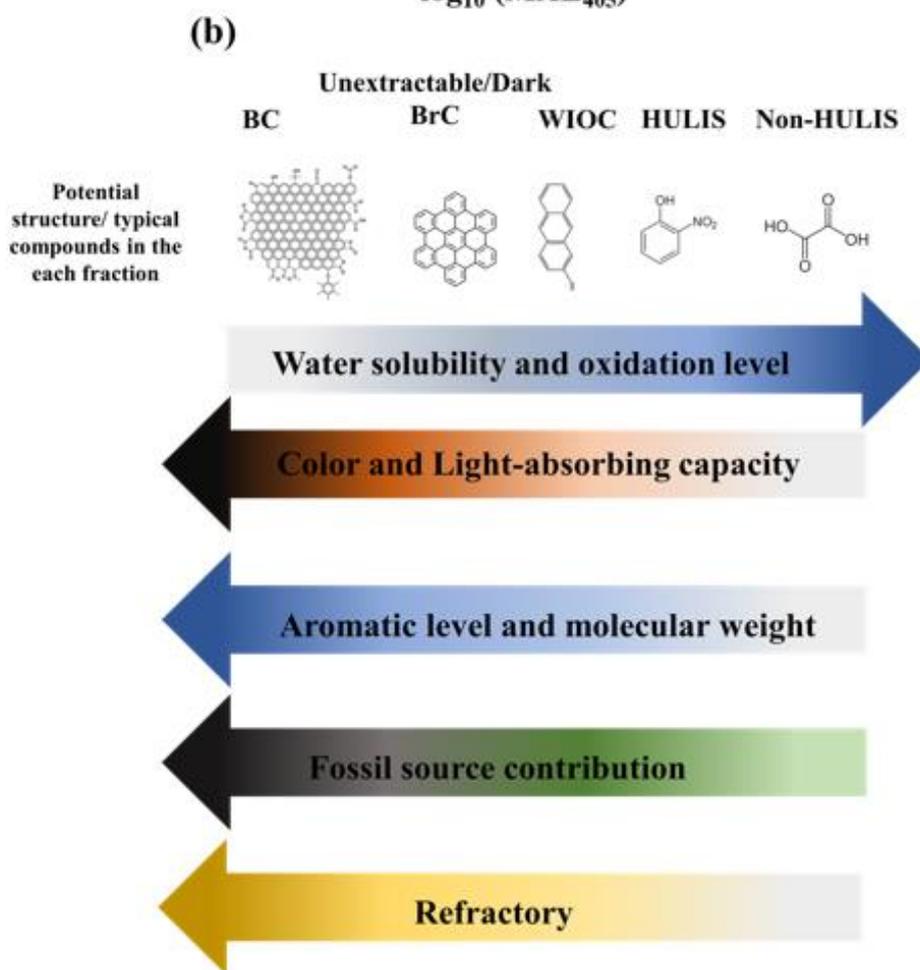
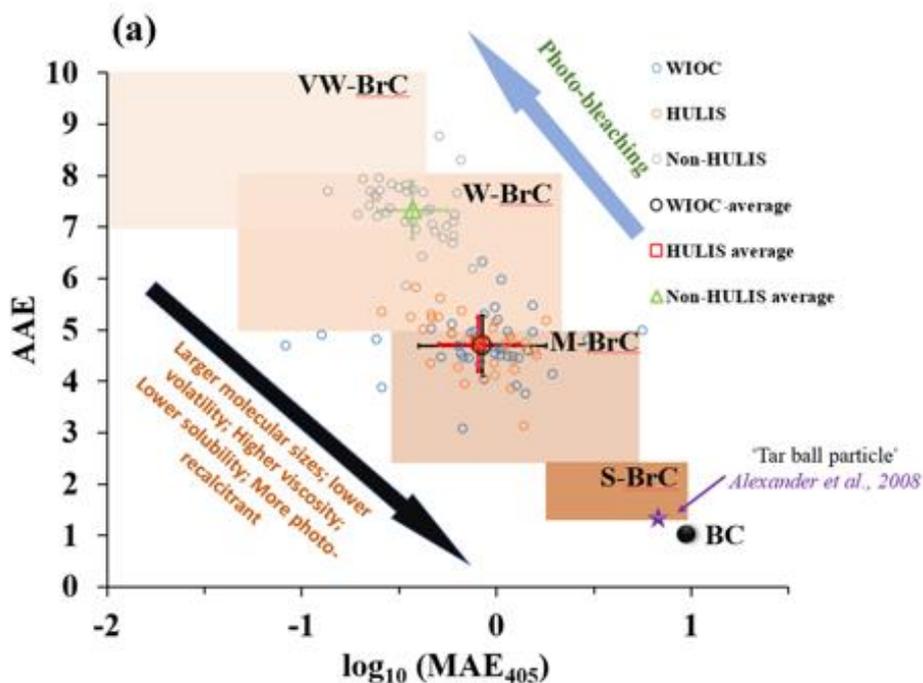
479 **Figure 5.** (a) The average simple forcing efficiency (SFE) of the WIOC, HULIS and WSOC from 300 to
 480 700 nm; (b) The fraction of solar radiation absorbed by WIOC, HULIS and non-HULIS relative to total
 481 extractable OC. The relative fraction of non-HULIS is calculated by the difference between WSOC and
 482 HULIS.
 483
 484
 485

486 **3.4 Possible continuum of light-absorbing carbonaceous components: aromaticity,** 487 **sources, and atmospheric processes**

488 The light-absorbing carbonaceous aerosols has conventionally been classified into BC and BrC.
 489 Following the classification framework introduced by Saleh (2020), we mapped the BC and BrC in an
 490 AAE-logMAE₄₀₅ space. Within the space, BrC can be further categorized into the following: very weakly

491 (VW), weakly (W), moderately (M), and strongly (S) light-absorbing BrC. In this framework, hydrophobic
492 OC, represented by WIOC and HULIS, falls into the M-BrC area. On the other hand, the relatively
493 hydrophilic OC (e.g., non-HULIS) is skewed more toward the W-BrC area (Figure 6a). It is important to
494 note that WIOC in this study refers to OC that is insoluble in water but soluble in methanol. Thus, WIOC,
495 HULIS, and non-HULIS are considered as extractable OC, implying that all solvent-extractable OC falls
496 within the W- and M-BrC categories. It should be emphasized that S/Dark-BrC, characterized by light-
497 absorbing properties similar to BC, is typically unextractable, as demonstrated in previous studies
498 (Chakrabarty et al., 2023; Corbin et al., 2019). Similarly, BC is traditionally considered unextractable and
499 exhibits the strongest light-absorbing capacity among the various carbonaceous components. According to
500 the chemical and physical properties, BC can be further subdivided into soot-BC and char-BC (Han et al.,
501 2010; Masiello, 2004). Char and soot are defined differently across various environmental matrices
502 (Coppola et al., 2022). For the carbonaceous aerosols, the char-BC and soot-BC are widely and
503 operationally defined by different temperatures in the Interagency Monitoring of Protected Visual
504 Environments (IMPROVE) protocol and the thermal-optical reflectance (TOR) method for OC and EC
505 analysis (Cai et al., 2023; Han et al., 2010). Generally, the light-absorbing capacity of soot-BC is higher
506 than char-BC (Andreae and Gelencser, 2006; Corbin et al., 2019; Schnaiter et al., 2003). The gradual
507 enhancement of the light-absorbing capacity within the carbonaceous components is intricately linked to
508 their molecular structure, specific sources, and atmospheric processes.

509



510

511 **Figure 6.** (a) The light-absorbing properties of WIOC, HULIS and Non-HULIS mapped in the in the
 512 $\log_{10}(\text{MAE}_{405 \text{ nm}}) - \text{AAE}$ space following the approach of Saleh (2020). Brown-shaded areas indicate “very
 513 weakly (VW)”, “weakly (W)”, “moderately (M)”, and “strongly (S)” light-absorbing BrC classes. The star
 514 symbol marks the upper limit of individual “tar ball particles” inferred from the electron energy loss Spectro

515 microscopy (Alexander et al., 2008). The AAE is calculated for the wavelength range 330 to 400 nm in this
516 study. (b) The continuum of light-absorbing capacity, water solubility, aromaticity, source and refractory of
517 different carbonaceous components. Arrows indicate the direction of increase. The WIOC in this study does
518 not strictly denote OC that is insoluble in water, it is more likely to be OC that is insoluble in water but
519 soluble in methanol.

520

521 In Figure 6b, we proposed a possible light-absorbing continuum of carbonaceous aerosols. The light-
522 absorbing properties of carbonaceous aerosols are largely dependent on their molecular structure, the
523 aromatic molecules have been shown to be the most important fractions relevant to the light-absorbing
524 properties (Andreae and Gelencser, 2006; Bond et al., 2013; Laskin et al., 2015). Generally, the light-
525 absorbing capacity increased with the aromatic level/fractions. For instance, most of BC and dark-BrC as
526 the unextractable and strong light-absorbing components, are enriched with carbon-rich aromatic molecules
527 (Corbin et al., 2019; El Hajj et al., 2021; Saleh, 2020). BC is composed of large polycyclic aromatics with
528 graphitic-like structures (Pöschl, 2005). According to the chemical and physical properties, BC can be
529 further subdivided into soot-BC and char-BC (Han et al., 2010; Masiello, 2004). Due to higher the sp^2 -bond
530 carbon and aromatic level of soot-BC, the light-absorbing capacity of soot-BC is higher than char-BC
531 (Andreae and Gelencser, 2006; Corbin et al., 2019; Schnaiter et al., 2003). Dark-BrC, also known as tar
532 balls, is also unextractable light-absorbing carbonaceous component, which exhibits light-absorbing
533 properties similar to BC. The dark-BrC could be considered as incipient BC, characterized by lower
534 molecular weight and aromatic levels compared to mature BC (El Hajj et al., 2021; Saleh et al., 2018). For
535 the extractable hydrophobic OC fraction (e.g., WIOC and HULIS), the aromatic compounds, including
536 PAHs, nitrophenol, and O-/N-aromatics, are the major light-absorbing components (Laskin et al., 2015).
537 Notably, both the molecular weight and aromatic level of aromatic compounds in the extractable
538 hydrophobic OC fraction are commonly lower than those in dark-BrC (Chakrabarty et al., 2023; Corbin et
539 al., 2019). Thus, both the WIOC and HULIS located in the M-BrC space as shown in the Figure 6a. In this
540 study, optical parameters ($E2/E3$ and AAE) do not reveal a significant difference in molecular weight and
541 aromatic levels between HULIS and WIOC. This discrepancy may be attributed to the limited reliability
542 and accuracy of these optical parameters in reflecting molecular weight and aromaticity. However,
543 employing robust analytical technologies, such as ultra-resolution mass spectrometry and benzene-poly-
544 carboxylic acids tracers (Sun et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2020), studies has demonstrated higher aromatic
545 fraction and aromaticity for WIOC compared to HULIS (Huang et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2021; Tang et al.,

2020). Particularly, polycyclic aromatics are identified as key fractions determining both the light absorptivity and wavelength dependence of WIOC from biomass burning source samples (Sun et al., 2021). Compared with hydrophobic OC, the hydrophilic OC exhibits much lower molecular weight and aromaticity. This is evidenced by the much lower E2/E3 and AAE values of hydrophobic OC than the hydrophilic OC (Figures 3b and c). Overall, the light-absorbing capacity (or color) of carbonaceous components follows the order: soot-BC > char-BC > dark-BrC > WIOC > HULIS > non-HULIS. The light-absorbing capacity and molecular weight of carbonaceous components increase with their aromaticity, while water solubility/polarity decreases with increasing aromaticity.

The molecular structure of carbonaceous components is highly related to specific sources. The BC as carbonaceous with highest aromatic level, is exclusively emitted from incomplete combustion of BB and fossil fuel (Bond et al., 2013). The content of soot-/char-BC from distinct primary emission sources significantly varies with fuel type and combustion conditions (Cai et al., 2023; Han et al., 2021). Soot-BC, formed in high-temperature combustion conditions and with high aromatic contents in the fuel, is more prevalent in fossil fuel combustion processes (e.g., coal and gasoline) than in BB (Han et al., 2021; El Hajj et al., 2021). Thus, soot-BC is predominantly contributed by fossil fuel combustion, while char-BC is the dominant subgroup in BB (Cai et al., 2023; Han et al., 2010). Remarkably, despite the subgroup distinctions within BC, as the strongest light-absorbing carbonaceous component, over 70% of BC in the ambient aerosols from major city clusters in China is attributed to fossil fuel combustion (Jiang et al., 2020a). Regarding the BrC, in addition to sharing primary emission sources with BC, it can also be formed secondarily through complex chemical reactions (Laskin et al., 2015). Dark-BrC as strongest light-absorbing OC, predominantly derived from incomplete combustion of BB and fossil fuels. Laboratory experiments and field observations consistently show that dark-BrC is more abundant in BB plumes (Chakrabarty et al., 2023; Mathai et al., 2023). However, it is noteworthy that controlled-combustion experiments report fossil fuel-derived dark-BrC may exhibit a stronger light-absorbing capacity than BB-derived dark-BrC (Cheng et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2021). Concerning the WIOC, our PMF-based sources apportionment results cannot distinctly differentiate between fossil and non-fossil sources for WIOC. However, radiocarbon isotope ($\Delta^{14}\text{C}$), a more robust source apportionment method, has demonstrated that, despite variations in sampling locations and seasons, fossil sources are more enriched in WIOC than WSOC in ambient aerosols from South/East Asia and the U.S.A. (Dasari et al., 2019; Kirillova et al., 2014; Wozniak et al., 2012; Kirillova et al., 2013). In the water-soluble fractions, the HULIS as relatively hydrophobic

577 WSOC, our previous study using radiocarbon isotope ($\Delta^{14}\text{C}$) have shown that the HULIS across ten Chinese
578 cities exhibit a higher fossil contribution than hydrophilic WSOC (e.g., non-HULIS) ($48.9 \pm 9.0\%$ vs.
579 $30.3 \pm 13.9\%$, $p < 0.01$) (Mo et al., 2024). By correlating the light-absorbing capacity with the variation
580 in the sources of different carbonaceous components, as discussed above, we observe that more strongly
581 absorbing carbonaceous components tend to be more enriched with fossil sources.

582

583 Upon emission or generation into the atmosphere, the light-absorbing properties of carbonaceous
584 aerosols undergo dynamic changes significantly influenced by atmospheric processes (Dasari et al., 2019;
585 Laskin et al., 2015). The response of different carbonaceous components to atmospheric processes varies
586 extensively. The BC is refractory carbonaceous component in the aerosols, which is recalcitrant to the
587 chemical oxidation. Although laboratory studies reported that the BC is possible oxidized and release water-
588 soluble component under specific conditions (Decesari et al., 2002). But BC is often cored with OC in the
589 ambient aerosols, making somewhat shielded towards oxidants (Bond et al., 2013). Similarly, dark-BrC
590 exhibits considerable resistance to sunlight-driven photochemical bleaching, resulting in the persistence of
591 light-absorbing organic aerosols in the atmosphere (Chakrabarty et al., 2023). This resistance is likely
592 associated with the high viscosity of dark-BrC, limiting surface and bulk reaction rates. Consequently,
593 unextractable light-absorbing components (BC + dark-BrC) not only display strong light absorptivity but
594 also persist longer in the atmosphere. For the WIOC, based on the PMF model results, we found that the
595 WIOC was enriched with primary emissions sources (e.g., coal combustion and BB) than WSOC. This
596 indicated the WIOC is more recalcitrant than WSOC. Indeed, employing dual carbon isotopes ($\delta^{13}\text{C}$ - $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$),
597 studies found that WIOC is not only enriched with fossil sources, but also exhibit greater persistence and
598 relatively longer lifetimes compared to WSOC components present in ambient aerosols (Kirillova et al.,
599 2014; Kirillova et al., 2013; Wozniak et al., 2012). Similar to WIOC, fossil components in HULIS are more
600 resistant and less susceptible to oxidative photobleaching, contributing to their relatively high light-
601 absorbing capacity compared to non-HULIS components (Mo et al., 2024). Generally, chromophores in the
602 aqueous phase experience rapid photo-bleaching, while those in the viscous organic phase undergo slower
603 rates of photo-degradation (Klodt et al., 2022). The recalcitrant properties of WIOC and HULIS may stem
604 from the tendency of these hydrophobic OC components to partition into the viscous organic phase,
605 potentially rendering them more photo-recalcitrant. By linking the light-absorbing capacity to the refractory
606 of different carbonaceous component as discussed above, the strongly light-absorbing carbonaceous

607 components tend to be more recalcitrant in the atmospheres (Figure 6b).

608
609 It is important to acknowledge that carbonaceous aerosols encompass a wide array of diverse
610 components, exhibiting a continuum of physical and chemical properties. The distinction between these
611 carbonaceous components, as discussed above, is primarily based on conceptual and operational definitions,
612 rather than clear boundaries in reality. In other words, the classification of carbonaceous components in
613 aerosols is highly dependent on operational criteria. In this study, on the one hand, the WIOC, HULIS-C,
614 and non-HULIS-C are well-defined based on their polarity. On the other hand, the definition of BC, which
615 includes char- and soot-BC, is more closely associated with thermal and optical properties. These
616 operational definitions may lead to overlaps between different carbonaceous components. For instance, BB
617 and coal combustion emit large amounts of large molecular weight soluble compounds, such as HULIS
618 (e.g., HULIS), which may char and produce false char EC signals in the TOT analysis (Yu et al., 2002).
619 Additionally, certain portions of char-BC may exhibit chemical and physical behaviors akin to high-
620 molecular-weight OC compounds, thereby overlapping with BrC. Therefore, there is no a clear boundary
621 for the carbonaceous components.

622
623 Taken together, we propose a continuum for light-absorbing carbonaceous aerosols, taking into account
624 factors such as aromaticity, molecular weight, sources, polarity and atmospheric processes (Figures 6a and
625 b). The light-absorbing capacity of carbonaceous components exhibit following orders: soot-BC > char-
626 BC > dark-BrC > WIOC > HULIS > non-HULIS. This hierarchy indicates that the light-absorbing capacity
627 of carbonaceous components increases with aromaticity, molecular weight, fossil sources contribution, and
628 refractoriness. Conversely, as the polarity/oxidized level of carbonaceous components increases, their light
629 absorbing-capacity weakens. These findings suggest that fossil fuel combustion tends to generate relatively
630 long-term and strongly light-absorbing carbonaceous components. In contrast, light-absorbing
631 carbonaceous components derived from biomass burning are prone to photo-degradation, transforming into
632 colorless carbon with high polarity and cloud condensation activity.

633 634 635 **4. Conclusions**

636 In this study, we investigated the light-absorbing properties and sources of WIOC in ten representative

637 urban cities across China. We found that WIOC averagely accounts for a substantial portion of the
638 concentrations ($33.4 \pm 7.66\%$) and Abs_{365} ($40.5 \pm 9.73\%$) of extractable OC (EX-OC). The MAE_{365} of
639 WIOC ($1.59 \pm 0.55 \text{ m}^2/\text{gC}$) was comparable to that of HULIS ($1.54 \pm 0.57 \text{ m}^2/\text{gC}$) but significantly higher
640 than non-HULIS ($0.71 \pm 0.28 \text{ m}^2/\text{gC}$), suggesting the stronger light-absorbing capacity of hydrophobic OC
641 (WIOC+HULIS) compared to hydrophilic OC (non-HULIS). The dominant sources of WIOC were
642 biomass burning (31.0%) and coal combustion (31.1%), with coal combustion exhibiting the highest light-
643 absorbing capacity among these sources. Moreover, utilizing the simple forcing efficiency ($\text{SFE}_{300-700\text{nm}}$)
644 method, we found that WIOC exhibited the highest $\text{SFE}_{300-700\text{nm}}$ ($6.57 \pm 5.37 \text{ W/g}$) among the EX-OC
645 fractions. Notably, the radiative forcing of EX-OC was predominantly attributed to hydrophobic OC
646 (WIOC: $39.4 \pm 15.5\%$ and HULIS: $39.5 \pm 12.1\%$). Finally, we proposed a light-absorbing carbonaceous
647 continuum based on considerations of aromaticity, sources, and atmospheric processes of different
648 carbonaceous components. This continuum revealed that carbonaceous components more enriched with
649 fossil sources tend to possess stronger light-absorbing capacity, higher aromatic levels, increased molecular
650 weights, and greater recalcitrance in the atmosphere. The implications of our study underscore the necessity
651 of reducing fossil fuel emissions as an effective strategy for mitigating both gaseous (CO_2) and particulate
652 light-absorbing carbonaceous warming components.

653

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666 **Competing interests**

667 The contact author has declared that none of the authors has any competing interests

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