Laboratory studies on the optical, physical, and chemical properties of fresh and aged biomass burning aerosols

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Abstract. Atmospheric brown carbon (BrC) plays a significant role in global warming, yet the evolution of its optical properties during aging remains poorly understood, leading to substantial uncertainties in its climate effects. In this study, we investigate the aging process of BrC and its driving factors using laboratory-generated biomass burning emissions, including four types of straw and one type of wood. Upon OH oxidation, there exists a large increase in OA fraction after 2-day aging, followed by a minor increase during aging to 7 days. The particle growth is dominated by the change in OA content and thus shows a similar trend during aging. The mass absorption efficiency (MAE) of fresh BrC measured at 370 nm is 2.1–5.7 $m^2\ g^{-1}$. A sharp decline in MAE is observed after 2-day aging, equally attributed to photobleaching and secondary organic aerosol (SOA) formation, while the subsequent slight decrease during further aging to 7 days is dominated by SOA formation. Although a negative correlation is observed between particle size and MAE, the reduction in MAE is mainly driven by the decline in the imaginary part (k) of BrC, with particle size playing a minor role. Combined with positive matrix factorization (PMF) analysis, the study reveals that oxygenated OA, characterized by higher O/C ratios but lower MAE, increases significantly with aging. In contrast, two hydrocarbon-like OA factors with lower O/C ratios and higher MAE, decrease over time. These results emphasize the importance of categorizing BrC based on its MAE and atmospheric behavior in climate

models.

1 Introduction

As a special class of organic aerosol (OA), brown carbon (BrC) exhibits a significant light absorption ability at near-UV and shorter visible wavelengths with a strong wavelength dependence (Laskin et al., 2015). It accounts for approximately 19–40% of the total absorption by carbonaceous particles (Feng et al., 2013; Lin et al., 2014), with a global radiative forcing ranging from +0.03 to +0.57 W m^{-2} (Li et al., 2023). BrC can also perturb the temperature structure of the atmosphere and then influence cloud cover, known as semi-direct effects (Laskin et al., 2015; Yan et al., 2018). When deposited on snow and ice, BrC can reduce surface albedo and cause early snow melting (Qian et al., 2015; Tuccella et al., 2021). Additionally, the strong UV-absorption due to BrC can reduce the rate of atmospheric photochemical reactions, resulting in a 15%–30% decrease in regional concentrations of OH radical and O$_3$ (Wang et al., 2022). However, current understanding of the BrC light absorptivity, especially its evolution upon aging processes, remains limited, driving a significant uncertainty in the estimates of its climate effects.

BrC originates from a variety of sources, including primary emissions from biomass burning, coal combustion, and vehicular emissions (Olson et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2017; Xie et al., 2017a; Park et al., 2018), as well as secondary processes such as photochemical oxidation (Lambe et al., 2013; Xie et al., 2017b), aqueous-phase processes (Lin et al., 2015; Ye et al., 2019) and nighttime oxidation (Jiang et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2023). Among these sources, biomass burning has long been recognized as a dominant source (Saleh, 2020). When OA absorption from biomass is considered, the regional or global radiative forcing from biomass burning aerosol can change from negative to positive effects, reaching up to +0.05 W m^{-2} (Saleh et al., 2015).

Many laboratory and field studies have investigated the chemical and optical properties of BrC from biomass burning (Hems et al., 2021). The light absorptivity of freshly emitted BrC has been shown to depend strongly on burning conditions. For instance, Huo et al. (2018) demonstrated that the mass absorption efficiency (MAE) decreased under high moisture or stacking conditions. The absorption Ångström exponent (AAE) also varies with the burning conditions, higher during smoldering than flaming stages (Martinsson et al., 2015; Park et al., 2020). Utilizing the ratio of BC/OA as a proxy of the burning condition, several studies have established a quantitative relationship between the MAE and the burning conditions (Saleh et al., 2014;

Xie et al., 2017a; Park et al., 2020). However, the relationship varies with different studies, and is suggested to be affected by the types of biomass (Xie et al., 2017a; Park et al., 2020). So far, to what extent could the biomass types affect the BrC absorptivity is not clear and requires further study.

Upon aging processes, BrC absorptivity could decrease significantly due to the photobleaching of some chromophores, with a lifetime ranging from a few hours (Zhao et al., 2015; Browne et al., 2019) to a few days (Forrister et al., 2015; Sumlin et al., 2017). The photobleaching rate largely depends on ambient conditions, including concentrations of OH radical (Wang et al., 2014) and NO_x (Yang et al., 2022) as well as relative humidity and temperature (Klodt et al., 2023; Gao et al., 2024). The chemical characteristics of BrC also determine the extent of the photobleaching effect. For example, tar balls from biomass burning are found to be resistant to the photobleaching process (Saleh, 2020). Moreover, the light absorption of BrC can be enhanced (i.e., photo-enhancement) through the nitration of existing OA (Wong et al., 2019; Hems et al., 2020). For example, He et al. (2022) showed that the MAE increased with the NO_x/VOCs ratio due to the formation of nitroaromatic compounds. The photobleaching and photo-enhancement may occur concurrently, making the evolution of BrC absorptivity more complicated. Some studies reported continuously decrease or increase in MAE (Choudhary et al., 2023) while some show a slight increase first followed by a significant decrease (Schnitzler et al., 2020; Fang et al., 2022). However, current studies mainly focus on the evolution of the overall BrC absorptivity, and few have endeavored to distinguish the behaviors of different BrC components, which may undergo totally different aging processes.

In this study, we characterized the optical, physical, and chemical properties of fresh and aged BrC emitted from biomass combustion. By analyzing the synchronous evolution of both chemical components and light absorption in the smoke, we explored the aging processes of different BrC components and their contributions to the overall light absorption at different aging levels. The study demonstrated significant discrepancies in the aging processes among different BrC components and suggested the necessity to classify BrC based on its optical properties, especially its photobleaching rate, for its better representation in climate models.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Experimental setup

75   Five types of biomass fuels were collected from major crop producing areas in China, including wheat straw (WS), rice straw (RS), corn straw (CS), soybean straw (SS) and apple branch (AB) (Table S1 and Fig. S1). The rice is mainly distributed in central and southern China, and others are mainly distributed in northern China. These biomass types could represent the majority of China's biofuels. The combustion experiments were conducted at the Institute of Earth Environment, Chinese Academy of Sciences (IEECAS) in Xi'an, China. Figure S2 illustrates the instrument configuration. Emissions were generated

80   by burning batches of ~10 g of dry biomass fuels (cut into pieces of 10–15 cm) on a combustion platform in a ~8 m^3 combustion chamber. After the flame was extinguished, the smoke was first mixed and allowed to stand in the combustion chamber, and was then diluted before being sampled by several online instruments. Details of the chamber and combustion facilities are provided in Tian et al. (2015).

A Potential Aerosol Mass-Oxidation Flow Reactor (PAM-OFR) (Aerodyne Research, LLC, Billerica, MA, USA) was

85   applied to simulate atmospheric aging processes. For each test, the fresh (F) aerosols were measured in the first 40 minutes and then the UV light of PAM-OFR was turned on for the next 40 minutes to measure the aged aerosols. Detailed information of the PAM-OFR is described by Cao et al. (2020). Briefly, inside the PAM-OFR, OH radicals were formed through a series of photochemical reactions of H_2O and O_2 under the illumination of UV light. Simulated OH concentrations could thus be controlled via tuning the intensity of UV light. Combined with the residence time within the PAM-OFR (90s) and the assumed

90   average OH concentration in the atmosphere (1.5×10^6 molecules cm^{-3}) (Mao et al., 2009), the equivalent atmospheric aging levels were estimated to be around 2-days (A-2) and 7-days (A-7) in this study, similar to those reported by Li et al. (2020) and Guo et al. (2022). Table S1 also summarizes the conditions for all burning tests in this study. It is important to note that the experimental conditions do not perfectly represent the photochemical conditions of the atmosphere, and it emphasizes OH-driven oxidation under initially high-NO$_x$ conditions which rapidly shift towards low-NO$_x$ conditions (Cappa et al., 2020).

95   ### 2.2 Gas analysis

The CO and CO_2 concentrations were monitored using a Fourier Transform Infrared (FTIR) gas analyzer (DX4015, Gasmet,

Finland). Before each group of experiments, we cleaned the FTIR sample cell with nitrogen and performed background measurements. Gas concentrations were treated by FTIR standard procedures (Calcmet v12.15) using the linear relationship between absorbance and molecular number combined with the reference spectra. The modified combustion efficiency (MCE),

100   defined as $\triangle CO_2/(\triangle CO_2+\triangle CO)$, was used to indicate the burning conditions during each fire test (Akagi et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2020b; Zhao et al., 2022). Here, the $\triangle CO$ and $\triangle CO_2$ represent the background-corrected CO and CO_2 values in the smoke. The MCE measured in this work ranged from 0.95 to 0.99 (Table S1). An MCE value greater than 0.9 is indicative of flaming combustion (Sinha et al., 2003; Akagi et al., 2011). Actually, flaming and smoldering phases occur simultaneously during a fire (Akagi et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2020b). The NO_x and SO_2 concentrations were monitored both before and after

105   the PAM-OFR (Fig. S2) using NO_x analyzers (model 42i, Thermo Scientific Inc., USA) and SO_2 analyzers (model 43i, Thermo Scientific Inc., USA), respectively. The consumption rate of NO_x and SO_2 during the aging process could then be derived base on their concentrations measured after the PAM-OFR relative those before the PAM-OFR.

2.3 Aerosol characterization

The mass concentrations of non-refractory chemical components were measured by a Time-of-Flight Aerosol Chemical

110   Speciation Monitor (ToF-ACSM; Aerodyne Research Inc., USA), including organics, nitrate (NO_3^-), sulfate (SO_4^{2-}), chloride (Cl^-), and ammonium (NH_4^+). Detailed descriptions of this instrument are provided in Decarlo et al. (2006). Briefly, the aerosols were first dried with a diffusion dryer and then passed through a critical orifice into a narrow beam via an aerodynamic lens. The aerosols were successively vaporized by a heated surface (~600 °C), ionized via electron ionization, and detected by a mass spectrometer detector. The collection efficiency (CE) value was 0.5 in this study. The calibrations were performed by

115   dried monodispersed (300 nm) ammonium nitrate and ammonium sulfate particles. The relative ionization efficiencies (RIEs) of 3.93 and 0.82 were used for ammonium and sulfate and the default values of 1.1, 1.4, and 1.3 were used for nitrate, organics, and chloride, respectively (Jimenez et al., 2003; Canagaratna et al., 2007). The ToF-ACSM data were analyzed with the standard data analysis software (Tofware v3.3) within Igor Pro (v7.08; WaveMetrics, Inc., Oregon, USA). In addition, Positive matrix factorization (PMF) (Paatero and Tapper, 1994) was performed on the high-resolution mass spectral matrix of OA

120   (Ulbrich et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2011). Finally, three OA factors were identified by the PMF model, including two

hydrocarbon-like OA (HOA-1 and HOA-2) and one oxygenated OA (OOA).

To quantify the photochemical effect on aerosol chemical compositions, we further calculated the enhancement ratio (*ER*)

of different species using BC as a proxy for primary emissions (Eq. 1):

$$ER = \frac{X_{aged}}{BC_{aged}} / \frac{X_{fresh}}{BC_{fresh}}, \tag{1}$$

125   where X represents a certain species, e.g., NO_3^-, SO_4^{2-}, OA, or OOA. BC was measured via a seven-wavelength

Aethalometer (AE33) as described in the following section. The *ER* >1 indicates net production of species X while the *ER* <1

indicates net loss. Bias could be introduced by the assumption that different species have the same wall-loss rate (Hennigan et

al., 2011). In addition, BC measured by AE 33 could also be biased by applying a fixed MAE value when converting the optical

absorption to the mass concentration, which instead varies with BC mixing state (Zanatta et al., 2018).

130   In addition, we also investigated the evolution of aerosol size distributions along with the aging process and its possible

influence on estimated BrC MAE. The particle number size distribution was obtained via a Differential Mobility Analyser

(DMA, Model 3082, TSI Inc., USA) combined with a Condensation Particle Counter (CPC, Model 3788, TSI Inc., USA),

focusing on particles within a size range of approximately 12–460 nm.

2.4 Optical measurement

135   The light absorption of aerosols was measured with a seven-wavelength Aethalometer (Model AE33, Magee Scientific,

Berkeley, CA, USA). The AE33 measures light transmitted through a filter on which particles are deposited and automatically

compensates for the loading effect and multiple scattering coefficients (*C*) in real time (Drinovec et al., 2015; Drinovec et al.,

2017). In this study, a newer filter tape (M8060) with a recommended *C* value of 1.39 was used. A value of 7.77 $m^2\ g^{-1}$ for BC

MAE at 880 nm was adopted to calculate the mass concentration of BC (Drinovec et al., 2015). The AAE is an important

140   parameter to characterize the spectral dependence of aerosol absorption, and was calculated via Eq. 2:

$$b_{abs}(\lambda) = K \times \lambda^{-AAE}, \tag{2}$$

where b_{abs} (λ) is the absorption coefficient at the wavelength of λ in unit of M m^{-1}, and *K* is a constant. The absorption

coefficients of seven wavelengths were used to fit the exponential function curve to obtain AAE. Assuming BC is the only

light-absorbing component at 880 nm (Kirchstetter et al., 2004; Kirchstetter and Thatcher, 2012), the b_{abs} of BC and BrC at

145   370 nm was then calculated by Eq. 3-4:

$$b_{abs,BC}(\lambda) = b_{abs}(880\ nm) \times \left(\frac{\lambda}{880}\right)^{-AAE_{BC}}, \tag{3}$$

$$b_{abs,BrC}(\lambda) = b_{abs}(\lambda) - b_{abs,BC}(\lambda), \tag{4}$$

$$MAE(\lambda) = \frac{b_{abs,BrC}(\lambda)}{OA}, \tag{5}$$

Here, AAE_{BC} was assumed to be 1.1, which represents the likely range of AAE for BC externally and internally mixed with

150   non-absorbing materials (Lack and Langridge, 2013; Li et al., 2022b; Tian et al., 2023). The MAE of BrC at different λ were

further calculated based on the mass concentrations of OA (Eq. 5). The *ER* of BrC absorption is also estimated by Eq. 1, where

X represents BrC absorption in either fresh or aged smoke.

    To further quantify the contributions of different OA components to BrC absorption, a multiple linear regression (MLR)

model was applied to obtain the MAE values for HOA-1, HOA-2, and OOA as follows:

155     $$b_{abs,BrC} = m_1 * [HOA - 1] + m_2 * [HOA - 2] + m_3 * [OOA], \tag{6}$$

Here, m_1, m_2 and m_3 denote the MAE, in unit of $m^2\ g^{-1}$. The light absorption and MAE in this study refer to the wavelength at

370 nm, unless otherwise noted.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Chemical compositions of fresh and aged smoke

160   The chemical components of fresh and aged smoke from different biomass burning are illustrated in Fig. 1a. For fresh smoke,

the mass fraction of OA is the highest (39%–63%). The relative importance of BC and Cl⁻ varies significantly with biomass

types. For example, the median mass fractions of BC emitted by AB and SS are relatively high, reaching 22% and 27%

respectively, but are only around 7.8%–10% by other biomass types, which instead exhibit higher mass fractions of Cl⁻ (21%–

34%) and NH_4^+ (10%–13%). This difference may be related to local crop fertilization, which significantly affect the element

165   content of the straw. Higher MCE may also cause more emission of Cl⁻ (Wang et al., 2020b). The mass fractions of SO_4^{2-} and

NO_3^- are very low (<5%) except for AB, consistent with other laboratory results (Li et al., 2016; Ma et al., 2019; Guo et al.,

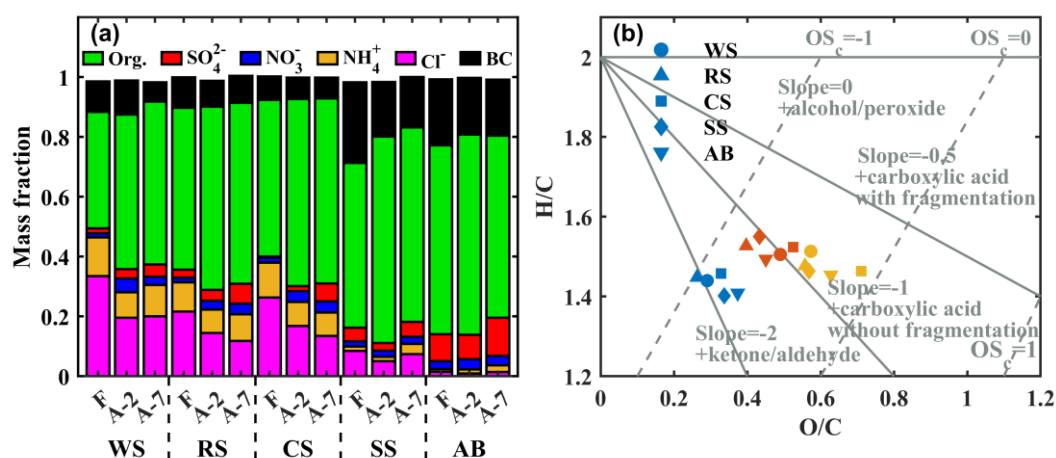
2022). Upon the aging process, significant changes were found for aerosols with secondary sources, including SO_4^{2-}, NO_3^-

and OA. For SO_4^{2-}, the *ER* is around 1.1–2.3 at A-2 and further increases to 1.7–3.1 at A-7 (Table S2). The *ER* of NO_3^- at A-2 (1.5–2.9) is higher than that of SO_4^{2-}, which could be explained by a faster NO_3^- production rate and is also consistent with

170   the higher NO_x consumption rate compared to SO_2 (Fig. S3). The *ER* of NO_3^- at A-7 (1.6–2.6), however, is similar to or even

lower than that at A-2, and hence is significantly lower than that of SO_4^{2-}. Similar trends of SO_4^{2-} and NO_3^- from A-2 to A-7

have also been reported in other studies (Guo et al., 2022), and are attributed to the replacement of NO_3^- by more acidic SO_4^{2-}.

This could also explain the low *ER* value of Cl^- (<1).

175   **Figure 1. (a) The mass fractions of chemical component of different biomass smoke and (b) the Van Krevelen diagram of H/C versus O/C ratios for all OA. Blue, red and orange dots represent fresh (F), 2-days (A-2) and 7-days (A-7), respectively.**

For OA, the *ER* increases from 1.3–1.6 at A-2 to 1.4–1.9 at A-7, showing continuous formation of SOA. This could be

verified by the stack diagram of the high-resolution mass spectra in Fig. S4, which demonstrates a notable increase in signals

at m/z 28 and 44 for all biomass types under the OH exposure, indicative of the formation of oxygenated OA, such as organic

180   acids (Aiken et al., 2008; Lambe et al., 2013). As a result, the H/C and O/C ratios shift from the region with a slope of –2 in

fresh smoke to the region with a slope of –1 upon aging (Fig. 1b), implying an increase in carboxyl group (-COOH) with a

direct replacement of H. Compared with A-2, H/C is slightly reduced under A-7 due to the hydrogen loss from the C=O bond

formation (Lambe et al., 2013).

3.2 OA classification based on PMF

185   To further explore the evolution of different OA components, we classified total OA from both fresh and aged smoke into three categories based on the PMF model (Fig. 2). Factor 1, classified as HOA-1, has the lowest O/C ratio (0.08) and shows strong correlations with ions at m/z 55 ($r^2 = 0.85$) and 57 ($r^2 = 0.90$), respectively. Many field observations indicate that this factor is usually related to different combustion processes (Thamban et al., 2017; Rivellini et al., 2020; Li et al., 2022a). Factor 2, classified as HOA-2, is also characterized by hydrocarbon fragments, especially at m/z of 41, 43, 55, 57, 67, 69, and 71. It

190 has moderate ratios of O/C (0.37) and H/C (1.2) compared to other factors. It also has a good correlation with BC ($r^2 = 0.50$), ions at m/z 60 ($r^2 = 0.41$) and 73 ($r^2 = 0.68$), respectively (Table S3), which is also similar to the HOA resolved from ambient OA (Thamban et al., 2017; Li et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2020a). Factor 3 is dominated by ions at m/z 28 and 44 with the highest O/C ratio of 0.76. Moreover, it is well correlated with oxidized products or fragments, including SO_4^{2-} ($r^2 = 0.51$), NO_3^- ($r^2 = 0.58$), m/z 28 ($r^2 = 0.72$) and m/z 44 ($r^2 = 0.90$), and thus is classified as OOA.

195   For fresh smoke, the OA is dominated by HOA-1 and HOA-2, while the contribution of OOA is still of significance (19%–40%, Fig. 2d). This is actually a significant feature distinguishing biomass sources from other sources, such as traffic exhaust (Thamban et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2019). Along with OH exposure, the fractions of HOA-1 and HOA-2 decrease while OOA increases significantly, reaching 55%–70% at A-2 and 62%–80% at A-7, respectively. For HOA-1, the *ER* for all biomass types decreases from 0.88 at A-2 to 0.66 at A-7, respectively. The *ER* of HOA-2 is around 0.63 at A-2, but slightly increases to 0.71

200 at A-7. The *ER* of OOA of different biomass types reaches 2.6–3.7 at A-2, implying significant and fast yields of SOA. The *ER* of OOA continues to grow at A-7 but the growth rate slows down compared to A-2. Previous studies have also shown that the initial rapid increase of SOA and O/C in biomass burning aerosols slows down with aging time (>2 day) due to the depletion of precursors (Grieshop et al., 2009; Cappa et al., 2020; Li et al., 2024). It is worth mentioning that there exists a large variability in OA composition as well as its evolution upon aging among different biomass types. For instance, the *ER* of OOA

205 in AB smoke is the smallest and the difference between A-2 and A-7 is minor, while the *ER* of OOA in WS smoke increased by nearly 63% from A-2 to A-7.

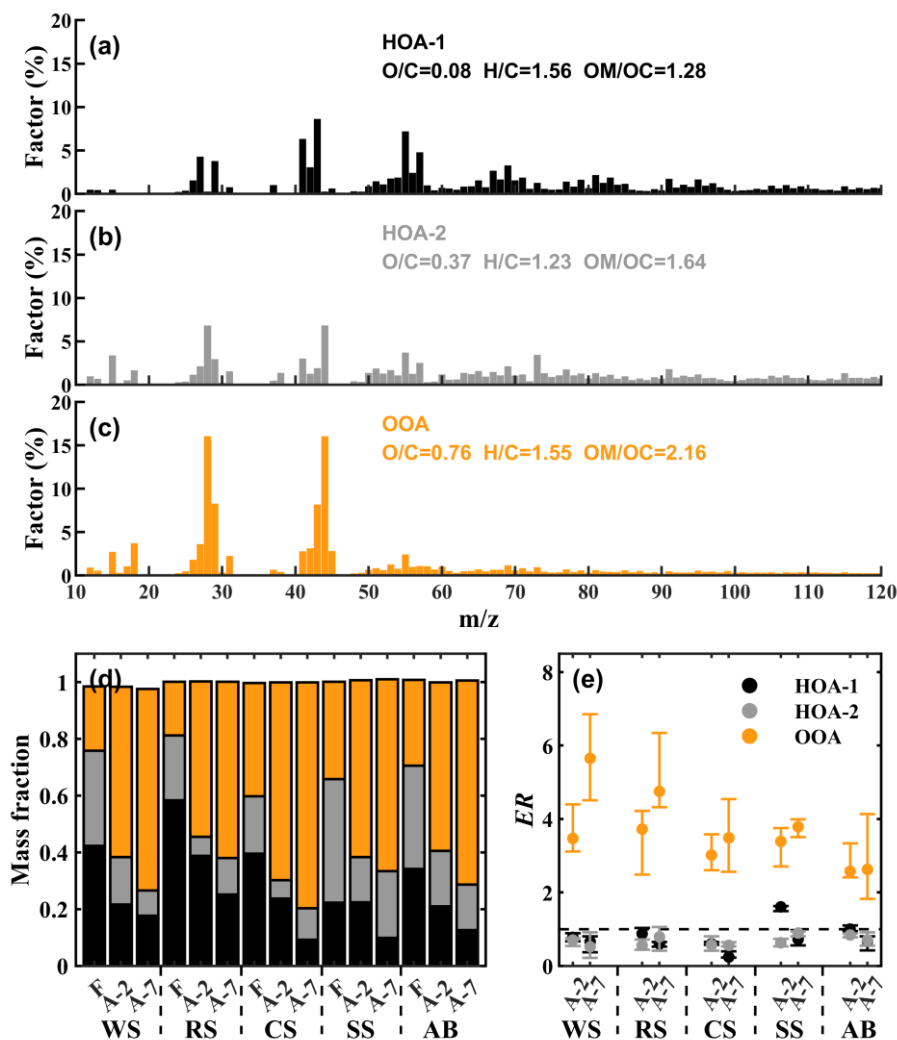



Figure 2. (a-c) High-resolution mass spectra of the three OA factors. (d) The median mass fractions and (e) the enhancement ratio (*ER*) of different OA factors at different aging levels. The solid circles and whiskers in (e) denote the median, 25th and 75th percentiles, respectively.

3.3 Evolution of particle size

The particle number size distribution of different biomass smoke exhibits a unimodal distribution. The maximum peak diameter (D_m) and half-peak widths (σ) of Gaussian fits are shown in Fig. 3. The WS shows the largest D_m (239 nm) of freshly emitted biomass aerosols, followed by CS (233 nm), SS (204 nm), RS (178 nm) and AB (162 nm). The D_m is within the range

215 (50–500 nm) reported by Chen et al. (2019). Previous studies also show that the wheat smoke has a higher D_m in residue crops

(Fang et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2019). Variations in D_m is related to both biomass types and combustion conditions (Park et al.,

2013; Ma et al., 2019), such as fuel to air ratio, moisture content and density. It can be seen that RS has the smallest σ (0.22),

while AB has the largest σ (0.28) and error bar (Fig. 3b), implying relatively uniform morphology or density of freshly emitted

particles from RS compared to those from AB.

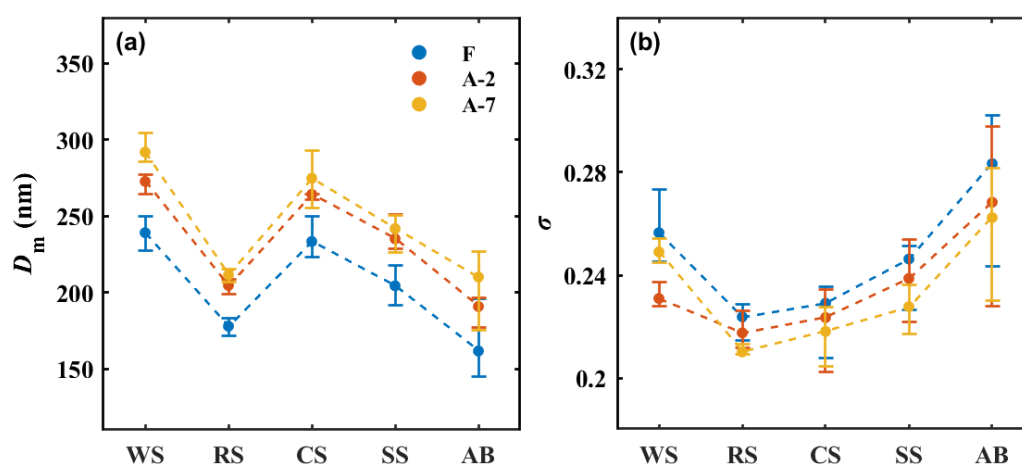



Figure 3. (a) The maximum peak diameter (D_m) and (b) half-peak widths (σ) from Gaussian fits for particle number size distribution. The solid circles and whiskers denote the median, 25th and 75th percentiles, respectively.

  A significant increase in D_m is observed with increasing OH exposure, about 15% and 17% increase for A-2 and A-7,

respectively. Similar change has also been reported in previous studies. For instance, Ma et al. (2019) reported a 1.1–1.4 times

225 increase in particle size during 4-hour aging and Zhao et al. (2022) showed 1.2 times increase after 15-day photooxidation.

The increase for 7-day is only slightly higher than that for 2-day, indicating a significant slowdown in particle growth. Many

studies have also shown that D_m in biomass burning aerosols increases slowly after a rapid increase upon OH exposure (Fang

et al., 2017; Reyes et al., 2019). This could be explained on one hand by limited availability of precursors. On the other hand,

more mass is required to increase one unit particle size as the particle grows. This may also explain the observed decease in σ

230 as particles shift to larger size along with aging (Fig. 3b).

3.4 Light absorption properties

A significant BrC contribution to the total light absorption in fresh smoke is observed but with a large variability across different biomass types (f_{BrC} = 29%–60%, Fig. 4). These values are in the middle range of the results in previous studies (~10%–90%) (Tian et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2020; Fang et al., 2022). The presence of BrC makes the AAE of total aerosol significantly deviated from 1, with the highest value for RS (2.3), followed by CS (1.8), AB (1.6), WS (1.5) and SS (1.4). These AAE values are also within the range of previous studies for biomass burning aerosols (Laskin et al., 2015). Under OH exposure, the AAE decreases due to a reduction in BrC light absorption, with the *ER* of $b_{abs, BrC}$ around 0.51–0.85 and 0.63–0.90 in A-2 and A-7, respectively. The large decrease in BrC absorption at A-2 implies a significant effect of photobleaching. The slight increase in the *ER* of BrC absorption at A-7 compared with that at A-2 on the one hand implies the effect of photo enhancement associated with the SOA formation, and on the other hand suggested limited photobleaching effect after 2-day aging. It has been reported that 20%–64% of BrC absorption remains even after a longer aging level (Sumlin et al., 2017; Browne et al., 2019; Hems et al., 2021), consistent with our results. Additionally, an exponential relationship between AAE and f_{BrC} is clearly observed (AAE = 0.97*exp (1.4*f_{BrC}), with 95% confidence intervals of 0.93–1.02 and 1.29–1.52 for the former and latter coefficients, respectively). Similar relationship has also been reported by Sun et al. (2021) for fresh household biomass burning smoke, with AAE = 1.01*exp (1.8*f_{BrC}), which falls within the uncertainty range of our results. And our results further demonstrate that the relationship stands for both fresh and aged biomass burning emissions.

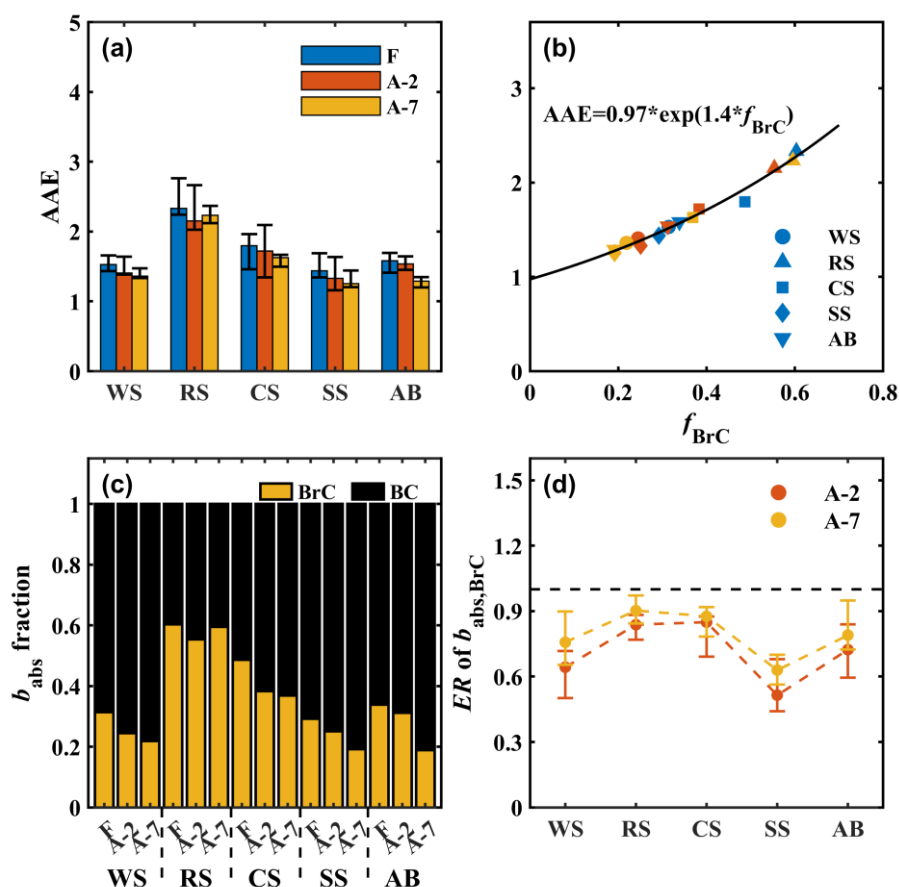



Figure 4. (a) AAE of total aerosol and (b) its relationship with BrC contribution to the total light absorption (f_{BrC}) at 370 nm; (c) relative contribution of BrC and BC to total light absorption at 370 nm; and (d) the enhancement ratio (*ER*) of BrC absorption.

250   In addition to the variation in BrC absorption, the MAE of fresh OA emitted from different biomass burning also exhibits a large range, with the highest value from RS (5.7 m^2 g^{-1}), followed by AB (3.9), SS (3.7), CS (3.5), and WS (2.1) (Fig. 5a). Upon OH exposure, A large decrease in the MAE is observed, reduced by 32%–64% and 37%–68% at A-2 and A-7, respectively. The change in MAE is associated with the changes in both BrC absorption and OA mass concentrations. In other words, it is due to the combined effect of photobleaching and the formation of SOA with weak absorption. For OA at A-2, the

255   reduction in MAE compared to the fresh smoke is dominated comparably by both the changes in $b_{abs, BrC}$ and OA mass. Compared to the condition of A-2, the reduction in MAE is mainly driven by the increasing in SOA with weak absorption. This again suggests the resistance of BrC to photobleaching after the first few days of aging. Similarly, Zhao et al. (2022)

reported that 49% to 67% of the initial MAE remained after equivalent 9 days of aging.

To further distinguish the light absorptivity of different OA components, we calculated the MAE of the three OA factors based the MLR method (Fig. 5b). There exists a significant difference in the MAE of the three OA factors, with the highest value (5.6 m^2 g^{-1}) for HOA-1, followed by HOA-2 (4.0 m^2 g^{-1}) and OOA (0.76 m^2 g^{-1}). The decrease in the MAE with the increase in O/C ratio is consistent with previous findings (Sumlin et al., 2017; Schnitzler et al., 2020; He et al., 2022). As discussed above, the evolutions of three OA factors are quite different during the aging process, their contribution to the light absorption thus varies significantly. For A-2 and A-7, the ER of $b_{\text{abs, BrC}}$ for HOA-1 are 0.85 and 0.60, respectively, and HOA-2 shows similar values of 0.69 and 0.79. Contrarily, OOA exhibits the highest ER of $b_{\text{abs, BrC}}$ (3.2 and 4.0, respectively). Consequently, the contribution from OOA absorption increases from 6% at fresh to 19% at A-2 and 26% at A-7, respectively, while the contribution from HOA-1 absorption decreases from 65% at fresh to 59% at A-2 and 43% at A-7, respectively, and that from HOA-2 remains similar (23%–30%) (Fig. S6). The significantly different behavior of the three OA factors combined with their distinct MAE values suggest the importance in climate models to classify OA into different groups based on their optical properties, which could be represented by the oxidation sate in this case.

Additionally, we found that the MAE of OA decreases with the increases of particle size (Fig. 5d). To explore the potential influence of particle size on the variation in BrC MAE, we conducted a theoretical calculation of the MAE for pure BrC particles as a function of D_p using Mie theory. Assuming that the BrC particles are spherical with as a density of 1.6 g cm^{-3}, the MAE for BrC particles at a specific diameter can be determined, given a particular refractive index. In this study, we adopt the real part (n) of the refractive index of pure BrC is 1.7 from Saleh et al. (2014) and the imaginary part (k) varies from 0.6 to 0.02. As shown in Fig. 5d, for a fixed particle diameter, the BrC MAE increases with k. The relationship between particle diameter and MAE is more complicated even with the refractive index remains constant. For small particles (<100 nm), the MAE generally increases with diameter (gray dashed lines). However, for large particles, the MAE decreases with diameter given a larger k value but exhibits weak fluctuations and no obvious trends when k is small, which is consistent with previous studies (Hems et al., 2021). The median diameters of BrC particles in both fresh and aged biomass burning plume detected in this study are in the region where MAE either decreases with diameter or shows minimal dependence on diameter (Fig. 5d). Therefore, the large reduction in MAE is mainly driven by changes in k, specifically, lower k values at larger D_p. As discussed

earlier, upon OH exposure, there is a significant increase in particle size with new components formation (Fig. 3). The latter is dominated by more contribution from OOA with high O/C (Fig. S5b), which has much lower MAE or k compared to the other two OA factors.

For better comparison, Fig. 5b also summarizes MAE values for biomass burning OA reported from both laboratory measurements and field observations. The MAE of fresh BrC either measured in the laboratory or derived from ambient observations shows a large variability but has a similar range as with our results. This large variability is primarily attributed to differences in biomass types and burning conditions. As mentioned above, the MAE of biomass burning OA could be expressed as a function of BC/OA, accounting for the influence of burning conditions (Saleh et al., 2014; Pokhrel et al., 2016). Here, we found similar relationship with a linear regression slope of 8.0 (Fig. S5a), which is within the range (~0.63–22) of the slope reported in previous studies (Xie et al., 2017a; Park et al., 2020). The MAE for aged OA is still very limited in laboratory measurements, with a value around 1.4 m^2 g^{-1} that largely depends on the simulated aging levels. This is also consistent with our results, 2.1 and 1.8 m^2 g^{-1} for OA at A-2 and A-7, respectively. The MAE of SOA derived from ambient observations is slight lower. This is because SOA from ambient studies includes precursors from sources other than biomass burning. It has been shown that SOA from biogenic sources is less light-absorbing compared to that from anthropogenic sources, including biomass burning (Du et al., 2014).

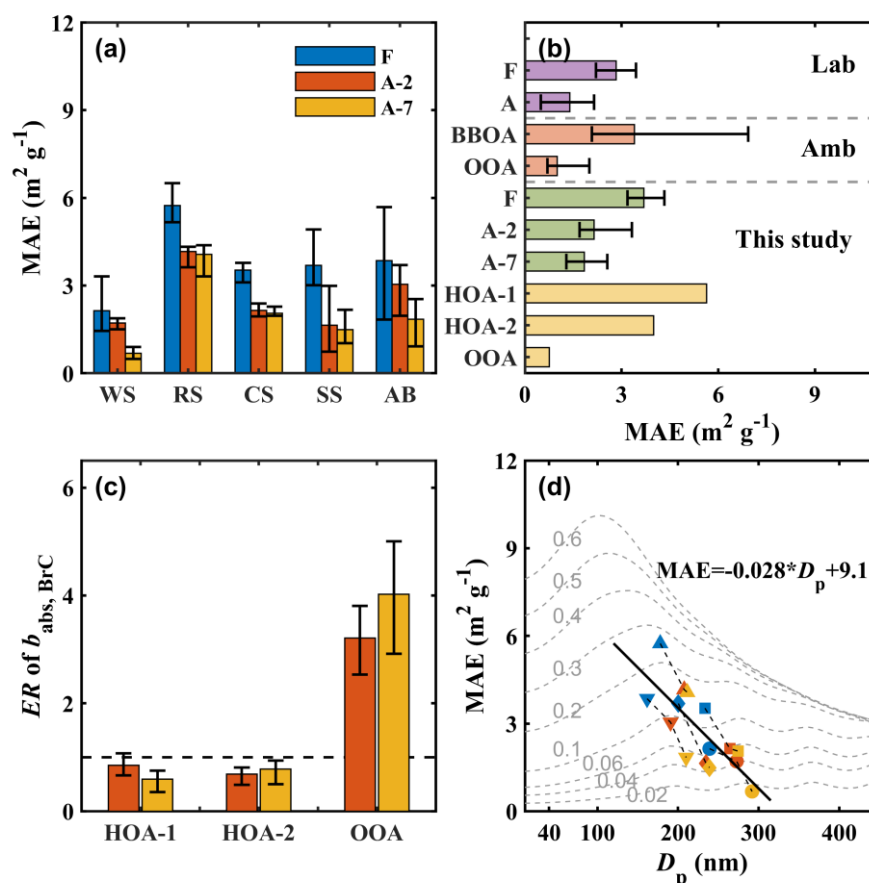



Figure 5. (a) MAE of BrC at 370 nm and (b) comparison of BrC MAE in this study with previous studies including both laboratory measurements and field observations (data from Table S4 and S5); (c) the enhancement ratio (*ER*) of BrC absorption in different OA factors; (d) relationship of MAE at 370 nm with particle diameter (D_p). Note that the MAE of OC in some studies has been converted to the MAE of OA assuming OA/OC equal to 1.8; the MAE dependence on particle size in (d) is calculated using the Mie model for pure BrC (gray dashed lines).

4 Conclusions

The optical, physical and chemical properties of the biomass burning smoke upon aging were monitored simultaneously to better understand the evolution of biomass burning aerosol, especially BrC, and its driving factors. Upon OH exposure, the fraction of secondary components increases significantly, and the increase in OA is associated with the rising value of O/C, mainly for the carboxyl group. However, the behavior of the secondary components differs significantly at different aging

310   levels. The *ER* of NO_3^- at A-2 is similar to or lower than A-7 due to the replacement of NO_3^- by more acidic SO_4^{2-}. The *ER* of

OA at A-2 and A-7 are also very similar, but due to limited availability of precursors. Particle growth is mainly dominated by

the formation of SOA and thus shows a similar trend as OA upon aging.

The optical properties of the biomass burning obtained in this study are in general within the wide range reported in previous

studies, including the relationship between the AAE of total aerosol and the fraction of BrC absorption, the dependence of BrC

315   MAE on the BC/OA ratio, and the presence of some BrC resistant to photobleaching. The large variation in the quantified

relationship, however, emphasizes the significant influence from the biomass types and warrants more studies. The extent of

the photobleaching as well as the formation of SOA with weak absorptivity together determine the evolution of BrC MAE at

different aging levels. There exists a large decrease in BrC MAE from fresh smoke to A-2, contributed comparably by both

the photobleaching in BrC absorption and the increase in SOA. Only a slight decrease in BrC MAE is found from A-2 to A-7

320   and is mainly caused by the small increase in SOA where the photobleaching effect is very limited. We also observed a negative

correlation between the MAE and the particle size. However, based on the Mie theory calculation, we found that the change

in MAE is mainly driven by the change in the imaginary part (k) of OA instead of the particle size, implying lower k value at

larger particle size. This is consistent with the formation of SOA with lower MAE (i.e. k) upon aging, which dominates the

particle growth. Therefore, it is important to distinguish the behavior of different OA components and their contribution to

325   BrC absorption.

The study further classified the OA into three factors based on the PMF model, among which, HOA-1 and HOA-2 are more

related to fresh smoke while OOA is associated with secondary formation with higher O/C value. The MAE of different OA

factors also differ from each other, decreasing as the O/C value increases. The behavior of different OA factors upon aging

also shows distinct patterns, with a significant decrease in HOA-1 and HOA-2 but an increase in OOA. For A-2 and A-7, the

330   *ER* of $b_{abs,\,BrC}$ for HOA-1 are 0.85 and 0.60, respectively, and HOA-2 shows similar values of 0.69 and 0.79. Contrarily, OOA

exhibits the highest *ER* of $b_{abs,\,BrC}$ (3.2 and 4.0, respectively). Our results thus demonstrate the necessity of classifying OA into

different categories based on their distinct MAE and behavior upon aging. Future studies should focus on the evolution of

different OA groups rather than the whole OA, which could be classified by their O/C value, solubility, etc., to develop more

appropriate BrC parameterization in model studies for better assessing its climate effects.

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Code and data availability. The code and data supporting the conclusions of this paper are available upon request Qiaoqiao Wang (qwang@jnu.edu.cn) and Qiyuan Wang (wangqy@ieecas.cn).

Author contributions. QQW, QYW, NM, JT and YQZ conceptualized and designed the study. NM, QYW and YFW provided instrumentation and experimental materials. ZY, GX, MG, XXZ, YZ and WKR performed the laboratory measurements. ZY
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Competing interests. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest. Some authors are members of the editorial board of journal X.

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