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Atmospheric chemical processing dictates aerosol aluminum solubility: insights from field measurement at two locations in northern China

Tianyu Zhang,[1,5] Yizhu Chen,[1,5] Huanhuan Zhang,[2] Lei Liu,[3] Chengpeng Huang,[4] Zhengyang Fang,[1,a] Yifan Zhang,[1,5] Fu Wang,[4] Lan Luo,[4] Guohua Zhang,[1] Xinming Wang,[1] Mingjin Tang[1,*]

[1] State Key Laboratory of Advanced Environmental Technology and Guangdong Key Laboratory of Environmental Protection and Resources Utilization, Guangzhou Institute of Geochemistry, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Guangzhou 510640, China

[2] Guangzhou Marine Geological Survey, China Geological Survey, Guangzhou 511458, China

[3] Hangzhou International Innovation Institute, Beihang University, Hangzhou 311115, China

[4] Longhua Center for Disease Control and Prevention of Shenzhen, Shenzhen 518109, China

[5] College of Earth and Planetary Sciences, University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100049, China

[a] Current address: Institute of Low Temperature Science, Hokkaido University, Sapporo, 060-0819, Japan

Correspondence: Mingjin Tang (mingjintang@126.com)

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Abstract

Deposition of mineral dust aerosol into open oceans significantly impacts marine biogeochemistry and primary production, and the deposition rates can be constrained using widely measured dissolved aluminum (Al) in surface seawater as a tracer. However, aerosol Al solubility, a critical parameter used in this method, remains highly uncertain. This work investigated seasonal variations of aerosol Al solubility for supermicron and submicron particles at two locations (Xi'an and Qingdao) in northern China. Aerosol Al solubility was found to be very low at Xi'an and much higher at Qingdao. Furthermore, seasonal variability of Al solubility, its correlation with relative abundance of sulfate and nitrate, and its dependence on relative humidity (RH), are all different at the two locations. We suggest that all the features observed for aerosol Al solubility at the two locations can be well explained by the effects of atmospheric chemical processing. Mineral dust transported to Xi'an (an inland city in Northwest China) was still not significantly aged and thus chemical processing had little effects on aerosol Al solubility. After arriving at Qingdao (a coastal city in the Northwest Pacific), mineral dust was substantially aged by chemical processing, leading to substantial enhancement in aerosol Al solubility. Our work further reveals that aerosol liquid water and acidity play vital roles in the dissolution of aerosol Al by atmospheric chemical processing. We suggest that spatial variation of aerosol Al solubility should be taken into account so that oceanic dust deposition can be better constrained using dissolved Al concentrations in surface seawater.

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

1. Introduction

As an important type of tropospheric aerosols, mineral dust aerosol significantly impacts atmosphere chemistry, climate, and ecological systems (Jickells et al., 2005; Tang et al., 2016; Kok et al., 2023). After long-range transport, deposition of mineral dust into the oceans is a major external source of several nutrient and toxic elements for surface seawater (Moore et al., 2013; Westberry et al., 2023), impacting primary production and biogeochemical cycles in the oceans and having further feedback on the climate system (Mahowald, 2011; Jiang et al., 2024). The deposition flux of desert dust aerosol into the oceans should be accurately estimated before we can assess its impacts on marine biogeochemistry in a reliable manner (Schulz et al., 2012; Anderson et al., 2016). Previous studies used several different methods to estimate dust deposition fluxes and found large discrepancies (Huneeus et al., 2011; Anderson et al., 2016).

Deposition of desert dust aerosol is the dominant source of dissolved aluminum (Al) in the surface water of open oceans, and dissolved Al is generally considered to be chemically and biologically inactive in seawater. As a result, dissolved Al concentrations in surface seawater could be used to calculate dust deposition flux into the oceans (Measures and Brown, 1996; Measures and Vink, 2000), and the fractional solubility of aerosol Al (the fraction of aerosol Al that can be dissolved) is one of the key parameters used in this method. Previous studies which used this method to estimate dust depositions fluxes (Han et al., 2008; Measures et al., 2010; Grand et al., 2015; Benaltabet et al., 2022) usually assumed uniform Al solubility values in the range of 1.5-5%. However, field measurements found that aerosol Al solubility could vary by more than an order of magnitude (Baker et al., 2006; Buck et al., 2013), and thereby using a uniform aerosol Al solubility value could lead to large uncertainties in

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

estimated dust deposition fluxes (Han et al., 2008; Xu and Weber, 2021). As a result, it is important to understand the spatiotemporal variations of aerosol Al solubility and elucidate the processes and mechanisms which drive such variations.

The initial Al solubility is generally low (typically <1.5%) for dust particles over desert regions (Shi et al., 2011; Aghnatios et al., 2014; Li et al., 2022), and field studies found that aerosol Al solubility in the troposphere could be much higher and showed wide variability. For example, Al solubility ranged from 0.2-15.9% for total suspended particles (TSP) over the Pacific (Buck et al., 2013), and were in the range of 3-78% over the Atlantic (Buck et al., 2010; Chance et al., 2015). Some studies (Measures et al., 2010; Sakata et al., 2023) found good correlations between dissolved aerosol Al (or Al solubility) and acid species in aerosol particles, and thus suggested that chemical processes in the atmosphere could substantially enhance aerosol Al solubility; furthermore, Li et al. (2017) found that Al solubility was significantly increased during cloud events when cloud processing enhanced the formation of secondary inorganic ions (mainly sulfate and nitrate) and thus increased the acidity of cloud droplets. However, Yang et al. (2023) found no correlations between Al solubility and the concentrations of aerosol acidic species, and concluded that the effect of acid processing on Al solubility was negligible. Aerosol Al solubility over the Atlantic appeared to be higher for air masses from Europe than those from the Saharan region (Baker et al., 2006; López-García et al., 2017), and some studies (Paris et al., 2010; López-García et al., 2017) hypothesized that this could be potentially explained by the influence of anthropogenic aerosol Al if it had higher solubility than desert dust. In summary, although aerosol Al solubility in the atmosphere was explored by previous studies, the governing processes and environmental factors remain poorly understood.

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

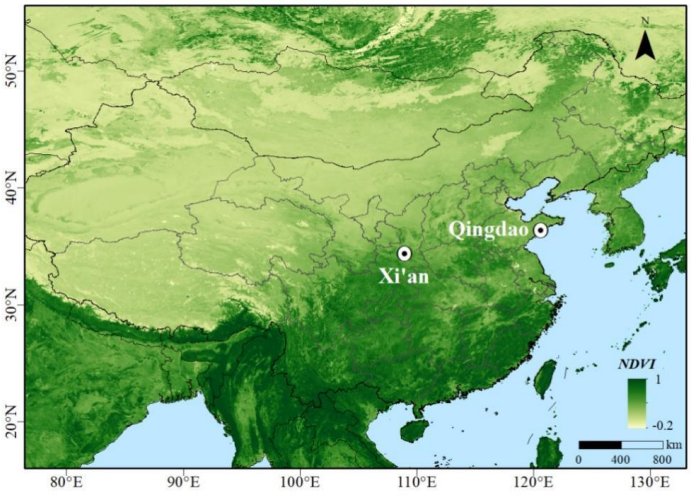


Figure 1. A map of East Asia and surrounding areas. The two locations (Xi'an and Qingdao) where we collected aerosol particles are highlighted. NDVI: normalized difference vegetation index provided by MODIS (Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer).

In this work, we collected supermicron (above 1 μm) and submicron (below 1 μm) aerosol particles at Xi'an and Qingdao, both located in northern China, and investigated seasonal variations of aerosol Al solubility at these two locations. Taklimakan and Gobi Deserts in northwestern China are two important source regions of Asian dust (Prospero et al., 2002). As shown in Figure 1, Xi'an is an inland city in northwestern China, and the aging extent of dust was found to be quite limited at Xi'an due to its proximity of desert regions (Wang et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2017). As Asian dust is transported eastward, it passes over the North China Plain where anthropogenic emission is very high, and may become much more aged when arriving at Qingdao, a coastal city of the Northwest Pacific (Li et al., 2014; Pan et al., 2017). By comparing aerosol Al solubility at Xi'an and Qingdao, our work can provide valuable insights

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

into how and to which extent aging processes during long-range transport can change aerosol Al solubility. Dust aerosol concentrations and meteorological conditions vary remarkably at different seasons in Northern China; as a result, examining its seasonal variations provides a good opportunity to understand the factors which regulate aerosol Al solubility.

2. Materials and methods

2.1 Sample collection

Samples were collected at two cities (Xi'an and Qingdao) in northern China at four different seasons during 2021-2023 (Zhang et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024), and further details can be found in the supplement (Text S1 and Table S1). In brief, supermicron (>1 μm) and submicron (<1 μm) particles were simultaneously collected using a two-stage aerosol sampler (TH-150C, Tianhong Co., China) which was operated at 100 L/min, and the sampling duration was typically 23.5 hours for each pair of aerosol samples. Whatman 41 cellulose filters were used for aerosol collection in our work, and they were acid-washed before being used for aerosol sampling to reduce background levels (Zhang et al., 2022). A total of 126 and 106 pairs of aerosol samples were collected at Xi'an and Qingdao, respectively (Zhang et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024). After collection, all the aerosol samples were stored at -20°C for further analysis.

In addition to aerosol particles, we also sampled atmospheric acidic and alkaline gases (mainly NH_3, HCl and HNO_3) at Qingdao, using a ChemComb 3500 Speciation Collection Cartridge (Thermo Fisher Scientific, USA) at a flow rate of 10 L/min (Walters and Hastings, 2018; Fang et al., 2025). Gas sampling was carried out concurrently with aerosol sampling. In brief, NH_3, HNO_3 and HCl were absorbed onto the inner walls of two tandem honeycomb diffusion tubes coated with proper adsorbents, and then converted into NH_4^+, NO_3^- and Cl^-.

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

After the sampling was completed, 20 mL ultrapure water was used to rinse each tube immediately, and a PTFE membrane syringe filter (0.22 μm in pore size) was used to filter the solution. The solution was then frozen at -20°C for further analysis.

2.2 Sample analysis and aerosol acidity calculation

Sample pretreatment and analysis were detailed in our previous work (Zhang et al., 2022), and therefore are only briefly summarized here. The first half of a filter (and only one quarter of a filter for supermicron particles) was shredded and digested in a Teflon jar using a microwave digestion instrument. After digestion, the Teflon jar was filled with 1% HNO_3 (20 mL), and a PTFE membrane syringe filter (0.22 μm in pore size) was used to filter the solution; subsequently, the solution was analyzed by inductively coupled plasma-mass spectrometry (ICP-MS) to determine total concentrations of individual trace elements, including Al.

The other half of a filter was immersed in ultrapure water (20 mL) and stirred using an orbital shaking for two hours; in the next step, the solution was filtered using a PTFE membrane syringe filter (0.22 μm in pore size) and divided into two parts. The first solution was acidified to contain 1% HNO_3 and subsequently analyzed by ICP-MS to determine the concentrations of dissolved trace elements; the second solution was analyzed by ion chromatography (IC) to quantify the concentration of water-soluble cations and anions.

The solutions obtained from honeycomb diffusion tubes (see Section 2.1 for more details) were also analyzed using IC to determine the concentrations of gaseous NH_3, HCl and HNO_3 in the atmosphere. ISORROPIA-II, a widely used aerosol thermodynamic model (Fountoukis and Nenes, 2007), was employed in this work to calculate the acidity of supermicron and submicron particles. It was operated in the forward mode, and aerosol particles were assumed

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

to remain metastable. Input parameters included concentrations of water-soluble ions in aerosol particles and gaseous NH_3, HCl and HNO_3, temperature and relative humidity (RH). Our previous work (Fang et al., 2025) found good agreement between measured and calculated NH_3 partitioning coefficients at Qingdao, and as a result the method we used could well estimate the acidity of supermicron and submicron particles.

3. Results

3.1 Seasonal variations of total and dissolved aerosol Al

3.1.1 Total aerosol Al

Figure 2 displays seasonal variations of total and dissolved aerosol Al at Xi'an and Qingdao. At Xi'an (Figure 2a), total Al in supermicron particles showed highest concentrations in spring and winter (1.54±0.89 and 1.91±0.93 μg/m^3) and lowest concentrations in summer (0.96±0.54 μg/m^3); a similar seasonal pattern was observed for submicron particles, with total Al concentrations being highest in spring and winter (4.29±3.70 and 2.92±1.47 μg/m^3) and lowest in summer (0.95±0.44 μg/m^3). At Qingdao (Figure 2b), total Al concentrations in supermicron particles were highest in spring (1.04±1.12 μg/m^3) and lowest in summer and autumn (0.33±0.18 and 0.31±0.12 μg/m^3); similarly, for submicron particles, total Al concentrations were also highest in spring (1.88±2.51 μg/m^3) and lowest in summer and autumn (0.35±0.22 and 0.65±0.82 μg/m^3).

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

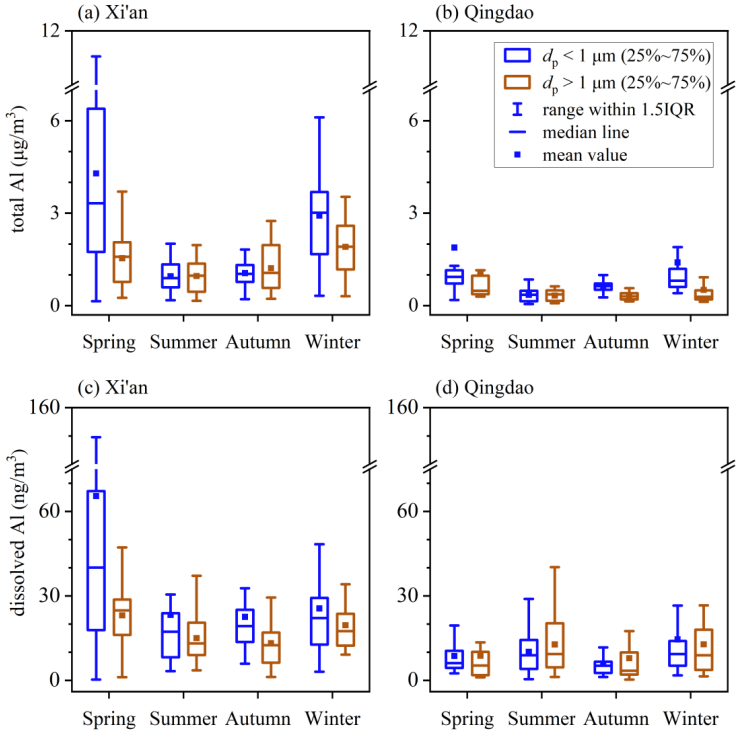


Figure 2. Seasonal variations of total and dissolved aerosol Al for submicron and supermicron particles: (a) total Al at Xi'an; (b) total Al at Qingdao; (c) dissolved Al at Xi'an; (d) dissolved Al at Qingdao.

Overall, total aerosol Al concentrations showed similar seasonal variations at Xi'an and Qingdao, being highest in spring and lowest in summer. This was consistent with previous studies carried out in other locations in East Asia, such as Huaniao Island in the East China Sea (Guo et al., 2014), northern Taiwan (Hsu et al., 2008), Hong Kong (Yang et al., 2023), and Japan (Sakata et al., 2023). In East Asia, desert dust aerosol was emitted into the atmosphere mainly in spring, leading to the increase in total aerosol Al concentrations. Lowest concentrations of total aerosol Al were observed in summer because precipitation in Northern

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

China mainly occurred in summer, leading to enhanced wet deposition of aerosol particles (Cao and Cui, 2021). Furthermore, Qingdao was frequently affected by marine air masses in summer, and this is also one reason why total aerosol Al concentrations were lower in summer than other seasons.

As summarized in the supplement (Table S2), total aerosol Al concentrations exhibited evident spatial variations in East Asia. As Asian dust was transported eastward to the North Pacific, a clear decrease in aerosol Al concentrations was observed. Desert dust was the dominant source for aerosol Al, and therefore concentrations of aerosol Al were found to be very high in desert regions. For example, total Al concentrations in TSP could reach 24 $\mu g/m^3$ over the Taklimakan Desert (Zhang et al., 2003). In our current study, annual average total Al concentrations at Xi'an, an inland city close to the desert, were reported to be 1.42±0.86 and 2.28±2.35 $\mu g/m^3$ for supermicron and submicron particles, significantly lower than that observed over the Taklimakan Desert. Further decrease in total Al concentrations was observed in coastal and oceanic regions. For example, our work found that the annual average total Al concentrations were 0.56±0.75 and 1.08±1.67 $\mu g/m^3$ for supermicron and submicron particles at Qingdao, lower than those at Xi'an; total Al concentrations in TSP ranged from 0.17 to 1.72 $\mu g/m^3$ in Hiroshima (Sakata et al., 2023), and further decreased to 1-56 ng/m^3 in Hawaii in the central Pacific (Measures et al., 2010).

3.1.2 Dissolved aerosol Al

At Xi'an (Figure 2c), for supermicron particles, dissolved aerosol Al concentrations were highest in spring (23.1±10.9 ng/m^3) and lowest in summer and autumn (15.0±8.7 and 13.2±8.6 ng/m^3); for submicron particles, dissolved Al concentrations were also highest in spring

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

(65.4±79.2 ng/m³) and lowest in summer and autumn (23.2±23.4 and 22.6±20.1 ng/m^3). Total (Figure 2a) and dissolved aerosol Al (Figure 2c) showed similar seasonal patterns at Xi'an, indicating that dissolved aerosol Al was mainly regulated by total aerosol Al.

As shown in Figure 2d, the average dissolved aerosol Al concentrations were 8.8±10.8, 12.8±11.1, 7.9±10.5 and 12.8±12.9 ng/m^3 for supermicron particles at Qingdao in spring, summer, autumn, and winter, respectively, and 8.7±5.8, 10.2±8.2, 6.0±4.8 and 14.5±15.2 ng/m^3 for submicron particles. Dissolved aerosol Al concentrations were highest in summer and winter and lowest in autumn for both supermicron and submicron particles. In contrast to Xi'an, total and dissolved aerosol Al at Qingdao showed different seasonal patterns (Figures 2b and 2d); for example, total Al concentrations were lowest in summer at Qingdao when dissolved Al concentrations were highest. This indicates that dissolved aerosol Al at Qingdao was not only regulated by total aerosol Al but also affected by other factors such as atmospheric aging processes.

Compared to Xi'an, dissolved Al concentrations at Qingdao were lower across all the four seasons, mainly because total Al concentrations were much lower at Qingdao (Tables S3-S4 in the supplement). As shown in Figure 2, similar seasonal patterns were observed at two locations for total aerosol Al, but dissolved aerosol Al showed very different seasonality; this suggests that seasonal patterns of aerosol Al solubility were different at Xi'an and Qingdao, as presented in Section 3.2.

3.2 Fractional solubility of aerosol Al

3.2.1 Seasonal variations of Al solubility

Figure 3 displays aerosol Al solubility in different seasons at Xi'an and Qingdao. The

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

median solubilities of aerosol Al were determined to be 1.38%, 1.59%, 1.04% and 1.01% for supermicron particles at Xi'an in spring, summer, autumn and winter, respectively, and 1.01%, 1.69%, 1.82% and 0.74% for submicron particles. Aerosol Al solubilities were generally low for the four seasons at Xi'an, showing no apparent variation with seasons (Figure 3a). In contrast, aerosol Al solubilities exhibited distinct seasonal variability at Qingdao (Figure 3b), and the median Al solubilities were highest in summer (3.56% and 2.33%) and lowest in spring (0.54% and 0.61%) for both supermicron and submicron particles.

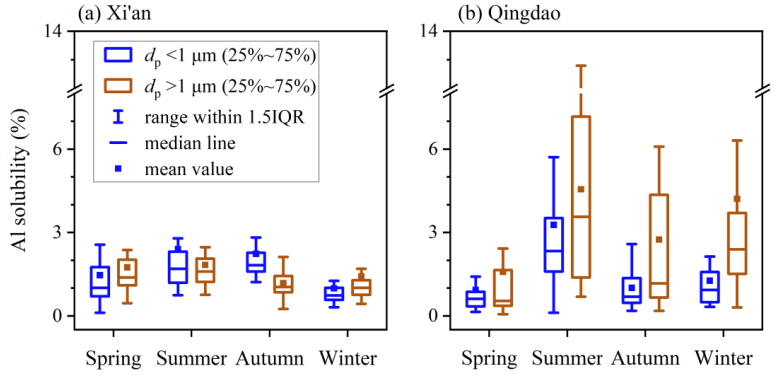


Figure 3. Seasonal variations of aerosol Al solubility for submicron and supermicron particles at (a) Xi'an and (b) Qingdao.

In three seasons (summer, autumn and winter), aerosol Al solubility at Qingdao was significantly higher than that at Xi'an (Figure 3, Table S5). This is likely because Xi'an is close to major deserts in northwestern China and thus the aging extent of mineral dust transported to Xi'an was rather limited (Wang et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2017). On the contrary, Qingdao is much farther from deserts and consequently mineral dust aerosol which arrived at Qingdao after long-distance transport was substantially aged (Trochkine et al., 2003; Takahashi et al., 2011; Jeong,

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

2020), thereby leading to enhanced dissolution of aerosol Al and thus the increase in Al solubility.

On the other hand, no significant difference in aerosol Al solubility was observed between Xi'an and Qingdao in spring, with median aerosol Al solubilities being <1.4% for supermicron and submicron particles (Figure 3). This agrees with a previous study (Hsu et al., 2010) which found that aerosol Al solubility was very low (average: ~0.7%) in spring even over the East China Sea. Furthermore, similar to what we observed in spring at Xi'an and Qingdao, Al solubility was found to be low (<1.5%) for surface soil particles collected from deserts (Shi et al., 2011; Aghnatios et al., 2014; Li et al., 2022). Overall, our work implies that in spring when Asian dust occurred most frequently, mineral dust particles arriving at Qingdao after long-distance transport did not show significant increase in Al solubility.

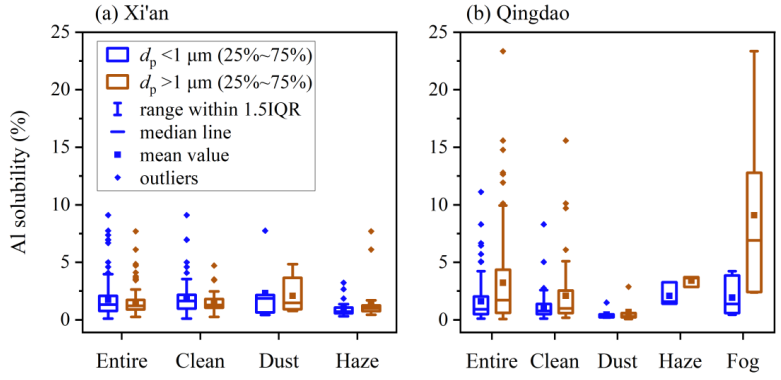
3.2.2 Al solubility under different weather conditions

We encountered four representative weather conditions (i.e. clean, dust, haze and fog days) during our sampling at Xi'an and Qingdao, and investigated aerosol Al solubility under different weather conditions (Figure 4, Tables S6-S7).

At Xi'an, no significant difference in Al solubility was observed during clean, haze, and dust days (Figure 4a, Table S6), with median values in the range of 1.01-1.47% for supermicron particles and 0.72-1.86% for submicron particles. Al solubility was found to be <1.2% for three desert dust samples (Luochuan loess, Arizona test dust, and dust collected during a dust storm in Xinjiang) (Li et al., 2022), and ranged from 0.47% to 1.42% for aerosol particles generated using soil samples from Saharan desert (Shi et al., 2011). Compared to desert dust in source regions, Al solubility was not higher under different weather conditions at Xi'an. In addition,

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

259 although emission and accumulation of anthropogenic pollutants was greatly enhanced during
260 haze days at Xi'an (An et al., 2019; Cao and Cui, 2021), there was no obvious increase in
261 aerosol Al solubility, indicating that the effects of anthropogenic emissions on aerosol Al
262 solubility was limited at Xi'an. Therefore, one may conclude that aerosol Al solubility at Xi'an
263 was not different from initial Al solubility of desert dust.



264

265 **Figure 4.** Aerosol Al solubility under different weather conditions for submicron and
266 supermicron particles: (a) Xi'an, (b) Qingdao.

267

268 Being different to Xi'an, aerosol Al solubility at Qingdao shows remarkable variations
269 under different weather conditions (Figure 4b, Table S7). Median Al solubilities were
270 determined to be 0.31% and 0.24% for supermicron and submicron particles during dust days,
271 significantly lower than these on clean days (0.99% and 0.77%, respectively). This is probably
272 because higher wind speeds during dust events hindered the accumulation of atmospheric
273 pollutants and shortened the transport time to Qingdao, and thus limiting the aging of mineral
274 dust aerosol. This explanation is supported by a recent study (Zhang et al., 2024) which found
275 that the aging extent of dust particles in Japan was much lower during fast-moving dust events

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

than slow-moving dust events. Moreover, large amounts of alkaline components (such as carbonates) which were emitted to the atmosphere during dust days neutralized acid species and therefore inhibited acid-promoted dissolution of aerosol trace elements (Zhi et al., 2025).

Figure 4b also suggests that aerosol Al solubilities were much higher during haze and fog days at Qingdao, when compared to clean days. Highest Al solubilities were observed during fog days, with median values being 6.90% for supermicron particles and 1.38% for submicron particles, followed by haze days (3.64% and 1.58%, respectively). This is very likely due to enhanced chemical processing during haze and fog periods (Shi et al., 2020; Shang et al., 2024), and especially during fog days the large increase in RH cause huge increase in aerosol liquid water, therefore greatly promoting aqueous reactions and Al dissolution.

In summary, aerosol Al solubility at Xi'an was low in general, and did not show much variability in different seasons or under different weather conditions. Compared to Xi'an, aerosol Al solubility was higher at Qingdao; furthermore, it was higher in the other three seasons than in spring, and much higher for haze and fog days than dust days. These results imply that atmospheric aging had little effects on aerosol Al solubility at Xi'an but could significantly increase aerosol Al solubility at Qingdao, as further elaborated in Section 4.

4. Discussion

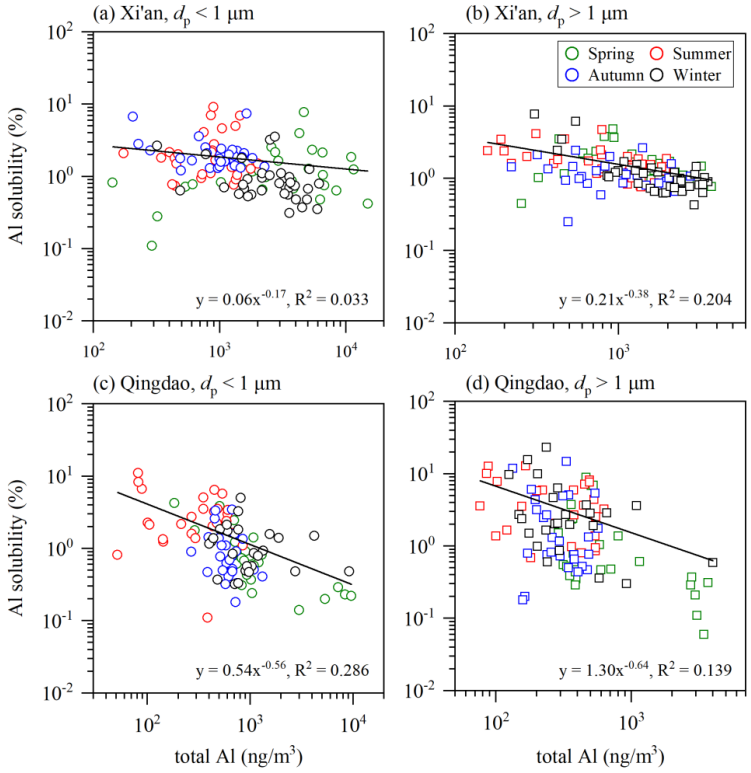
As shown in Figure 5, our work observed the inverse dependence of aerosol Al solubility on total Al concentrations at both Xi'an and Qingdao, given by Eq. (1):

$$f_s(\mathrm{Al}) = \mathrm{a} \times [\mathrm{Al}]^{-b} \qquad (1)$$

where f_s(Al) is aerosol Al solubility (%) and [Al] is total Al concentration (ng/m^3). Such relationship was also reported in some previous studies (Jickells et al., 2016; Shelley et al.,

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

298 2018; Baker et al., 2020; Shelley et al., 2025). Baker and Jickells (2006) suggested that such
299 inverse relationship was due to that larger particles have higher deposition velocities and lower
300 Al solubility: aerosol Al concentrations decrease during transport in the atmosphere due to
301 deposition, with deposition being faster for larger particles; as a result, aerosol particles will be
302 enriched with smaller particles with higher Al solubility. However, Shi et al. (2011) found no
303 significant change in Al solubility with particle size for desert dust samples, and therefore put
304 the explanation proposed by Baker and Jickells (2006) into doubt.



305

306 **Figure 5.** Aerosol Al solubility versus total aerosol Al concentrations: (a) submicron particles
307 at Xi'an, (b) supermicron particles at Xi'an, (c) submicron particles at Qingdao, (d)
308 supermicron particles at Qingdao.

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

Aerosol Fe solubility was also frequently observed to increase with the decrease in total Fe concentrations (Sedwick et al., 2007; Mahowald et al., 2018; Meskhidze et al., 2019), and one possible reason is the influence of anthropogenic aerosol Fe (Sholkovitz et al., 2009; Ito and Shi, 2016) with higher solubility than desert dust (Schroth et al., 2009; Fu et al., 2012; Ito et al., 2021). Nevertheless, being different from aerosol Fe, aerosol Al stems predominantly from desert dust, with little contribution from anthropogenic sources; furthermore, Al solubility was measured to be 0.4±0.6% for coal fly ash (Li et al., 2022), an important type of anthropogenic aerosols, not higher than that for desert dust (0.8±0.4%). Therefore, we suggest that anthropogenic emission may not be able to explain the inverse dependence of Al aerosol solubility on total Al concentrations.

We argue that chemical processing in the atmosphere can very well explain such inverse dependence. Total aerosol Al concentrations decrease with transport due to deposition, while reactions with acidic gases (such as SO_2 and NO_x) can significantly enhance the dissolution of aerosol Al (Jickells et al., 2016). Figure 5 shows that the inverse dependence of Al solubility on total Al concentration was more pronounced at Qingdao, with the slopes (*b* values) much larger than those obtained at Xi'an. This is because compared to Xi'an, Qingdao is more distant from deserts and therefore dust aerosol is expected to be more aged at Qingdao. It also further supports the vital role chemical aging plays in regulating aerosol Al solubility,

4.1 Effects of acid processing and the role of RH

4.1.1 Effects of acid processing

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

Laboratory experiments found that the amount of Al dissolved from minerals would increase with the decrease in solution pH (Amram and Ganor, 2005; Bibi et al., 2011, 2014; Cappelli et al., 2018), and some field measurements also suggested that acid processing in the atmosphere could lead to significant increase in aerosol Al solubility (Measures et al., 2010; Sakata et al., 2023). In this work, we examined the relationship between aerosol Al solubility and the relative abundance of acidic species ([sulfate]/[Al] and [nitrate]/[Al]) at Xi'an and Qingdao. It should be noted that non-sea-salts sulfate (Virkkula et al., 2006), instead of sulfate, was used at Qingdao because it is a coastal city and heavily impacted by sea spray aerosol.

At Xi'an, aerosol Al solubility showed no significant correlation with [sulfate]/[Al] or [nitrate]/[Al] for either supermicron or submicron particles ($r < 0.4$, Figure 6 and S1), indicating that acid processing did not enhance aerosol Al solubility. Enhancement of aerosol trace element solubility by acid processing requires internal mixing of acid species with mineral dust particles (Baker and Croot, 2010). Previous studies (Wang et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2017) suggested that mineral dust particles observed at Xi'an which is close to deserts largely remained externally mixed with acid species, and thus aerosol Al solubility was not significantly enhanced by acid processing at Xi'an.

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Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

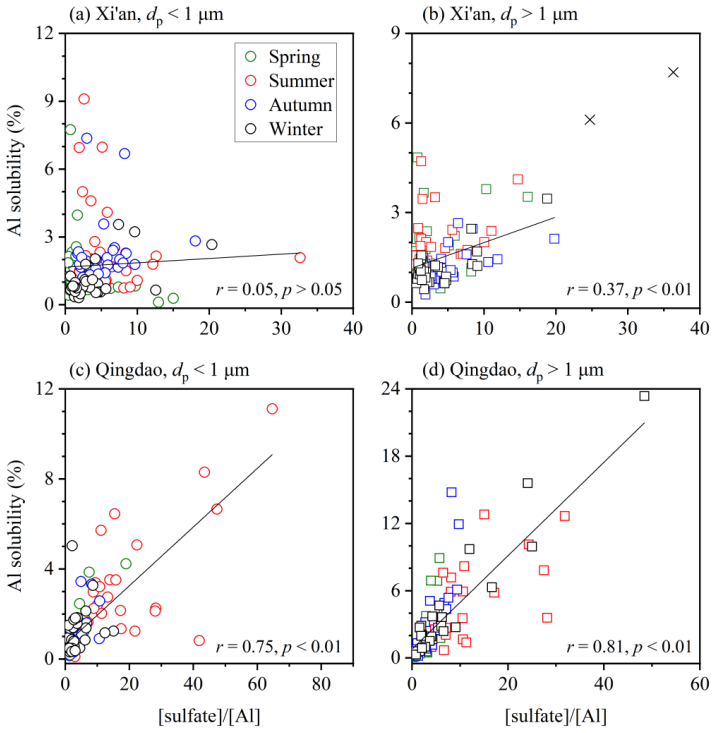


Figure 6. Aerosol Al solubility versus [sulfate]/[Al]: (a) submicron particles at Xi'an, (b) supermicron particles at Xi'an, (c) submicron particles at Qingdao, (d) supermicron particles at Qingdao. Data represented by crosses are not included in fitting.

On the contrary, Figure 6 shows that aerosol Al solubility at Qingdao was well correlated with [sulfate]/[Al] ($r > 0.7$, $p < 0.01$), implying that acid-promoted dissolution significantly enhanced Al solubility. We also found that correlations of Al solubility with [sulfate]/[Al] was better than those with [nitrate]/[Al] (Figures 6 and S1, Table S8), in line with a previous study (Sakata et al., 2023) which found aerosol Al solubility at Hiroshima, southern Japan, to be correlated with [sulfate]/[Al] but not with [nitrate]/[Al]. This may imply that chemical

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

processing by sulfate was more important than nitrate for Al solubility enhancement via acid processing, likely because aluminosilicate dust particles tend to react preferentially with SO_2 and H_2SO_4 while nitrogen oxides react mainly with carbonate particles (Sullivan et al., 2007; Fitzgerald et al., 2015). Furthermore, our work reveals better correlations between Al solubility and [sulfate]/[Al] for supermicron particles than submicron particles (Figure 6), indicating that the effect of acid processing on Al solubility was more important in supermicron particles.

4.1.2 The role of RH

Relative humidity (RH) is a vital factor influencing liquid water contents and phase state of aerosol particles and thus their secondary chemistry. When RH increased >60%, the phase state of aerosol particles in northern China changed from semisolid to liquid (Liu et al., 2017; Sun et al., 2018; Song et al., 2022), leading to large increase in aerosol liquid water content and thereby potentially affecting aerosol Al solubility.

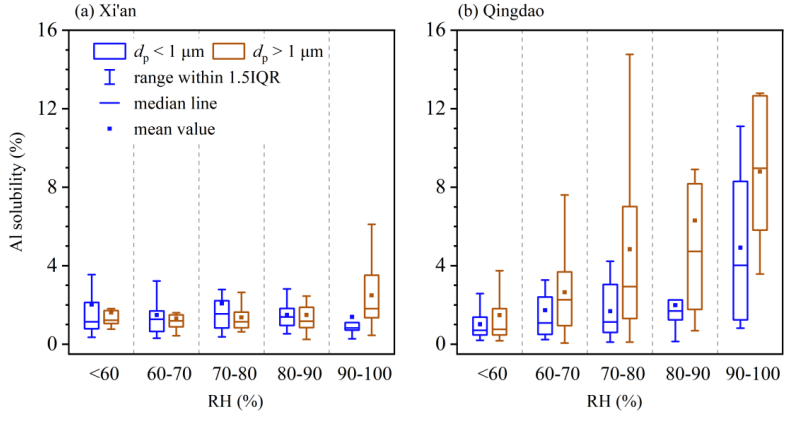


Figure 7. Aerosol Al solubility at different relative humidity (RH) for submicron and supermicron particles: (a) Xi'an, (b) Qingdao.

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

We observed no apparent variation of aerosol Al solubility with RH at Xi'an (Figure 7a). When RH was <60%, median Al solubilities for supermicron and submicron particles were 1.22% and 1.14%, respectively; when RH increased >90%, the median Al solubilities were determined to be 1.82% and 0.82%, showing no obvious increase when compared to those at <60% RH. This again may imply that chemical processing had very limited impact on aerosol Al solubility at Xi'an.

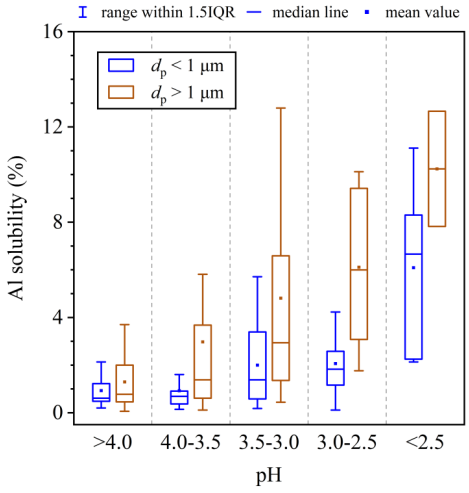
In contrast, RH played an important role in regulating aerosol Al solubility at Qingdao. As shown in Figure 7b, for supermicron particles, the median Al solubility was only 0.76% at <60% RH, and gradually increased to 4.73% at 80-90% RH, and abruptly increased to 8.87% at >90% RH. For submicron particles, median Al solubility was <1% at <60% RH, and further increase in RH to 80-90% did not lead to large changes in Al solubility; nevertheless, when RH exceeded 90%, the median Al solubility was remarkably increased to 4.02%, much higher than those observed when RH was < 90%.

4.2 Effects of aerosol acidity on aerosol Al solubility at Qingdao

Figure 8 shows the dependence of aerosol Al solubility on aerosol acidity (represented by pH) at Qingdao (we did not measure NH_3 at Xi'an and thus could not estimate the aerosol acidity in a reliable manner). For supermicron particles, the median Al solubility was only 0.99% when aerosol pH was >4.0, and gradually increased to 10.24% as aerosol pH was decreased to <2.5. For submicron particles, the median Al solubility was only 0.69% when pH was >4.0, increased slightly with the decrease in pH when pH was in the range of 2.5-4.0, and then increased greatly to 6.09% when pH was decreased to <2.5. In addition, aerosol acidity at Qingdao was highest in summer and lowest in spring (Chen et al., 2024), consistent with the

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

395 seasonal variation of aerosol Al solubility, further supporting the importance of aerosol acidity
396 in regulating Al solubility.



397

398 **Figure 8.** Aerosol Al solubility corresponding to different aerosol acidity for submicron and
399 supermicron particles in Qingdao.

400

401 As shown in Figure S2, aerosol Al solubility was generally <2% when aerosol acidity was
402 low (pH > 4.0), and higher Al solubility (>2%) was usually observed for samples with high RH
403 and high acidity (pH < 4.0), again underscoring the roles of aerosol acidity (and RH). However,
404 some samples exhibited low Al solubility although the corresponding RH and aerosol acidity
405 were both higher, and such phenomenon was more pronounced for submicron particles. This
406 is very likely linked with aerosol mixing state (Riemer et al., 2019). Aerosol Al solubility and
407 acidity used in our work are both the average properties of an aerosol sample which contains
408 numerous particles, while in reality the two properties will have large particle-to-particle
409 variations. For a given aerosol sample, it can happen that particles with high acidity may

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

contain very little Al while particles with low acidity are enriched in Al; in this case, high acidity do not promote Al solubility for this sample.

4.3 Size-dependence of aerosol Al solubility

At Xi'an, no significant difference in aerosol Al solubility was found between supermicron and submicron particles across all the four seasons (Figure 3a). This is because the aging extent of dust particles was rather limited at Xi'an (Wang et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2017) and Al solubility does not vary with particle size for fresh dust particles (Shi et al., 2011). At Qingdao, aerosol Al solubility showed no significant difference between supermicron and submicron particles in spring, because the aging extent of dust arriving at Qingdao was also limited in spring when Asian dust occurred most frequently. However, in the other three seasons, Al solubility was significantly higher for supermicron particles than submicron particles at Qingdao, and the ratios of median Al solubility in supermicron particles to that in submicron particles were found to be 1.53, 1.70 and 2.57 in summer, autumn and winter, respectively. Similar to our observation at Qingdao, Li et al. (2017) found that aerosol Al solubility was significantly higher for TSP (14-28%) than $PM_{2.5}$ (2-23%) at the summit of Mount Heng, southern China.

On the other hand, a few other studies (Baker et al., 2020; Hsieh et al., 2023; Sakata et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2023) found that aerosol Al solubility was higher in fine particles than coarse particles. For example, aerosol Al solubility was found to increase with the decrease in particle size over the tropical eastern Atlantic (Baker et al., 2020), being ~10.31% for particles in the size of 0.36-0.61 μm and 0.43-4.53% for particles above 0.61 μm. At Hiroshima, southern Japan, aerosol Al solubility was reported to be 8.82±6.48% for fine particles (<1.3 μm), more

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

than two times larger than that (3.25±3.41%) for coarse particles (>1.3 μm) (Sakata et al., 2023). Baker and Jickells (2006) suggested that this is because fine particles have larger surface-to-volume ratios and thus facilitate Al dissolution via acid processing. Hsieh et al. (2023) found aerosol Al solubility to be 38% for fine particles (0.57-1.0 μm) but only 0.37% for coarse particles (>7.3 μm) over the East China Sea, and suggested that the observed size-dependence could be explained by the enrichment of anthropogenic Al (which has higher solubility than dust Al) in fine particles. However, aerosol Al originates predominantly from desert dust, with little contributions from anthropogenic sources (Taylor and McLennan, 1985; Mahowald et al., 2018), and fractional solubility of anthropogenic Al was not necessarily higher than desert dust (Li et al., 2022).

As discussed above, there is not clear yet how and why aerosol Al solubility varies with particle size. Such discrepancy is at least partly because different leaching protocols were used in previous studies to extract dissolved aerosol Al and thereby Al solubility obtained in different studies was not directly comparable (Meskhidze et al., 2019; Li et al., 2023; Li et al., 2024). Furthermore, mechanistic insights can be obtained by laboratory experiments which examine the size dependence of the solubility and dissolution kinetics of Al for mineral dust particles under atmospherically relevant conditions.

5. Conclusions and atmospheric implications

Deposition of mineral dust aerosol is a major external source of several nutrient and toxic elements for surface water in open oceans, and thus have significant impacts on marine biogeochemistry; however, previous studies which estimated dust deposition flux into the oceans reveals large discrepancies. Aerosol Al solubility, which is a critical parameter in using

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

dissolved Al concentrations in surface seawater as a tracer to constrain dust deposition flux, remains poorly understood. In this work, we investigated seasonal variations of aerosol Al solubility for supermicron (>1 μm) and submicron (<1 μm) aerosol particles at Xi'an and Qingdao, both located in northern China, in attempt to elucidate the processes and mechanisms which govern the variation of aerosol Al solubility in the atmosphere.

At Xi'an, aerosol Al solubility was low in general for both supermicron and submicron particles, showing no obvious variability in different seasons or under different weather conditions. This implies that chemical processing did not significantly enhance aerosol Al solubility at Xi'an, as it is an inland city close to major deserts in northwestern China and thus the aging extent of mineral dust particles arriving at Xi'an was quite limited. Compared to Xi'an, aerosol Al solubility was higher at Qingdao, a coastal city in northern China; furthermore, Al solubility was higher in the other three seasons than in spring, and much higher for haze- and especially fog-impacted days than dust days. This indicates that chemical processing substantially increased aerosol Al solubility at Qingdao.

Aerosol Al solubility at Xi'an showed no significant correlation with relative abundance of sulfate or nitrate, and did not vary apparently with RH; in contrast, Al solubility at Qingdao was well correlated with relative abundance of sulfate and nitrate, and increased with RH. This further supports that chemical processing had little impacts on aerosol Al solubility at Xi'an (because the aging extent of mineral dust aerosol at Xi'an is very limited) but significantly increased aerosol Al solubility at Qingdao (because mineral dust particles transported to Qingdao were substantially aged). Moreover, for both supermicron and submicron particles, Al solubility at Qingdao was found to increase with aerosol acidity (in addition to RH),

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2025-2235
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

underscoring the vital role of aerosol liquid water and acidity in enhancing Al dissolution via chemical aging.

Our comprehensive investigation of aerosol Al solubility at two locations in Northern China suggests that atmospheric chemical processing dictates aerosol Al solubility. As a result, aerosol Al solubility is expected to spatially variable, depending on the extent of chemical processing. For example, we found that aerosol Al solubility is higher at Qingdao than Xi'an in general, and expect it to increase further as mineral dust aerosol is further transported eastward to the Pacific. As a result, when leveraging dissolved Al concentrations in surface seawater as a tracer to estimate deposition flux of desert dust aerosol into open oceans, considering the spatial distribution of aerosol Al solubility, instead of using a uniform value on the global scale, can help us better constrain the oceanic deposition flux of desert dust.

Author contribution.

Tianyu Zhang: Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing; **Yizhu Chen:** Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing - Original Draft; **Huanhuan Zhang:** Investigation; **Lei Liu:** Writing - Review & Editing; **Chengpeng Huang:** Investigation; **Zhengyang Fang:** Investigation; **Yifan Zhang:** Investigation; **Fu Wang:** Resources; **Lan Luo:** Resources; **Guohua Zhang:** Writing - Review & Editing; **Xinming Wang:** Resources; **Mingjin Tang:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Supervision; Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing.

Competing interests.

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2025

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