

1 **Contrasting physical drivers of chlorophyll-a responses to summer** 2 **marine heatwaves in the South China Sea**

3 Yunlu Fang^{1,2,3}, Cong Liu^{1,3}, Yicheng Chen², Peiliang Li^{1,2,3}, Mingyang Li^{1,2,3}

4 ¹Hainan Institute, Zhejiang University, Sanya, 572000, China

5 ²State Key Laboratory of Ocean Sensing & Ocean College, Zhejiang University, Zhoushan 316021, China

6 ³Hainan Provincial Observatory of Ecological Environment and Fishery Resource in Yazhou Bay, Sanya, 572025, China

7 *Correspondence to:* Cong Liu (liucong175@gmail.com) and Yicheng Chen (cyc_dsfirst@foxmail.com)

8 **Abstract.** In recent years, more frequent marine heatwaves (MHWs) in the South China Sea (SCS) have affected surface
9 chlorophyll-a (Chl-a). Traditional linear statistical methods have limited capacity to identify the contributions of multiple
10 highly interrelated physical drivers in complex oceanic systems. To address this limitation, we applied the Synergistic-
11 Unique-Redundant Decomposition (SURD) method to investigate MHW-related Chl-a anomalies from 1998 to 2024.
12 Analyses reveal a marked regional contrast during summer MHWs, with positive Chl-a anomalies in the northern SCS and
13 negative anomalies in the western SCS. Although summer thermal extremes in both regions were linked to similar anomalous
14 atmospheric circulations associated with the western North Pacific subtropical high, the local physical mechanisms controlling
15 Chl-a responses differed. In the South Vietnam upwelling region, weakened wind forcing reduced Ekman pumping and vertical
16 transport, limiting surface cooling and nutrient replenishment to the euphotic zone, thereby contributing to negative Chl-a
17 anomalies. In the Pearl River Estuary, enhanced incident shortwave radiation promoted rapid surface warming, while
18 weakened wind-driven export favoured the nearshore retention of low-salinity plume water. The SURD results suggest that
19 retained plume water likely strengthened surface-layer stratification and maintained relatively nutrient-rich surface conditions,
20 potentially allowing plume retention to act synergistically with cumulative heat stress and favouring positive Chl-a anomalies.
21 However, the associated nutrient pathway remains inferred rather than directly demonstrated. These results suggest that besides
22 thermal forcing, Chl-a responses to MHWs in marginal seas are also shaped by regional physical pathways.

23 **1 Introduction**

24 Under excessive greenhouse gas emissions, the Earth's climate system is experiencing an unprecedented energy imbalance
25 (Robinson et al., 2021; von Schuckmann et al., 2020). As the largest heat sink in the climate system, the ocean has absorbed
26 more than 90 % of the excess heat, contributing to a continued rise in global sea surface temperature (SST) and more frequent
27 marine heatwaves (MHWs) (Cheng et al., 2019). Since the twentieth century, global MHW frequency and mean duration have
28 increased by approximately 34 % and 17 %, respectively (Oliver et al., 2018). As global warming intensifies during the twenty-
29 first century, MHWs are projected to increase nonlinearly in spatial extent and destructive potential including Arctic
30 precipitation forecasting, vapor pressure deficit, and meteorological drought (Oliver et al., 2018; Yao et al., 2020), exerting

diverse impacts on the marine biosphere, including shellfish diseases and mollusk mortality (Jones et al., 2018; Oliver et al., 2017), coral reef bleaching (Le Nohaïc et al., 2017), functional extinction of kelp forests (Wernberg et al., 2016), harmful algal blooms, and mass strandings of marine mammals and seabirds (Cavole et al., 2016).

Marine phytoplankton underpin global primary productivity and biogeochemical cycles, and their sensitivity to environmental variability is reflected in variations in chlorophyll a (Chl-a) (Fernández-González et al., 2022). However, the mechanisms by which MHWs influence Chl-a are complex and spatially heterogeneous. Temperature directly influences phytoplankton physiological rates, including growth, which generally increase toward taxon-specific thermal optima and decline once these optima are exceeded (Thomas et al., 2012; Coello-Camba and Agustí, 2017). During boreal summer, the SCS commonly exhibits a pronounced subsurface chlorophyll maximum, with substantial spatial variability in its depth and magnitude (Xu et al., 2022). During the record-breaking 2020 SCS MHW, reduced surface Chl-a coincided with increased subsurface Chl-a (Zheng et al., 2024), and Chl-a responses differed among MHWs with different vertical structures (Yuan et al., 2024). MHW-related changes in vertical Chl-a structure have also been reported in other oceanic regions (Li et al., 2025). Surface Chl-a alone may therefore not fully capture the underlying biological response. In low-latitude waters, MHW-induced thermal stratification can restrict the vertical transport of subsurface nutrients, leading to declines in Chl-a concentrations (Le Grix et al., 2021; Montie et al., 2020; Noh et al., 2022). By contrast, in high-latitude light-limited regions, a shallower mixed layer can enhance phytoplankton blooms by improving light availability within the euphotic zone (Le Grix et al., 2021; Noh et al., 2022). Such spatial variability makes it difficult to generalize or evaluate the ecological impacts of MHWs based on a single physical mechanism.

The South China Sea (SCS), the largest marginal sea in the western Pacific Ocean, is governed by a complex monsoon circulation system and hosts extensive coral reef ecosystems (Li et al., 2011), rendering it highly sensitive to climate change. Observational and reanalysis data identify the SCS as a hotspot for MHWs, with their frequency, duration, and intensity showing significant upward trends (Li et al., 2019; Yao and Wang, 2021). In particular, previous studies have identified the northern SCS continental shelf and the western SCS as active regions of MHW occurrence, with documented regional differences in coastal warming amplitudes and seasonal variability (Wang et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023). Recent studies have extended this characterization below the sea surface, revealing pronounced subsurface intensification and diverse vertical structures of MHWs in the SCS (Yao and Wang, 2024; Yuan et al., 2024). Despite these advances in characterizing MHW variability in the SCS, their ecological impacts remain less well understood, partly because of methodological challenges.

Previous studies have shown that Chl-a responses to MHWs in the SCS are spatially heterogeneous and vary among different oceanographic settings (Chen et al., 2024; He et al., 2023). However, most attribution analyses still rely on traditional linear statistical methods, such as correlation analysis and multiple linear regression. These methods have inherent limitations when applied to complex marine systems where environmental variables are highly interrelated. In particular, they struggle to disentangle overlapping influences among drivers such as SST, wind fields, and mixed layer depth (MLD), and rarely resolve

63 synergistic effects of these factors. Thus, a key scientific question remains unresolved: are Chl-a anomalies during MHWs
64 mainly driven by direct thermal effects, or by concurrent changes in the physical environment?

65 To address these limitations, this study applies the Synergistic–Unique–Redundant Decomposition (SURD) method (Martínez-
66 Sánchez et al., 2024). More recent applications have extended the framework to climate and environmental problems, including
67 Arctic precipitation forecasting, vapor pressure deficit, and meteorological drought (Panja et al., 2025; Han et al., 2025; Ren
68 et al., 2026). SURD decomposes the information shared between candidate drivers and the target variable into redundant,
69 unique, and synergistic components. This allows us to distinguish independent, overlapping, and joint contributions of physical
70 drivers to Chl-a anomalies during MHWs. By applying this framework to the SCS, this study aims to clarify why summer
71 MHW-related Chl-a responses differ between the selected regions and to identify the physical pathways associated with these
72 contrasting responses. These results provide a clearer view of regional Chl-a variability during MHWs in the SCS and improve
73 our understanding of physical–biological coupling in marginal seas.

74 The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Sect. 2 describes the datasets, MHW identification, Chl-a anomaly analysis,
75 and SURD method. Sect. 3 presents and discusses the spatiotemporal characteristics of MHWs in the SCS, the associated Chl-
76 a responses, and the regional physical–biological mechanisms in the Vietnam upwelling area and the Pearl River Estuary. Sect.
77 4 summarizes the main conclusions.

78 **2 Materials and methods**

79 **2.1 Study area**

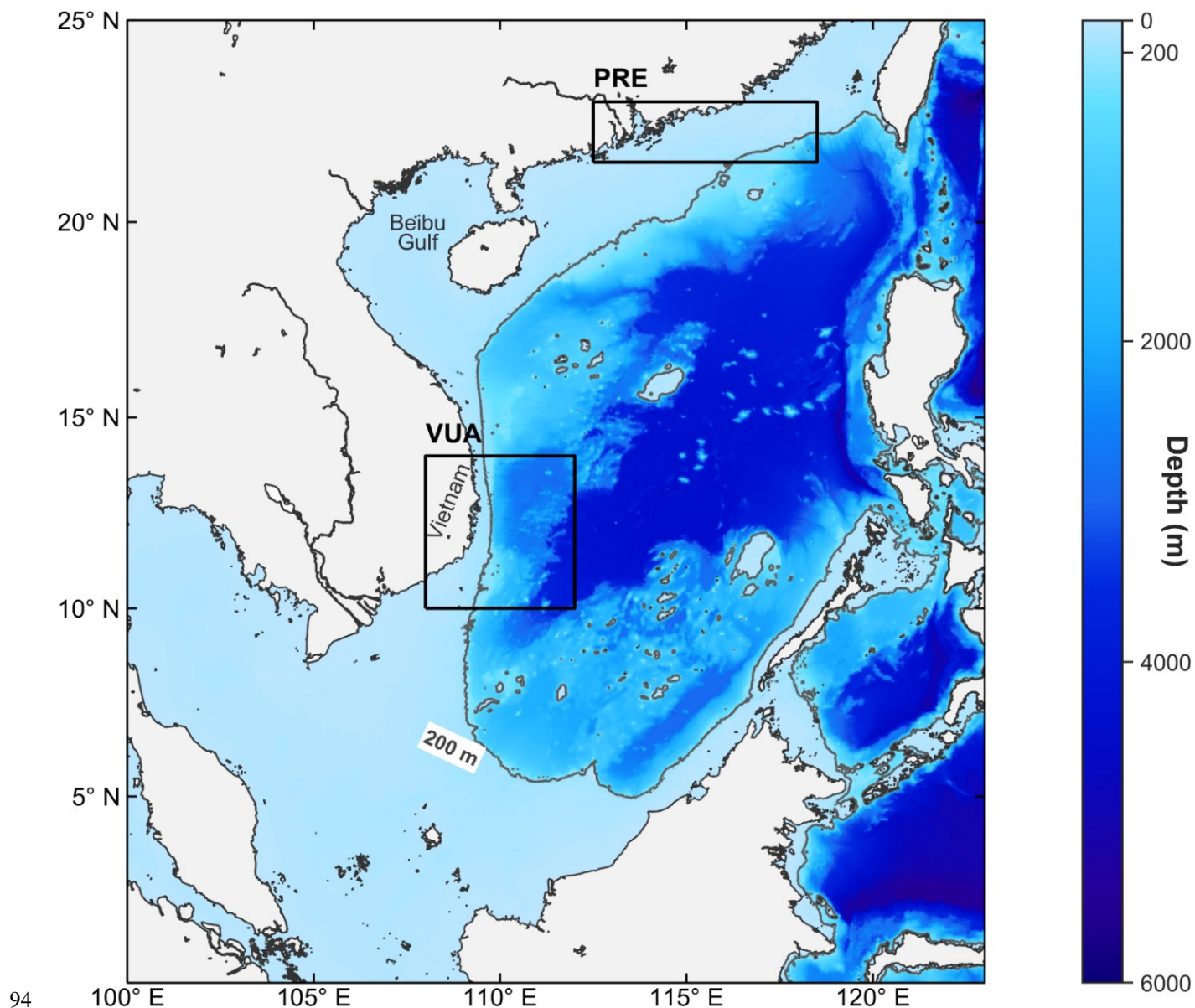
80 The SCS is a semi-enclosed basin whose circulation is governed by the East Asian monsoon system (Jiang et al., 2023). The
81 prevailing southwest winds in summer and northeast winds in winter (Liu and Xie, 1999) drive a seasonally reversing basin-
82 scale circulation and shape a range of complex coastal dynamical processes. In recent years, the region has also become a
83 hotspot for MHWs, posing a growing threat to marine ecosystem stability.

84 This study focuses on two regions within the SCS that represent contrasting oceanographic settings:

85 The Pearl River Estuary (PRE) and its adjacent waters are located on the northern continental shelf of the SCS (Fig. 1) and
86 represent a typical runoff-dominated estuarine ecosystem. The Pearl River, the second-largest river system in China, delivers
87 substantial summer runoff to the continental shelf, transporting freshwater and terrestrial nutrients (Harrison et al., 2008) that
88 sustain high primary productivity in this region (Ye et al., 2020).

89 The Vietnam Upwelling Area (VUA) defined in this study is located off southeastern Vietnam and lies within the broader
90 South Vietnam upwelling region (Fig. 1). It represents a principal summer wind-driven upwelling system of the SCS. The
91 strong summer southwest monsoon generates offshore Ekman transport in this region (Ngo and Hsin, 2021), driving the

92 upwelling of cold subsurface water. This process transports nutrient-rich subsurface water into the euphotic zone, forming a
93 characteristic summer belt of high Chl-a concentration (Liu and Tang, 2022).



94
95 **Figure 1.** Bathymetry of the South China Sea (SCS) and locations of the two study regions. Shading indicates water depth (m), and
96 the grey contour denotes the 200 m isobath. Black rectangles mark the Pearl River Estuary (PRE) and the Vietnam Upwelling Area
97 (VUA).

98 2.2 Data sources and preprocessing

99 A daily dataset covering 1998 to 2024 was compiled from physical, biological, and atmospheric variables. MHWs were
100 identified using the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Optimum Interpolation Sea Surface
101 Temperature version 2.1 (OISST v2.1) product at 0.25° resolution (Huang et al., 2020), and Chl-a concentrations were obtained
102 from the Copernicus Marine Environment Monitoring Service (CMEMS) GlobColour level 4 (L4) merged product (Global
103 Ocean Colour, 2025). Vertically resolved Chl-a used for the supplementary vertical-structure diagnostics was obtained from
104 the CMEMS Global Ocean Biogeochemistry (BGC) Hindcast product (GLOBAL_MULTIYEAR_BGC_001_029). Oceanic
105 physical variables, including temperature, salinity, MLD, and ocean currents, were obtained from the CMEMS GLORYS12V1
106 reanalysis, an eddy-resolving product at $1/12^\circ$ resolution suitable for examining upper-ocean physical variability (Lellouche
107 et al., 2021; Global Ocean Physics Reanalysis, 2023). The GLORYS12V1 MLD is defined using a density criterion relative
108 to 10 m depth, with the density increment corresponding to a 0.2°C temperature decrease under local conditions (Dréville et
109 al., 2023). The squared Brunt–Väisälä frequency (N^2) was derived from the temperature and salinity profiles. Following the
110 linear equation of state approximation (Gill, 1982), density was approximated as $\rho = \rho_0[1 - \alpha(T - T_0) + \beta(S - S_0)]$ with
111 $\rho_0 = 1025 \text{ kg m}^{-3}$, $\alpha = 1.7 \times 10^{-4}$, $\beta = 7.6 \times 10^{-4}$. Here, T and S denote seawater temperature and salinity,
112 respectively, and $T_0 = 25^\circ\text{C}$ and $S_0 = 35$ are reference values. N^2 was calculated from the vertical density gradient as $N^2 =$
113 $(g/\rho_0) \partial\rho/\partial D$, where D is depth increasing downward and $g = 9.81 \text{ m s}^{-2}$. Sea level anomaly (SLA) was obtained from the
114 Copernicus Marine Service sea level climate product (Global Ocean Gridded, 2024). The SLA in this product is referenced to
115 the product mean sea surface for 1993 to 2012, rather than to the 1998 to 2024 climatology used in this study. Thus, the
116 climatological SLA fields shown later should be interpreted as study-period mean departures from the product reference mean
117 surface. The GlobColour L4 product has also been used in studies of Chl-a variability in the SCS, including analyses of MHW-
118 related Chl-a responses and summer upwelling-associated phytoplankton changes (Liu and Tang, 2022; He et al., 2023).
119 Atmospheric variables were obtained from the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts (ECMWF) ERA5
120 reanalysis. The 10 m winds, surface downward shortwave radiation (SWR), and total precipitation were obtained from ERA5
121 post-processed daily statistics on single levels (Hersbach et al., 2023b), while 500 hPa geopotential height (GH500) and 850
122 hPa wind components were obtained from ERA5 post-processed daily statistics on pressure levels (Hersbach et al., 2023a).
123 These atmospheric variables were used to diagnose local wind forcing, radiative and precipitation conditions during MHWs,
124 and the circulation background related to the western North Pacific subtropical high (WNPSH). Ekman pumping velocity
125 (EPV) was derived from the wind stress curl calculated using ERA5 10 m wind components and was used as an indicator of
126 wind-driven vertical transport. The calculation followed $EPV = (\partial\tau_y/\partial x - \partial\tau_x/\partial y)/(\rho_0 f)$, where τ_x and τ_y are the zonal
127 and meridional wind stress components, ρ_0 is the reference seawater density, and f is the Coriolis parameter. To ensure
128 spatiotemporal consistency among variables for SURD analysis, the OISST grid ($0.25^\circ \times 0.25^\circ$) was adopted as the reference
129 grid, and the remaining datasets were resampled onto this grid using bilinear interpolation. The temporal coverage of all
130 datasets was restricted to 1998 to 2024, the common period with consistent availability of the key Chl-a, oceanic, and

131 atmospheric variables used in this study. This procedure yielded a unified spatiotemporal dataset for the SURD analysis.
132 Detailed information on the data sources is summarized in Table 1.

133 **Table 1. Summary of the datasets used in this study.**

Category	Variable	Source / Product ID	Temporal resolution	Spatial resolution
Ocean physics	SST	NOAA OISST v2.1	Daily	$0.25^{\circ} \times 0.25^{\circ}$
	salinity, currents (u, v), MLD, temperature	CMEMS GLORYS12V1	Daily	$1/12^{\circ} \times 1/12^{\circ}$
	SLA	CMEMS SEALEVEL L4	Daily	$0.25^{\circ} \times 0.25^{\circ}$
Ocean biology	Chl-a	CMEMS GlobColour L4	Daily	4 km $\times$ 4 km
	Chl-a (vertical)	CMEMS BGC Hindcast	Daily	$0.25^{\circ} \times 0.25^{\circ}$
Atmosphere	10 m wind (u, v), SWR, precipitation	ERA5 single levels	Daily	$0.25^{\circ} \times 0.25^{\circ}$
	GH500, 850 hPa wind (u, v)	ERA5 pressure level	Daily	$0.25^{\circ} \times 0.25^{\circ}$
Derived variable	EPV	Calculated from ERA5 10 m wind components via wind stress curl	Daily	$0.25^{\circ} \times 0.25^{\circ}$

134 **2.3 Research methods**

135 **2.3.1 MHW identification and metric calculation**

136 MHW events were identified following the definition of Hobday et al. (2016), using the MATLAB code package developed
137 by Zhao and Marin (2019). Under this framework, MHWs are defined as discrete extreme events characterized by anomalously
138 high SST. The detection criteria were as follows. An MHW event was recorded when daily SST exceeded the seasonally
139 varying 90th percentile threshold for at least five consecutive days. If two events were separated by a gap of two days or less,
140 they were merged into a single event. The period 1982 to 2011 was used as a fixed 30-year climatological baseline for
141 calculating daily thresholds, consistent with the fixed-baseline approach widely used in MHW studies (Hobday et al., 2016;
142 Chiswell, 2022). MHW detection was then applied to SST time series from 1998 to 2024. One limitation of this approach is
143 that the climatological threshold remains fixed and therefore does not adjust to the long-term warming of the background
144 climate (Chiswell, 2022).

145 Four metrics were calculated at each grid cell to describe the spatial distribution of MHW occurrence and event-scale temporal
146 properties: frequency, duration, total days, and cumulative intensity. MHWs were identified independently from the daily SST
147 time series at each grid cell. Frequency was defined as the annual number of MHW events, total days as the annual number of

MHW days, duration as the length of an individual MHW event, and cumulative intensity as the sum of daily SST anomalies relative to the climatological mean over an individual MHW event (Hobday et al., 2016). Frequency and total days were then averaged over 1998 to 2024 at each grid cell. Duration and cumulative intensity were first calculated for each grid-cell event and then averaged over all events detected at that grid cell during 1998 to 2024.

Separately, for the SURD analysis, we constructed a running cumulative SST anomaly metric (SST_CUM) to represent the thermal exposure accumulated from MHW onset to each MHW day. SST_CUM therefore evolves over the progression of an event rather than representing a single event-level value.

2.3.2 SURD causality analysis

To disentangle the causal contributions of environmental drivers to Chl-a anomalies, this study adopted the SURD method. SURD is grounded in information theory and quantifies causality as the reduction in uncertainty (Shannon entropy) of a future target variable provided by the past states of observed drivers. In this study, the target variable Q_j^+ was defined as the Chl-a anomaly at future time $t + \tau$, where τ is the response lag. The observed physical vector $Q = [Q_1, Q_2, \dots, Q_N]$ represents the states of the selected physical variables at time t . This framework is suitable for the present problem because Chl-a anomalies during MHWs in the SCS are shaped by highly coupled physical drivers and potentially nonlinear interactions. The SURD decomposition was implemented in Python using the surd function provided by Martínez-Sánchez et al. (2024).

Following the principle of forward information propagation, the total entropy $H(Q_j^+)$, representing the uncertainty of the future Chl-a anomaly, can be decomposed into redundant, unique, synergistic, and residual components:

$$H(Q_j^+) = \sum_{i \in \mathcal{C}} \Delta I_{i \rightarrow j}^R + \sum_{i=1}^N \Delta I_{i \rightarrow j}^U + \sum_{i \in \mathcal{C}} \Delta I_{i \rightarrow j}^S + \Delta I_{\text{leak} \rightarrow j} \quad (1)$$

Here, $\mathcal{C}$ denotes the set of all driver combinations involving two or more observed drivers. In the redundant and synergistic sums, $i \in \mathcal{C}$ indexes a driver combination, whereas in the unique term, $i = 1, \dots, N$ indexes individual drivers. In this study, causality refers to lagged information-theoretic predictive causality under the prescribed driver set and response lag, rather than direct experimental causation. The unique causality ΔI^U quantifies the causal information provided by a single driver that is not contained in any other individual driver, thus serving as a key indicator for identifying independent drivers. The redundant causality ΔI^R represents the overlapping information arising from shared dependencies among drivers. By separating this shared information, SURD reduces misattribution caused by multicollinearity in traditional models (Han et al., 2025), helping to prevent correlated signals from being interpreted as independent mechanisms. The synergistic causality ΔI^S represents causal information about future Chl-a anomalies that can be obtained only from the joint states of multiple selected physical drivers, rather than from any single driver alone. It therefore indicates additional information on the future Chl-a response arising from interactions among the selected drivers. The causality leak ΔI_{leak} quantifies target uncertainty not

177 assigned to the selected driver set under the prescribed lag, variable subset, and discretization scheme. It may reflect unresolved
178 processes, observational uncertainty, finite-sample effects, or missing variables.

179 SST_CUM, defined in Sect. 2.3.1, was retained in all tested variable subsets as the metric of cumulative thermal stress. This
180 design allowed us to evaluate whether Chl-a anomalies during MHWs were mainly associated with cumulative heat stress
181 itself or with concurrent changes in other physical processes. For each region, three additional predictors were combined with
182 SST_CUM from a candidate pool consisting of sea surface salinity (SSS), SLA, MLD, EPV, zonal and meridional current
183 components, wind speed, and zonal (u_{wind}) and meridional (v_{wind}) wind components. These variables represent major
184 physical pathways known to regulate Chl-a variability in the SCS, including monsoon wind forcing, Ekman pumping, coastal
185 and offshore circulation, mesoscale modulation, and upper-ocean thermohaline structure (Lu and Gan, 2015; Chen et al., 2021;
186 Hong et al., 2022; Zhi et al., 2022). SST_CUM at time t represented the accumulated thermal conditions from MHW onset to
187 the current day, whereas the other predictors were represented by their concurrent daily anomalies at t and were not averaged
188 over the MHW duration or converted to cumulative metrics. Nutrient and biological variables were not included in the SURD
189 driver pool; the associated data limitations and implications are discussed in Sect. 3.5. All variables were standardized using
190 z-scores before SURD analysis.

191 The main analysis used four-variable subsets. Although adding more variables can in principle reduce the causality leak by
192 conditioning the future Chl-a state on a larger set of drivers, a lower leak alone does not necessarily yield a more physically
193 interpretable or statistically robust decomposition. Increasing the number of variables also produces increasingly high-order
194 SURD terms, making individual information components more difficult to relate to specific physical processes. The four-
195 variable setting was therefore adopted as a parsimonious balance among leak reduction, probability-estimation stability, and
196 physical interpretability. Within this framework, each candidate four-variable subset was evaluated over bin numbers from 2
197 to 10. For each region, the subset with the lowest mean causality leak across these bin settings was selected for the subsequent
198 SURD decomposition.

199 In practice, SURD requires the estimation of the joint probability distribution between the future Chl-a anomaly and the
200 selected physical drivers. Given the continuous nature of these anomalous time series, they were first discretized into a finite
201 number of states before estimating the joint probability distribution. The number of bins defines the number of discrete states
202 used to represent each variable and therefore controls the resolution of the discretized state space. Too few bins may merge
203 distinct anomaly states and obscure variability, whereas too many bins may leave insufficient samples in each state and lead
204 to unstable probability estimates. The bin-sensitivity results were also used to determine the discretization for the final
205 decomposition. Nine bins were retained as a common setting for both regions, providing a low causality leak while limiting
206 further sparsity in the joint state space. The response lag τ defines the time interval between the physical drivers and the future
207 Chl-a anomaly. Sensitivity tests for $\tau = 1, 2$, and 3 days showed that the selected region-specific variable subsets remained
208 unchanged across the tested lags (Table S1). Given this limited sensitivity to the lag choice, $\tau = 1$ day was retained for the
209 main analysis.

210 The non-leak SURD terms were normalized by the mutual information captured by the selected driver subset. Therefore, for
 211 a given non-leak term k , the percentage shown in Figs. 5b and 8b was calculated as

$$212 \quad P_k = 100 \times \frac{\Delta I_k}{\sum_{\ell \in \Omega} \Delta I_\ell} \quad (2)$$

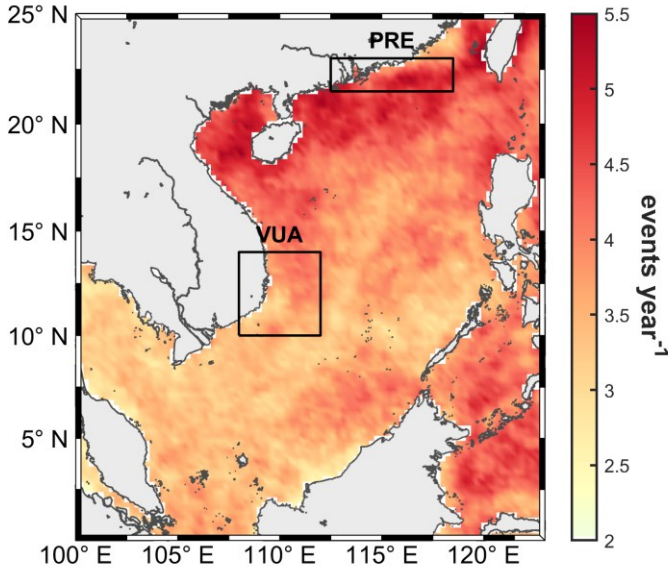
213 where Ω includes all unique, redundant, and synergistic terms of the selected driver subset, but excludes the causality leak.
 214 These percentages therefore represent relative information contributions within the information captured by the selected
 215 physical drivers. They should not be interpreted as fractions of total Chl-a variance or total target entropy. The causality leak
 216 is reported separately because it is normalized by $H(Q_j^+)$ and measures the fraction of target uncertainty that remains
 217 unexplained by the selected driver set.

218 **3 Results and Discussion**

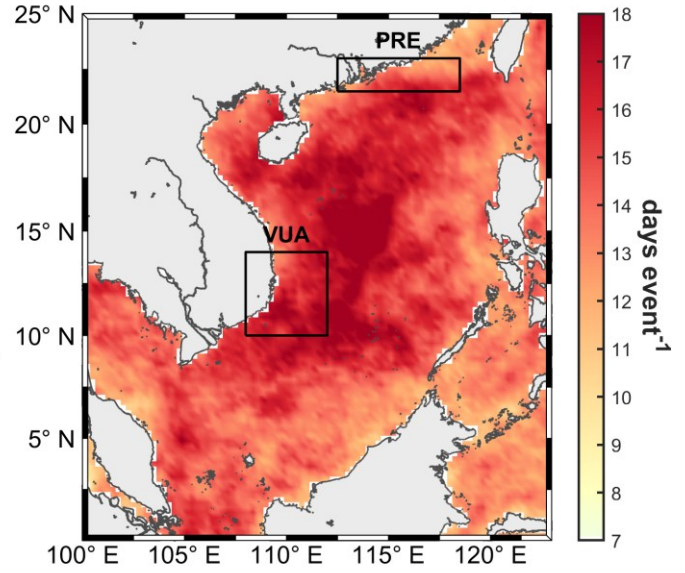
219 **3.1 Spatial distribution of MHWs**

220 MHW metrics in the SCS exhibit marked spatial heterogeneity (Fig. 2). In terms of occurrence frequency (Fig. 2a), high values
 221 are mainly concentrated on the northern continental shelf, with annual occurrence frequencies generally exceeding 4 events
 222 year⁻¹. High values of single-event duration (Fig. 2b) and cumulative intensity (Fig. 2d) are present in the Beibu Gulf, off
 223 Vietnam, and in the western SCS basin, where the mean duration exceeds 15 days. Annual total MHW days display a spatial
 224 pattern characterized by higher values in coastal regions and lower values in the open basin (Fig. 2c). In the Beibu Gulf and
 225 PRE, annual total MHW days exceed 50 days. These patterns indicate pronounced MHW activity in the northern shelf region,
 226 including the PRE, and in the VUA.

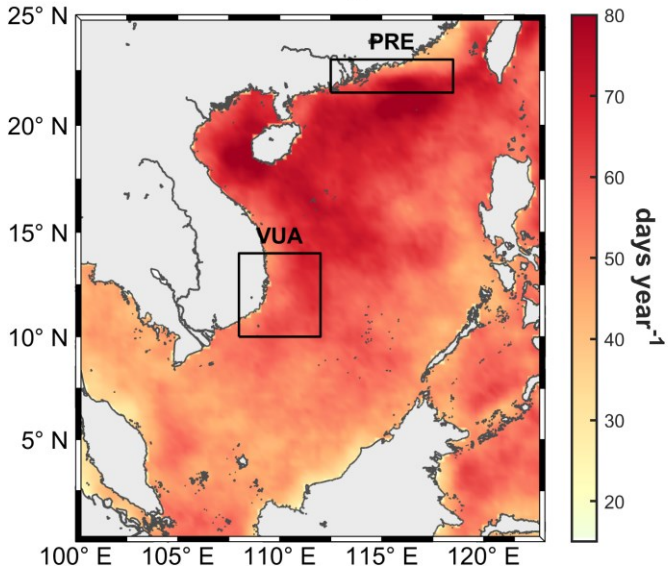
Frequency



Duration



Total days



Cumulative intensity

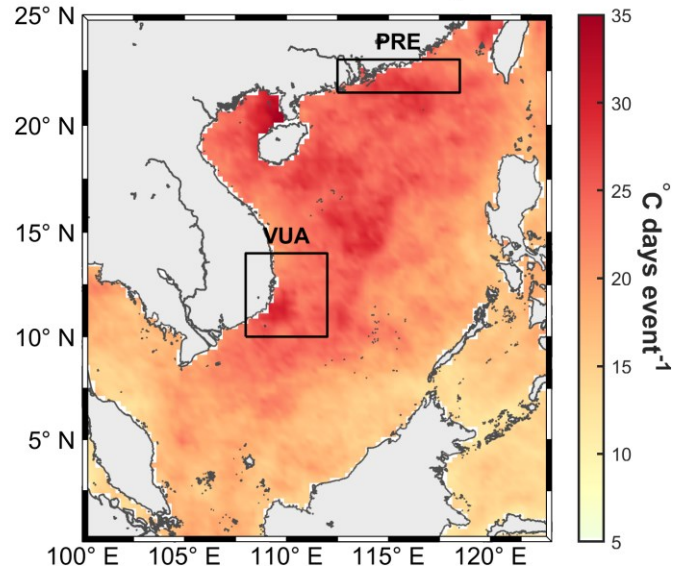
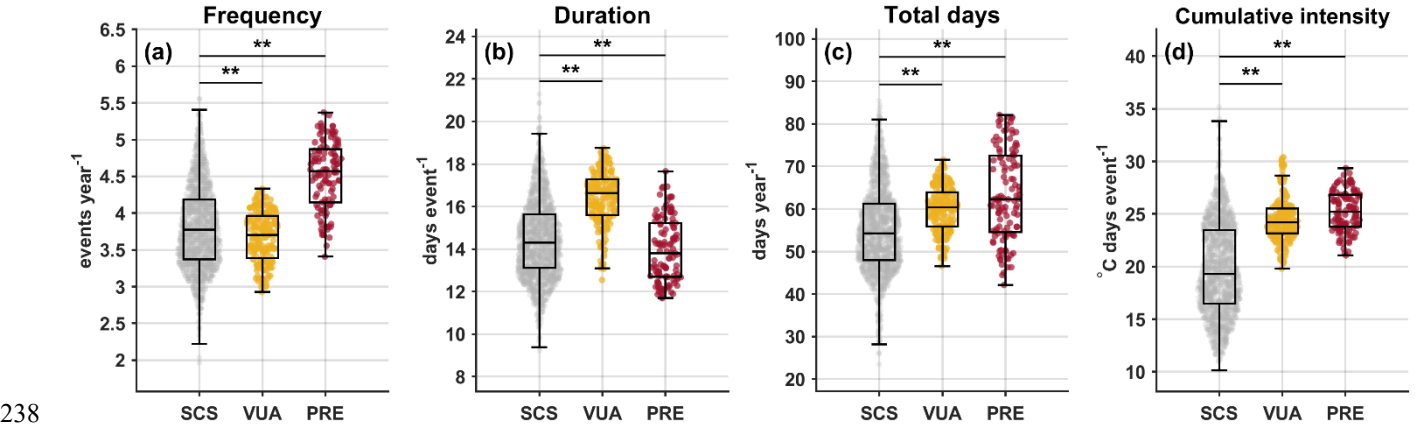


Figure 2. Mean spatial distribution of MHW characteristics in the SCS during 1998 to 2024. Black rectangles indicate the PRE and VUA study regions. The panels show (a) annual mean occurrence frequency (events year⁻¹), (b) mean duration (days event⁻¹), (c) annual mean total MHW days (days year⁻¹), and (d) mean cumulative intensity (°C days event⁻¹).

Statistical analyses further quantified the MHW characteristics of the VUA and the PRE relative to the basin-wide SCS statistics ($p < 0.01$; Fig. 3). The PRE is characterized as a typical high-frequency MHW area. The annual occurrence frequency ranges from 3.41 to 5.37 events year⁻¹, with a median of 4.57 events year⁻¹, which is higher than the basin-wide SCS median of 3.78 events year⁻¹ (Fig. 3a). The VUA, by comparison, is characterized as a long-duration area. In this region, the median

235 duration of individual events reaches 16.63 days event⁻¹, exceeding the basin-wide SCS median of 14.30 days event⁻¹ (Fig.
236 3b). In addition, both the PRE and the VUA exhibit significantly higher median annual total MHW days and cumulative
237 intensity than the basin-wide SCS median values (Fig. 3c, d).



239 **Figure 3. Comparison of MHW characteristics among the SCS, the VUA, and the PRE.** The panels show (a) annual mean occurrence
240 frequency, (b) mean duration, (c) annual mean total MHW days, and (d) mean cumulative intensity. Each point represents one valid
241 grid cell, with values averaged over 1998 to 2024. Boxes indicate the interquartile ranges, and central horizontal lines denote medians.
242 Horizontal bars indicate comparisons of VUA versus SCS and PRE versus SCS; double asterisks indicate significant differences (p
243 < 0.01) based on two-sided Wilcoxon rank-sum tests (Wilcoxon, 1945).

244 3.2 Chl-a responses to MHWs

245 Seasonal composite analysis of Chl-a anomalies during MHWs reveals a predominantly negative response across most seasons
246 (Fig. 4). In spring, autumn, and winter, negative Chl-a anomalies dominate the SCS (Fig. 4a, c, d). By contrast, the summer
247 response exhibits a marked spatial contrast between the northern shelf and the western SCS (Fig. 4b). In the PRE and adjacent
248 northern shelf regions, Chl-a concentrations show positive anomalies during MHWs, with increases exceeding 40 % relative
249 to the climatological summer chlorophyll concentration in some nearshore core areas. Meanwhile, the VUA shows negative
250 Chl-a anomalies. Because the SCS exhibits strong seasonal variability in both physical conditions and Chl-a background states,
251 pooling MHW responses across seasons could mask these season-specific contrasts. The summer composite anomalies in both
252 regions also lay outside the variability observed under comparable non-MHW summer conditions (Fig. S3). We therefore
253 focus the subsequent mechanistic analysis on summer, when the clearest contrast emerges between the PRE and VUA.

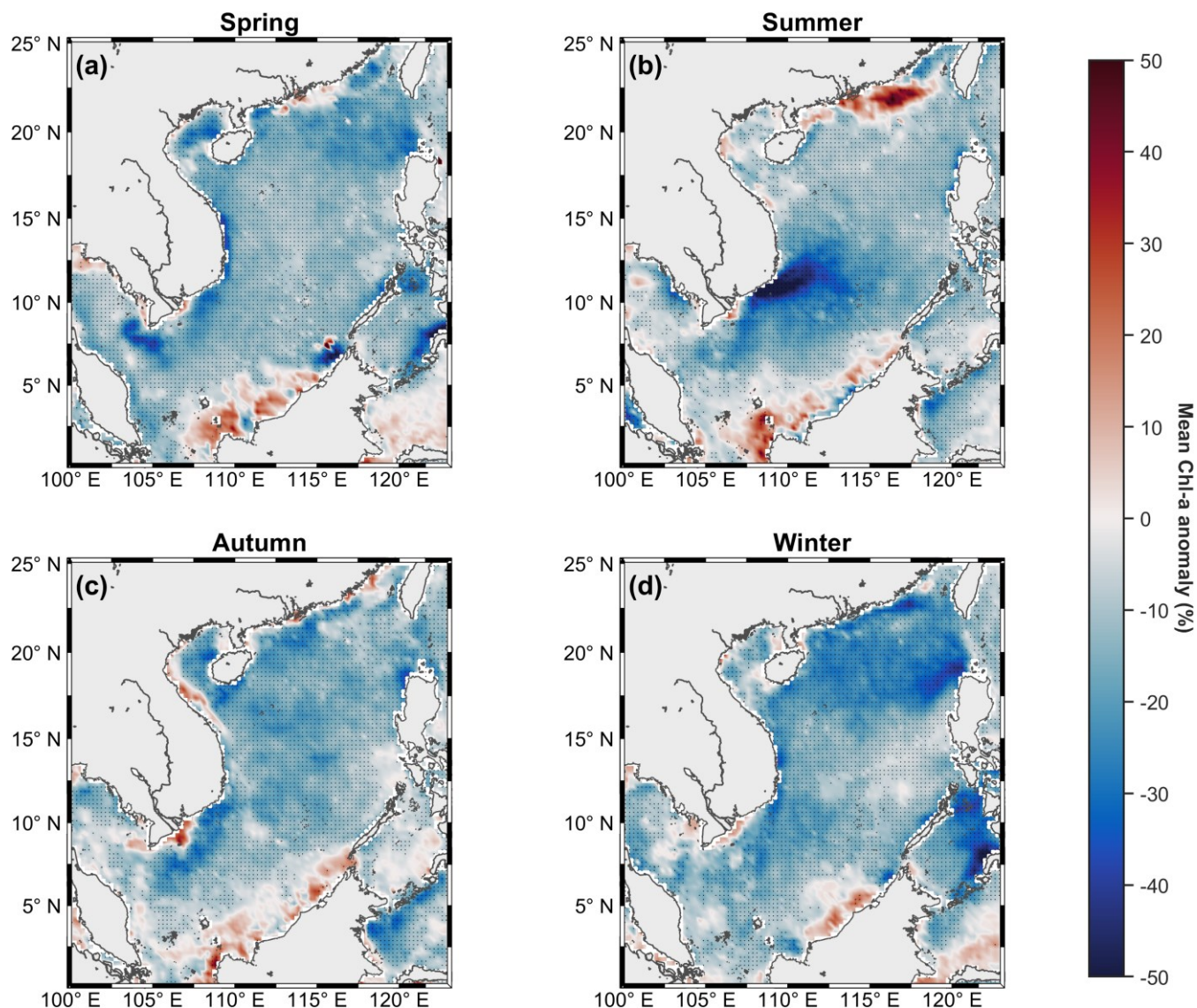


Figure 4. Spatial distribution of the seasonal mean Chl-a percentage anomalies during MHWs in the SCS for 1998 to 2024. The panels show composite anomalies for (a) spring, (b) summer, (c) autumn, and (d) winter. Chl-a anomalies are expressed as percentage differences between event-mean values during MHWs and the seasonal climatology at each grid cell. Black stippling indicates anomalies significantly different from zero ($p < 0.05$).

3.3 Regional physical pathways of Chl-a responses during summer MHWs

To identify the dominant physical signals associated with summer Chl-a anomalies during MHWs, SURD was applied separately to the VUA and PRE using the region-specific variable subsets selected as described in Sect. 2.3.2. The resulting decompositions revealed distinct information structures between the two regions, which are examined below in terms of unique, redundant, and synergistic contributions.

264 **3.3.1 Suppressed upwelling in the VUA**

265 As a typical wind-driven upwelling system, the VUA is strongly regulated by local air–sea interactions during summer (Ngo
266 and Hsin, 2021). Within the tested four-variable subsets described above, the combination of SSS, SLA, EPV, and SST_CUM
267 had the lowest mean causality leak over the tested bin numbers, with a leak of approximately 0.55 under the selected nine-bin
268 discretization (Fig. 5a). This subset was therefore used to examine the physical information associated with VUA Chl-a
269 anomalies.

270 Figure 6 illustrates climatological fields and MHW-related composite anomalies for key variables in the VUA during summer.
271 The climatological fields show the canonical summer upwelling signature off southeastern Vietnam, including relatively lower
272 SST, enhanced EPV, lower nearshore SLA, and a nearshore high-Chl-a belt (Fig. 6a, b, d, e). The high-Chl-a belt remains
273 evident under alternative characterizations of the summer background state, suggesting that it is not primarily driven by a small
274 number of episodic high-Chl-a observations (Fig. S4). This pattern agrees with previous studies indicating that southwest
275 monsoon forcing and Ekman processes drive coastal and offshore upwelling in the western SCS, thereby supporting elevated
276 Chl-a in the upwelling zone (Herrmann et al., 2023; To Duy et al., 2022; Zhao and Tang, 2007).

277 High mean cumulative-intensity values span the entire region, with high-value centres (>30 °C days) concentrated in offshore
278 waters and along the nearshore band south of 12° N (Fig. 6f). Correspondingly, Chl-a concentrations show negative anomalies
279 (Fig. 6j), with the core decline zone (10 to 12° N) overlapping the coastal region experiencing the strongest cumulative heat
280 stress. These negative Chl-a anomalies spatially coincide with the summer climatological high-Chl-a belt (Fig. 6e), suggesting
281 that MHWs may suppress surface Chl-a in this climatologically high-Chl-a region.

282 These negative Chl-a anomalies cannot be solely explained by direct surface warming. The SURD analysis (Fig. 5b) detected
283 no unique information contribution from SST_CUM within the selected VUA variable subset, whereas EPV showed the largest
284 unique information contribution (12.9 %). The absence of a detected unique contribution from SST_CUM should not be
285 interpreted as an absence of thermal involvement, because SST_CUM remained involved in synergistic terms with the other
286 selected physical variables. This result identifies vertical transport as the primary independent physical driver of the Chl-a
287 decline within the selected variable set. EPV exhibits negative anomalies along the coast, with a spatial extent that generally
288 coincides with the core region of negative Chl-a anomalies (Fig. 6g, j). This phenomenon further supports that negative EPV
289 anomalies contribute to the Chl-a decline.

290 Substantial redundant information is shared by SSS and EPV (18.9 %; Fig. 5b), consistent with the spatial overlap of their
291 negative anomalies (Fig. 6g, h). This redundancy suggests that SSS variability contains information linked to EPV. Reduced
292 EPV suppresses the upward transport of subsurface high-salinity water, contributing to surface freshening (Ngo and Hsin,
293 2021; To Duy et al., 2022). Thus, the negative SSS anomaly can be interpreted as a hydrographic tracer of weakened wind-
294 driven upwelling (Dippner et al., 2007; Wu et al., 2025).

295 Within the explainable information captured by the selected subset, the largest single contribution (20.9 %) arose from the
 296 synergistic interaction among SSS, SLA, EPV, and SST_CUM. Given that SURD terms are not stepwise marginal effects, the
 297 four-variable synergy should not be interpreted as the incremental effect of adding SSS to a lower-order combination. The
 298 SSS–EPV redundancy mainly reflects shared upwelling-related information. The dominant four-variable synergy therefore
 299 supports a joint-state interpretation rather than a single-driver explanation. The vertical structure further supports this point
 300 (Fig. 7). During MHWs, positive temperature anomalies penetrate into the subsurface layer (Fig. 7f), strengthening water-
 301 column stratification, as reflected by positive N^2 anomalies (Fig. 7i). Positive SLA anomalies (Fig. 6i) correspond to
 302 thermocline deepening (Fig. 7e, f), while negative EPV anomalies indicate weakened upwelling. This synergy can be
 303 interpreted as a dual suppression mechanism: dynamically, reduced wind-driven upwelling limits the upward transport of
 304 nutrients (He and Mahadevan, 2021); thermally, enhanced stratification further restricts vertical nutrient exchange in the upper
 305 ocean (Yao and Wang, 2021; Noh et al., 2022). Together, these processes restrict the upward supply of nutrients to the upper
 306 ocean and are consistent with the observed negative surface Chl-a anomalies (He et al., 2023; Ma and Chen, 2025).

307 The vertical Chl-a from the CMEMS BGC Hindcast product (Sect. 2.2) was used to further examine the negative surface Chl-
 308 a anomalies in the VUA. Although the magnitude differs from the satellite observations, the BGC hindcast also shows a
 309 negative surface Chl-a anomaly in the VUA (Fig. S5), supporting its use for examining the vertical structure of the response.
 310 The climatological vertical profile shows a pronounced subsurface Chl-a maximum at approximately 50–70 m (Fig. S5a).
 311 Strong climatological summer upwelling (Fig. 6b) transports subsurface high-Chl-a water upward, contributing to the high
 312 climatological Chl-a in the VUA (Fig. 6e). During MHWs, weakened upwelling (Fig. 6g) reduced this upward transport, while
 313 enhanced stratification (Fig. 7i) suppressed vertical exchange, thereby contributing to the negative surface Chl-a anomalies.

314 When averaged over the full water column, the water-column anomaly is only -0.006 mg m^{-3} , substantially smaller in
 315 magnitude than the model-derived surface anomaly of -0.077 mg m^{-3} (Fig. S5c). The much weaker water-column mean
 316 anomaly suggests that vertical redistribution associated with weakened upwelling and enhanced stratification contributed to
 317 the surface Chl-a response in the VUA.

318 Chl-a anomalies were negative throughout approximately the upper 60 m, where climatological Chl-a concentrations are higher
 319 than in deeper water (Fig. S5a, b). This broad upper-ocean decrease suggests that vertical redistribution alone may not fully
 320 explain the observed response. Other unresolved processes may also contribute to the surface Chl-a response in the VUA.
 321 Given that the causality leak in the SURD analysis for the VUA Chl-a anomalies is not zero (Fig. 5b), these unresolved
 322 processes may contribute to the remaining causality leak.

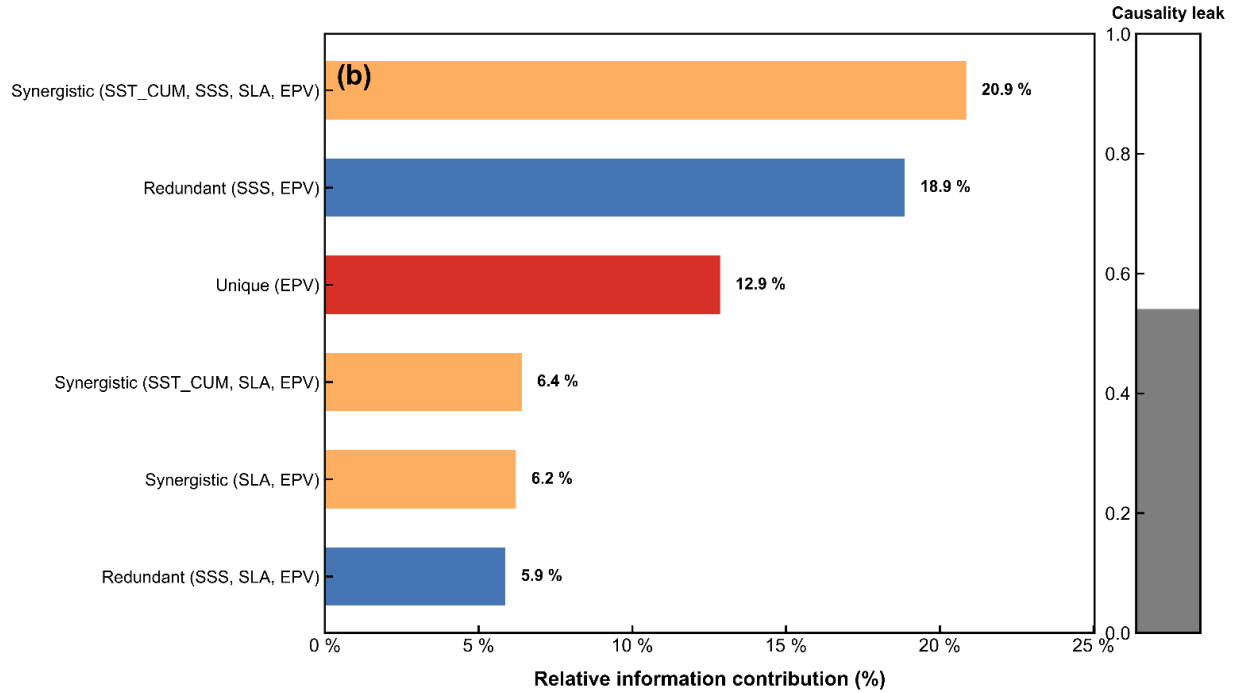
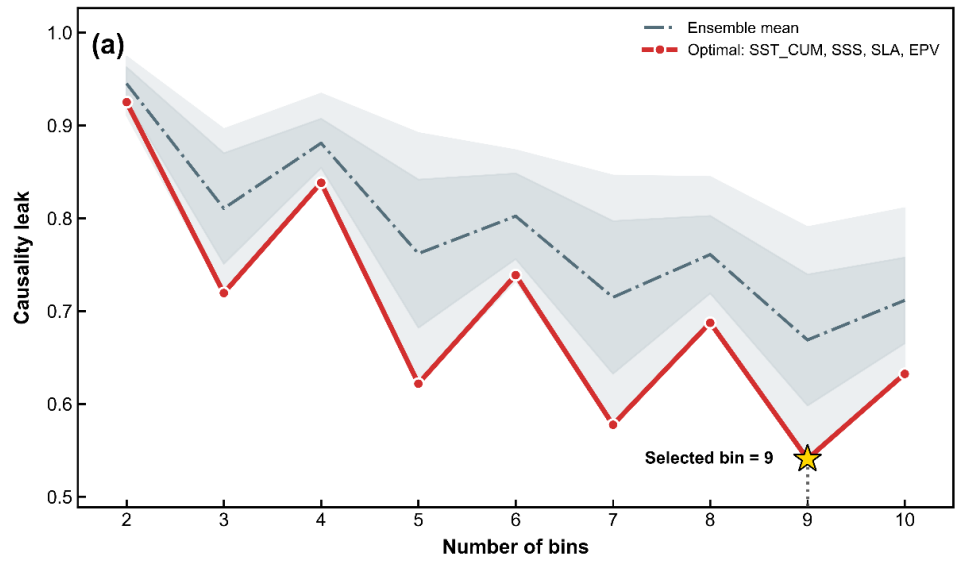


Figure 5. Selection of the four-variable subset and SURD decomposition for the VUA during summer MHWs. (a) Sensitivity of the causality leak to the number of bins. The solid red line denotes the selected variable subset, and the dot-dashed grey line denotes the ensemble mean across all four-variable subsets. Shading indicates the full range and ± 1 standard deviation of the ensemble. The yellow star marks the selected discretization parameter of nine bins. (b) Relative non-leak information contributions to the future Chl-a anomaly. Percentages are normalized by the sum of all unique, redundant, and synergistic SURD terms for the selected subset. The grey bar indicates the causality leak, $\Delta I_{\text{leak} \rightarrow j} / H(Q_j^+)$, which is normalized separately. Only the six largest non-leak terms are shown; therefore, the displayed percentages do not sum to 100 %.

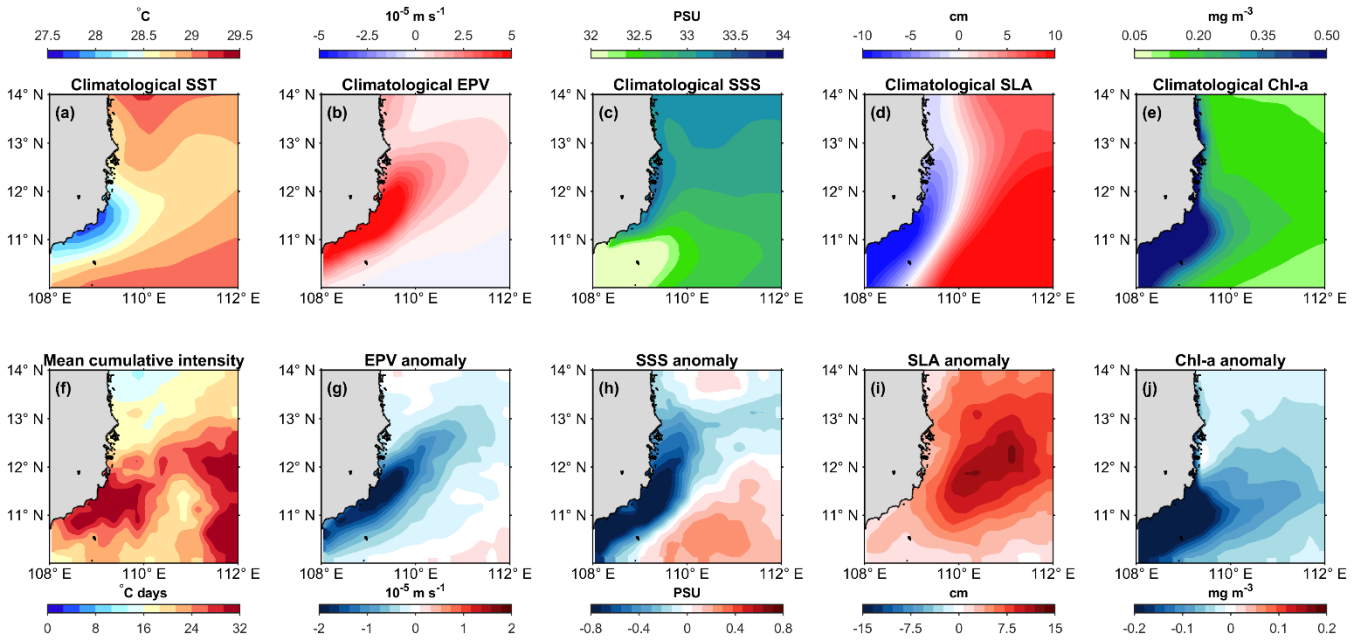


Figure 6. Summer climatological fields and MHW-related anomaly composites in the VUA. Panels show (a) climatological SST (°C), (f) mean cumulative intensity of summer MHWs (°C days), and climatological fields with corresponding anomaly composites for (b, g) EPV (10⁻⁵ m s⁻¹), (c, h) SSS (PSU), (d, i) SLA (cm), and (e, j) Chl-a (mg m⁻³). The anomaly fields were calculated from daily departures relative to the day-of-year climatology and then averaged using an event-equal composite.

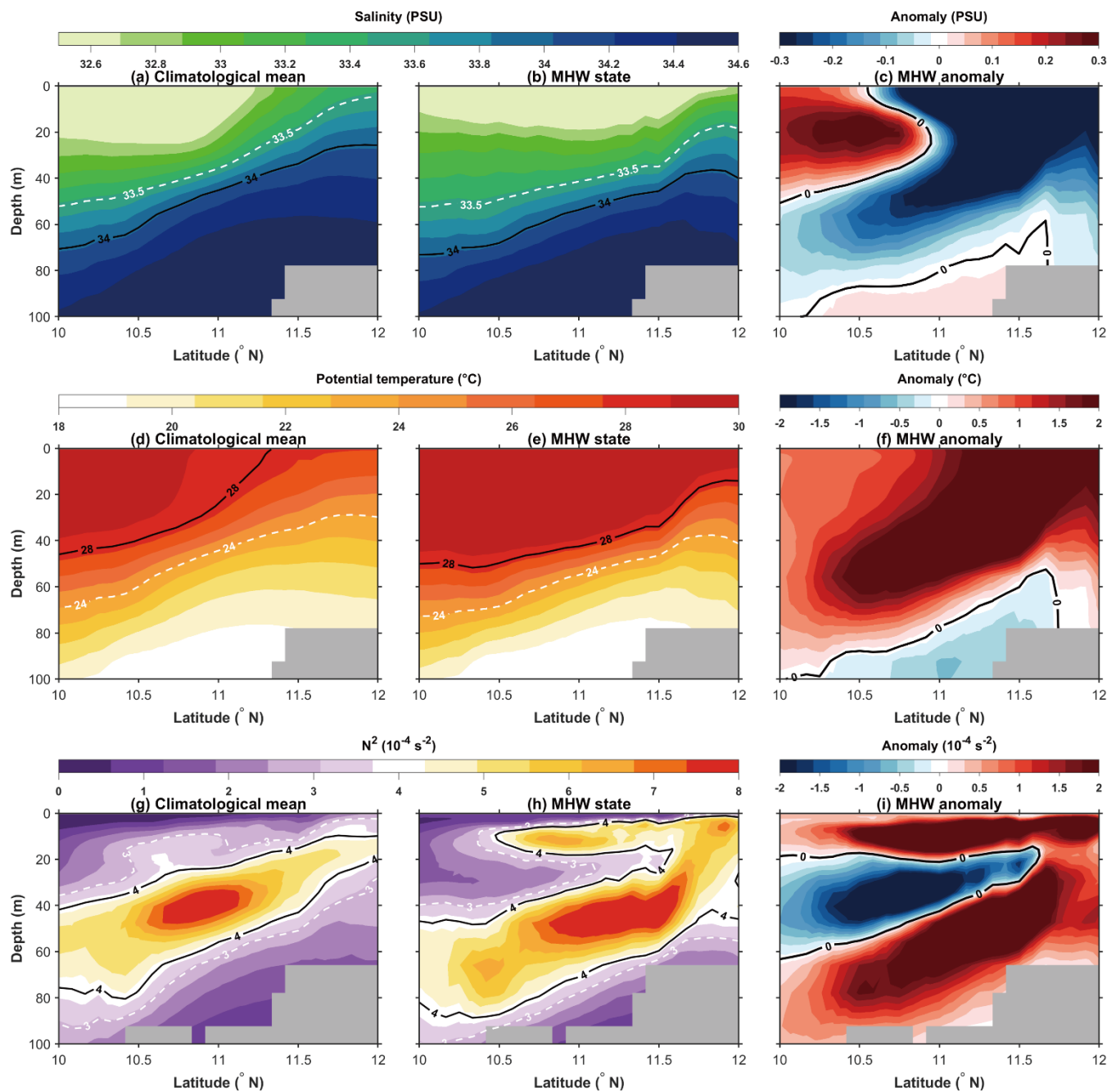


Figure 7. Vertical upper-ocean structure (0 to 100 m) along the 109.33° E transect in the VUA during summer (June to August). The rows display, from top to bottom, the (a–c) salinity (PSU), (d–f) potential temperature (°C), and (g–i) squared Brunt–Väisälä frequency (N^2 , 10^{-4} s^{-2}). The left, middle, and right columns represent the climatological mean, MHW state, and MHW anomaly field, respectively. In the left and middle columns, solid black and dashed white contours indicate selected salinity, potential-temperature, and N^2 values. In the right column, thick black contours denote zero anomalies. Grey shading at the bottom of each panel represents seafloor bathymetry.

343 3.3.2 Horizontal plume retention in the PRE

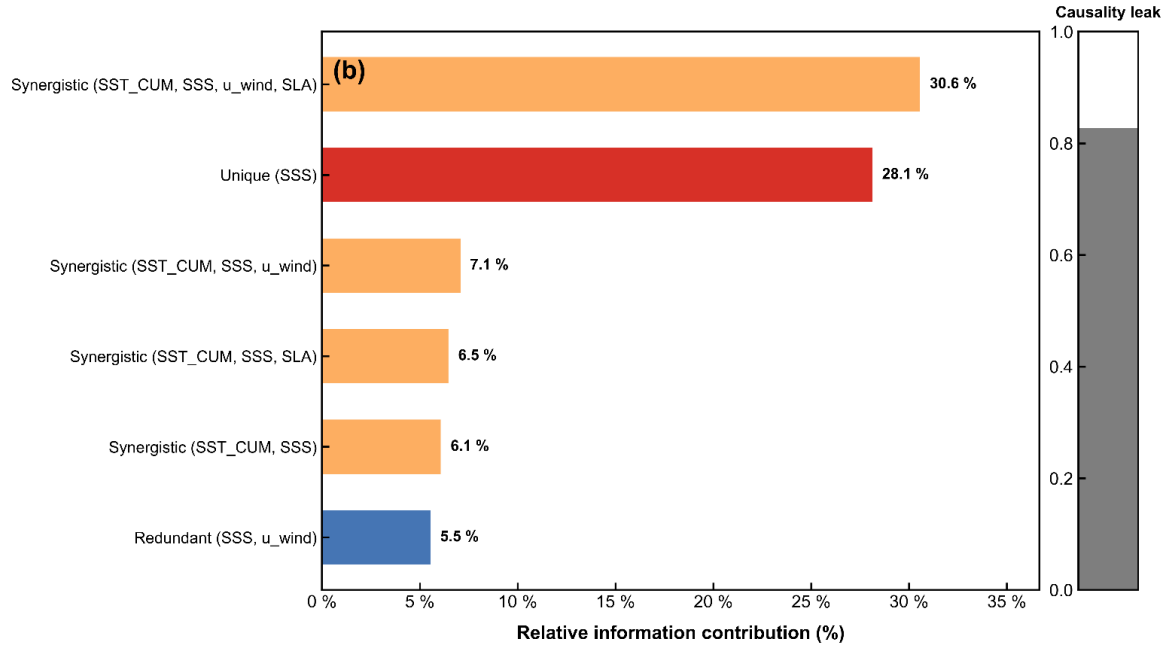
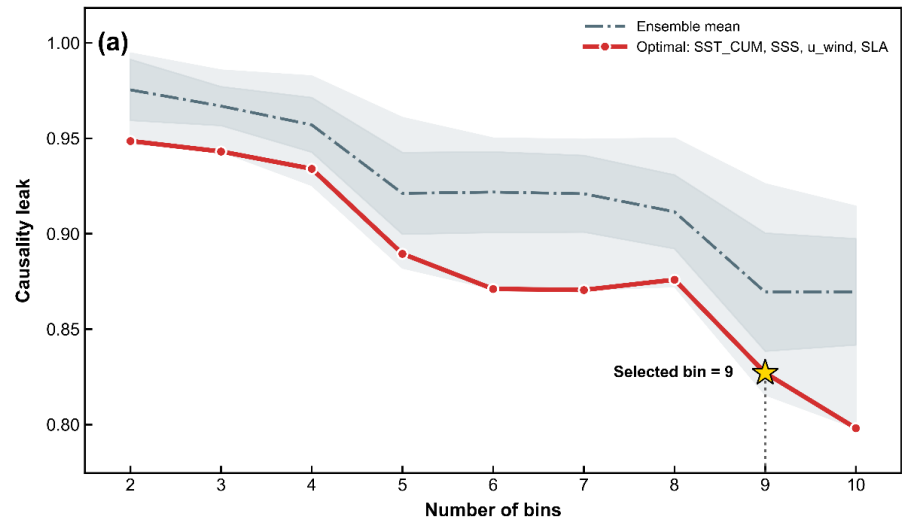
344 Using the same four-variable selection framework as in the VUA, the PRE subset selected at the nine-bin discretization
345 consisted of SSS, SLA, SST_CUM, and u_wind (Fig. 8a). Although the causality leak continued to decrease at 10 bins, nine
346 bins were retained for the main analysis to maintain comparability with the VUA and to avoid excessive sparsity in the
347 discretized joint probability estimates. Within this selected subset, the largest non-leak contribution was the four-variable
348 synergistic term involving SST_CUM, SSS, SLA, and u_wind (30.6 %; Fig. 8b). As in the VUA, the SURD analysis detected
349 no unique information contribution from SST_CUM, whereas SSS provided the largest unique information contribution
350 (28.1 %; Fig. 8b). This contrast indicates that cumulative thermal stress did not provide separable predictive information within
351 the selected PRE variable subset, with SSS instead representing the dominant source of unique information. The spatial
352 distribution of SSS provides physical context for this result. The climatology shows low-salinity plume water near the estuary
353 and more saline offshore waters (Fig. 9e), while the MHW composite shows predominantly positive SSS anomalies outside
354 the plume-affected region (Fig. 9f). Therefore, the intrusion of high-salinity offshore waters—both climatological and
355 anomalous—cannot account for the pronounced negative SSS anomalies in the nearshore area (Fig. 9f). The pronounced
356 negative SSS anomalies are mainly concentrated in the plume-affected region (Fig. 9e, f). Together, these spatial patterns
357 support an enhanced influence or local retention of low-salinity Pearl River plume water near the coast. Precipitation anomalies
358 provide little support for enhanced rainfall as the source of this freshening: local PRE precipitation did not increase during
359 summer MHWs, and nearby PRD land precipitation likewise showed no systematic increase around regional MHW
360 establishment (Fig. S2).

361 In the eutrophic PRE, nutrient concentrations often exhibit a negative correlation with salinity (Dai et al., 2008; Niu et al.,
362 2020), so retention of Pearl River plume water could also maintain relatively nutrient-rich surface conditions. Because nutrient
363 concentrations were not directly observed during the MHW events, this nutrient pathway remains inferred rather than directly
364 demonstrated. The same low-salinity surface layer reduces surface density and strengthens salinity-driven stratification,
365 consistent with the salinity and N^2 anomaly patterns in Fig. S1a and c in the Supplement.

366 The four-variable synergy among SST_CUM, SSS, SLA, and u_wind supports a joint-state interpretation rather than a single-
367 driver response. This term should not be interpreted as the sum of separate marginal effects from u_wind and SLA. The
368 negligible unique contributions of u_wind and SLA indicate that neither variable provides strong independent information on
369 its own. Instead, they become informative in the joint state because they help distinguish plume-retention conditions during
370 cumulative heat stress. The composite fields show weakened winds relative to the summer monsoon background (Fig. 9c, d),
371 reducing wind-driven offshore Ekman transport and favouring nearshore plume retention. Positive SLA anomalies over the
372 adjacent shelf indicate elevated nearshore sea level during MHWs (Fig. 9h). This sea-level rise could reduce the estuary–shelf
373 water-level gradient and slow the offshore spreading of plume water, reinforcing the retention effect of weakened winds.
374 Sustained surface heating could further stabilize the upper layer, as indicated by positive temperature and N^2 anomalies in Fig.

375 S1b and c in the Supplement. This enhanced stratification could help maintain the low-salinity plume water within the upper
376 layer and limit its vertical mixing with surrounding waters. Where nutrient availability remained sufficient, plume retention
377 together with a warmer and more stratified surface environment could favour the observed positive surface Chl-a anomalies.
378 Such a response would be consistent with the strong dependence of phytoplankton responses to warming on nutrient
379 availability (Marañón et al., 2018) and with evidence that MHWs can promote phytoplankton blooms in nutrient-rich coastal
380 waters (Hayashida et al., 2020). Although the selected physical variables support the plume-retention interpretation, the
381 relatively high causality leak in the PRE suggests that unresolved biogeochemical processes may also contribute to local Chl-
382 a variability.

383 The vertical Chl-a diagnostics are also consistent with this stratification-related interpretation. Both the satellite observations
384 and the BGC hindcast show positive surface Chl-a anomalies in the PRE (Fig. S6b). This agreement supports the use of the
385 BGC hindcast to further examine the vertical structure of the PRE response. Under climatological conditions, Chl-a is
386 concentrated near the surface (Fig. S6a), while widespread mixed-layer shoaling during summer MHWs indicates enhanced
387 upper-ocean stratification (Fig. S7). The stronger stratification suppresses vertical exchange between the relatively high-Chl-
388 a upper layer and the lower-Chl-a water below, favouring higher Chl-a concentrations near the surface. Within the BGC
389 hindcast, the positive surface Chl-a anomaly is much larger in magnitude than the water-column mean anomaly, which is close
390 to zero (-0.004 mg m^{-3} ; Fig. S6c). This difference supports a contribution from vertical redistribution to the positive surface
391 Chl-a response in the PRE.



392

393 **Figure 8. Selection of the four-variable subset and SURD decomposition for the PRE during summer MHWs. (a) Sensitivity of the**
 394 **causality leak to the number of bins. The solid red line denotes the selected variable subset, and the dot-dashed grey line denotes the**
 395 **ensemble mean across all four-variable subsets. Shading indicates the full range and ± 1 standard deviation of the ensemble. The**
 396 **yellow star marks the selected discretization parameter of nine bins. (b) Relative non-leak information contributions to the future**
 397 **Chl-a anomaly. Percentages are normalized by the sum of all unique, redundant, and synergistic SURD terms for the selected subset.**
 398 **The grey bar indicates the causality leak, $\Delta I_{\text{leak} \rightarrow j} / H(Q_j^+)$, which is normalized separately. Only the six largest non-leak terms are**
 399 **shown; therefore, the displayed percentages do not sum to 100 %.**

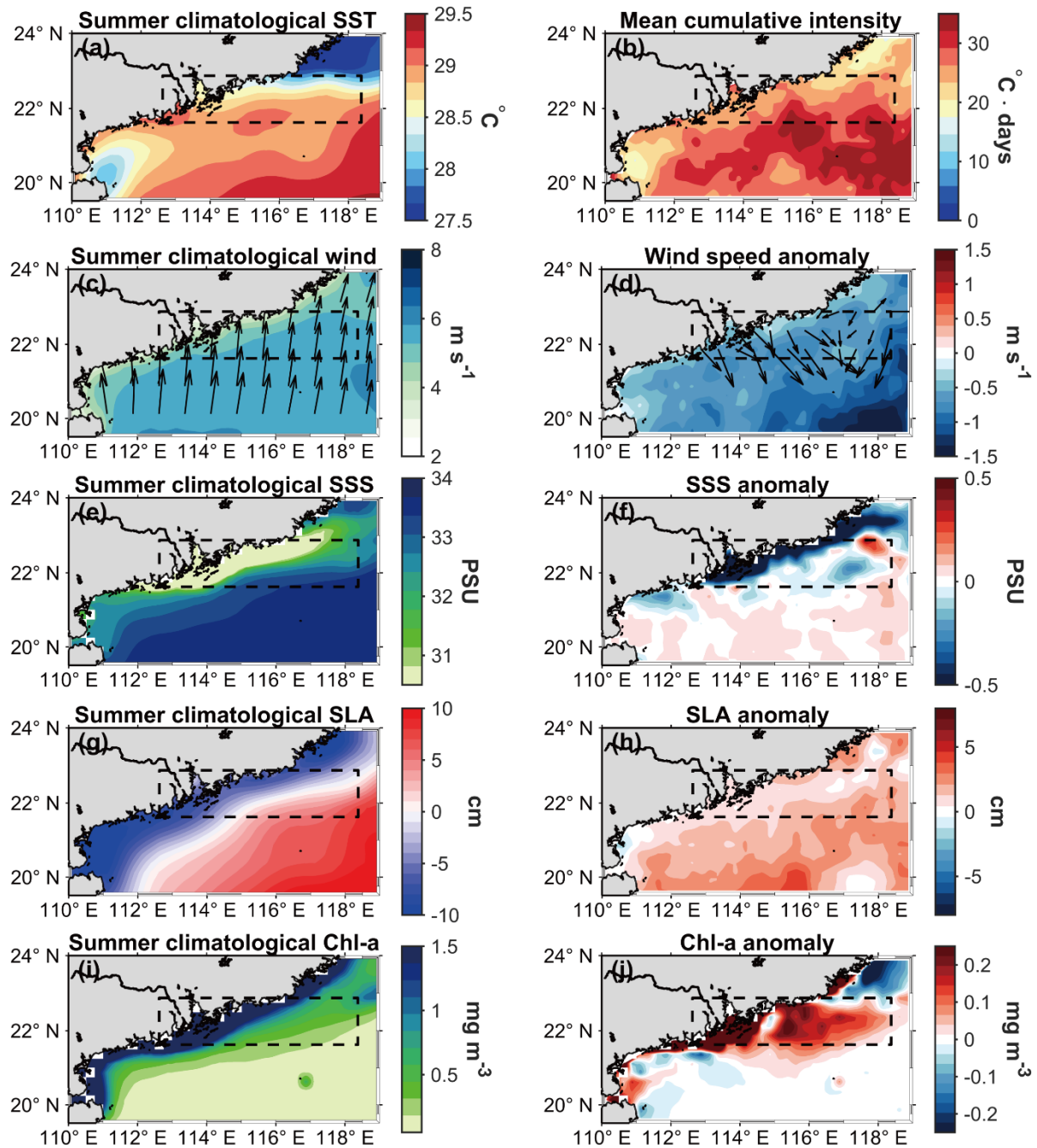


Figure 9. Summer climatological fields and MHW-related anomaly composites in the PRE. The first row shows (a) summer climatological SST (°C) and (b) mean cumulative intensity of summer MHWs (°C days). The remaining rows display, from top to bottom, wind speed (m s⁻¹), SSS (PSU), SLA (cm), and Chl-a (mg m⁻³); the left and right columns represent the summer climatological mean and the corresponding MHW anomaly field, respectively. In the wind panels, arrows indicate climatological wind vectors in (c) and wind-vector anomalies in (d). The dashed black box denotes the PRE region used for regional analysis. The anomaly fields were calculated from daily departures relative to the day-of-year climatology and then averaged using an event-equal composite.

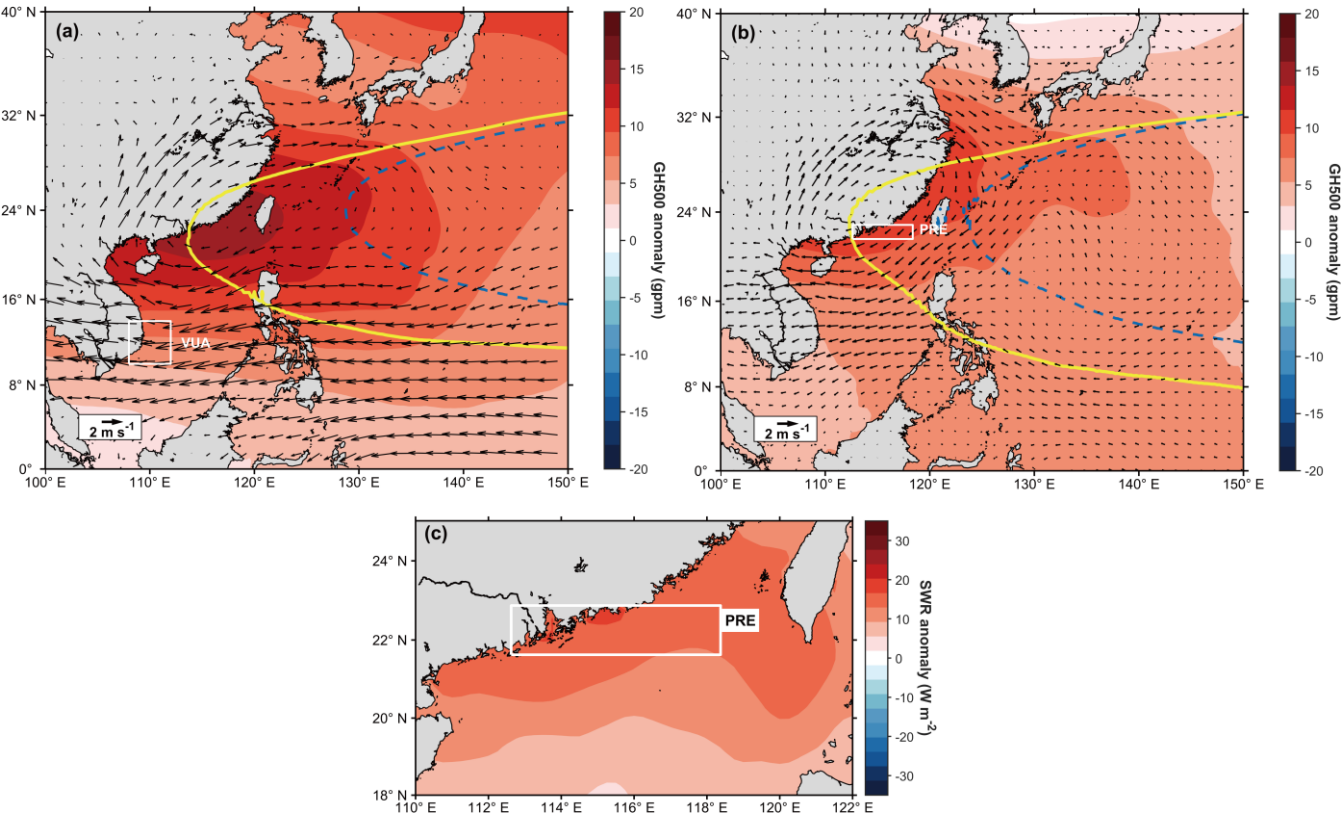
3.4 Contrasting regional responses to the western North Pacific subtropical high

The VUA and the PRE exhibit contrasting Chl-a responses during summer MHWs, yet their respective event composites point to a similar large-scale atmospheric background associated with the westward extension and intensification of the western North Pacific subtropical high (WNPSH; Fig. 10a, b). The WNPSH is the western sector of the North Pacific subtropical high and an important component of the summer atmospheric circulation over East Asia. Here, GH500 denotes 500 hPa geopotential height, expressed in geopotential metres (gpm), and the 5875 gpm contour is used as a proxy for the WNPSH extent (Basconcillo and Moon, 2022; Nie et al., 2024). Anomalous intensification and westward extension of the WNPSH are typically accompanied by an anomalous anticyclonic circulation over the western North Pacific and SCS. Associated subsidence can suppress convection and cloud cover, thereby increasing incoming shortwave radiation at the sea surface (Tan et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022). The accompanying wind anomalies can also weaken the SCS summer monsoon and suppress wind-driven upwelling and the midwestern SCS cold filament (Yao and Wang, 2021; Song et al., 2023). These processes reduce local ocean cooling and favour the development and persistence of summer MHWs in the SCS. Under similar large-scale circulation anomalies, differences in regional oceanographic settings give rise to distinct physical pathways and contrasting physical–biological coupling mechanisms (Fig. 11).

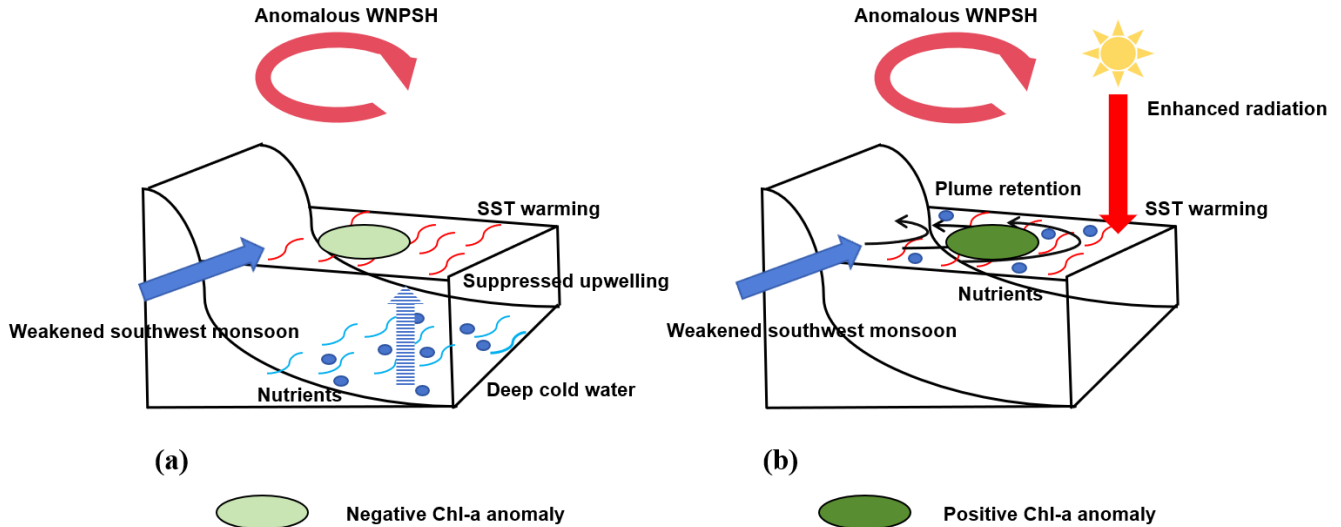
In the VUA, MHW occurrence and negative Chl-a anomalies are linked through a common physical pathway. For the VUA events, positive GH500 anomalies and the westward extension of the 5875 gpm contour are accompanied by anomalous low-level winds consistent with weakened southwest monsoon forcing (Yao and Wang, 2021; Li et al., 2022). This shift in dynamical forcing weakens coastal Ekman transport and EPV. This suppression can produce two linked effects: first, reduced upwelling of cold subsurface water weakens surface cooling and favours elevated temperatures (Yao and Wang, 2021); second, restricted upward nutrient transport to the euphotic zone can contribute to decreases Chl-a concentrations. These results indicate that MHW development and reduced Chl-a in the VUA represent coupled thermal and biological responses to weakened vertical dynamics under the same anomalous wind forcing.

By contrast, the PRE exhibits a more complex response, reflecting the joint effects of thermal and dynamical processes. The WNPSH-related anomalies influence the PRE through two distinct pathways. Thermally, the PRE composite shows positive SWR anomalies over the northern shelf (Fig. 10c), indicating enhanced incident shortwave radiation during MHWs. Given that the SST variability in shallow areas is highly sensitive to surface heat fluxes, the enhanced radiation favours rapid surface warming and hence MHW development (Wang et al., 2022; Gao et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2025). Dynamically, WNPSH-related anomalous atmospheric circulations weakened low-level wind forcing over the northern SCS shelf (Fig. 10b), reducing wind-driven offshore transport. These conditions favour nearshore retention of low-salinity river plume water, consistent with the negative SSS anomalies in the plume-affected region (Fig. 9f). The absence of enhanced precipitation over the PRE and nearby PRD around these events further argues against anomalous rainfall as the primary cause of the nearshore freshening (Fig. S2). In the eutrophic PRE, retention of plume water could maintain favourable nutrient conditions for positive Chl-a anomalies, although this nutrient pathway was not directly resolved in the present analysis. Together, these processes provide a physically

440 consistent framework for the simultaneous occurrence of elevated temperatures and positive Chl-a anomalies in the PRE,
 441 linking radiative warming with wind-regulated plume retention and a plausible nutrient-mediated response.



442
 443 **Figure 10. Composite large-scale atmospheric circulation and local shortwave-radiation anomalies during summer MHWs. (a, b)**
 444 **Composite anomalies of 500 hPa geopotential height (GH500; geopotential metres, gpm) and 850 hPa wind (m s^{-1}) for summer MHW**
 445 **events in (a) the VUA and (b) the PRE during 1998 to 2024. The reference vector in panels (a) and (b) indicates 2 m s^{-1} . The dashed**
 446 **blue and solid yellow contours denote the summer-climatological and MHW composite 5875 gpm GH500 contours, respectively. (c)**
 447 **Composite SWR anomalies (W m^{-2}) during summer MHW events in the PRE. All anomalies are relative to the summer climatology**
 448 **over the corresponding analysis period. White rectangles mark the focal study regions.**



449

450 **Figure 11. Schematic diagram of the contrasting physical–biological coupling mechanisms in the VUA and the PRE during summer**
 451 **MHWs under an anomalous WNPSH. (a) In the VUA, a weakened southwest monsoon suppresses coastal upwelling, which**
 452 **simultaneously reduces surface cooling and restricts subsurface nutrient supply, thereby favouring MHW development and a**
 453 **negative Chl-a anomaly. (b) In the PRE, enhanced shortwave radiation promotes surface warming and MHW development, while**
 454 **weakened wind-driven offshore transport favours nearshore retention of low-salinity river plume water, providing conditions**
 455 **associated with a positive Chl-a anomaly. Arrows indicate key physical processes, and ellipse colours denote the sign of the Chl-a**
 456 **response.**

457 3.5 Causal leakage and uncertainty in SURD-based interpretation

458 In the SURD framework, the causality leak represents the residual uncertainty of the target variable that cannot be explained
 459 by the selected driver set under the prescribed time lag, variable combination, and discretization scheme. It should not be
 460 interpreted as model failure, but rather as reflecting the incompleteness of the current variable set in explaining Chl-a variability.
 461 This residual uncertainty may arise from processes not represented by the selected variables, as well as from observational and
 462 finite-sample uncertainty, and therefore cannot be assigned to any single missing process. The causality leak is lower in the
 463 VUA than in the PRE, indicating that the selected physical variables capture a larger fraction of the information associated
 464 with Chl-a anomalies in the upwelling system, whereas greater unresolved uncertainty remains in the estuarine shelf system.

465 This regional difference reflects the contrasting process complexity of the two systems. In the VUA, negative Chl-a anomalies
 466 are closely linked to wind-driven vertical dynamics. The selected variables, including EPV, SSS, SLA, and SST_CUM,
 467 represent key physical processes such as weakened upwelling, thermocline adjustment, and enhanced stratification. The SURD
 468 decomposition thus provides a physically consistent interpretation of the Chl-a decline in the VUA. In comparison, the PRE is
 469 more complex. Chl-a variability there is influenced by wind-regulated plume retention and surface warming, but also by
 470 biological, biogeochemical, and optical processes that are not fully represented by the selected physical variables. Nutrient and
 471 biological variables were not included in the SURD driver pool because suitable datasets with daily resolution, spatial

continuity, and consistent reliability across both study regions over 1998 to 2024 were not available. This limitation is particularly relevant in nearshore and estuarine waters, where optically complex conditions affect satellite retrievals and model-derived biogeochemical variables remain subject to uncertainties associated with parameterization and limited observational constraints (Aurin and Dierssen, 2012; Mamnun et al., 2022; Skákala et al., 2024). Several processes affecting Chl-a during MHWs therefore remain unresolved. In the turbid PRE, variations in suspended sediment and light availability may constrain phytoplankton growth and modify Chl-a variability (Lu and Gan, 2015). Changes in grazing pressure may alter Chl-a accumulation independently of bottom-up nutrient forcing, and microzooplankton grazing is known to represent an important phytoplankton loss pathway in coastal waters influenced by the Pearl River (Chen et al., 2009). MHWs can also alter phytoplankton community composition and size structure, potentially modifying the aggregate Chl-a response (Arteaga and Rousseaux, 2023; Zhan et al., 2026). In coastal waters around China, including the Pearl River Delta, warming and MHWs have also been associated with changes in bloom occurrence, suggesting that biological responses to MHWs may extend beyond the physical pathways represented by the selected physical variables (Yang et al., 2026). These processes are plausible contributors to the larger causality leak in the PRE, although their individual contributions cannot be separated from the leak term in the present analysis.

Given these constraints, the PRE results should be interpreted as relative information contributions among the included physical variables, rather than as a complete attribution of estuarine Chl-a variability. The high unique contribution of SSS and the synergistic contribution among SST_CUM, SSS, SLA, and u_wind support a physically consistent plume-retention interpretation, but they are insufficient to establish the nutrient delivery pathway. The lag sensitivity tests and bin-sensitivity analysis support the stability of the main SURD results under the tested settings.

These methodological checks cannot resolve uncertainties associated with omitted biological processes or with the biological interpretation of surface Chl-a itself. Satellite-derived surface Chl-a is not a direct measure of phytoplankton biomass or primary productivity. Physiological photoacclimation can alter cellular chlorophyll content independently of proportional biomass changes (Masuda et al., 2021). Accordingly, the physical pathways identified here should be interpreted as processes associated with the observed surface Chl-a anomalies, rather than as direct evidence of changes in phytoplankton biomass or productivity. Distinguishing among these biological responses will require high-frequency in situ observations of nutrients, light attenuation, plankton biomass, and phytoplankton community composition during MHW events in the PRE.

4 Conclusions

This study used satellite observations and reanalysis data from 1998 to 2024 to investigate the contrasting surface Chl-a responses to summer MHWs in the SCS. During summer MHWs, surface Chl-a exhibited positive anomalies in the PRE and negative anomalies in the VUA. By applying SURD, we quantified the contributions of multiple physical drivers to these contrasting summer Chl-a responses.

503 Although WNPSH-related circulation anomalies provided a similar large-scale atmospheric background, these contrasting
504 responses were shaped largely by region-specific physical pathways. In the VUA, the dominant unique contribution of EPV
505 indicates that weakened upwelling was the key physical pathway linking MHW development and negative Chl-a anomalies.
506 Reduced vertical transport restricted nutrient replenishment to the euphotic zone. In addition, weakened upwelling brought
507 less cold subsurface water to the surface, reducing surface cooling during MHWs. Enhanced stratification further inhibited
508 vertical nutrient exchange. These processes contributed to the local Chl-a decline.

509 In the PRE, the dominant unique contribution of SSS and its synergy with SST_CUM, SLA, and u_wind support a coupled
510 radiative-warming and plume-retention interpretation. The negative SSS anomalies likely reflect the retention of low-salinity
511 plume water. Precipitation did not increase during the MHW events, further supporting plume retention rather than anomalous
512 rainfall as a cause of the observed nearshore freshening. Enhanced shortwave radiation favoured rapid surface warming and
513 MHW development in this shallow shelf region, while weakened wind-driven export favoured the nearshore retention of low-
514 salinity plume water. This low-salinity surface layer likely strengthened upper-ocean stratification and hence favoured the
515 positive surface Chl-a anomalies, although the associated nutrient pathway was not directly resolved.

516 By separating unique, redundant, and synergistic information, SURD distinguishes independent physical contributions from
517 shared and joint effects among covarying drivers. The interpretation is limited by the variables in the current multi-source
518 datasets, especially in the PRE. The higher causality leak in the PRE indicates that unresolved optical and biological processes,
519 such as sediment-driven light limitation and zooplankton grazing, remain important sources of uncertainty. The plume-
520 retention pathway in the PRE should therefore be treated as a physically supported interpretation rather than a complete
521 explanation of the estuarine Chl-a response. Future high-frequency observations of nutrients, optical properties, and plankton
522 communities will be needed to validate the inferred pathways.

523 Overall, this study shows that contrasting Chl-a responses to summer MHWs in the SCS cannot be explained by heat stress
524 alone. In both the VUA and the PRE, SST_CUM showed no unique information contribution within the selected variable
525 subsets but remained involved in synergistic interactions with region-specific physical variables. These findings highlight the
526 importance of physical–biological coupling in shaping Chl-a responses to MHWs. Because Chl-a provides an indicator of
527 phytoplankton conditions, and phytoplankton form the energetic foundation of marine food webs, persistent Chl-a reductions
528 may reduce energy availability for higher trophic levels and affect fisheries productivity in ecosystems (Ware and Thomson,
529 2005; Chassot et al., 2010). In addition, changes in Chl-a may indicate alterations in marine primary production and biological
530 carbon export, with implications for regional carbon cycling (Richardson, 2019; Siegel et al., 2023). Beyond the SCS, future
531 applications of this SURD-based framework to other marginal seas around China could help assess whether MHW-driven Chl-
532 a responses arise from similar or regionally distinct physical–biological pathways.

533 **Data availability**

534 The datasets used in this study are publicly available from their respective data providers. SST data were downloaded from
535 NOAA OISST v2.1 (<https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/data/sea-surface-temperature-optimum-interpolation/v2.1/access/avhrr/>, last
536 access: 23 May 2026). Surface Chl-a data were obtained from the Copernicus Marine Service GlobColour L4 product
537 (https://data.marine.copernicus.eu/product/OCEANCOLOUR_GLO_BGC_L4_MY_009_104/services, last access: 23 May
538 2026). Vertically resolved Chl-a data were obtained from the Copernicus Marine Service Global Ocean Biogeochemistry
539 Hindcast product (https://data.marine.copernicus.eu/product/GLOBAL_MULTIYEAR_BGC_001_029/description, last
540 access: 27 August 2026). The 10 m wind, SWR, and total precipitation data were obtained from ERA5 daily statistics on single
541 levels (<https://cds.climate.copernicus.eu/datasets/derived-era5-single-levels-daily-statistics?tab=download>, last access: 27
542 August 2026). GH500 and 850 hPa wind data were obtained from ERA5 daily statistics on pressure levels
543 (<https://cds.climate.copernicus.eu/datasets/derived-era5-pressure-levels-daily-statistics?tab=download>, last access: 23 May
544 2026). Salinity, temperature, currents, and MLD data were obtained from the Copernicus Marine Service GLORYS12V1 ocean
545 reanalysis product (https://data.marine.copernicus.eu/product/GLOBAL_MULTIYEAR_PHY_001_030/services, last access:
546 23 May 2026). SLA data were obtained from the Copernicus Marine Service sea level product
547 (https://data.marine.copernicus.eu/product/SEALEVEL_GLO_PHY_CLIMATE_L4_MY_008_057/services, last access: 23
548 May 2026). All datasets were used for the common analysis period of 1998–2024.

549 **Author contributions**

550 YLF and CL conceived the study. YLF, CL, and YCC designed the analysis framework. YLF compiled and processed the
551 datasets, conducted the analyses, generated the figures, and wrote the original manuscript. YCC and MYL contributed to
552 dataset compilation and checked the analyses. CL, YCC, and PLL contributed to the analysis design and interpretation of the
553 results. All authors reviewed and edited the final version of the manuscript.

554 **Competing interests**

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

556 **Acknowledgements**

557 The authors are grateful for the support provided by the Hainan Provincial Observatory of Ecological Environment and Fishery
558 Resource in Yazhou Bay. The authors also acknowledge NOAA/NCEI, the Copernicus Marine Service, the Copernicus
559 Climate Data Store, and ECMWF for providing the datasets used in this study.

560 **Financial support**

561 This research has been supported by the Project of Sanya Yazhou Bay Science and Technology City (contract no. SKJC-
562 JYRC-2025-52), the Key Research and Development Program of Hainan Province (grant no. ZDYF2026SXLH039), and the
563 Funds for Special Projects of the Central Government in Guidance of Local Science and Technology Development (grant no.
564 2025ZY01111).

565 **References**

566 Arteaga, L. A. and Rousseaux, C. S.: Impact of Pacific Ocean heatwaves on phytoplankton community composition, *Commun.*
567 *Biol.*, 6, 263, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s42003-023-04645-0>, 2023.

568 Aurin, D. A. and Dierssen, H. M.: Advantages and limitations of ocean color remote sensing in CDOM-dominated, mineral-
569 rich coastal and estuarine waters, *Remote Sens. Environ.*, 125, 181–197, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rse.2012.07.001>, 2012.

570 Basconcillo, J. and Moon, I.-J.: Increasing activity of tropical cyclones in East Asia during the mature boreal autumn linked
571 to long-term climate variability, *npj Clim. Atmos. Sci.*, 5, 4, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41612-021-00222-6>, 2022.

572 Cavole, L. M., Demko, A. M., Diner, R. E., Giddings, A., Koester, I., Pagniello, C. M. L. S., Paulsen, M.-L., Ramirez-Valdez,
573 A., Schwenck, S. M., Yen, N. K., Zill, M. E., and Franks, P. J. S.: Biological impacts of the 2013–2015 warm-water anomaly
574 in the Northeast Pacific: winners, losers, and the future, *Oceanography*, 29, 273–285, <https://doi.org/10.5670/oceanog.2016.32>,
575 2016.

576 Chassot, E., Bonhommeau, S., Dulvy, N. K., Mélin, F., Watson, R., Gascuel, D., and Le Pape, O.: Global marine primary
577 production constrains fisheries catches, *Ecol Lett*, 13, 495–505, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1461-0248.2010.01443.x>, 2010.

578 Chen, B., Liu, H., Landry, M. R., Chen, M., Sun, J., Shek, L., Chen, X., and Harrison, P. J.: Estuarine nutrient loading affects
579 phytoplankton growth and microzooplankton grazing at two contrasting sites in Hong Kong coastal waters, *Mar. Ecol. Prog.*
580 *Ser.*, 379, 77–90, <https://doi.org/10.3354/meps07888>, 2009.

581 Chen, Y., Shi, H., and Zhao, H.: Summer phytoplankton blooms induced by upwelling in the western South China Sea, *Front.*
582 *Mar. Sci.*, 8, 740130, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2021.740130>, 2021.

583 Chen, Y., Shen, C., Zhao, H., and Pan, G.: The impact of marine heatwaves on surface phytoplankton chlorophyll-a in the
584 South China Sea, *Sci. Total Environ.*, 949, 175099, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2024.175099>, 2024.

585 Chen, Z., Wang, Y., Wang, J., Zhang, R.-H., Jiang, Y., Qi, Y., and Yu, X.: Distinct mechanisms of marine heatwave formation
586 in offshore waters of China, *J. Oceanol. Limnol.*, 43, 1405–1424, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00343-025-4192-3>, 2025.

587 Cheng, L., Abraham, J., Hausfather, Z., and Trenberth, K. E.: How fast are the oceans warming?, *Science*, 363, 128–129,
588 <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aav7619>, 2019.

589 Chiswell, S. M.: Global Trends in Marine Heatwaves and Cold Spells: The Impacts of Fixed Versus Changing Baselines,
590 *Journal of Geophysical Research: Oceans*, 127, e2022JC018757, <https://doi.org/10.1029/2022JC018757>, 2022.

591 Coello-Camba, A. and Agustí, S.: Thermal Thresholds of Phytoplankton Growth in Polar Waters and Their Consequences for
 592 a Warming Polar Ocean, *Front. Mar. Sci.*, 4, 168, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2017.00168>, 2017.

593 Dai, M., Wang, L., Guo, X., Zhai, W., Li, Q., He, B., and Kao, S.-J.: Nitrification and inorganic nitrogen distribution in a large
 594 perturbed river/estuarine system: the Pearl River Estuary, China, *Biogeosciences*, 5, 1227–1244, [https://doi.org/10.5194/bg-5-](https://doi.org/10.5194/bg-5-1227-2008)
 595 1227-2008, 2008.

596 Dippner, J. W., Nguyen, K. V., Hein, H., Ohde, T., and Loick, N.: Monsoon-induced upwelling off the Vietnamese coast,
 597 *Ocean Dyn.*, 57, 46–62, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10236-006-0091-0>, 2007.

598 Drévillon, M., Fernandez, E., and Lellouche, J.-M.: Product User Manual for the Global Ocean Physical Multi Year Product,
 599 GLOBAL_MULTIYEAR_PHY_001_030, Issue 1.5, Copernicus Marine Service, 2023.

600 Fernández-González, C., Tarran, G. A., Schuback, N., Woodward, E. M. S., Aristegui, J., and Marañón, E.: Phytoplankton
 601 responses to changing temperature and nutrient availability are consistent across the tropical and subtropical Atlantic, *Commun.*
 602 *Biol.*, 5, 1035, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s42003-022-03971-z>, 2022.

603 Gao, Z., Jia, W., Zhang, W., and Wang, P.: Study on seasonal characteristics and causes of marine heatwaves in the South
 604 China Sea over nearly 30 years, *Atmosphere*, 14, 1822, <https://doi.org/10.3390/atmos14121822>, 2023.

605 Gill, A. E.: *Atmosphere-Ocean Dynamics*, International Geophysics, 30, Academic Press, 662 pp., ISBN 9780122835223,
 606 1982.

607 Global Ocean Colour: Global Ocean Colour (Copernicus-GlobColour), Bio-Geo-Chemical, L4 (monthly and interpolated)
 608 from Satellite Observations (1997–ongoing), E.U. Copernicus Marine Service Information (CMEMS), Marine Data Store
 609 (MDS) [data set], <https://doi.org/10.48670/moi-00281>, 2025.

610 Global Ocean Gridded: Global Ocean Gridded L4 sea surface heights and derived variables reprocessed Copernicus Climate
 611 Service, E.U. Copernicus Marine Service Information (CMEMS), Marine Data Store (MDS) [data set],
 612 <https://doi.org/10.48670/moi-00145>, 2024.

613 Global Ocean Physics Reanalysis: Global Ocean Physics Reanalysis, E.U. Copernicus Marine Service Information (CMEMS),
 614 Marine Data Store (MDS) [data set], <https://doi.org/10.48670/moi-00021>, 2023.

615 Han, Y., Zhou, P., Lv, Q., Cui, R., and Meng, L.: Synergistic drivers and threshold effects of vapor pressure deficit in China:
 616 An integrated framework of causal inference and machine learning, *J. Environ. Manag.*, 395, 127739,
 617 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2025.127739>, 2025.

618 Harrison, P. J., Yin, K., Lee, J. H. W., Gan, J., and Liu, H.: Physical–biological coupling in the Pearl River Estuary, *Cont.*
 619 *Shelf Res.*, 28, 1405–1415, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.csr.2007.02.011>, 2008.

620 Hayashida, H., Matear, R. J., and Strutton, P. G.: Background nutrient concentration determines phytoplankton bloom response
 621 to marine heatwaves, *Glob. Change Biol.*, 26, 4800–4811, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gcb.15255>, 2020.

622 He, J. and Mahadevan, A.: How the source depth of coastal upwelling relates to stratification and wind, *J. Geophys. Res.-*
 623 *Oceans*, 126, e2021JC017621, <https://doi.org/10.1029/2021JC017621>, 2021.

624 He, W., Zeng, X., Deng, L., Pi, Q. L. C., and Zhao, J.: Enhanced impact of prolonged MHWs on satellite-observed chlorophyll
625 in the South China Sea, *Prog. Oceanogr.*, 218, 103123, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pocean.2023.103123>, 2023.

626 Herrmann, M., To Duy, T., and Estournel, C.: Intraseasonal variability of the South Vietnam upwelling, South China Sea:
627 influence of atmospheric forcing and ocean intrinsic variability, *Ocean Sci.*, 19, 453–467, [https://doi.org/10.5194/os-19-453-](https://doi.org/10.5194/os-19-453-2023)
628 2023, 2023.

629 Hersbach, H., Comyn-Platt, E., Bell, B., Berrisford, P., Biavati, G., Horányi, A., Muñoz Sabater, J., Nicolas, J., Peubey, C.,
630 Radu, R., Rozum, I., Schepers, D., Simmons, A., Soci, C., Dee, D., Thépaut, J.-N., Cagnazo, C., and Cucchi, M.: ERA5 post-
631 processed daily statistics on pressure levels from 1940 to present, Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S) Climate Data
632 Store (CDS) [data set], <https://doi.org/10.24381/cds.50314f4c>, 2023a.

633 Hersbach, H., Comyn-Platt, E., Bell, B., Berrisford, P., Biavati, G., Horányi, A., Muñoz Sabater, J., Nicolas, J., Peubey, C.,
634 Radu, R., Rozum, I., Schepers, D., Simmons, A., Soci, C., Dee, D., Thépaut, J.-N., Cagnazo, C., and Cucchi, M.: ERA5 post-
635 processed daily statistics on single levels from 1940 to present, Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S) Climate Data Store
636 (CDS) [data set], <https://doi.org/10.24381/cds.4991cf48>, 2023b.

637 Hobday, A. J., Alexander, L. V., Perkins, S. E., Smale, D. A., Straub, S. C., Oliver, E. C. J., Benthuisen, J. A., Burrows, M.
638 T., Donat, M. G., Feng, M., Holbrook, N. J., Moore, P. J., Scannell, H. A., Sen Gupta, A., and Wernberg, T.: A hierarchical
639 approach to defining marine heatwaves, *Prog. Oceanogr.*, 141, 227–238, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pocean.2015.12.014>, 2016.

640 Hong, B., Xue, H., Zhu, L., and Xu, H.: Climatic change of summer wind direction and its impact on hydrodynamic circulation
641 in the Pearl River Estuary, *J. Mar. Sci. Eng.*, 10, 842, <https://doi.org/10.3390/jmse10070842>, 2022.

642 Huang, B., Liu, C., Banzon, V. F., Freeman, E., Graham, G., Hankins, W., Smith, T. M., and Zhang, H.-M.: NOAA 0.25-
643 degree Daily Optimum Interpolation Sea Surface Temperature (OISST), Version 2.1, NOAA National Centers for
644 Environmental Information [data set], <https://doi.org/10.25921/RE9P-PT57>, 2020.

645 Jiang, K., Wang, Y., Sun, Y., and Lan, J.: The seasonal variation of shallow meridional overturning circulation in the South
646 China Sea and the related dynamics, *Ocean Model.*, 186, 102242, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ocemod.2023.102242>, 2023.

647 Jones, T., Parrish, J. K., Peterson, W. T., Bjorkstedt, E. P., Bond, N. A., Ballance, L. T., Bowes, V., Hipfner, J. M., Burgess,
648 H. K., Dolliver, J. E., Lindquist, K., Lindsey, J., Nevins, H. M., Robertson, R. R., Roletto, J., Wilson, L., Joyce, T., and Harvey,
649 J.: Massive mortality of a planktivorous seabird in response to a marine heatwave, *Geophys. Res. Lett.*, 45, 3193–3202,
650 <https://doi.org/10.1002/2017GL076164>, 2018.

651 Le Grix, N., Zscheischler, J., Laufkötter, C., Rousseaux, C. S., and Frölicher, T. L.: Compound high-temperature and low-
652 chlorophyll extremes in the ocean over the satellite period, *Biogeosciences*, 18, 2119–2137, [https://doi.org/10.5194/bg-18-](https://doi.org/10.5194/bg-18-2119-2021)
653 2119-2021, 2021.

654 Le Nohaïc, M., Ross, C. L., Cornwall, C. E., Comeau, S., Lowe, R., McCulloch, M. T., and Schoepf, V.: Marine heatwave
655 causes unprecedented regional mass bleaching of thermally resistant corals in northwestern Australia, *Sci. Rep.*, 7, 14999,
656 <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-017-14794-y>, 2017.

657 Lellouche, J.-M., Greiner, E., Bourdallé-Badie, R., Garric, G., Melet, A., Drévillon, M., Bricaud, C., Hamon, M., Le Galloudec,
658 O., Regnier, C., Candela, T., Testut, C.-E., Gasparin, F., Ruggiero, G., Benkiran, M., Drillet, Y., and Le Traon, P.-Y.: The
659 Copernicus Global 1/12° oceanic and sea ice GLORYS12 reanalysis, *Front. Earth Sci.*, 9, 698876,
660 <https://doi.org/10.3389/feart.2021.698876>, 2021.

661 Li, J., Miller, A. J., Wang, Q., Amaya, D. J., Li, P., Gu, Y., and Bai, P.: Vertical structure of chlorophyll-a during marine
662 heatwaves in the California Current Ecosystem, *Commun. Earth Environ.*, 6, 938, [https://doi.org/10.1038/s43247-025-02835-](https://doi.org/10.1038/s43247-025-02835-8)
663 8, 2025.

664 Li, S., Yu, K., Chen, T., Shi, Q., and Zhang, H.: Assessment of coral bleaching using symbiotic zooxanthellae density and
665 satellite remote sensing data in the Nansha Islands, South China Sea, *Chin. Sci. Bull.*, 56, 1031–1037,
666 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11434-011-4390-6>, 2011.

667 Li, Y., Ren, G., Wang, Q., and You, Q.: More extreme marine heatwaves in the China Seas during the global warming hiatus,
668 *Environ. Res. Lett.*, 14, 104010, <https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ab28bc>, 2019.

669 Li, Y., Ren, G., Wang, Q., Mu, L., and Niu, Q.: Marine heatwaves in the South China Sea: tempo-spatial pattern and its
670 association with large-scale circulation, *Remote Sens.*, 14, 5829, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rs14225829>, 2022.

671 Liu, F. and Tang, S.: A double-peak intraseasonal pattern in the chlorophyll concentration associated with summer upwelling
672 and mesoscale eddies in the western South China Sea, *J. Geophys. Res.-Oceans*, 127, e2021JC017402,
673 <https://doi.org/10.1029/2021JC017402>, 2022.

674 Liu, W. T. and Xie, X.: Spacebased observations of the seasonal changes of south Asian monsoons and oceanic responses,
675 *Geophys. Res. Lett.*, 26, 1473–1476, <https://doi.org/10.1029/1999GL900289>, 1999.

676 Lu, Z. and Gan, J.: Controls of seasonal variability of phytoplankton blooms in the Pearl River Estuary, Deep-Sea Res. II: Top.
677 *Stud. Oceanogr.*, 117, 86–96, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dsr2.2013.12.011>, 2015.

678 Ma, X. and Chen, G.: Marine heatwaves are shaping the vertical structure of phytoplankton in the global ocean, *Commun.*
679 *Earth Environ.*, 6, 715, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43247-025-02718-y>, 2025.

680 Mammun, N. M. N., Völker, C., Vrekoussis, M., and Nerger, L.: Uncertainties in ocean biogeochemical simulations:
681 Application of ensemble data assimilation to a one-dimensional model, *Front. Mar. Sci.*, 9, 984236,
682 <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2022.984236>, 2022.

683 Marañón, E., Lorenzo, M. P., Cermeño, P., and Mouriño-Carballido, B.: Nutrient limitation suppresses the temperature
684 dependence of phytoplankton metabolic rates, *ISME J.*, 12, 1836–1845, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41396-018-0105-1>, 2018.

685 Martínez-Sánchez, Á., Arranz, G., and Lozano-Durán, A.: Decomposing causality into its synergistic, unique, and redundant
686 components, *Nat. Commun.*, 15, 9296, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-024-53373-4>, 2024.

687 Masuda, Y., Yamanaka, Y., Smith, S. L., Hirata, T., Nakano, H., Oka, A., and Sumata, H.: Photoacclimation by phytoplankton
688 determines the distribution of global subsurface chlorophyll maxima in the ocean, *Commun. Earth Environ.*, 2, 128,
689 <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43247-021-00201-y>, 2021.

690 Montie, S., Thomsen, M. S., Rack, W., and Broady, P. A.: Extreme summer marine heatwaves increase chlorophyll a in the
691 Southern Ocean, *Antarct. Sci.*, 32, 508–509, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954102020000401>, 2020.

692 Ngo, M.-H. and Hsin, Y.-C.: Impacts of wind and current on the interannual variation of the summertime upwelling off
693 southern Vietnam in the South China Sea, *J. Geophys. Res.-Oceans*, 126, e2020JC016892,
694 <https://doi.org/10.1029/2020JC016892>, 2021.

695 Nie, J., Fang, J., Yang, X.-Q., and Huang, Q.: Subseasonal relationship between the zonal oscillation of the Western Pacific
696 Subtropical High and the South Asia High, *Clim. Dynam.*, 62, 7293–7308, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00382-024-07279-y>, 2024.

697 Niu, L., van Gelder, P., Luo, X., Cai, H., Zhang, T., and Yang, Q.: Implications of nutrient enrichment and related
698 environmental impacts in the Pearl River Estuary, China: characterizing the seasonal influence of riverine input, *Water*, 12,
699 3245, <https://doi.org/10.3390/w12113245>, 2020.

700 Noh, K. M., Lim, H.-G., and Kug, J.-S.: Global chlorophyll responses to marine heatwaves in satellite ocean color, *Environ.*
701 *Res. Lett.*, 17, 064034, <https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ac70ec>, 2022.

702 Oliver, E. C. J., Benthuisen, J. A., Bindoff, N. L., Hobday, A. J., Holbrook, N. J., Mundy, C. N., and Perkins-Kirkpatrick, S.
703 E.: The unprecedented 2015/16 Tasman Sea marine heatwave, *Nat. Commun.*, 8, 16101,
704 <https://doi.org/10.1038/ncomms16101>, 2017.

705 Oliver, E. C. J., Donat, M. G., Burrows, M. T., Moore, P. J., Smale, D. A., Alexander, L. V., Benthuisen, J. A., Feng, M., Sen
706 Gupta, A., Hobday, A. J., Holbrook, N. J., Perkins-Kirkpatrick, S. E., Scannell, H. A., Straub, S. C., and Wernberg, T.: Longer
707 and more frequent marine heatwaves over the past century, *Nat. Commun.*, 9, 1324, [https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-018-](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-018-03732-9)
708 03732-9, 2018.

709 Panja, M., Das, D., Chakraborty, T., Ray, A., Athulya, R., Hens, C., Dana, S. K., Murukesh, N., and Ghosh, D.: Forecasting
710 precipitation in the Arctic using probabilistic machine learning informed by causal climate drivers, *Chaos*, 35, 113108,
711 <https://doi.org/10.1063/5.0297336>, 2025.

712 Ren, K., Guo, W., Wang, F., Qu, J., Ming, T., and Fang, W.: Synergistic-unique-redundant decomposition of the causal
713 influences of four large-scale climate oscillations on meteorological drought in the Yangtze River Basin, *Stoch. Environ. Res.*
714 *Risk Assess.*, 40, 128, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00477-026-03255-6>, 2026.

715 Richardson, T. L.: Mechanisms and Pathways of Small-Phytoplankton Export from the Surface Ocean, *Ann. Rev. Mar. Sci.*,
716 11, 57–74, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-marine-121916-063627>, 2019.

717 Robinson, A., Lehmann, J., Barriopedro, D., Rahmstorf, S., and Coumou, D.: Increasing heat and rainfall extremes now far
718 outside the historical climate, *npj Clim. Atmos. Sci.*, 4, 45, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41612-021-00202-w>, 2021.

719 Skákala, J., Ford, D., Fowler, A., Lea, D., Martin, M. J., and Ciavatta, S.: How uncertain and observable are marine ecosystem
720 indicators in shelf seas?, *Prog. Oceanogr.*, 224, 103249, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pcean.2024.103249>, 2024.

721 Siegel, D. A., DeVries, T., Cetinić, I., and Bisson, K. M.: Quantifying the Ocean’s Biological Pump and Its Carbon Cycle
722 Impacts on Global Scales, *Ann Rev Mar Sci*, 15, 329–356, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-marine-040722-115226>, 2023.

723 Song, Q., Yao, Y., and Wang, C.: Response of Future Summer Marine Heatwaves in the South China Sea to Enhanced Western
 724 Pacific Subtropical High, *Geophys. Res. Lett.*, 50, e2023GL103667, <https://doi.org/10.1029/2023GL103667>, 2023.

725 Tan, H.-J., Cai, R.-S., and Wu, R.-G.: Summer marine heatwaves in the South China Sea: Trend, variability and possible
 726 causes, *Adv. Clim. Change Res.*, 13, 323–332, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.accre.2022.04.003>, 2022.

727 Thomas, M. K., Kremer, C. T., Klausmeier, C. A., and Litchman, E.: A Global Pattern of Thermal Adaptation in Marine
 728 Phytoplankton, *Science*, 338, 1085–1088, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1224836>, 2012.

729 To Duy, T., Herrmann, M., Estournel, C., Marsaleix, P., Duhaut, T., Bui Hong, L., and Trinh Bich, N.: The role of wind,
 730 mesoscale dynamics, and coastal circulation in the interannual variability of the South Vietnam Upwelling, South China Sea
 731 – answers from a high-resolution ocean model, *Ocean Sci.*, 18, 1131–1161, <https://doi.org/10.5194/os-18-1131-2022>, 2022.

732 von Schuckmann, K., Cheng, L., Palmer, M. D., Hansen, J., Tassone, C., Aich, V., Adusumilli, S., Beltrami, H., Boyer, T.,
 733 Cuesta-Valero, F. J., Desbruyères, D., Domingues, C., García-García, A., Gentine, P., Gilson, J., Gorfer, M., Haimberger, L.,
 734 Ishii, M., Johnson, G. C., Killick, R., King, B. A., Kirchengast, G., Kolodziejczyk, N., Lyman, J., Marzeion, B., Mayer, M.,
 735 Monier, M., Monselesan, D. P., Purkey, S., Roemmich, D., Schweiger, A., Seneviratne, S. I., Shepherd, A., Slater, D. A.,
 736 Steiner, A. K., Straneo, F., Timmermans, M.-L., and Wijffels, S. E.: Heat stored in the Earth system: where does the energy
 737 go?, *Earth Syst. Sci. Data*, 12, 2013–2041, <https://doi.org/10.5194/essd-12-2013-2020>, 2020.

738 Wang, Q., Zhang, B., Zeng, L., He, Y., Wu, Z., and Chen, J.: Properties and drivers of marine heat waves in the northern South
 739 China Sea, *J. Phys. Oceanogr.*, 52, 917–927, <https://doi.org/10.1175/JPO-D-21-0236.1>, 2022.

740 Wang, Y., Zhang, C., Tian, S., Chen, Q., Li, S., Zeng, J., Wei, Z., and Xie, S.: Seasonal cycle of marine heatwaves in the
 741 northern South China Sea, *Clim. Dynam.*, 61, 3367–3377, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00382-023-06747-1>, 2023.

742 Ware, D. M. and Thomson, R. E.: Bottom-up ecosystem trophic dynamics determine fish production in the Northeast Pacific,
 743 *Science*, 308, 1280–1284, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1109049>, 2005.

744 Wernberg, T., Bennett, S., Babcock, R. C., De Bettignies, T., Cure, K., Depczynski, M., Dufois, F., Fromont, J., Fulton, C. J.,
 745 Hovey, R. K., Harvey, E. S., Holmes, T. H., Kendrick, G. A., Radford, B., Santana-Garcon, J., Saunders, B. J., Smale, D. A.,
 746 Thomsen, M. S., Tuckett, C. A., Tuya, F., Vanderklift, M. A., and Wilson, S.: Climate-driven regime shift of a temperate
 747 marine ecosystem, *Science*, 353, 169–172, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aad8745>, 2016.

748 Wilcoxon, F.: Individual comparisons by ranking methods, *Biometrics Bulletin*, 1, 80–83, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3001968>,
 749 1945.

750 Wu, X., Yao, F., and Wang, D.: Interannual variability of the summer surface salinity in the southern South China Sea driven
 751 by the summer monsoon, *J. Geophys. Res.-Oceans*, 130, e2025JC022399, <https://doi.org/10.1029/2025JC022399>, 2025.

752 Xu, W., Wang, G., Cheng, X., Jiang, L., Zhou, W., and Cao, W.: Characteristics of subsurface chlorophyll maxima during the
 753 boreal summer in the South China Sea with respect to environmental properties, *Sci. Total Environ.*, 820, 153243,
 754 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2022.153243>, 2022.

755 Yang, S., Feng, L., Dai, Y., Liu, X., Zheng, C., Wang, D.-Z., Zhou, K., and Zhai, X.: Phytoplankton Blooms in the Coastal
756 Seas Around China Increase in Response to Warming, *J. Geophys. Res.-Oceans*, 131, e2025JC022348,
757 <https://doi.org/10.1029/2025JC022348>, 2026.

758 Yao, Y. and Wang, C.: Variations in summer marine heatwaves in the South China Sea, *J. Geophys. Res.-Oceans*, 126,
759 e2021JC017792, <https://doi.org/10.1029/2021JC017792>, 2021.

760 Yao, Y. and Wang, C.: Subsurface Marine Heatwaves in the South China Sea, *J. Geophys. Res.-Oceans*, 129, e2024JC021356,
761 <https://doi.org/10.1029/2024JC021356>, 2024.

762 Yao, Y., Wang, J., Yin, J., and Zou, X.: Marine heatwaves in China's marginal seas and adjacent offshore waters: past, present,
763 and future, *J. Geophys. Res.-Oceans*, 125, e2019JC015801, <https://doi.org/10.1029/2019JC015801>, 2020.

764 Ye, H., Yang, C., Tang, S., and Chen, C.: The phytoplankton variability in the Pearl River estuary based on VIIRS imagery,
765 *Cont. Shelf Res.*, 207, 104228, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.csr.2020.104228>, 2020.

766 Yuan, T., Zhang, J., Yang, S., Su, Q., Zhao, Z., and Ren, K.: Vertical Structures of Marine Heatwaves in the South China Sea:
767 Characteristics, Drivers and Impacts on Chlorophyll Concentration, *J. Geophys. Res.-Oceans*, 129, e2024JC021091,
768 <https://doi.org/10.1029/2024JC021091>, 2024.

769 Zhan, W., Zhang, Y., He, Q., Feng, M., Du, Y., Shen, X., Liu, Y., and Zhan, H.: Global Responses of Phytoplankton Size
770 Structure to Marine Heatwaves, *Glob. Biogeochem. Cycles*, 40, e2025GB008854, <https://doi.org/10.1029/2025GB008854>,
771 2026.

772 Zhao, H. and Tang, D. L.: Effect of 1998 El Niño on the distribution of phytoplankton in the South China Sea, *J. Geophys.*
773 *Res.-Oceans*, 112, C02017, <https://doi.org/10.1029/2006JC003536>, 2007.

774 Zhao, Z. and Marin, M.: A MATLAB toolbox to detect and analyze marine heatwaves, *J. Open Source Softw.*, 4, 1124,
775 <https://doi.org/10.21105/joss.01124>, 2019.

776 Zheng, J., Xiu, P., Zeng, L., Zhu, X., Ji, X., Gao, S., and Li, Z.: Phytoplankton Response to the Record-Breaking Marine
777 Heatwave in the Summer of 2020 in the South China Sea, *J. Geophys. Res.-Oceans*, 129, e2024JC021275,
778 <https://doi.org/10.1029/2024jc021275>, 2024.

779 Zhi, H., Wu, H., Wu, J., Zhang, W., and Wang, Y.: River plume rooted on the sea floor: seasonal and spring-neap variability
780 of the Pearl River plume front, *Front. Mar. Sci.*, 9, 791948, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2022.791948>, 2022.