

# GPU-accelerated three-dimensional variational data assimilation with automatic differentiation for WRF-Chem

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**Abstract:** This study developed a PyTorch-based three-dimensional variational (3DVar) data assimilation system (PY3DVar) for the Weather Research and Forecasting model coupled to Chemistry (WRF-Chem), which integrates automatic differentiation (AD) to replace traditional manual gradient derivation and adopts Graphics Processing Unit (GPU) acceleration for high computational efficiency. PY3DVar enables the simultaneous assimilation of gaseous pollutants (SO<sub>2</sub>, NO<sub>2</sub>, CO, O<sub>3</sub>) and particulate matter (PM<sub>2.5</sub>, PM<sub>10</sub>) and supports flexible deployment on both Central Processing Unit (CPU) and GPU computing platforms. Idealized tests were first conducted to verify the physical consistency of the assimilation system. Twenty consecutive real-case assimilation experiments, each followed by a 24-hour forecast, were then conducted to assess computational performance and efficiency, benchmarked against the classic Fortran-based 3DVar system (FT3DVar) using CPU parallelization. The results of the idealized tests show PY3DVar effectively propagates observation information, generating increment fields consistent with FT3DVar. Long-term real-case experiments further verify that the two assimilation systems achieve nearly identical analysis accuracy for chemical initial fields. On the GPU platform, PY3DVar achieves an average assimilation time of 1.2 s, representing a 22.2-fold speedup compared to FT3DVar on 64 CPU cores (26.2 s). Parallel scalability tests across 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32 and 64 CPU cores reveal that FT3DVar runs faster per iteration across all core counts. Consequently, FT3DVar achieves shorter total assimilation time on 1–16 cores, whereas PY3DVar outperforms it at 32 and 64 cores, owing to its intrinsically fewer required iterations for convergence. The average 24-hour forecast results show that the improved initial fields have sustained positive effects on short-term forecasts: the improvements persist for over 24 hours for SO<sub>2</sub>, CO, PM<sub>2.5</sub>, and PM<sub>10</sub>, and for over 6 hours for NO<sub>2</sub> and O<sub>3</sub>. These results demonstrate that PY3DVar delivers substantially faster assimilation than traditional Fortran-based systems while maintaining equivalent analysis accuracy, offering an efficient and practical solution for operational atmospheric chemical data assimilation.

## 1. Introduction

Air quality models (AQMs) are crucial tools for atmospheric pollution simulation and forecasting (Li et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2022; Gao et al., 2024). Errors in initial conditions can degrade model performance, particularly within the early hours of simulation, leading to significant biases in short-term forecasts. Data assimilation (DA) combines multi-source observations, such as those from surface stations and satellites, with model background fields through statistically derived weighting to produce an optimal analysis field. This technique effectively improves the initial conditions of numerical models and has become a core method for enhancing simulation accuracy in both research and operational forecasting (Engelen et al., 2009; Ma et al., 2025).

Compared to the long-standing development of meteorological data assimilation, atmospheric chemical data assimilation started relatively late, and its theoretical framework and operational applications are still under continuous improvement. Early explorations in atmospheric chemical data assimilation were largely constrained by limitations in observational capabilities and the difficulty of simulating complex aerosol compositions. Consequently, research initially focused on gaseous precursors like  $\text{SO}_2$ ,  $\text{NO}_2$ ,  $\text{O}_3$  and typical key chemical components like  $\text{HNO}_3$  with clear chemical reaction mechanisms and mature simulation schemes. In contrast, the assimilation of particulate matter (PM) components was less common due to the high complexity of their sources and physicochemical mechanisms. In earlier work, Austin et al. (1992) assimilated LIMS satellite measurements of  $\text{HNO}_3$  and  $\text{O}_3$  into a 2D chemical model, effectively identifying and correcting systematic biases in the original chemical model, significantly improving the analysis accuracy of stratospheric chemical composition, and demonstrating the key role of four-dimensional assimilation in refining chemical models. Elbern et al. (1997) used the RADM2 (Second-Generation Regional Acid Deposition Model) gas-phase chemical mechanism and a variational method to assimilate ozone observations, successfully optimizing the initial concentrations of its precursors  $\text{NO}_x$  and volatile organic compounds (VOCs), and enabling quantitative analysis of ozone chemical sensitivity. Frydendall et al. (2009) developed a data assimilation algorithm based on statistical interpolation and coupled it with the Danish Eulerian Operational Model (DEOM), conducting assimilation studies on surface ozone and effectively improving forecast performance by optimizing assimilation parameters.

With advancements in observational technology and the continuous improvement of atmospheric chemistry modeling systems, the focus of atmospheric chemical data assimilation has gradually expanded to include particulate pollutants with more complex compositions and sources. In the early stages, owing to the limited simulation capability for aerosol physicochemical processes, assimilation studies mainly focused on adjusting total mass concentrations, such as  $\text{PM}_{2.5}$  and  $\text{PM}_{10}$ , to improve model performance. For example, Denby et al. (2008) applied both Statistical Interpolation (SI) and Ensemble Kalman Filtering (EnKF) data assimilation methods to an atmospheric chemistry model. They found that both methods significantly corrected the model's systematic underestimation of  $\text{PM}_{10}$  concentration, with the SI method reducing the root mean square error (RMSE) of daily average

concentration from  $16.7 \mu\text{g m}^{-3}$  to  $9.2 \mu\text{g m}^{-3}$ , and noted that the improvement from SI was significantly better than that from EnKF. Tombette et al. (2009) used the optimal interpolation (OI) method to assimilate surface  $\text{PM}_{10}$  observations from France into a regional chemical transport model, effectively enhancing the short-term forecast accuracy of total aerosol mass ( $\text{PM}_{2.5}$  and  $\text{PM}_{10}$ ) across Europe, demonstrating the potential application of this method in operational forecasting.

As a core method in data assimilation, the three-dimensional variational (3DVar) approach statistically combines observations with model background fields to derive improved initial conditions by minimizing a prescribed cost function (Lorenc, 1986; Parrish and Derber, 1992). Although more advanced methods such as four-dimensional variational (4DVar) and hybrid ensemble-variational assimilation have been developed for global operational systems, 3DVar remains widely used in regional and chemical data assimilation applications owing to its computational efficiency, implementation simplicity, and robust performance (Jiang et al., 2013; Seo et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2025). Pagowski et al. (2010) introduced surface ozone and fine particulate matter ( $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ ) observations into the WRF-Chem model using the GSI (Grid-point Statistical Interpolation) 3DVar system. Results showed that while assimilation significantly reduced forecast errors, these errors grew rapidly in the early forecast hours. With the advancement of observational techniques and the refinement of model mechanisms, simply correcting total aerosol mass often fails to fundamentally optimize the simulation of its internal chemical composition. The target variables for aerosol assimilation are shifting from total mass concentration towards a multivariate system encompassing key chemical components such as sulfate, nitrate, and organic carbon. Li et al. (2013) integrated a 3DVar algorithm with the WRF-Chem model employing the MOSAIC aerosol scheme. By assimilating  $\text{PM}_{2.5}$  and its chemical component observations, they achieved a comprehensive analysis of the concentrations and size distributions of eight key species, including black carbon, organic carbon, sulfate, and nitrate, significantly improving the simulation and forecast accuracy of these components. Jiang et al. (2013) implemented the assimilation of  $\text{PM}_{10}$  observations using the 3DVar method, providing an improved initial field for the WRF-Chem model by optimizing various aerosol components. However, the assimilation effect diminished rapidly due to vertical mixing and advective processes, highlighting the importance of optimizing the aerosol vertical initial state. By designing various assimilation scenarios, Zang et al. (2016) confirmed that introducing aircraft-measured aerosol data into traditional surface-based aerosol data assimilation significantly optimized aerosol mass concentration, vertical distribution, and chemical composition. They also found that the forecast skill improvement from vertical observations lasted longer than that from surface data, underscoring the important influence of vertical resolution on forecast performance. Apart from experiments focusing on different observation types and pollutants, studies have optimized the intrinsic mathematical formulation of 3DVar algorithms. From a methodological perspective, Key et al. (2024) revealed the mathematical connection between 3DVar and Gaussian process regression, offering an alternative pathway for scalable assimilation computation.

Despite continuous improvements in assimilation algorithms and observation sources, traditional Fortran-based 3DVar systems still face prominent computational bottlenecks in modern high-resolution chemical assimilation scenarios. As observational data grow in volume and diversity, model resolutions become finer, and the number of simulated chemical species continues to expand, the state vector and matrix dimensions in atmospheric chemistry assimilation have increased substantially (Liang et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022). The incorporation of satellite-derived aerosol optical depth and extinction profiles has proven effective for constraining the three-dimensional distribution of pollutants (Zhang et al., 2011; Chen et al., 2017; Ye et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022). However, these observations require complex observation operators and their adjoints, which further compounds the computational challenge (Liang et al., 2020; Zang et al., 2020; Ye et al., 2021). These factors impose a heavy computational burden on traditional Fortran-based assimilation systems, prolonging assimilation time and challenging their ability to meet the timeliness requirements of operational air quality forecasting. In recent years, emerging high-performance computing techniques and PyTorch-based tensor computing frameworks have provided promising solutions to relieve the computational bottlenecks and tedious manual coding burden of traditional Fortran 3DVar systems (Boudier et al., 2023; De et al., 2021; He et al., 2025). In parallel, modern deep learning (DL) frameworks such as PyTorch provide tensor-based computation and AD capabilities that are well suited to the matrix-dominated operations in variational data assimilation. Closely related to this study, Cheng et al. (2025) developed TorchDA, a Python package that implements multiple assimilation algorithms including 3DVar within PyTorch, demonstrating the feasibility of building variational assimilation systems in DL frameworks. However, TorchDA was demonstrated primarily on low-dimensional Lorenz models, and its applicability to full-scale atmospheric chemistry assimilation with three-dimensional grids and multiple species has not been established. Beyond updating classical algorithms, numerous full data-driven methods have been proposed to augment or replace components of traditional assimilation, such as using neural networks as ensemble surrogates (Chattopadhyay et al., 2023), adopting learned priors to replace background error covariance (Beauchamp et al., 2025), and constructing end-to-end frameworks that eliminate explicit observation operators (Xu et al., 2025). Although satisfactory computational efficiency, most existing fully data-driven assimilation methods are validated only under idealized low-dimensional experimental conditions. Meanwhile, their inherent black-box characteristic leads to poor physical interpretability and limited generalization ability. Such drawbacks not only hinder diagnostic analysis of pollution formation and evolution mechanisms, but also bring potential risks for reliable operational forecasting applications.

Overall, current atmospheric chemical data assimilation still faces a clear trade-off: traditional Fortran-based 3DVar owns rigorous physical basis and full mathematical traceability but suffers from low computational efficiency and tedious manual coding; pure DL-based assimilation achieves fast computation but sacrifices physical interpretability and practical robustness. To fill this research gap and balance reliable physical constraints and high computational performance, this study develops a novel PyTorch-based 3DVar assimilation system. The proposed framework inherits the complete

classical 3DVar variational optimization theory without modifying underlying physical equations, guaranteeing transparent physical meaning and traceable gradient calculation throughout the assimilation workflow. Benefiting from native PyTorch AD and hardware-accelerated tensor parallel computing, the new system avoids manual adjoint programming and supports flexible deployment on both CPU and GPU hardware. Meanwhile, compared with fully black-box DL assimilation methods, it retains all physical constraints of traditional variational assimilation. This study finally conducts comprehensive contrast experiments between the newly built PY3DVar system and the traditional manually coded Fortran 3DVar system (FT3DVar), focusing on computational efficiency, parallel scalability and assimilation analysis performance for multiple conventional air pollutants including SO<sub>2</sub>, NO<sub>2</sub>, CO, O<sub>3</sub>, PM<sub>2.5</sub>, and PM<sub>10</sub>.

## 2. Model, data, and methodology

### 2.1 Air quality model

The Weather Research and Forecasting model with Chemistry (WRF-Chem), was jointly developed by the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and other institutions (Grell et al., 2005; Fast et al., 2006). Its core strength lies in the fully online, bidirectional coupling between meteorological and chemical fields, enabling a precise description of pollutant transport, transformation, and removal under complex meteorological conditions. The meteorological fields drive the spatiotemporal distribution and transformation of chemical species through physical processes such as dynamic advection, turbulent diffusion, and dry/wet deposition. In turn, the chemical fields can feedback on meteorological elements through mechanisms like aerosol radiative forcing and cloud condensation nuclei effects. This online coupling ensures spatiotemporal consistency and physical compatibility between atmospheric dynamic processes and chemical transformations.

The WRF-Chem (version 3.5) used in this study integrates the Aerosol Module 5 (AERO5) from the Community Multiscale Air Quality Modeling System (CMAQ) and employs the SAPRC-99 gas-phase chemical mechanism (Carter, 2000; Li et al., 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2012). Through over two decades of development, this model incorporates advanced chemical reactions and processes crucial for atmospheric particulate formation. For example, it includes irreversible aqueous-phase processes of glyoxal and methylglyoxal on particle surfaces, which improves the simulation of secondary organic aerosol (SOA) over China (Xing et al., 2018). A parameterization for heterogeneous nitrous acid (HONO) processes has been implemented, enhancing the model's capability to simulate atmospheric oxidizing capacity and SOA (Feng et al., 2005, 2016). The suppression effect of organic coatings on the heterogeneous hydrolysis uptake of dinitrogen pentoxide (N<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub>) is also parameterized, leading to better simulation of nitrate aerosols. Furthermore, the model incorporates sulfate formation via transition-metal catalysis and Criegee intermediate reactions, improving sulfate simulation. Additionally, a module accounting for aerosol–radiation–photolysis interactions has been developed,

enabling assessment of aerosol–cloud interactions, radiative effects of brown carbon aerosols, and direct and indirect effects of various aerosol components.

In this study, a single-domain configuration with 210 (west–east)  $\times$  168 (south–north) grid points at 27 km horizontal resolution and 34 vertical layers was employed. The vertical layers follow a terrain-following coordinate with higher resolution near the surface that gradually decreases with altitude, extending from the surface to approximately 20 km. The domain-averaged height corresponding to each vertical level is illustrated in Fig. 2, which mainly presents the vertical distribution of background error standard deviation. The simulation domain covers most of China and surrounding regions, as shown in Fig. 1.

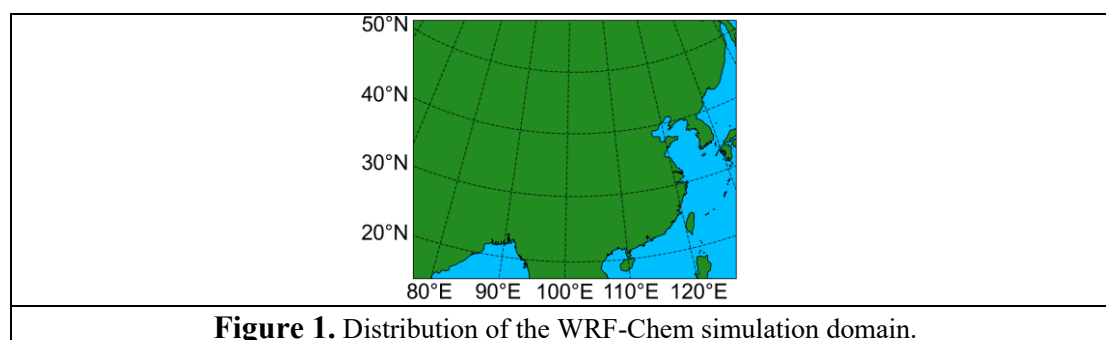


**Figure 1.** Distribution of the WRF-Chem simulation domain.

## 2.2 Data

The meteorological fields for the WRF-Chem model were driven by the NCEP Final Operational Global Analysis (FNL, <https://gdex.ucar.edu/datasets/d083002/>) data, which has a horizontal resolution of  $1^\circ \times 1^\circ$  and a temporal resolution of 6 hours. Provided by NCAR and NCEP, the FNL dataset assimilates multi-source global observations from surface stations, radiosondes, satellites, etc. It supplies physically consistent meteorological fields and serves as crucial input for generating reliable initial and boundary conditions for the model. This dataset has been widely used in various mesoscale numerical simulations.

Anthropogenic emissions were derived from the 2013 Multi-resolution Emission Inventory for China (MEIC, <http://www.meicmodel.org/index.html>), provided by Tsinghua University (Tong et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2021). This inventory has a spatial resolution of 6 km, covers most regions of China, and includes emission data for the gaseous pollutants and aerosol precursors required in this study.

Chemical boundary conditions for the WRF-Chem model were obtained from the Whole Atmosphere Community Climate Model (WACCM, <https://www.acom.ucar.edu/waccm/download.shtml>) data released by NCAR. This dataset provides the global spatiotemporal distribution of various chemical components, including ozone and aerosol precursors, ensuring reasonable atmospheric chemical boundary conditions for the regional air quality simulations.

Observation data were sourced from the China National Environmental Monitoring Centre (CNEMC, <https://air.cnemc.cn:18007/>), primarily comprising hourly surface concentrations of major

211 air pollutants: SO<sub>2</sub>, NO<sub>2</sub>, CO, O<sub>3</sub>, PM<sub>2.5</sub>, and PM<sub>10</sub>. The locations of observation sites follow the  
212 distribution described in He et al. (2025). To ensure data quality and suitability for 3DVar assimilation,  
213 the following procedures were applied to the raw observational data:

214 (1) Removal of invalid values: All concentration records with negative values for any pollutant were  
215 identified as invalid and removed.

216 (2) Extreme value control: To prevent interference from anomalously high values, maximum  
217 concentration thresholds were set for each pollutant (units:  $\mu\text{g m}^{-3}$  for all except CO in  $\text{mg m}^{-3}$ ). The  
218 specific thresholds were: 500  $\mu\text{g m}^{-3}$  for SO<sub>2</sub>, NO<sub>2</sub>, and O<sub>3</sub>; 600  $\mu\text{g m}^{-3}$  for PM<sub>2.5</sub>; 1200  $\mu\text{g m}^{-3}$  for  
219 PM<sub>10</sub>; and 500  $\text{mg m}^{-3}$  for CO. Observations exceeding their respective thresholds were discarded.

220 (3) Grid-based thinning and averaging: To match the irregularly distributed station observations to the  
221 model grid, a grid-averaging method was employed for data thinning. First, all station observations  
222 falling within the same WRF-Chem model grid cell were grouped. Then, for the valid observation  
223 sequence within each grid cell, an internal consistency check using the 3-standard-deviation criterion  
224 was applied to remove outliers that deviated excessively from the mean. Finally, the arithmetic mean  
225 was calculated from all observations that passed the quality control in each grid cell, resulting in a  
226 single representative concentration value for that grid. This process generated a regular, gridded  
227 observational dataset consistent with the model's grid resolution.

228 After quality control, the observations comprised approximately 1,948 stations on average. For  
229 independent evaluation, the quality-controlled observations were divided into two subsets: the gridded  
230 and thinned observations (Section 2.2, step 3) with 546 stations on average (28%) were used for  
231 assimilation, while the remaining quality-controlled observations with 1,402 stations on average (72%)  
232 were reserved exclusively for validation.

### 233 2.3. Control variable design

234 The WRF-Chem model employed in this study incorporates aerosol variables that encompass a  
235 variety of fine and coarse particle components. The fine particle components include: elemental carbon  
236 (ECJ), ammonium (NH<sub>4</sub>AJ), sulfate (SO<sub>4</sub>AJ), nitrate (NO<sub>3</sub>AJ\_A/B), organic aerosols (ORGAJ,  
237 ORGBAJ, SOA\_RXT\_G/M), nine categories of secondary organic aerosols generated from the semi-  
238 volatile gases of primary organic aerosol (CPO1AER–CPO9AER), chloride (CLAJ), and  
239 accumulation-mode fine particles (P25AJ), among others. The coarse particle components include:  
240 dust (DUST\_1–DUST\_5), anthropogenic coarse aerosol (ANTHA), and coarse-mode soil-derived  
241 particles (SOILA). Furthermore, the model also includes gaseous pollutants such as SO<sub>2</sub>, NO<sub>2</sub>, CO,  
242 and O<sub>3</sub>. The fine particle components listed above collectively constitute PM<sub>2.5</sub>, while the addition of  
243 the coarse particle components (DUST\_1–DUST\_5, ANTHA, and SOILA) forms the complete PM<sub>10</sub>  
244 composition.

245 Using all aerosol species directly as control variables would provide detailed compositional

246 resolution but at the cost of substantially increased computational scale, storage demands, and reduced  
 247 efficiency. To balance assimilation accuracy with computational cost, this study merges specific  
 248 components based on their physicochemical properties and particle size characteristics: the dual nitrate  
 249 components are merged into a single variable; the four organic aerosol components are combined into  
 250 one group; the nine secondary organic aerosols originating from semi-volatile primary organic gases  
 251 are uniformly merged; the dust components are optimally merged according to particle size  
 252 differences—DUST\_1 is retained as an independent control variable, while DUST\_2 to DUST\_5 are  
 253 merged into a single variable. Through this merging process, the number of aerosol control variables  
 254 is reduced to 12. Gaseous pollutants (SO<sub>2</sub>, NO<sub>2</sub>, CO, O<sub>3</sub>) are directly used as control variables for  
 255 assimilation. Consequently, the assimilation system constructed in this study utilizes a total of 16  
 256 control variables. Table 1 provides the detailed mapping between the WRF-Chem model variables and  
 257 the 3DVar control variables.

| Model variables                  | 3DVar control variables |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| ECJ                              | EC                      |
| NH4AJ                            | NH4                     |
| SO4AJ                            | SO4                     |
| NO3AJ_A NO3AJ_B                  | NO3                     |
| ORGAJ ORGBAJ SOA_RXT_G SOA_RXT_M | ORG                     |
| CPO1AER CPO2AER ... CPO9AER      | CPO                     |
| CLAJ                             | CL                      |
| P25AJ                            | P25                     |
| DUST_1                           | DUST1                   |
| DUST_2 DUST_3 DUST_4 DUST_5      | DUST2                   |
| ANTHA                            | ANTHA                   |
| SOILA                            | SOILA                   |
| SO2                              | SO2                     |
| NO2                              | NO2                     |
| CO                               | CO                      |
| O3                               | O3                      |

258 **Table 1.** Mapping between WRF-Chem model variables and 3DVar control variables.

## 259 2.4 3DVar assimilation theory

260 The 3DVar method is based on probability and statistical theory, treating both the simulated  
 261 background field and observations as useful information containing errors. This method constructs a  
 262 cost function that incorporates the weighted errors of the background field and the observations, and  
 263 seeks the state that minimizes this function, known as the analysis field. Statistically, this analysis field  
 264 is considered the optimal estimate of the true atmospheric state. The 3DVar cost function is:

$$265 J(x) = \frac{1}{2}(x - x_b)^T B^{-1}(x - x_b) + \frac{1}{2}(Hx - y)^T R^{-1}(Hx - y) \quad (1)$$

where  $x$  is the analysis field, representing the set of control variables at all grid points in the model. Its dimensionality is jointly determined by the number of control variables, vertical layers, and horizontal grid points.  $x_b$  is the background field, provided by the WRF-Chem model simulation, and has the same dimensions as  $x$ .  $B$  is the background error covariance matrix, which describes the magnitude and spatial structure of the uncertainties in the background field.  $H$  is the observation operator that maps from model space to observation space. Since only surface in-situ observations are assimilated,  $H$  consists solely of horizontal bilinear interpolation from the model surface level to the observation locations, without any vertical interpolation.  $y$  is the observation vector, containing the assimilated observations, with dimensions of  $\text{Obs\_Station} \times 6$ , where  $\text{Obs\_Station}$  represents the number of valid observation sites, and 6 corresponds to the six types of pollutants.  $R$  is the observation error covariance matrix, representing the uncertainty of the observational data, and has dimensions consistent with  $y$ . Following Li et al. (2013), the observational error standard deviation in this study is set to half of the background error standard deviation.

The background error covariance matrix  $B$  has a very large dimension. Storing and performing iterative computations with it directly would pose serious challenges to memory and computational efficiency. To optimize the solution of the cost function, this study adopts a classic preconditioning framework for variational data assimilation, factorizing and structurally simplifying the  $B$  matrix (El Akkraoui et al., 2013; Li et al., 2013). The specific processing is as follows: First, the  $B$  matrix is decomposed into the form  $B = DCD^T$ , where  $D$  is a diagonal matrix composed of the background error standard deviations, and  $C$  is the background error correlation matrix. Furthermore, the background error correlation matrix  $C$  is decomposed into the tensor product of correlation matrices along the longitude, latitude, and vertical directions, i.e.,  $C = C_x \otimes C_y \otimes C_z$  (Derber and Rosati, 1989; Li et al., 2008). In practical assimilation, the analysis field  $x$  is typically not solved for directly. Instead, the incremental field  $\delta x = x - x_b$  is introduced to solve for the analysis field indirectly, and the control variable is transformed to  $\delta z$ , where the control variables satisfy  $\delta x = DC^{1/2}\delta z$ . Defining the transformation operator  $F = DC^{1/2}$ , the cost function can be rewritten in terms of  $\delta z$  as:

$$J(\delta z) = \frac{1}{2}\delta z^T \delta z + \frac{1}{2}(HF\delta z - d)^T R^{-1}(HF\delta z - d) \quad (2)$$

where  $d = y - Hx_b$  is the innovation vector (observation increment). After minimizing  $J(\delta z)$  to obtain the optimal  $\delta z$ , the final analysis field  $x_a$  is obtained through the following transformation:

$$x_a = x_b + F\delta z \quad (3)$$

## 2.5 Implementation of the two assimilation systems

The two assimilation systems compared in this study, PY3DVar and FT3DVar, are built upon the same variational theory (Section 2.4) and share identical background error covariance modeling scheme (Section 2.6). Both systems employ the Limited-memory Broyden-Fletcher-Goldfarb-Shanno (L-BFGS) algorithm to achieve minimization with identical parameter settings: the memory size

(history size) is set to 6, which determines the number of historical gradient-update pairs stored for the Hessian approximation (Liu and Nocedal, 1989); the maximum number of inner iterations per optimization step (max iteration) is set to 4; and convergence is declared when the scaled gradient norm satisfies  $\| \nabla J \| / \max(1, \| x \|) \leq 10^{-2}$ , a standard criterion in variational data assimilation. The inherent algorithmic difference between the two implementations lies in the internal line search strategy: FT3DVar uses the Moré-Thuente line search from the MINPACK library (Moré and Thuente, 1994), while PY3DVar relies on the Strong Wolfe line search built into PyTorch's L-BFGS optimizer.

FT3DVar is a Fortran-based 3DVar system independently developed by our research group and validated in several previous studies over China (Zang et al., 2016; Liang et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). It should be noted that FT3DVar is entirely independent of the WRFDA-Chem system distributed with the official WRF release. The full assimilation algorithm is written in Fortran with OpenMP loop parallelism for CPU execution. The L-BFGS solver of FT3DVar is adapted from an established Fortran library, with customized data interfaces for compatibility with the 3DVar framework and parallelized via multi-CPU threading. The gradient of the cost function is derived analytically:

$$\nabla J(\delta z) = \delta z + F^T H^T R^{-1} (H F \delta z - d) \quad (4)$$

This analytical gradient is then manually implemented in the code. Although AD tools are available for Fortran, the adjoint of the 3DVar cost function involves a limited set of modular operations whose analytical derivation is straightforward, allowing manual implementation with full control over memory and parallelization.

PY3DVar is developed within the PyTorch framework and can be deployed on both CPU and GPU platforms without code modification. All core computations, including the background error covariance transformations, the observation operator, and the cost function evaluation, are formulated as tensorized matrix operations. Gradient computation is handled entirely by PyTorch's AD engine via PyTorch's native backpropagation autograd engine, which avoids tedious manual derivation and coding of adjoint modules. During minimization, the system constructs a computational graph that records all tensor operations in the forward pass, then automatically computes the gradient  $\partial J / \partial \delta z$  via backpropagation. This AD mechanism eliminates the need for manual adjoint coding, thereby simplifying development while ensuring numerical accuracy. While the two gradient calculation methods are mathematically equivalent, they differ substantially in their implementation approaches.

## 2.6 Background error covariance modeling

The key components of the background error covariance matrix  $B$ , namely, the background error standard deviation matrix  $D$ , the vertical background error correlation matrix  $C_z$ , and the horizontal correlation scale parameter  $L$ , are statistically estimated using the NMC method (Parrish et al., 1992). In this procedure, 24-hour and 48-hour forecast experiments are initiated daily at 00:00 UTC for 30 consecutive days. The forecast difference field  $\varepsilon$  is then constructed from forecasts at the same time,

337 calculated as  $\varepsilon = X_{48h} - X_{24h}$ . These forecasts were run with the same model configuration as the  
 338 assimilation experiments, ensuring consistency between the estimated background error statistics and  
 339 the assimilation cycles.

340 The background error standard deviation matrix  $D$  is a diagonal matrix. The values for each  
 341 control variable in  $D$  are computed from the standard deviation of the 30-day forecast difference field:

$$342 \quad D = \sqrt{\frac{1}{N-1} \sum_{i=1}^N (\varepsilon_i - \bar{\varepsilon})^2} \quad (5)$$

343 where  $N$  is the number of days ( $N=30$  in this study). The vertical profiles of the background error  
 344 standard deviation for each control variable are shown in Fig. 2.

345 The vertical correlation matrix  $C_z$  is obtained by calculating the correlation coefficients of the  
 346 same variable between different model layers. Its matrix elements can be expressed as:

$$347 \quad [C_z]_{mn} = \frac{\text{cov}(m,n)}{\sigma_{\varepsilon_m} \cdot \sigma_{\varepsilon_n}} \quad (6)$$

348 Here,  $\varepsilon_m$  and  $\varepsilon_n$  represent the forecast differences at the  $m$ -th and  $n$ -th layers, respectively,  $\text{cov}$   
 349 denotes the covariance, and  $\sigma$  represents the standard deviation. The distribution of the vertical  
 350 autocorrelation matrix for the background error of each control variable is shown in Fig. 3.

351 For the horizontal correlation matrices  $C_x$  and  $C_y$ , horizontal isotropy is assumed. Consequently,  
 352 they can be represented by the same decay function, differing only in their dimensions. Their physical  
 353 meaning is to describe the horizontal correlation between different grid points in the longitudinal or  
 354 latitudinal direction, specifically fitted using a Gaussian kernel function:

$$355 \quad C(x_1, x_2) = \exp[-(x_1 - x_2)^2 / (2L^2)] \quad (7)$$

356 Here,  $L$  is the horizontal correlation scale parameter for the background error,  $x_1$  and  $x_2$  represent  
 357 horizontal grid points.

358 Horizontal correlation scale parameter  $L$  is estimated by analyzing the decay of correlation for  
 359 the same variable across different horizontal grid distances. The correlation coefficient  $\rho(d)$  between  
 360 all pairs of horizontal grid points is computed as a function of their distance  $d$ .  $L$  is defined as the  
 361 maximum grid distance  $d$  at which the horizontal correlation coefficient  $\rho(d)$  decays to  $e^{-1/2}$ :

$$362 \quad L = \max\{d \mid \rho(d) \geq e^{-1/2}\} \quad (8)$$

363 The horizontal correlation scale parameter  $L$  quantitatively describes the decay characteristics of  
 364 background error correlation between different grid points with increasing distance. Its physical  
 365 meaning is that when the distance between two horizontal grid points exceeds  $L$ , the correlation  
 366 coefficient between their background errors falls below  $e^{-1/2}$  (approximately 0.6065), indicating that  
 367 their statistical correlation has significantly weakened. This parameter quantifies the decay rate of  
 368 horizontal correlation and is a key parameter for describing the horizontal structure of the background

error covariance. The computed values of  $L$  are used to construct the horizontal correlation matrices  $C_x$  and  $C_y$ , which characterize the spatial horizontal correlation structure and directly determine the shape of the Gaussian correlation kernel function. The decay of the horizontal background error correlation coefficient with distance and the corresponding  $L$  value for each control variable are shown in Fig. 4.

To achieve efficient computation, the three correlation matrices  $C_x$ ,  $C_y$  and  $C_z$  are further decomposed via Cholesky decomposition. Each is expressed as the product of a lower triangular matrix and an upper triangular matrix (e.g.,  $C_x = C_{x\_low} \cdot C_{x\_up}$ ), where these two triangular matrices are transposes of each other (i.e.,  $C_{x\_up} = C_{x\_low}^T$ , where  $T$  denotes transpose). During the actual assimilation process, only the upper triangular matrices for these three directions are retained and used, thereby avoiding direct manipulation of the full  $B$  matrix.

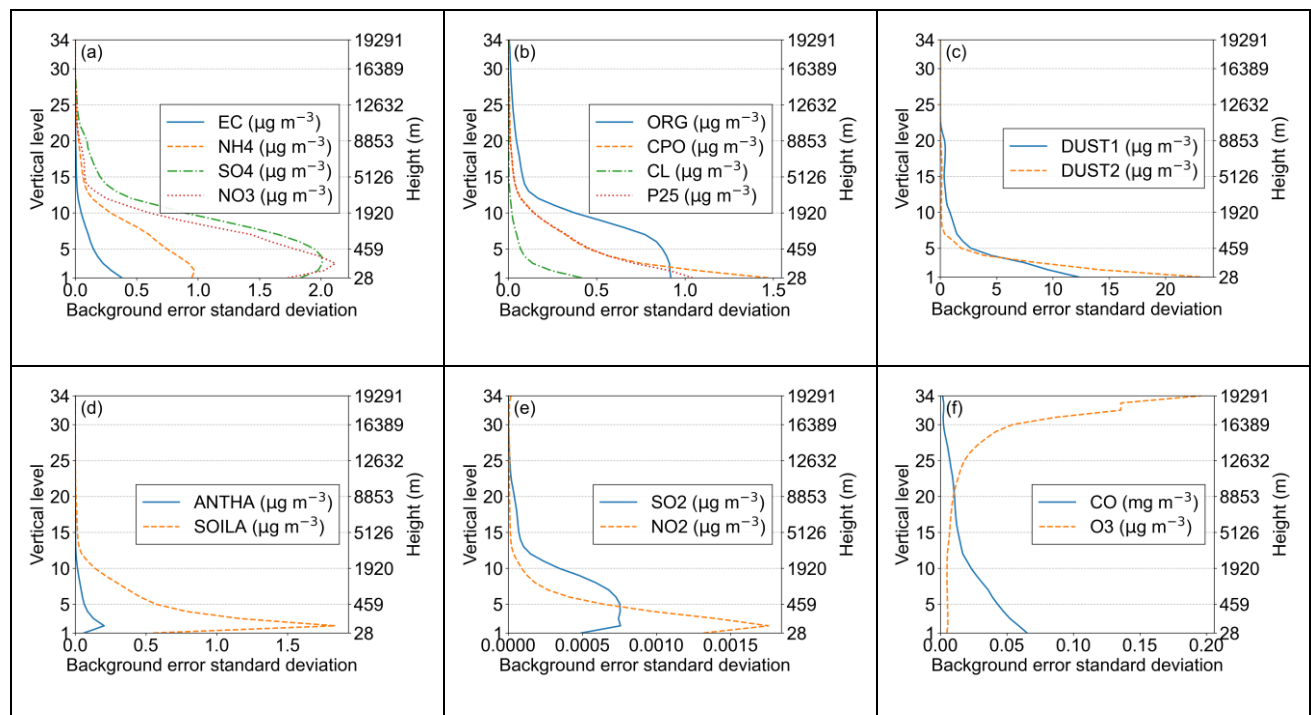


**Figure 2.** Vertical profiles of background error standard deviation for each control variable: (a) EC, NH<sub>4</sub>, SO<sub>4</sub>, NO<sub>3</sub>; (b) ORG, CPO, CL, P25; (c) DUST1, DUST2; (d) ANTHA, SOILA; (e) SO<sub>2</sub>, NO<sub>2</sub>; (f) CO, O<sub>3</sub>. CO is in mg m<sup>-3</sup>; all other variables are in μg m<sup>-3</sup>.

Fig. 2 shows the vertical profiles of the background error standard deviation, which quantifies the uncertainty of the model background field across different vertical layers and for different variables. In the 3DVar assimilation process, the  $D$  matrix assigns the relative weights of the analysis increments among the control variables in response to observational information. A larger background error standard deviation for a variable indicates higher uncertainty in the background field simulation, allowing for greater adjustment by observational information during assimilation. Conversely, a smaller standard deviation implies higher confidence in the background field, resulting in more moderate increments. Fig. 2 reveals significant differences in the near-surface values among the

388 variables. The background error standard deviations for DUST1 and DUST2 are the largest,  
 389 substantially higher than those of other variables. With increasing height, the background error  
 390 standard deviations for most variables generally exhibit a decaying trend, and the differences between  
 391 them gradually diminish. In contrast, O<sub>3</sub> exhibits an increasing trend with height, reflecting the  
 392 enhanced background uncertainty associated with its photochemical production and longer lifetime in  
 393 the upper troposphere. In terms of profile shape and decay rate, DUST1 and DUST2 decay most rapidly,  
 394 while the decay of the other variables is relatively gradual. Additionally, some species show non-  
 395 monotonic vertical variations, such as a near-surface peak for SO<sub>2</sub> and NO<sub>2</sub>, indicating distinct vertical  
 396 uncertainty characteristics for these species.

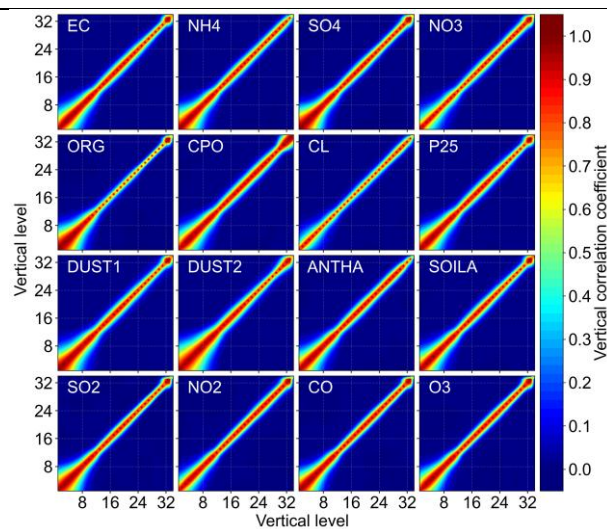


**Figure 3.** Distribution of the vertical autocorrelation matrix of background error for each control variable.

397 Fig. 3 presents the vertical autocorrelation matrices of the background error for each control  
 398 variable. These matrices govern how surface observational information propagates across vertical  
 399 levels during assimilation. Although the detailed structures differ among variables, all matrices exhibit  
 400 strong correlations in the near-surface layers that weaken with increasing height. This indicates that  
 401 surface observations primarily constrain the lower levels of the model, while their influence on the  
 402 upper levels is more limited.

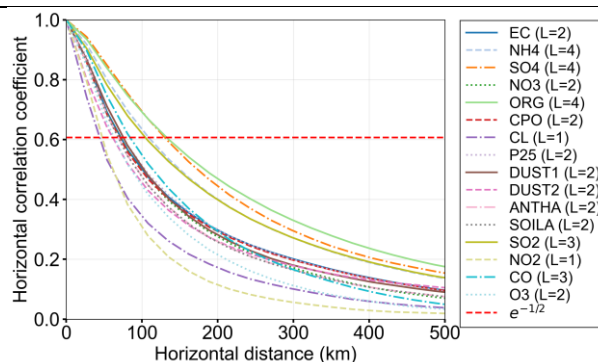


**Figure 4.** Decay of horizontal background error correlation coefficient with distance for each control variable.

Fig. 4 presents the decay curves of the horizontal background error correlation coefficient with grid distance for each control variable, along with their corresponding horizontal correlation scale parameter  $L$ . These curves are derived directly from the empirical correlation statistics computed over the 30-day forecast difference fields, rather than from a mathematical fitting process. This correlation coefficient determines the horizontal spread and weight allocation of observational information. The horizontal axis represents physical distance, calculated from a model grid spacing of approximately 27 km. To focus on the region of physical significance, the figure only displays distances up to 500 km, as correlation coefficients beyond this range are already negligible. These empirical curves exhibit an initially rapid then gradually slowing decay with distance, consistent with the Gaussian-type correlation model. The decay rates differ considerably among the variables, yielding  $L$  values that range from 1 to 4 grid units. This spread reflects the heterogeneity in the horizontal spatial correlation of background errors for different pollutants.

### 3. Experimental design and evaluation metrics

#### 3.1 Experimental design

To systematically evaluate the performance and effectiveness of the PY3DVar assimilation system, this study designed three categories of numerical experiments: idealized experiment, 20-day real-case assimilation and forecast experiments, and multi-core CPU parallel performance benchmark tests.

**Computing platforms.** The CPU platform is a single node equipped with two AMD EPYC 7542 processors (32 physical cores per processor, 64 cores in total @ 2.9 GHz) and 256 GB of system memory. The GPU platform employs an NVIDIA RTX 3090 with 24 GB of device memory. The FT3DVar system runs exclusively on CPU, whereas PY3DVar is deployed on both CPU and GPU platforms. All calculations adopted 32-bit floating-point precision.

**Idealized experiment.** An idealized twin-observation experiment was designed based on the 27 km grid. Its purpose is to test the system's capability to generate physically reasonable increment fields with observations of varying magnitudes. Two observation sites were positioned far apart to avoid spatial correlation interference, ensuring the independence of constraints from different observation magnitudes. For the low-concentration observation site (37.2104°N, 116.0108°E), the prescribed concentrations were 0.01  $\mu\text{g m}^{-3}$  ( $\text{SO}_2$ ,  $\text{NO}_2$ ,  $\text{O}_3$ ), 0.01  $\text{mg m}^{-3}$  ( $\text{CO}$ ), 1.00  $\mu\text{g m}^{-3}$  ( $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ ) and 1.50  $\mu\text{g m}^{-3}$  ( $\text{PM}_{10}$ ). For the high-concentration site (37.8666°N, 92.3785°E), the corresponding values were 200  $\mu\text{g m}^{-3}$  ( $\text{SO}_2$ ,  $\text{NO}_2$ ,  $\text{O}_3$ ), 10  $\text{mg m}^{-3}$  ( $\text{CO}$ ), 500  $\mu\text{g m}^{-3}$  ( $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ ) and 700  $\mu\text{g m}^{-3}$  ( $\text{PM}_{10}$ ). By comparing the analysis field with the background field, the ability of the assimilation system to produce physically sound increment fields under different concentration magnitudes can be verified.

**Real-case assimilation and forecast experiments.** Twenty consecutive assimilation cycles were conducted at 00:00 UTC each day from October 10 to October 29, 2023. For each cycle, the assimilation was performed using two systems: (1) FT3DVar on the CPU platform with 64 cores, and

(2) PY3DVar on the GPU platform. Following each assimilation, a 24-hour forecast was launched from the respective analysis field. A control forecast was also initiated from the original, unassimilated background field (labeled Control). All three forecasts for each cycle shared identical model configurations except for the initial conditions.

Multi-core CPU parallel benchmark tests. To evaluate the parallel scalability of both FT3DVar and PY3DVar on CPU platforms, the 20 assimilation cases were repeated using 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, and 64 CPU cores. Only the assimilation step was performed in these tests, without the subsequent 24-hour forecast. This experiment enables a direct comparison of how the computational efficiency of each system scales with increasing parallel resources.

### 3.2 Evaluation metrics

To quantitatively evaluate the assimilation and forecasting performance of both PY3DVar and FT3DVar, this study employs three statistical metrics: the correlation coefficient (CORR), root mean square error (RMSE), and mean absolute error (MAE). CORR measures the linear correlation between simulated and observed values; RMSE is more sensitive to extreme errors and reflects the overall deviation of the simulation results; MAE measures the average absolute error between simulated and observed values and is less sensitive to outliers. The formulas for each metric are as follows:

$$\text{CORR} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^N (M_i - \bar{M})(O_i - \bar{O})}{\sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^N (M_i - \bar{M})^2 \sum_{i=1}^N (O_i - \bar{O})^2}} \quad (9)$$

$$\text{RMSE} = \sqrt{\frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^N (M_i - O_i)^2} \quad (10)$$

$$\text{MAE} = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^N |M_i - O_i| \quad (11)$$

Where:

$M_i$  and  $O_i$  represent the simulated value and observed value for the  $i$ -th sample, respectively.

$\bar{M}$  and  $\bar{O}$  are the average values of the simulated and observed values, respectively.

$N$  is the total number of samples.

## 4. Results and evaluation

### 4.1 Evaluation of the idealized experiment

Figs. 5 and 6 present the surface increment fields generated by PY3DVar and FT3DVar in the idealized experiment, while Figs. 7 and 8 show the corresponding vertical cross-sections. The  $\text{PM}_{2.5}$  and  $\text{PM}_{10}$  increments are diagnosed as the sum of the relevant aerosol control variable increments, while the gaseous pollutant increments are those of the corresponding control variables.

468 For both systems, the increments exhibit Gaussian-type horizontal distributions centered on the  
 469 observation points, decaying with distance, and columnar vertical structures that weaken with height.  
 470 The vertical extent of the increments is controlled by the vertical correlation matrix  $C_z$ , while their  
 471 horizontal spread is governed by the horizontal correlation scale parameter  $L$ , consistent with the  
 472 background error characteristics described in Section 2.6. Differences in  $L$  and  $C_z$  among pollutants  
 473 account for the observed variations in horizontal spread and vertical column thickness.

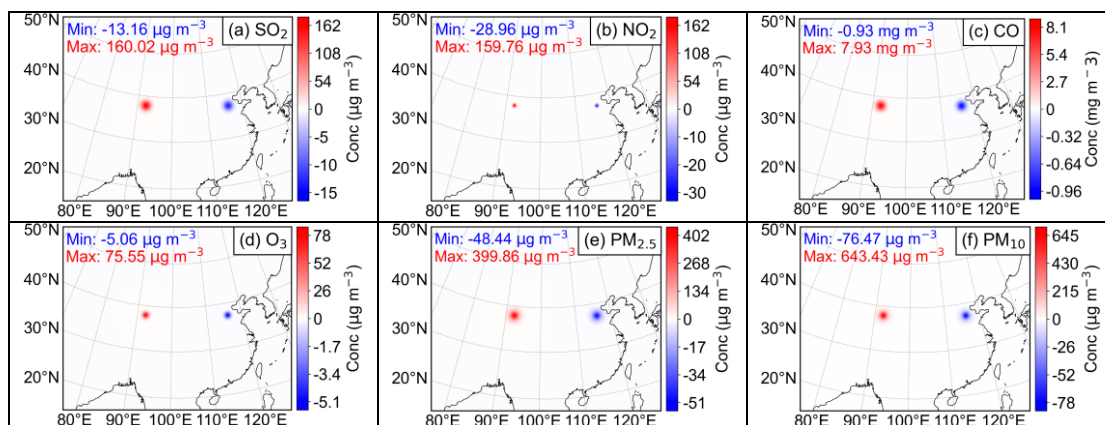


**Figure 5.** Surface increment fields for the six pollutants ((a)  $\text{SO}_2$ , (b)  $\text{NO}_2$ , (c) CO, (d)  $\text{O}_3$ , (e)  $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ , (f)  $\text{PM}_{10}$ ) from the PY3DVar assimilation system in the idealized experiment. Blue and red colors represent negative and positive increments, respectively.

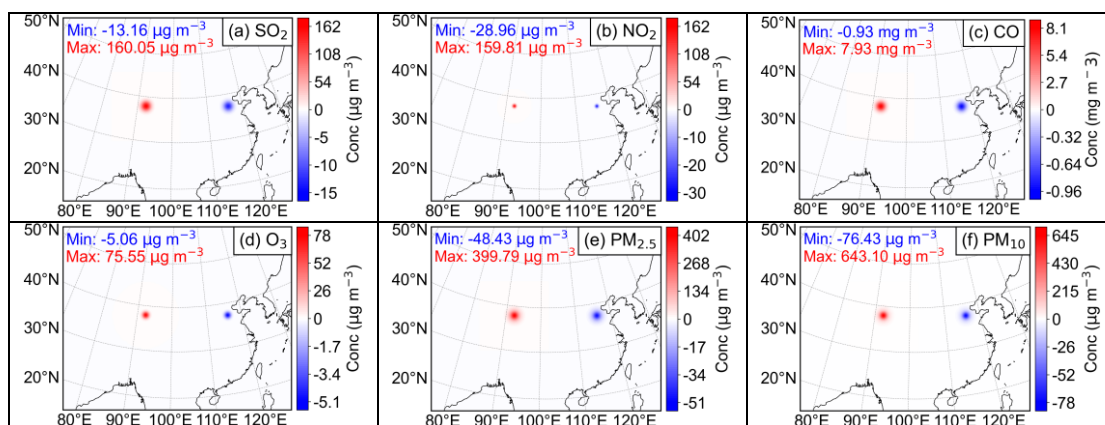


**Figure 6.** Surface increment fields for the six pollutants ((a)  $\text{SO}_2$ , (b)  $\text{NO}_2$ , (c) CO, (d)  $\text{O}_3$ , (e)  $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ , (f)  $\text{PM}_{10}$ ) from the FT3DVar assimilation system in the idealized experiment. Blue and red colors represent negative and positive increments, respectively.

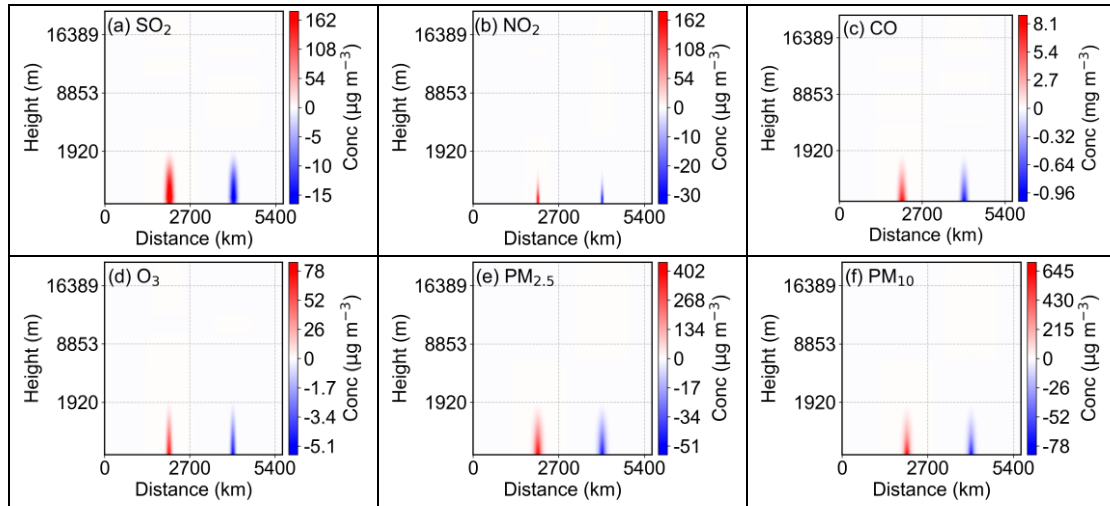


**Figure 7.** Vertical cross-sections of the increment fields for the six pollutants ((a) SO<sub>2</sub>, (b) NO<sub>2</sub>, (c) CO, (d) O<sub>3</sub>, (e) PM<sub>2.5</sub>, (f) PM<sub>10</sub>) from the PY3DVar assimilation system in the idealized experiment. Blue and red colors represent negative and positive increments, respectively.

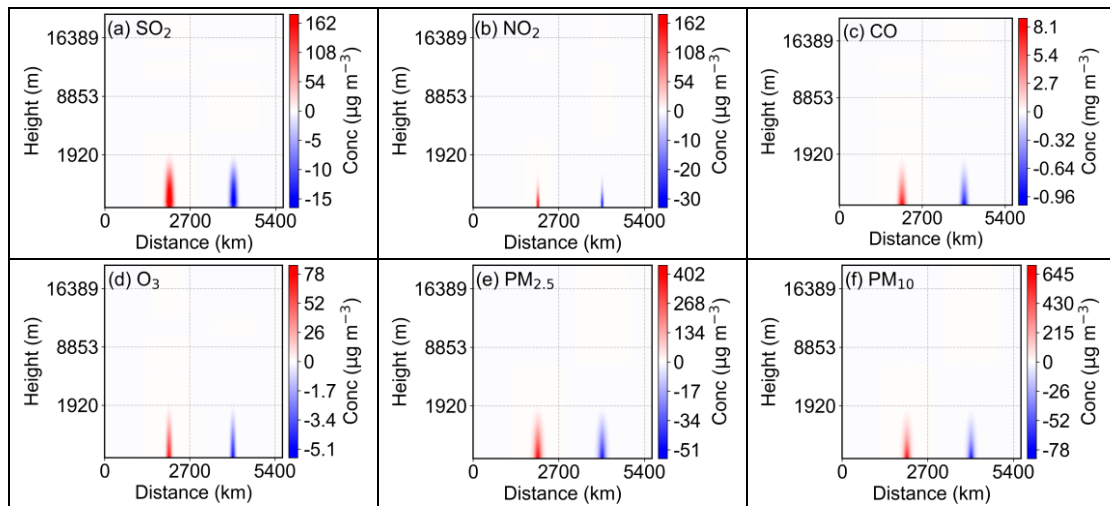


**Figure 8.** Vertical cross-sections of the increment fields for the six pollutants ((a) SO<sub>2</sub>, (b) NO<sub>2</sub>, (c) CO, (d) O<sub>3</sub>, (e) PM<sub>2.5</sub>, (f) PM<sub>10</sub>) from the FT3DVar assimilation system in the idealized experiment. Blue and red colors represent negative and positive increments, respectively.

Fig. 9 further compares the analysis fields under high and low concentration conditions, showing that both systems effectively correct the background field toward the observations, with negligible differences between their analysis values. Together, Figs. 5–9 demonstrate that PY3DVar and FT3DVar produce highly consistent increment fields and analysis values under idealized conditions, confirming that PY3DVar achieves numerical accuracy and physical consistency comparable to FT3DVar.

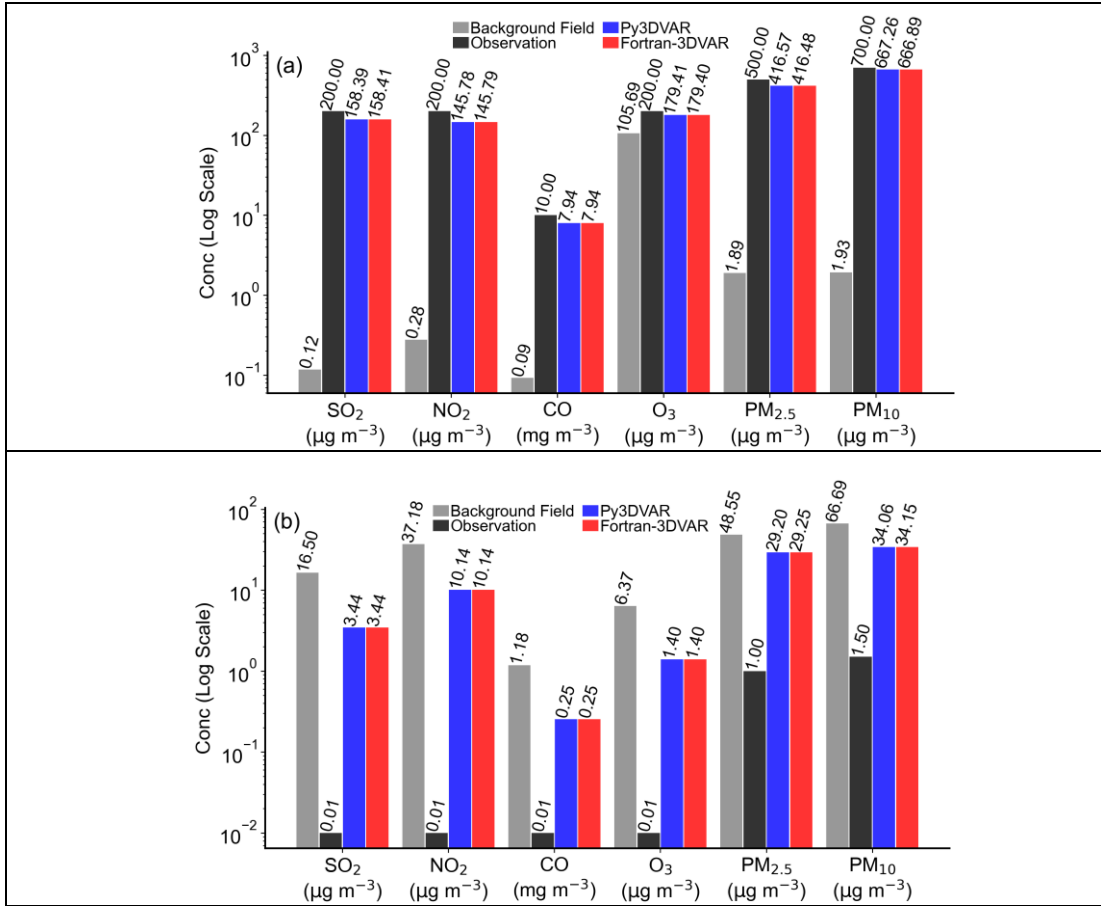


**Figure 9.** Comparison of background (gray), observation (black), FT3DVar analysis (red), and PY3DVar analysis (blue) under extremely high (a) and low (b) concentration conditions.

## 4.2 Evaluation of the analysis fields

Figs. 10 and 11 present scatter plots comparing simulated and observed concentrations across the 20-day period for the Control run, the PY3DVar assimilation experiment, and the FT3DVar assimilation experiment, respectively. In these figures, blue dots represent the control experiment, while red dots represent the assimilation experiments. PY3DVar was run on the GPU platform, while FT3DVar was run on the CPU platform with 64 cores. Regarding the distribution pattern, the blue dots from the Control experiment are relatively scattered and deviate considerably from the 1:1 line. In contrast, the red dots from the assimilation experiments show a clear convergence towards the 1:1 line, indicating that both assimilation systems effectively improve the quality of the initial field, with a very pronounced improvement effect.

Examining the specific evaluation metrics, the degree of improvement in the initial fields varies among different pollutants. After assimilation, the CORR values for all pollutants increased significantly. The CORR for SO<sub>2</sub> and CO both exceeded 0.6, those for NO<sub>2</sub>, O<sub>3</sub> and PM<sub>2.5</sub> were above 0.8, and the value for PM<sub>10</sub> was higher than 0.7. Concurrently, the RMSE and MAE for all pollutants decreased substantially compared to the Control experiment, further confirming the corrective effect of assimilation on initial field biases. The scatter distributions from PY3DVar and FT3DVar are nearly identical across all pollutants, and the corresponding CORR, RMSE, and MAE values differ only

marginally. This strong quantitative agreement, consistent with the findings of the idealized experiment, confirms that the two systems achieve equivalent assimilation performance in real-case applications.

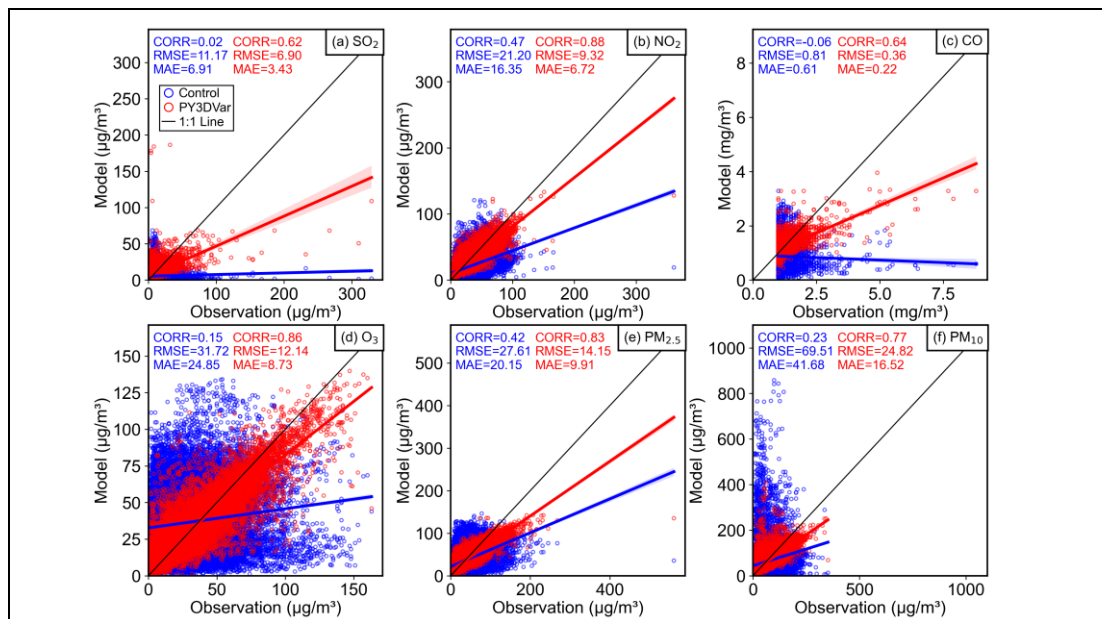


**Figure 10.** Scatter plots of observations against Control (blue) and PY3DVar analysis (red) concentrations. The black line is the 1:1 line.

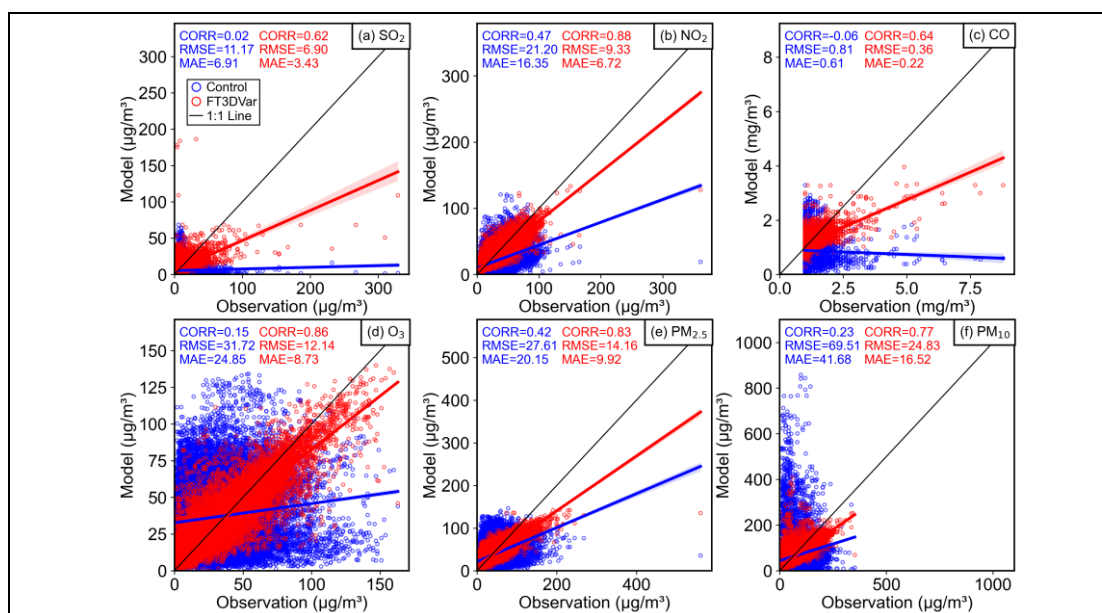


**Figure 11.** Scatter plots of observations against Control (blue) and FT3DVar analysis (red) concentrations. The black line is the 1:1 line.

### 4.3 Iteration behavior and computational efficiency

This section comprehensively evaluates the iteration behavior and computational efficiency of the conventional FT3DVar and the developed PY3DVar (GPU-based implementation) using 20 consecutive days of real atmospheric assimilation experiments. The analysis encompasses iteration

506 counts, total and per-iteration time consumption, and cost function convergence characteristics, as  
507 presented in Fig. 12.

508 Fig. 12a illustrates the number of iterations required per assimilation cycle throughout the 20-day  
509 experiment. FT3DVar requires an average of 24.9 iterations to converge, whereas PY3DVar converges  
510 in only 7.5 iterations on average. As discussed in Section 2.5, both systems adopt identical L-BFGS  
511 parameter settings and the same convergence criterion; the primary difference lies in their internal line  
512 search algorithms—the Moré-Thuente scheme for FT3DVar versus the Strong Wolfe scheme for  
513 PY3DVar. The Strong Wolfe line search generally yields a larger per-iteration reduction in the cost  
514 function, which fundamentally explains the substantially fewer iterations required by PY3DVar to  
515 achieve convergence.

516 Fig. 12b presents the total iteration time per cycle. On average, FT3DVar requires 26.2 s per cycle,  
517 while PY3DVar requires only 1.2 s, yielding a  $22.2\times$  speedup over the traditional system. The per-  
518 iteration time shown in Fig. 12c further elucidates the source of this performance discrepancy. The  
519 mean per-iteration time is 1.05 s for FT3DVar and 0.16 s for PY3DVar, corresponding to a  $6.7\times$   
520 speedup. Combined with the significantly reduced iteration count (Fig. 12a), these two factors  
521 collectively account for the high overall efficiency of PY3DVar. The GPU-accelerated execution of  
522 vectorized tensor operations, which is central to the PyTorch framework, is the primary contributor to  
523 the drastic per-iteration time reduction.

524 Fig. 12d displays the mean descent curves of the cost function within the common iteration range.  
525 All curves exhibit a typical nonlinear convergence pattern, characterized by a rapid initial drop  
526 followed by a gradually slowing decline, eventually leveling off as the systems approach the optimal  
527 solution. Consistent with the fewer iterations depicted in Fig. 12a, PY3DVar reduces the cost function  
528 much more aggressively in the early iterations than FT3DVar. Specifically, the descent curve of  
529 FT3DVar becomes notably flat and decreases only very slowly after the 10th iteration. The close  
530 agreement between the final cost values of PY3DVar and FT3DVar further confirms that both systems  
531 achieve highly consistent assimilation accuracy.

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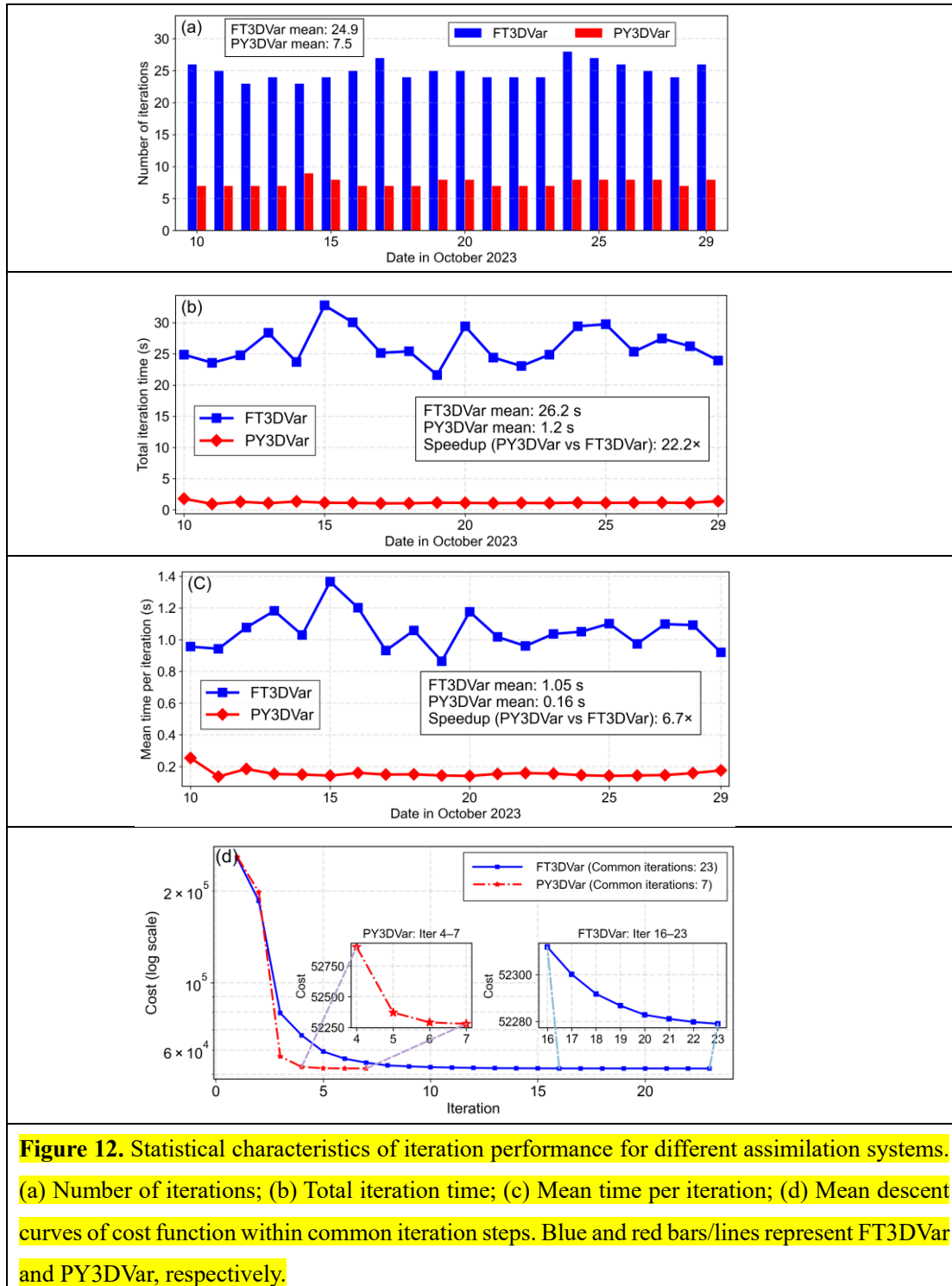


**Figure 12.** Statistical characteristics of iteration performance for different assimilation systems. (a) Number of iterations; (b) Total iteration time; (c) Mean time per iteration; (d) Mean descent curves of cost function within common iteration steps. Blue and red bars/lines represent FT3DVar and PY3DVar, respectively.

#### 4.4 Evaluation of multi-core CPU scalability

Fig. 13 illustrates the parallel scalability and computational efficiency of FT3DVar and PY3DVar across different CPU core configurations (1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, and 64 cores), based on averaged results from a 20-day continuous assimilation experiment.

In terms of per-iteration time, FT3DVar outperforms PY3DVar across all tested core counts, decreasing from 4.09 s to 0.91 s, which reflects the inherent speed of the compiled Fortran

543 implementation. PY3DVar drops more steeply, from 59.70 s to 2.13 s, yet remains consistently slower  
544 than FT3DVar at every core configuration. The modest absolute reduction in FT3DVar's per-iteration  
545 time is due to its already fast single-core baseline, which leaves limited room for further improvement.

546       Regarding total iteration time, both systems benefit substantially from increasing parallelism.  
547 FT3DVar declines steadily from 106.3 s at a single core to 23.6 s at 64 cores. PY3DVar starts from a  
548 much higher baseline of 448.1 s but exhibits a steeper reduction, reaching 16.0 s at 64 cores. Despite  
549 its per-iteration disadvantage, PY3DVar achieves a shorter total assimilation time than FT3DVar at  
550 both 32 cores (23.0 s vs. 26.3 s) and 64 cores (16.0 s vs. 23.6 s). This reversal results from the combined  
551 effect of PY3DVar's substantially fewer iterations (7.5 vs. 24.9; Fig. 12a) and its stronger parallel  
552 scaling at higher core counts. At 16 cores and below, FT3DVar retains the total-time advantage, as its  
553 faster per-iteration speed outweighs the difference in iteration count. The speedup of PY3DVar relative  
554 to FT3DVar (Fig. 13c) crosses unity between 16 and 32 cores and reaches 1.48 at 64 cores.

555       In summary, FT3DVar benefits from inherently faster single-core performance, while PY3DVar  
556 compensates through stronger parallel scalability and far fewer iterations. These two factors together  
557 enable PY3DVar to surpass FT3DVar in total assimilation time at 32 cores and above.

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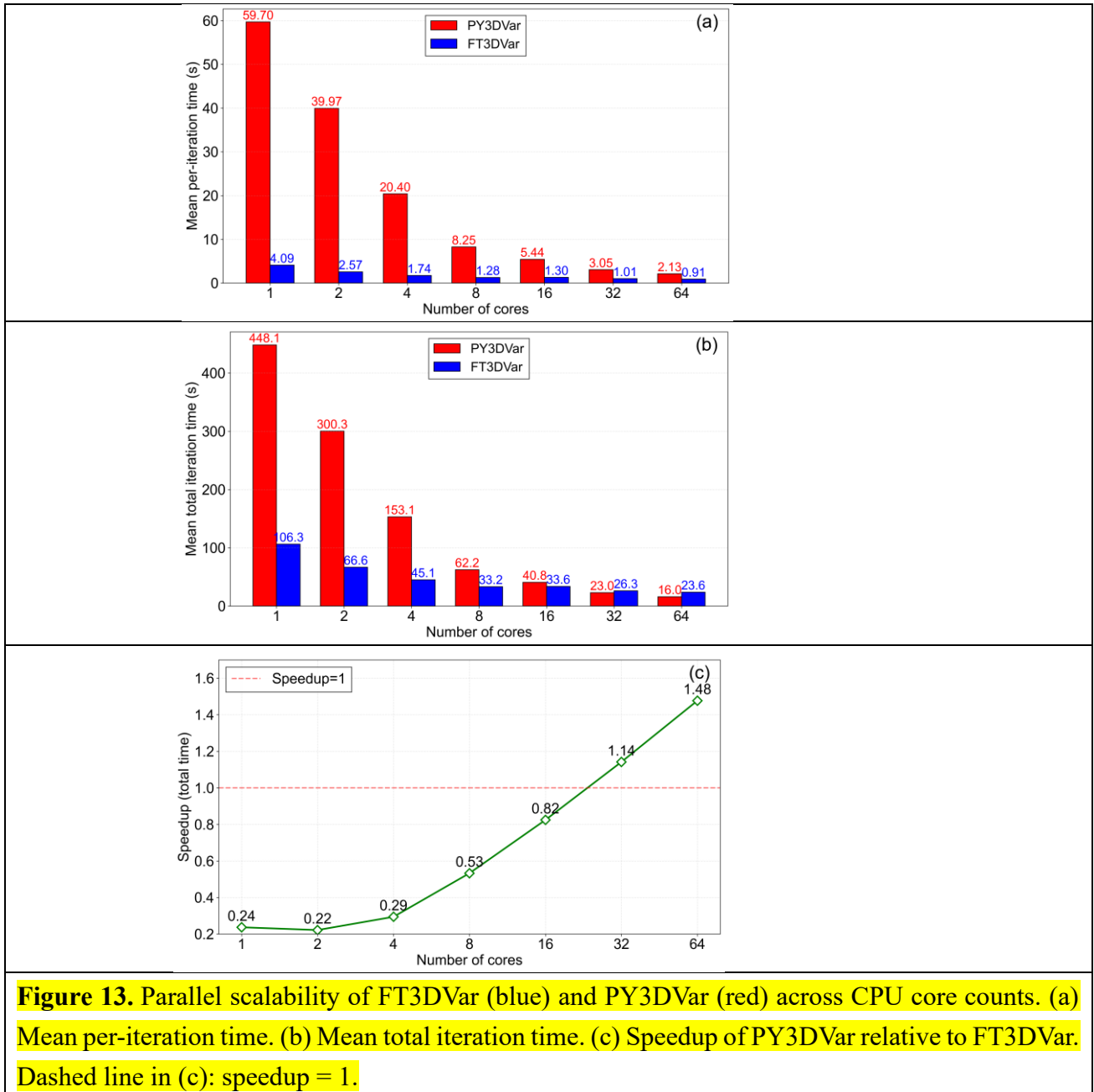


**Figure 13.** Parallel scalability of FT3DVar (blue) and PY3DVar (red) across CPU core counts. (a) Mean per-iteration time. (b) Mean total iteration time. (c) Speedup of PY3DVar relative to FT3DVar. Dashed line in (c): speedup = 1.

#### 4.5 Evaluation of 24-hour forecast performance

Fig. 14 and 15 display the 20-day averaged temporal evolution of the CORR, RMSE, and MAE for various pollutants during the 24-hour forecast period, initialized from the analysis fields of PY3DVar and FT3DVar, respectively. Comparing the forecast performance of the two systems reveals that the curves of the forecast metrics for all pollutants are fundamentally consistent in terms of morphological characteristics, temporal trends, and numerical values. This finding corroborates the previous results showing minor differences in idealized experiment increment fields, similar analysis field effectiveness in the real case, and comparable cost function convergence characteristics during iteration. It fully demonstrates that the PY3DVar system achieves performance consistent with the mature FT3DVar system not only in initial field assimilation but also in subsequent forecast applications, thoroughly verifying the reliability and practical utility of its assimilation results.

Regarding the evolution of forecast performance, although the initial field is significantly optimized by assimilation, this positive effect decays rapidly as the forecast lead time increases (Pagowski et al., 2010; Jiang et al., 2013; Li et al., 2013). This decay primarily stems from inherent model uncertainties, spatiotemporal errors in emission inventories, and inaccuracies in the simulated meteorological fields affecting pollutant dispersion and transport. These errors accumulate during the forecast process and gradually become dominant, thereby progressively diminishing the positive effect of the assimilation improvements.

It is noteworthy that the duration of the positive assimilation effect varies significantly among different pollutants. The improvement for SO<sub>2</sub>, CO, PM<sub>2.5</sub>, and PM<sub>10</sub> can be maintained for over 24 hours, whereas the positive effects for NO<sub>2</sub> and O<sub>3</sub> are shorter, lasting approximately 6 hours and 8 hours, respectively. This difference is mainly determined by the respective physicochemical properties and dominant life-cycle processes of the pollutants. SO<sub>2</sub>, CO, and particulate matter typically have longer atmospheric lifetimes, and their concentration distributions are more influenced by large-scale transport processes. Consequently, improvements in the initial field yield more lasting positive effects. In contrast, NO<sub>2</sub> and O<sub>3</sub> have strong photochemical reactivity. Their concentrations during daytime are more significantly governed by local photochemical processes and boundary layer variations, causing the initial field improvements from assimilation to dissipate quickly.

In summary, PY3DVar achieves assimilation accuracy comparable to FT3DVar and delivers sustained forecast improvements. Although these improvements decay with forecast time, the benefits for short-term forecasts are evident, particularly for longer-lived species such as SO<sub>2</sub>, CO, and particulate matter.

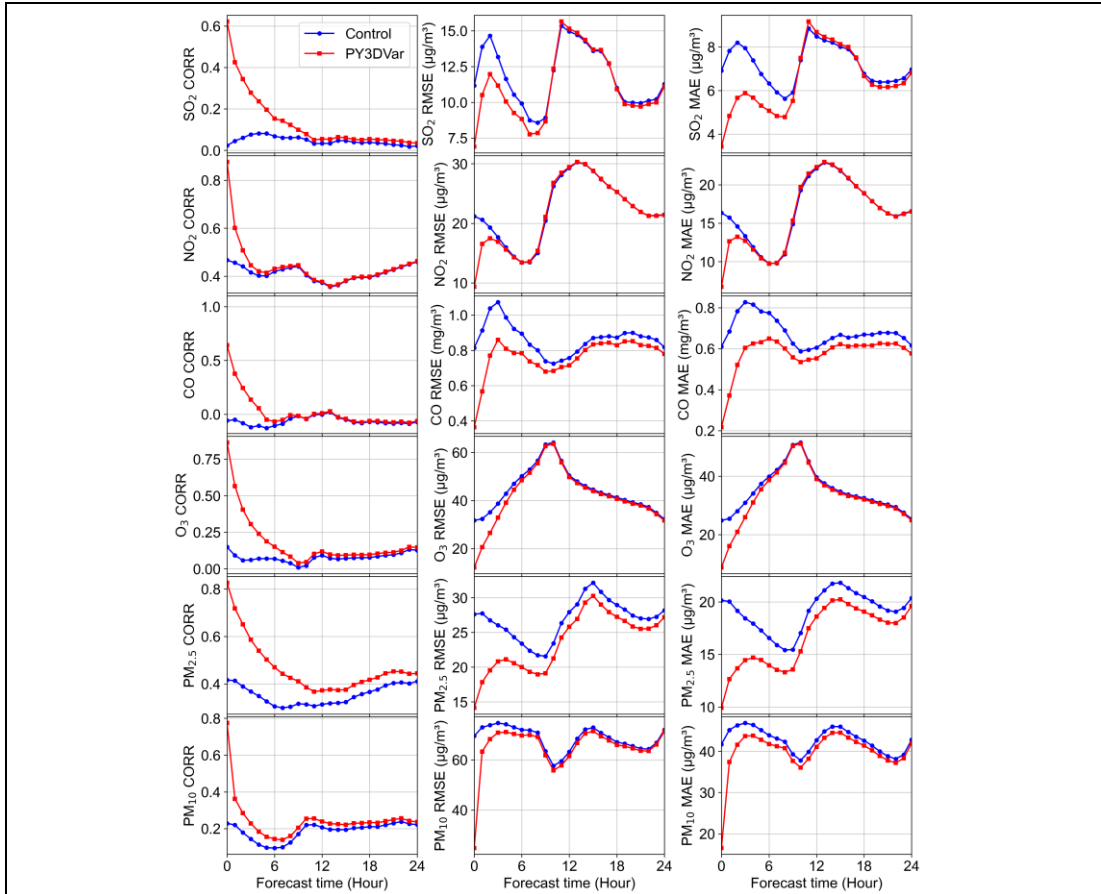


**Figure 14.** Temporal evolution of forecast performance for PY3DVar (red) and Control (blue) over the 24-hour period. From left to right: CORR, RMSE, MAE. From top to bottom: SO<sub>2</sub>, NO<sub>2</sub>, CO, O<sub>3</sub>, PM<sub>2.5</sub>, PM<sub>10</sub>.

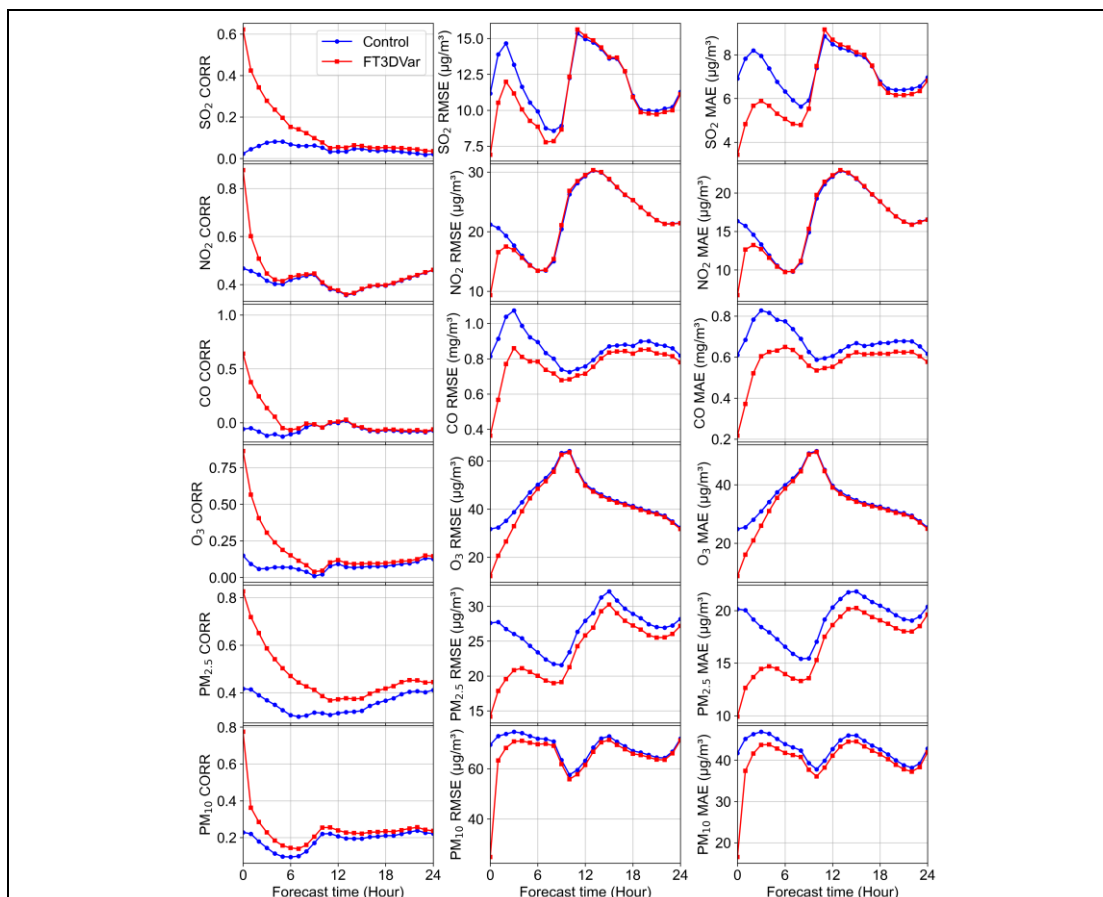


**Figure 15.** Temporal evolution of forecast performance for FT3DVar (red) and Control (blue) over the 24-hour period. From left to right: CORR, RMSE, MAE. From top to bottom: SO<sub>2</sub>, NO<sub>2</sub>, CO, O<sub>3</sub>, PM<sub>2.5</sub>, PM<sub>10</sub>.

## 5. Summary

Based on the three-dimensional variational (3DVar) assimilation principle and integrated with the PyTorch DL framework, this study successfully developed a GPU-accelerated atmospheric chemical 3DVar assimilation system (PY3DVar). The system is built upon the CMAQ-AERO5 aerosol scheme coupled with the WRF-Chem model. It consolidates 27 aerosol species into 12 control variables and directly designates four gaseous pollutants as additional control variables. The background error covariance matrix is constructed using the NMC method, enabling the simultaneous assimilation of surface concentrations of SO<sub>2</sub>, NO<sub>2</sub>, CO, O<sub>3</sub>, PM<sub>2.5</sub>, and PM<sub>10</sub>. At the algorithm level, the core computations replace traditional Fortran loops with PyTorch tensor operations. Leveraging the AD mechanism greatly simplifies the gradient derivation required for the minimization, and the PyTorch built-in L-BFGS optimizer, along with the tensorized computation, facilitates efficient minimization on both CPU and GPU hardware.

To comprehensively evaluate the system, this study conducted a series of experiments: an idealized test to verify physical correctness, 20-day real-case assimilation cycles using both FT3DVar and PY3DVar (GPU-accelerated), and parallel scalability assessments across 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, and 64 CPU cores. The system's performance was benchmarked against the traditional FT3DVar in terms of

assimilation accuracy, computational efficiency, and forecast skill. The idealized experiments demonstrate that PY3DVar propagates observation information through the background error covariance to generate Gaussian-distributed increment fields. These fields exhibit high consistency with those produced by FT3DVar, confirming the physical soundness and numerical correctness of the new framework. In the 20-day real-case assimilation experiments, PY3DVar substantially improved the model background field across all six target pollutants. Compared to the control run, the assimilation significantly enhanced the CORR between the analysis and observations, while notably reducing the RMSE and MAE. Furthermore, the final analysis fields produced by PY3DVar were nearly identical to those of FT3DVar. This agreement verifies that the GPU-based implementation achieves the same high assimilation accuracy as the traditional Fortran system. In terms of computational efficiency, PY3DVar demonstrates a clear advantage, which is most pronounced on GPU hardware. With FT3DVar on 64 CPU cores requiring an average of 26.2 s per assimilation cycle, the GPU-accelerated PY3DVar completes the same task in 1.2 s, a 22.2-fold speedup. The mean iteration count is correspondingly reduced from 24.9 (FT3DVar) to 7.5 (PY3DVar). This speedup results from two factors: the massive parallelism of tensor operations on the GPU, and the faster convergence of the PyTorch L-BFGS optimizer, whose Strong Wolfe line search yields a larger per-iteration reduction in the cost function than the Moré-Thuente scheme used in FT3DVar. On CPU platforms, although PY3DVar remains slower per iteration than FT3DVar across all tested core counts, its substantially fewer iterations and stronger parallel scaling enable it to surpass FT3DVar in total iteration time when 32 or more cores are used. Overall, PY3DVar's computational efficiency arises from the combination of hardware acceleration and an algorithmic advantage in convergence speed, ensuring competitive performance across diverse computing environments. Finally, short-term forecast experiments demonstrate that the positive impacts of assimilation persist over time. The improvements for SO<sub>2</sub>, CO, PM<sub>2.5</sub>, and PM<sub>10</sub> last for more than 24 hours, while those for NO<sub>2</sub> and O<sub>3</sub> maintain significance for over 6 hours. Importantly, the decay trends of these forecast improvements are consistent between the PY3DVar and FT3DVar, further validating the robustness and stability of the proposed system across different hardware architectures.

In summary, the PY3DVar system developed in this study achieves substantial improvements in computational efficiency compared to the traditional Fortran-based FT3DVar, while maintaining equivalent assimilation accuracy. This is accomplished through GPU-accelerated tensor computation and the faster convergence of the PyTorch L-BFGS optimizer. Additionally, the use of AD significantly simplifies code development by eliminating the need for manual adjoint coding. The results demonstrate that PY3DVar offers an efficient and practical solution for operational atmospheric chemical data assimilation.

653 *Code and data availability.* The WRF-Chem model source code can be downloaded at the WRF model  
654 download page (<https://www.mmm.ucar.edu/models/wrf>). The PY3DVar system was developed by the  
655 authors. The exact version of the aerosol PY3DVar system code and input data for supporting this  
656 paper are available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18401481> (You, 2026).

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658 *Author contributions.* Hancheng Ye conceived the study, developed the PY3DVar assimilation system,  
659 performed all numerical simulations and assimilation experiments, conducted the formal analysis, and  
660 wrote the original manuscript. Zengliang Zang and Wei You contributed to the methodology design  
661 and assisted in the validation and evaluation of the assimilation system. Yiwen Hu, Ning Liu and Yi Li  
662 discussed the assimilation effects of PY3DVar, provided supervision for the research, and reviewed  
663 and edited the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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665 *Competing interests.* The contact author has declared that neither they nor their co-authors have any  
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