



**A method to retrieve
super-thin cloud
optical depth**

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A method to retrieve super-thin cloud optical depth over ocean background with polarized sunlight

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Abstract

In this work, an algorithm that uses the polarization angle of the backscattered solar radiation to detect clouds with optical depth (OD) $< \sim 0.3$ is further developed. We find that at viewing angles within $\pm \sim 8^\circ$ around the backscattering direction, the p -polarized intensity that is parallel to the meridian plane of reflected light from surface is sensitive to and nearly linearly related to the optical depth of super-thin clouds. Moreover, our sensitivity study suggests that the p -polarized intensity at these viewing angles is not sensitive to the ocean surface conditions. Using this property of p -polarized intensity, super-thin clouds' optical depth can be retrieved.

1 Introduction

Super-thin clouds of optical depths smaller than ~ 0.3 cover $\sim 50\%$ of the globe (McFarquhar et al., 2000; Sun et al., 2011b, 2014) and play an important role in the radiation energy balance of the Earth (Dessler and Yang, 2003; Lee et al., 2009; Sun et al., 2011a, b), as well as in the remote sensing of aerosols (Sun et al., 2011b; Omar et al., 2013) and surface temperature (Sun et al., 2011a). These clouds are hard to be detected by space-borne instruments, thus complicate the retrieval of atmospheric constituents (Christi and Stephens, 2004). For example, the NASA Atmospheric CO₂ Observations from Space (ACOS) XCO₂ retrieval algorithm (O'Dell et al., 2012) defines clear-sky scenes for CO₂ retrieval as cases with atmospheric optical depth ≤ 0.3 , which may still have super-thin cloud contamination. When undetected, super-thin clouds can introduce significant bias errors in the atmospheric carbon data measured by the ACOS and by the Orbiting Carbon Observatory 2 (OCO-2) mission (Crisp et al., 2004) due to the scattering of incident light by these clouds. This scattering introduces uncertainties in the optical path length and thus the light absorption by CO₂, from which the CO₂ amount is retrieved. Unfortunately, the variation in surface background reflection means super-thin clouds generally cannot be detected by

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with greater spatial coverage for reliable detection of super-thin clouds have become critical issues for atmospheric remote-sensing practice.

In our previous work (Sun et al., 2014), we studied solar radiation backscattered from clouds with both the Polarization and Anisotropy of Reflectances for Atmospheric Science coupled with Observations from a Lidar (PARASOL) (Deschamps et al., 1994) data and an adding-doubling radiative-transfer model (ADRTM) (Sun and Lukashin, 2013). We found that the dominant backscattered electric field from the clear-sky Earth–atmosphere system is nearly parallel to the ocean surface. However, when clouds are present, this electric field can rotate significantly away from the parallel direction. We further discovered that this polarization feature can be used to detect super-thin cirrus clouds having an optical depth of only ~ 0.06 and super-thin liquid water clouds having an optical depth of only ~ 0.01 . Such clouds are too thin to be sensed using any current passive satellite instruments.

In this study, we further develop this algorithm not only to find super-thin clouds, but also to retrieve quantitatively their optical depth (OD). Note that this algorithm is developed as a means to remotely sense clouds that cannot be detected by other passive remote-sensing techniques, to help the remote sensing of optically thin atmospheric constituents and sea surface temperature that require clear-sky conditions. Any cases that include thick clouds which can be observed by conventional ways are out of the scope of this study. In Sect. 2, modeling results supplementary to the work in Sun et al. (2014) for the polarization feature of reflected sunlight from clouds are reported. The algorithm for retrieving OD of super-thin clouds with polarized sunlight is introduced in Sect. 3. We make concluding remarks in Sect. 4.

2 *P*-polarization feature of reflected sunlight from clouds

As a complement to the work in Sun et al. (2014), we further modeled the angle of linear polarization (AOLP) of reflected sunlight from clouds of different thermodynamic phases, particle shapes, and optical depth, over oceans. In the modeling, the

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atmosphere including the cloud and aerosol layers is assumed to be plane-parallel. The cloud is assumed to be a homogeneous single layer over ocean surface. The atmospheric profiles are from the US Standard Atmosphere (1976). The p -polarization feature of the reflected sunlight from clouds is our focus in this study. Note that “ p -polarization” here means that the polarized electric field is parallel to the meridian plane of the reflected light as shown in Fig. 1 of Sun and Lukashin (2013), and it is $\sim 0^\circ/180^\circ$ in term of the AOLP in this work.

Figure 1 shows the modeled AOLP of reflected sunlight as a function of viewing zenith angle (VZA) and relative azimuth angle (RAZ) at a wavelength of 670 nm from water clouds with different optical depth (OD) over ocean. In the ADRTM modeling, the ocean wind speed is assumed to be 7.5 ms^{-1} , the solar zenith angle (SZA) is 29.17° , and the aerosol optical depth (AOD) is 0.06. The C1 size distribution (Deirmendjian, 1969) is used for water cloud droplets. The water cloud is within an altitude range of 2–3 km. We can see that the near-backscatter p -polarization feature of the reflected light is evident even when the cloud OD is as small as 0.01. With the increase of the cloud OD, this pattern becomes stronger, and when cloud OD $> \sim 0.5$, it becomes saturated. Therefore, using the near-backscatter p -polarization feature of the reflected light, we can detect any water clouds, including subvisible ones with OD < 0.03 , over oceans.

Figure 2 shows the modeled AOLP of reflected sunlight as a function of VZA and RAZ at a wavelength of 670 nm from cirrus clouds. In the ADRTM modeling, the clouds’ ODs are set from 0.01 to 2.0, the ocean wind speed is assumed to be 7.5 ms^{-1} , the SZA is 29.17° , and the AOD is 0.06. The cirrus cloud is within an altitude range of 7–8 km. The size distribution of the ice particles in the cirrus clouds is from Heymsfield and Platt (1984) for the cloud temperature of -20 to -25°C . The cirrus clouds are assumed to be composed of solid hexagonal column ice crystals with aspect ratios as given in Fu et al. (1998). The calculation of the single-scattering properties of the ice crystals is described in Baum et al. (2000). We can see that similar to water clouds, cirrus clouds composed of hexagonal column ice crystals reflect sunlight with a significant near-backscatter p -polarization feature even when their OD is only ~ 0.01 . This means that

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if ice cloud particle shapes are not complex, the clouds can be detected by the near-backscatter p -polarization feature even if it is invisible with respect to standard passive remote sensing techniques. It is known that super-thin cirrus clouds more often appear in the tropical tropopause layer from 14.5 to 18.5 km (Fu et al., 2007; Virts et al., 2010), where the shapes of ice particles are more regular hexagonal columns since they form in-situ due to the large-scale slow uplift. Our results in Fig. 2 shows that these clouds could be well detected by the near-backscatter p -polarization feature of the reflected light. However, when cloud particle shapes are complex, such as a mixture of irregular particle shapes for tropical cirrus clouds as described in Meyer et al. (2004), Fig. 3 demonstrates that the near-backscatter p -polarization feature can hardly be seen for cloud ODs $< \sim 0.02$. Despite this limitation, the approach should be able to reliably detect ice clouds with a mixture of complex particle shapes when their OD $> \sim 0.06$ (Sun et al., 2014).

We briefly explained the background physics of the near-backscatter p -polarization feature of reflected sunlight from clouds in Sun et al. (2014). To further explain the physics behind the optical phenomenon, we refer to well-known aspects of reflection theory in geometric optics as illustrated in Fig. 4. When natural light interacts with a water surface, the reflected field tends to be polarized parallel to the surface (s -polarized) and the transmitted field tends to be polarized within the plane of incidence (p -polarized). This occurs in ray-tracing from large water droplets also, where the internal fields have a tendency to favor the p -polarization state. One manifestation of this can be seen in the glory, which occurs at near-backscattered angles and is p -polarized. If the particle strongly absorbs light, like some aerosols, the refracted light cannot emerge from the particle, and the p -polarization feature is not observed. In addition, if the particle shape/surface is complex, like ice particle aggregates, the refracted light has weaker constructive interference, resulting in a weaker p -polarization feature. As the particle size becomes small, like stratospheric liquid sulfur aerosols, the little phase differences occur between paths within the particle, scattering features become broader, and the glory feature disappears. Furthermore, if the background sur-

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face can be characterized by single-scattering facets, like a water surface, the dominant reflected electric field from the surface at the near-backscatter direction is parallel to the surface (i.e., s -polarized to the meridian plane of reflected light) (Sun et al., 2014), thus the p -polarization feature of the reflected light unambiguously indicates the presence of clouds. However, if the ground surface is not single-scattering-dominated, such as needle-leaf trees and grass lands, the electric field of reflected sunlight directly from the surface may not always be parallel to the surface, where the p -polarized light from the multiple-scattering surface introduces uncertainties in the method. Under this condition, the OD must be large for the cloud to be identified unambiguously. For example, our modeling shows that over the desert the OD should be larger than ~ 0.1 for a cloud to be detected by this method. This highlights some limitations of using reflected light's p -polarization feature to detect particulates in the atmosphere.

The results reported in Sun et al. (2014) and in this section clearly demonstrate that super-thin clouds can be reliably detected by the p -polarization feature of reflected sunlight from them. However, because the AOLP of reflected light (which can be derived from the ratio of polarized intensities Q and U) is not very sensitive to cloud optical depth, we must develop new algorithm for super-thin cloud optical depth's quantitative retrieval.

3 Method for retrieving super-thin cloud optical depth

Because of variations in surface reflections and atmospheric profiles, using total reflected intensity to detect super-thin clouds is generally difficult. Remote sensing atmospheric particulates using polarization measurements in the backscattering region can minimize surface, molecule, and absorbing gas interferences, thus increasing the sensitivity to atmospheric particulates, like super-thin clouds (Sun et al., 2014). With super-thin cirrus clouds as an example, the difference between Fig. 5a and b from our previous work (Sun et al., 2014) demonstrates that at viewing angles in the neighborhood of the backscattering direction, the clear-sky AOLP of reflected sunlight at

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a wavelength of $\lambda = 670$ nm can be used to locate super-thin clouds. In this study, we further find that the optical depth of super-thin clouds can be retrieved at viewing angles in the neighborhood of the backscattering direction. Following the previous discussion (Sun et al., 2014), we refer to these regions as the “glory angles” that are within $\pm \sim 8^\circ$ around the backscattering direction and include the blue and yellow spots in Fig. 5b. To exclude the effect of background reflection, we will use only the polarized component of the backscattered light parallel to the meridian plane of the reflected light (p -polarized light) for the OD retrieval. Since the clear-sky surface background reflection is only perpendicular to the meridian plane of the reflected light (s -polarized) in the neighborhood of the backscattering direction (Fig. 5a), the p -polarized component of the backscattered light is caused by super-thin clouds (Sun et al., 2014). Assuming that the linearly polarized electric field of the reflected light from the Earth–atmosphere system is E_p , we can express its p -polarized component as (see Fig. 1 in Sun and Lukashin, 2013),

$$E_p^\perp = E_p \cos(\text{AOLP}). \quad (1)$$

Therefore, the p -polarized reflectance is in the form

$$I_p^\perp = I_p \cos^2(\text{AOLP}), \quad (2)$$

where $I_p = \sqrt{Q^2 + U^2}$ denotes the polarized reflectance. For a clear-sky system in which the AOLP $\sim 90^\circ$ at our specific observation direction, $[I_p \cos^2(\text{AOLP})] \sim 0$. In a system containing super-thin clouds or heavy aerosols in which the AOLP $\sim 0^\circ/180^\circ$ in the observation direction, $[I_p \cos^2(\text{AOLP})] \sim I_p$. At this specific observation direction, the OD can be retrieved from the polarized reflectance and the AOLP as

$$\text{OD} = f^{-1} [I_p \cos^2(\text{AOLP})], \quad (3)$$

where $f^{-1}[\]$ denotes an function that will be determined by the OD and $[I_p \cos^2(\text{AOLP})]$ correlation curve from modeling results for various super-thin clouds.

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Figure 6 shows the modeled p -polarized reflectance at a wavelength of 670 nm as a function of VZA and at a RAZ of 177° for a clear and super-thin cloud scene over oceans with different wind speeds. In the modeling, the SZA is 29.17° and the AOD is 0.1. The size distribution of the ice particles in the cirrus clouds is from Heymsfield and Platt (1984) for the cloud temperature of -20 to -25°C . The cirrus cloud is assumed to be composed of hexagonal ice columns and is contained within an altitude range of 7–8 km. Results for clear oceans (dotted curves) and oceans with a cirrus layer with an OD of 0.1 (solid curves) are shown. Different colors represent different wind speeds: 2.5 ms^{-1} (black), 7.5 ms^{-1} (red), and 12.5 ms^{-1} (blue). We can see that for clear-sky oceans, $[I_p \cos^2(\text{AOLP})]$ varies with the ocean surface roughness (wind speed) and its magnitude is low. However, when there is a layer of thin cloud over the oceans, at the glory angles, $[I_p \cos^2(\text{AOLP})]$ is about one order of magnitude larger than the clear-sky values and has a very small dependence on the ocean surface conditions. This is very important, since surface conditions can vary widely, and a significant dependence would complicate the OD retrievals. Figure 6 demonstrates that $[I_p \cos^2(\text{AOLP})]$ is a robust quantity to use to retrieve the OD of optically thin clouds regardless of ocean surface conditions.

Figure 7 shows the modeled p -polarized reflectance at a wavelength of 670 nm as a function of VZA and at a RAZ of 177° for super-thin cirrus clouds over oceans with different ODs (solid curves). Also shown in the figure is the result for clear oceans (black dots). In the modeling, the SZA is 29.17° , the wind speed is 7.5 ms^{-1} , and the aerosol optical depth (AOD) is 0.1. The size distribution of the ice particles in the cirrus clouds is from Heymsfield and Platt (1984) for the cloud temperature of -20 to -25°C . The midlatitude cirrus cloud is assumed to be composed of a mixture of complex particle shapes as described in Baum et al. (2000) and to be within an altitude range of 7–8 km. We can see that with the increase of cloud OD, $[I_p \cos^2(\text{AOLP})]$ systematically increases at the glory angle region. When cloud OD approaches ~ 0.6 , $[I_p \cos^2(\text{AOLP})]$ becomes saturated and it is difficult to differentiate the OD of the respective clouds. Therefore, this OD retrieval method may only work well for thin clouds that have $\text{OD} < \sim 0.6$. From

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the same calculations of Fig. 7, the modeled p -polarized reflectance at 670 nm as a function of cloud optical depth (OD) at a VZA of 28.5° and a RAZ of 177° for super-thin cirrus clouds over oceans is displayed in Fig. 8. We can see that $[I_p \cos^2(\text{AOLP})]$ is nearly linearly related to cloud OD when the cloud OD $< \sim 0.6$. Therefore, based on this type of relationship, super-thin cloud OD can be retrieved from the $[I_p \cos^2(\text{AOLP})]$. The OD and $[I_p \cos^2(\text{AOLP})]$ correlation curve in Fig. 8 is just an example of the $f^{-1}[]$ in Eq. (3).

Since this algorithm uses near-backscatter polarized reflectance for retrieval of cloud optical depth, obviously it is sensitive to cloud thermodynamic phase or particle size and shape if the cloud is cirrus or mixed-phase cloud. Thus, $[I_p \cos^2(\text{AOLP})]$ must be some function of ice-cloud particle size and shape, or liquid water cloud size distribution. Reliably detecting the thermodynamic phase of the clouds is a prerequisite for a good retrieval using this method. Using the oxygen A-band (759–770 nm) (Min et al., 2014) $[I_p \cos^2(\text{AOLP})]$ to estimate the altitude of the clouds could help to determine the cloud thermodynamic phase. On the other hand, a detailed study of the effects of particle size and shape of the clouds on the polarized reflectance from them is also necessary in the application of this method. As an example, Fig. 9 shows the modeled p -polarized reflectance at a wavelength of 670 nm as a function of VZA and at a RAZ of 177° for super-thin cirrus clouds over oceans with different ODs. In the modeling, the SZA is 29.17°, the wind speed is 7.5 ms⁻¹, and the AOD is 0.06. The size distribution of the ice particles in the cirrus clouds is from Heymsfield and Platt (1984) for the cloud temperature of -20 to -25°C. The cirrus clouds are assumed to be within an altitude range of 7–8 km and composed of mixtures of complex particle shapes for typical midlatitude cirrus clouds as described in Baum et al. (2000) (open circles) and tropical cirrus clouds as described in Meyer et al. (2004) (solid curves), respectively. It can be seen that different mixtures of ice cloud particle shapes can result in different $[I_p \cos^2(\text{AOLP})]$. This can cause an uncertainty of ~ 0.05 in the retrieved cloud OD.

It is worth noting here that in Figs. 6, 7, and 9, for each case of the p -polarized reflectance curves of clouds, at the boundary of the glory angle region $[I_p \cos^2(\text{AOLP})]$

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active remote-sensing instruments is an obvious benefit. Moreover, the insights gained from identifying super-thin clouds can have significant impact on surface and atmospheric constituents remote sensing and shed greater light on the role clouds play in the larger Earth–atmosphere system.

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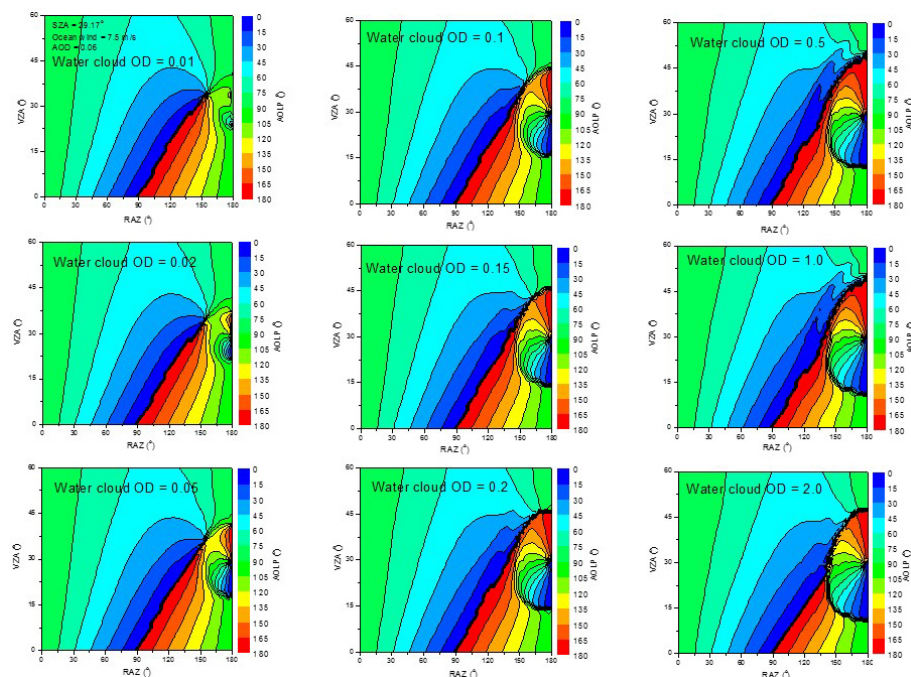


Figure 1. The angle of linear polarization (AOLP) of reflected sunlight at 670 nm from water clouds showing that even clouds with optical depths (OD) of 0.01 exhibit the near-backscatter p -polarization feature. In the ADRTM modeling, the clouds' ODs are set from 0.01 to 2.0, the ocean wind speed is assumed to be 7.5 m s^{-1} , the solar zenith angle (SZA) is 29.17° , and the aerosol optical depth (AOD) is 0.06. The C1 size distribution (Deirmendjian, 1969) is used for water cloud droplets.

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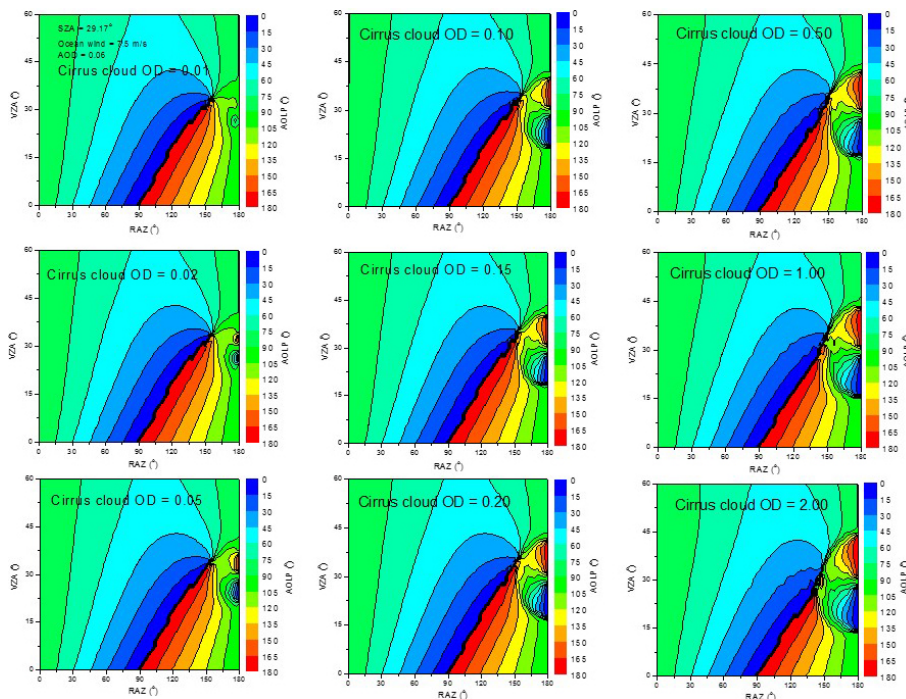


Figure 2. The modeled AOLP of reflected sunlight at a wavelength of 670 nm from cirrus clouds (hexagonal column particle shapes). In the ADRTM modeling, the clouds' optical depths (OD) are set from 0.01 to 2.0, the ocean wind speed is assumed to be 7.5 m s^{-1} , the solar zenith angle (SZA) is 29.17° , and the aerosol optical depth (AOD) is 0.06. The size distribution of the ice particles in the cirrus clouds is from Heymsfield and Platt (1984) for the cloud temperature of -20 to -25°C . The cirrus clouds are assumed to be composed of solid hexagonal column ice crystals with aspect ratios as given in Fu et al. (1998). Similar to water clouds, cirrus clouds composed of hexagonal column ice crystals exhibit the p -polarization feature even when their OD is ~ 0.01 .

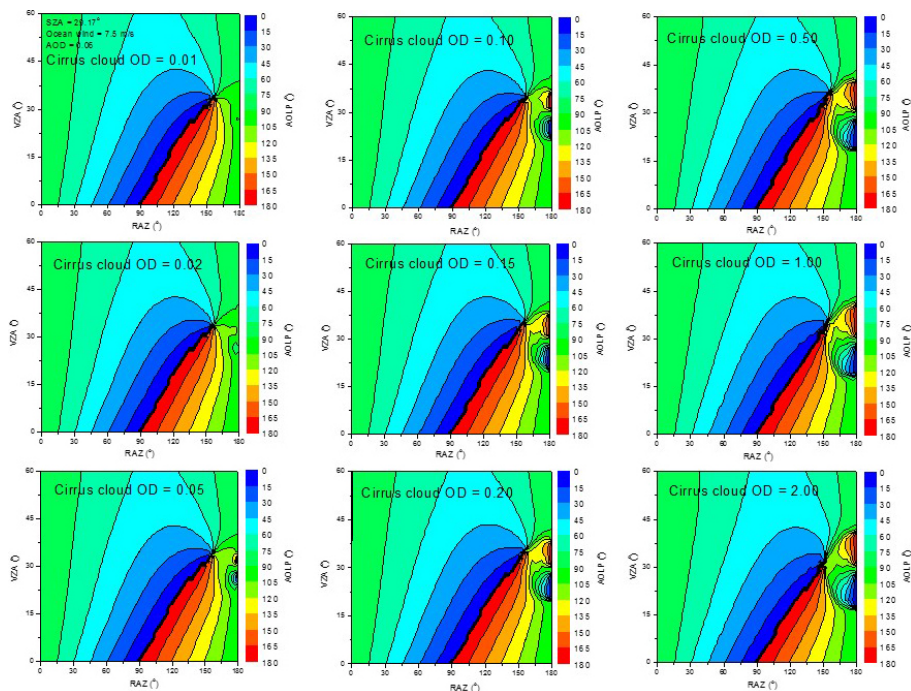


Figure 3. The modeled AOLP of reflected sunlight at a wavelength of 670 nm from cirrus clouds (complex particle shapes). In the ADRTM modeling, the clouds' optical depths (OD) are set from 0.01 to 2.0, the ocean wind speed is assumed to be 7.5 ms^{-1} , the solar zenith angle (SZA) is 29.17° , and the aerosol optical depth (AOD) is 0.06. The size distribution of the ice particles in the cirrus clouds is from Heymsfield and Platt (1984) for the cloud temperature of -20 to -25°C . The cirrus clouds are assumed to be composed of a mixture of complex particle shapes for tropical cirrus clouds as described in Meyer et al. (2004). Cirrus clouds composed of complex particle shapes crystals exhibit the p -polarization feature when their OD is > 0.06 .

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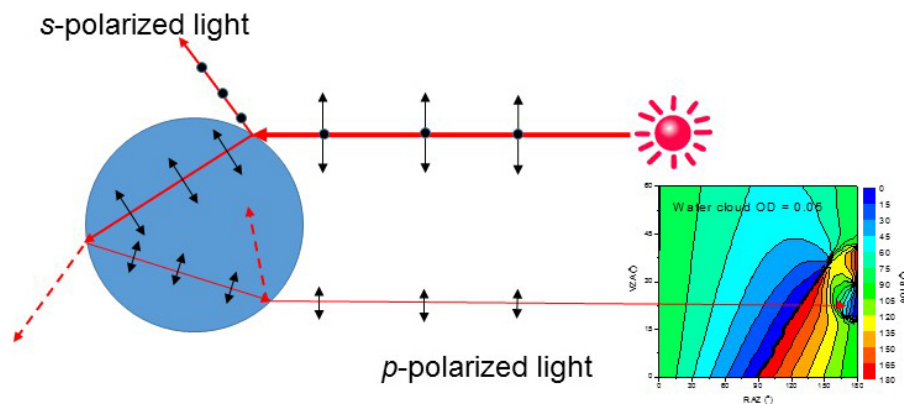


Figure 4. Illustration of the physics for the near-backscatter *p*-polarization feature of the reflected light from clouds.

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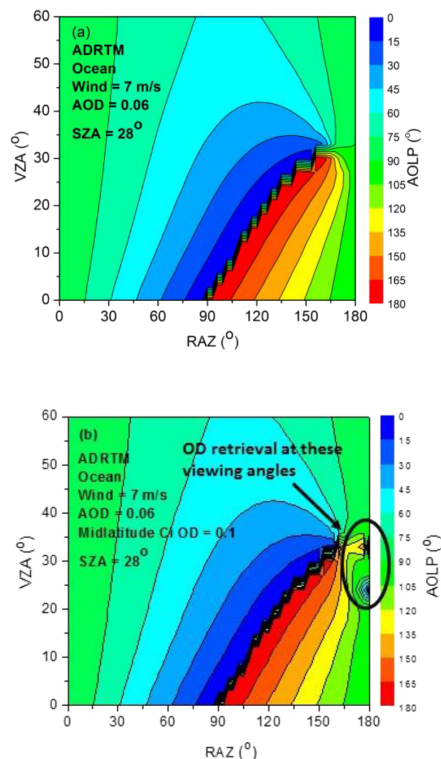


Figure 5. The modeled AOLP at a wavelength of 670 nm as a function of viewing zenith angle (VZA) and relative azimuth angle (RAZ) from (a) the ADRTM for clear-sky oceans and (b) the ADRTM for oceans with a layer of super-thin clouds. In the modeling, the solar zenith angle (SZA) is 28°, ocean wind speed is 7 ms⁻¹, the sea-salt aerosol optical depth (AOD) is 0.06, and a layer of midlatitude cirrus cloud with an optical depth of 0.1 is assumed with an altitude range of 7–8 km. The difference of (a) and (b) shows the effect of super-thin clouds on the reflected sunlight's AOLP. This figure is reproduced from Sun et al. (2014).

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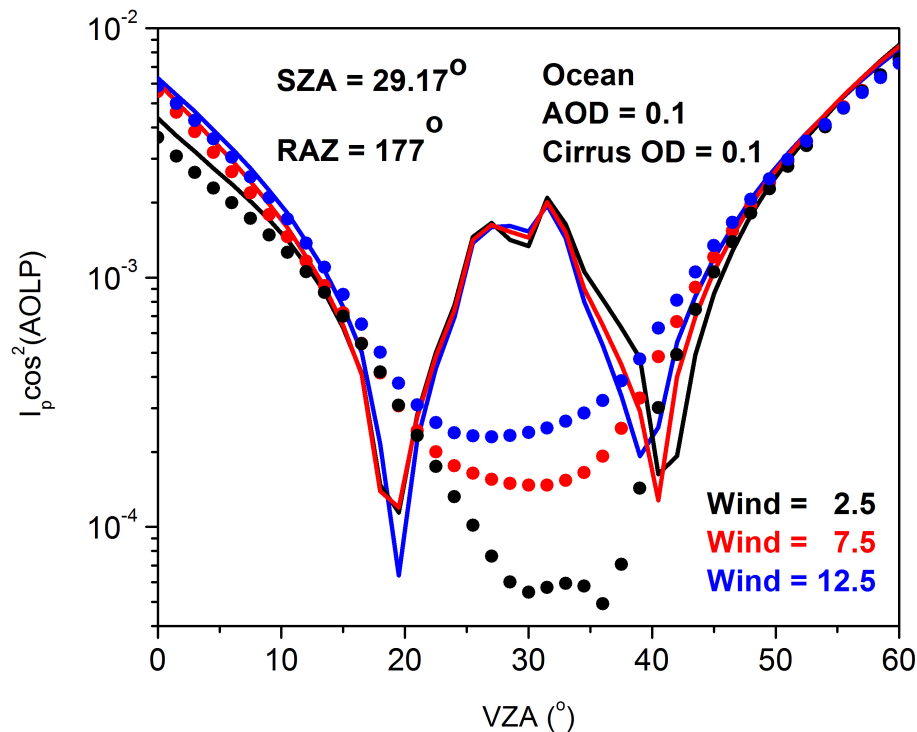


Figure 6. Modeled perpendicularly polarized reflectance at a wavelength of 670 nm as a function of viewing zenith angle (VZA) and at a relative azimuth angle (RAZ) of 177° for clear and super-thin clouds over oceans with different wind speeds. In the modeling, the solar zenith angle (SZA) is 29.17° , and the aerosol optical depth (AOD) is 0.1. Results for clear oceans (dots) and oceans with a cirrus layer with an optical depth (OD) of 0.1 (solid curves) are shown. The size distribution of the ice particles in the cirrus clouds is from Heymsfield and Platt (1984) for the cloud temperature of -20 to -25°C . The cirrus clouds are assumed to be composed of hexagonal ice columns with aspect ratios as given in Fu et al. (1998).

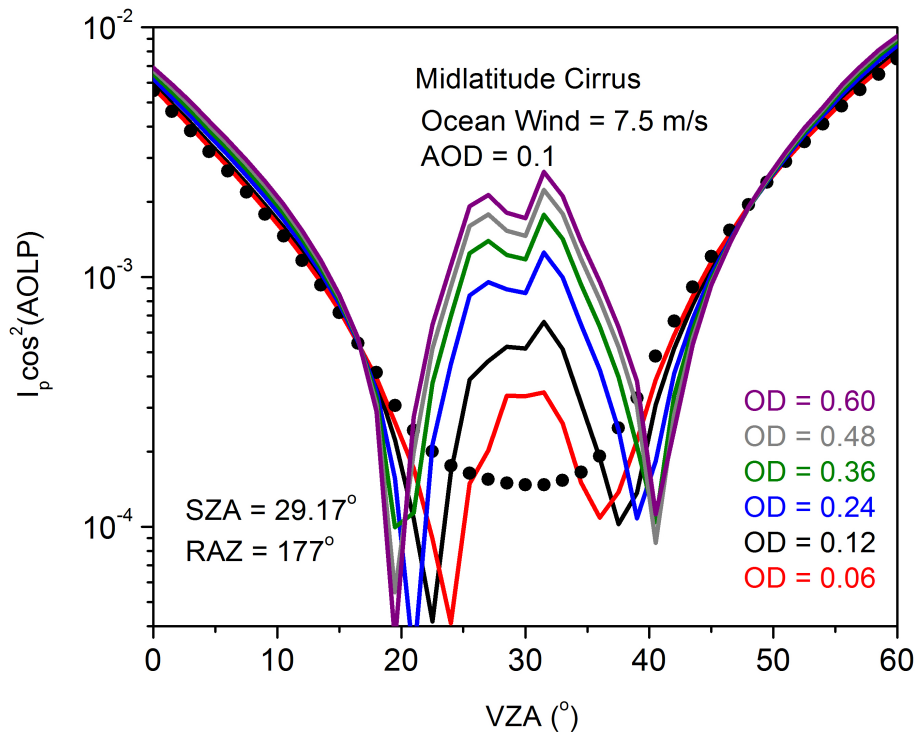


Figure 7. Modeled perpendicularly polarized reflectance at a wavelength of 670 nm as a function of viewing zenith angle (VZA) and at a relative azimuth angle (RAZ) of 177° for super-thin cirrus clouds over oceans with different optical depth (OD) (solid curves). Also shown in the figure is the result for clear oceans (black dots). In the modeling, the solar zenith angle (SZA) is 29.17°, the wind speed is 7.5 ms⁻¹, and the aerosol optical depth (AOD) is 0.1. The size distribution of the ice particles in the cirrus clouds is from Heymsfield and Platt (1984) for the cloud temperature of -20 to -25°C. The midlatitude cirrus clouds are composed of a mixture of complex particle shapes as described in Baum et al. (2000). These results suggest that the OD retrieval method may only work well for thin clouds which have OD <~ 0.6.

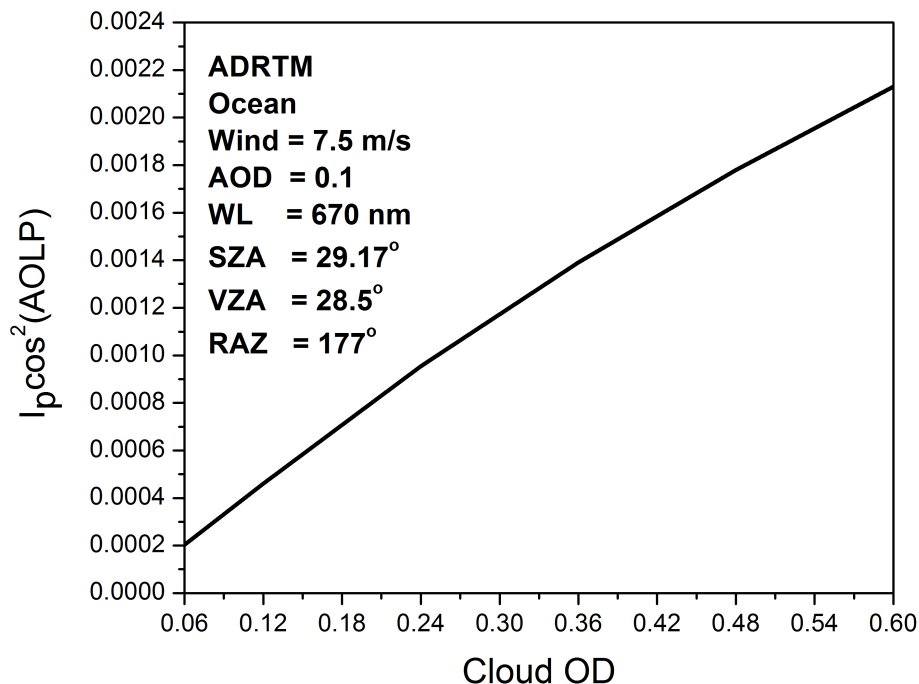


Figure 8. Modeled perpendicularly polarized reflectance at a wavelength of 670 nm as a function of cloud optical depth (OD) at a viewing zenith angle (VZA) of 28.5° and a relative azimuth angle (RAZ) of 177° for super-thin cirrus clouds over oceans. The solar zenith angle (SZA) is 29.17° , the wind speed is 7.5 ms^{-1} , and the aerosol optical depth (AOD) is 0.1. The size distribution of the ice particles in the cirrus clouds is from Heymsfield and Platt (1984) for the cloud temperature of -20 to -25°C . The midlatitude cirrus clouds are composed of a mixture of complex particle shapes as described in Baum et al. (2000). This figure shows the nearly linearly relationship between cloud OD and AOLP for $\text{OD} < 0.6$.

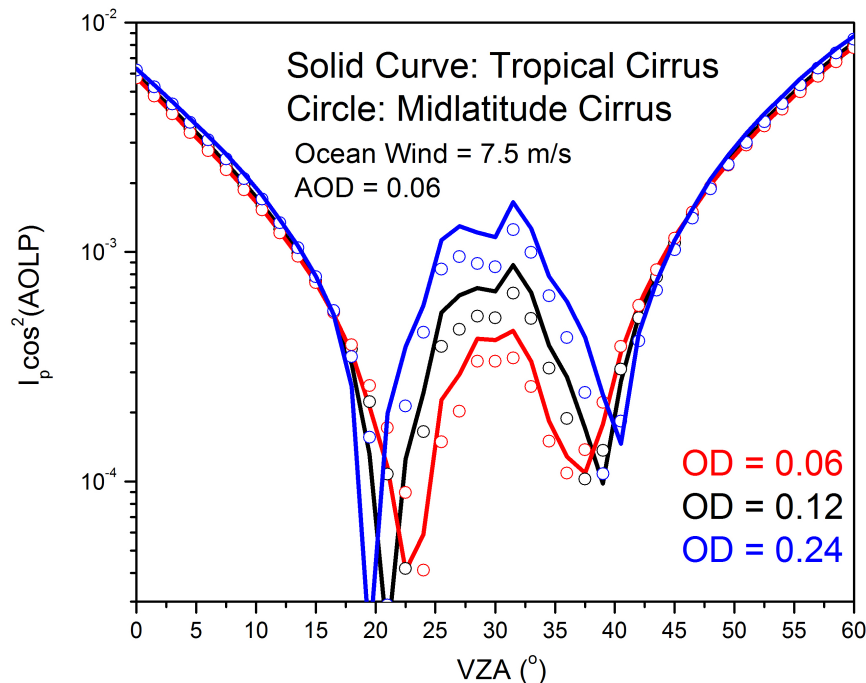


Figure 9. Modeled perpendicularly polarized reflectance at a wavelength of 670 nm as a function of viewing zenith angle (VZA) and at a relative azimuth angle (RAZ) of 177° for super-thin cirrus clouds over oceans with different optical depth (OD). In the modeling, the solar zenith angle (SZA) is 29.17° , the wind speed is 7.5 m s^{-1} , and the aerosol optical depth (AOD) is 0.06. The size distribution of the ice particles in the cirrus clouds is from Heymsfield and Platt (1984) for the cloud temperature of -20 to -25°C . The clouds are composed of mixtures of complex particle shapes for typical midlatitude cirrus clouds as described in Baum et al. (2000) (open circles) and tropical cirrus clouds as described in Meyer et al. (2004) (solid curves), respectively. This illustrates that with inadequate knowledge of cloud particle shapes uncertainties of up to ~ 0.05 in the retrieved cloud OD can be obtained.