Measurement Report: Wintertime new particle formation in the rural area of North China Plain: influencing factors and possible formation mechanism

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Abstract:

The high concentration of fine particles as well as gaseous pollutants makes polluted areas, such as the urban setting of North China Plain (NCP) of China, a different environment for NPF compared to many clean regions. Such conditions also hold for other polluted environments in this region, for instance, the rural area of NCP, yet the underlying mechanisms for NPF remain less understood owing to the limited observations of particles in the sub-3nm range. Comprehensive measurements, particularly covering the particle number size distribution down to 1.3 nm, were conducted at a rural background site of Gucheng (GC) in the North China Plain (NCP) from 12 November to 24 December in 2018. Five NPF events during the 39 effective days of measurements for the campaign were identified, with

the mean particle nucleation rate ($J_{1.3}$) and growth rate ($GR_{1.3\text{-}2.4}$) were 22.0 $cm^{-3}\cdot s^{-1}$ and 3.9 $nm\cdot h^{-1}$, respectively. During these five days, NPF concurrently occurred at an urban site in Beijing. Sharing similar sources and transport paths of air masses arriving at our site to that of urban Beijing, we hypothesis that NPF events during these days in this region might be a regional phenomenon. The simultaneous occurrence of NPF in both places implies that H_2SO_4-amine nucleation, concluded for urban Beijing there, could probably be the dominating mechanism for NPF at our rural site. The higher concentration of sulfuric acid during many non-event days compared to that of event days indicates that the content of sulfuric acid may not necessarily lead to NPF events under current atmosphere. Only when the condensation sink or coagulation sink was significantly lowered, atmospheric NPF occurred, implying that CS or CoagS are the dominating factor controlling the occurrence of NPF for present rural environment of NCP, being quite similar to the feature at urban Beijing.

Keywords: new particle formation, particle number size distribution, condensational sink, nucleation mechanism.

1. Introduction

Atmospheric new particle formation (NPF) is a major source of the global particles in terms of number concentration and size distribution (Kulmala et al., 2004) and is considered to contribute up to half of the global cloud condensation nuclei (CCN) budget in the lower troposphere (Spracklen et al., 2006; Dunne et al., 2016). In general, NPF consists of two consecutive processes: a) the formation or nucleation of molecular clusters by low-volatile gaseous substances, and b) their subsequent growth to detectable sizes or even larger, at which these particles may act as CCN or contribute to the particle mass concentration (Kulmala et al., 2000; Zhang et al., 2012).

Numerous laboratory measurements and field studies have shown that sulfuric acid molecules (H_2SO_4) are one of the key precursors to form molecular clusters for nucleation (Nieminen et al., 2010; Sipilä et al., 2010; Kirkby et al., 2011; Riccobono et al., 2014; Stolzenburg et al., 2020). However, these H_2SO_4 clusters relevant to atmospheric nucleation are typically quite small, i.e., with diameters below 1.5 nm, at which the detection efficiency of traditional instruments specific for NPF was usually unsatisfactory (Kulmala et al., 2013). This had led to large uncertainties in the measured formation rate of newly formed particles and thus required precise measurements of these clusters or particles down to sub-3 nm. Upon recently, progress such as the use of a particle size magnifier (PSM) (Vanhanen et al., 2011; Xiao et al., 2015), a neutral cluster and air ion spectrometer (NAIS) (Mirme and Mirme, 2013) and a chemical ionization atmospheric pressure interface time of-flight mass spectrometer (CI-APi-TOF) (Jokinen et al., 2012) make it possible to directly measure the number concentration of clusters in the 1-3 nm size range. Benefit from these novel techniques, observations have found that the growth of H_2SO_4 clusters would be significantly promoted after stabilized by other precursors like amines, ammonia or iodine species (Berndt et al., 2010; Kirkby et al., 2011; Almeida et al., 2013; Riccobono et al., 2014; Kürten et al., 2016; Sipilä et al., 2010). Furthermore,

oxidation products from volatile organic compounds, for instance, highly oxidized organic compounds, were suggested to be important contributors to atmospheric nucleation (Ehn et al., 2014; Bianchi et al., 2016; Kirkby et al., 2016; Tröstl et al., 2016).

The North China Plain (NCP) of China, has been suffering heavily from the highly complex air pollution since decades (Ma et al., 2016; Shen et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2020), owing to the high emissions or formation of different pollutants such as SO_2, NH_3, VOCs as well as fine particles from various sources (Guo et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2015). Due to the high concentration of pre-existing particles, previous studies considered that in the NCP, less NPF would occur as the newly-formed particles would be scavenged much faster before growing. By contrast, atmospheric NPF was still frequently observed in this region (Chu et al., 2019; Deng et al., 2020; Cai et al., 2021), being more often than theoretically predicted (Kulmala et al., 2014), indicating that the underlying mechanisms for NPF in this area might be different, that those mechanism previously found for other environments might not be completely applicable. The higher concentration of these gaseous precursors makes this region an unique condition for NPF compared to relatively clean environments (Kulmama et al., 2016; Yu et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2017), further supporting the hypothesis of different formation mechanisms and thereby distinct features of NPF events in this region. These doubts concerning NPF in the NCP, however, still remain to be elucidated due to limitations of comprehensive measurements, particularly for rural areas of the NCP, where observations regarding NPF was even more rare.

In addition, with respect to those existing studies concerning NPF in the NCP, they mainly focused on the measurements of particles beyond 3 nm. Without applicable instruments, observations of new particles down to sub-3nm was still quite limited (Fang et al., (2020); Zhou et al., (2020)), causing large uncertainties in the measured characteristics of NPF for current region. To fill the gap of measurements of particles or clusters in the size range of 1-3 nm and further advance our understanding of NPF in this region, particularly in the rural area of NCP, we conducted a comprehensive measurement campaign at a rural background site in

the NCP during 12 November to 24 December, 2018. By obtaining the particle number size distribution over a wide diameter range (1.3 nm - 10 μm), we aimed to investigate the characteristics of NPF events at the rural site in NCP during wintertime, find out which factors govern the occurring of NPF compared to other regions of NCP such as the urban areas and explore the potential mechanisms for NPF in this area.

2. Experiment

2.1. Field measurements site

The measurements were conducted at Gucheng (GC) site (39°09'01.1"N 115°44'02.6"E), situated at an Ecological and Agricultural Meteorology Station (39°09' N, 115°44' E) of the Chinese Academy of Meteorological Sciences from 12 November to 24 December in 2018. The station is located in Dingxing county, Baoding city, Hebei Province, China, as seen in Fig.1 and surrounded by agricultural fields and sporadic villages. Being far from the urban and industrial emission areas, this site can be treated as a representative regional site in the northern part of NCP. More details about this site can be found in Lin et al. (2009) and Shen et al. (2018).

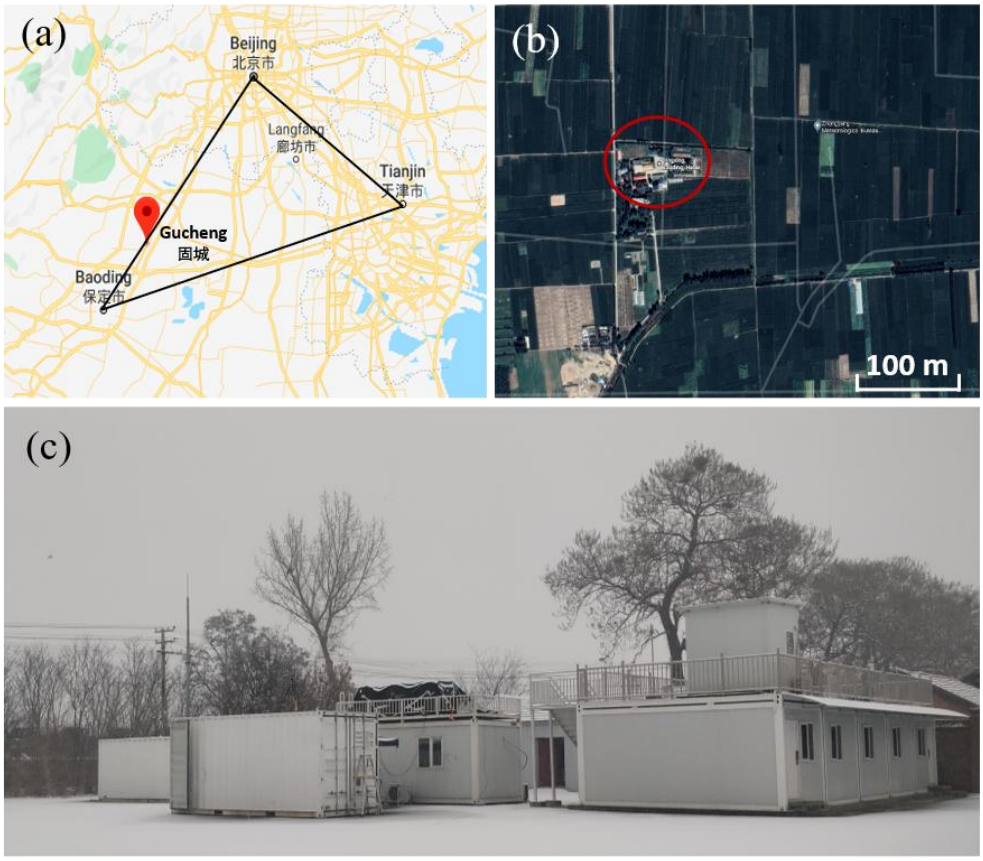

Figure 1. The upper panel shows the geographical location of the site (red dot and circled, © Google Maps), where our field measurements were carried out. The lower panel shows the measurement containers, where the sampling instruments were set up.

2.2. Measurements

2.2.1. Particle Number Size Distribution (PNSD) measurement

The aerosol sampling inlet was located on the rooftop of a measurement container, where room temperature was maintained at 22 ℃ (Fig1. c). The aerosol was sampled via a low-flow PM_{10} cyclone inlet, passed through a Nafion dryer, and directed to different instruments through stainless steel or conductive black tubings using an isokinetic flow splitter. The particle number size distribution of aerosol particles with diameters from 10 nm to 10000 nm was measured by using a scanning mobility particle sizer (SMPS, model TSI 3938) and an Aerodynamic Particle Size Spectrometer (APS, model TSI 3321) at a time resolution of around 5 minutes. The SMPS consisted of an electrostatic classifier (model TSI 3080) and a condensation particle counter (CPC, model TSI 3772).

2.2.2. Sub-3nm Particle Number Concentration measurement

Sub-3nm particles were measured with an Airmodus nano Condensation Nucleus Counter system (nCNC, model A11), consisting of a Particle Size Magnifier (PSM, model A10) and a butanol condensation particle counter (CPC, model A20) (Vanhanen et al., 2011). The Airmodus PSM uses diethylene glycol as the working fluid to activate and grow nano-sized particles. Specifically, the PSM was operated under the scanning mode that the diethylene glycol flow was varied between 0.1 to 1.3 $L \cdot min^{-1}$. Thus, the number size distribution of five different size bins, i.e., 1.3-1.4, 1.4-1.6, 1.6-1.9, 1.9-2.4, and 2.4-3.7 nm was obtained. Owing to the data quality, only the former four size bins data were used in this study. During this campaign, the duration of each scan was completed within around 240 s.

2.2.3. Pollutant gases, PM2.5 and meteorological parameters measurement

Concentration of trace gases, including SO_2, O_3, CO and NOx, was measured continuously during this campaign using different Thermo Fisher Analysers (model

43i-TLE, 49i, 48i, and 42i), respectively, at a time resolution of 1 minute. The concentration of oxygenated volatile organic compounds (OVOCs) was measured with an iodide-adduct long time-of-flight chemical ionization mass spectrometer (I-CIMS, Aerodyne, US) at a time resolution of 10-30 s for current study.

In addition, ambient meteorological conditions, such as wind speed, wind direction, temperature, relative humidity and solar radiation, were also regularly measured in another building, which is located about 20 meters to the southwest of the container, at the same observational site.

Furthermore, in order to investigate the influence of the origins and transport paths of air parcels to the local atmospheric compositions during NPF events, 72-h back trajectories of air masses arriving at 100 m above ground level at our GC site were analyzed using the HYbrid Single-Particle Lagrangian Integrated Trajectory (HYSPLIT) model for the classified event days.

2.3. Data processing

2.3.1. Formation Rate (J_{Dp}) and Growth Rate (GR)

J_{Dp} defines the formation rate of atmospheric particles at a certain diameter (D_P) and can be calculated according to Kulmala et al. (2012) as:

$$J_{D_p} = \frac{dN_{\Delta D_p}}{dt} + CoagS_{\Delta D_p} \times N_{\Delta D_p} + \frac{1}{\Delta D_p} GR_{\Delta D_p} \times N_{\Delta D_p}$$

where N is the particle number concentration between the diameter dp_2 and dp_1 (denotes as ΔD_P), $CoagS$ is the coagulation sink of particles, GR is the particle growth rate out of the selected size bin.

In our study, we used two independent methods to calculate GR. One is the maximum concentration method (Kulmala et al., 2012), being mainly for the PSM data. The other is based on the variation in geometric mean diameters of particle number size distribution, which is derived by fitting the PNSD into 2 or 3 log-normal modes using an automatic algorithm (DO-FIT model) (Hussein et al., 2005), mainly for SMPS data.

$$GR = \frac{ddp}{dt} = \frac{\Delta dp}{\Delta t} = \frac{dp_2 - dp_1}{t_2 - t_1}$$

where dp_1 and dp_2 were particle diameters at time t_1 and t_2, respectively.

2.3.2. Condensation Sink (CS) and Coagulation Sink ($CoagS$)

CS describes how fast the low-volatility molecules condense onto pre-existing aerosols and can be expressed as (Kulmala et al., 2012):

$$CS = 2\pi D \int_0^{dpmax} \beta_{m,dp} dp N_{dp} ddp = 2\pi D \sum_{dp} \beta_{m,dp} dp N_{dp}$$

where *D* is the diffusion coefficient of the condensing vapor, which is usually referred to sulfuric acid and $\beta_{m,dp}$ is the mass flux transition correction factor.

$CoagS$ represents how fast the freshly formed particles are lost to pre-existing particles through coagulation and can be calculated as :

$$CoagS_{dp} = \int K(dp, dp') n(dp) ddp' \cong \sum_{dp'=dp}^{dp'=max} K(dp, dp') N_{dp'}$$

where, $K(dp, dp')$ is the collision efficiency between particles at the diameter from dp to dp'.

2.3.3. Sulfuric Acid proxy (*SA* proxy)

SA was considered as one of the key precursors responsible for particle nucleation in the atmosphere. However, no direct measurement for the concentration of SA was available in current study. We therefore used a proxy variable to substitute the concentration of SA, as SA is mainly produced by the oxidation of SO_2 by OH radicals, which can be approximated by the UV-B intensity (Petäjä et al., 2009). Thus, the proxy concentration of SA can be calculated by Lu et al. (2019):

$$SA\ proxy = 0.0013 \cdot UVB^{0.13} \cdot [SO_2]^{0.40} \cdot CS^{-0.17} \cdot ([O_3]^{0.44} + [NO_x]^{0.41})$$

2.3.4. Classification of NPF event

Days of NPF events was classified according to the method proposed by Dal Maso et al.（2005) and Kulmala et al. (2012), in which (a) a burst in the concentration of sub-3 nm particles or clusters was observed and (b) these particles had a continuous growth over a time span of hours (e.g., usually more than ten hours). If no clear growth of these newly formed particles (sub-3 nm particles) can be identified, the day was classified as an undefined day. The day without both the burst of sub-3 nm particles and their subsequent growth was considered as a non-event day.

2.3.5. Indicator for the occurrence of NPF

Previously, McMurry et al. (2005)proposed a dimensionless criterion, *L*, to predict the occurrence of NPF events in the atmosphere. After being validated in diverse atmospheric environments (Kuang et al., 2010; Cai et al., 2017) , *L* has been used to investigate the governing factors for NPF events under typical atmospheric conditions. Upon recently, Cai et al. (2021a) proposed a new indicator, *I*, on the basis of *L*, which only considered H_2SO_4 to drive the growth. The new indicator was calculated by further taking into account the condensation of other species, for instance, amines and has been suggested to be a good quantitative representation for the occurrence of NPF after comparing with *L* for NPF events observed at urban Beijing (Deng et al., 2020). The detailed information to calculated *I* can be found in (Cai et al., 2021a).

3. Results and discussion

3.1. General characteristics of NPF at GC site

Figure 2 shows the time series of meteorological parameters (a: wind speed and direction, b: temperature and relative humidity) and aerosol properties (c: total surface and volume concentration, d and e: PNSD in the size range of 10 to 800 nm and particle number concentration in the range of 1.3 to 2.4 nm) during this field campaign. During our study, wind speed was typically quite low with an average of 1.18 $m \cdot s^{-1}$, indicating stagnant meteorological conditions for the limited dilution of air pollutants at the current site. The temperature and relative humidity (RH) show opposite diurnal variation over the observational period, with the highest temperature and lowest RH during daytime and vice versa during nighttime. The observed time series of concentration of different trace gases during current study is shown in Fig. S1. To be specific, the campaign-averaged concentration of CO, O_3, NO_X and SO_2 was 1394 ppb, 7 ppb, 83 ppb and 10 ppb, respectively.

According to the PNSD and PSM data, five days, with four of which having significant burst of sub-3 nm clusters as shown in Fig.2e, were classified as NPF events out of the total experimental period. It has to be noted that on the day of November 18, though PSM data was not available due to technical issues, clear growth of nucleation mode particles with a typical banana-shape PNSD was observed, lasting for more than 12 hours. These particles under the growth of such a long time should not be from traffic emissions or transported. Therefore, it was also classified as an event day in our study. Considering all these five NPF event, this corresponds to an NPF frequency of 12.8%, which was lower than those at an urban site (i.e., Beijing) in the same region during the same season Shen et al. (2018) (25.8%); Deng et al. (2020) (51.4%)). Similar findings were also observed in Yue et al. (2009) and Wang et al. (2013), that NPF frequencies were higher at the Beijing urban site than at the corresponding regional background or rural site. Yue et al. (2009) and Wang et al.

(2013) attributed this to the higher pollution level and correspondingly higher precursor content in the urban cities, leading to stronger NPF events there.

During our study, six days, with a slightly weak burst of sub-3 nm particles, were identified as undefined days as their formation and growth rate cannot be calculated accurately. For non-event days, we observed that during many of them some nucleation-mode particles with size above 10 nm did appear. However, we did not observe the burst of sub-3 nm clusters from the PSM measurements and moreover no clear growth of these particles can be identified. This indicates that these small particles probably are not from nucleation of H_2SO_4 with other species and their subsequent growth, but more likely local emissions (traffic exhausts) or long-range transported.

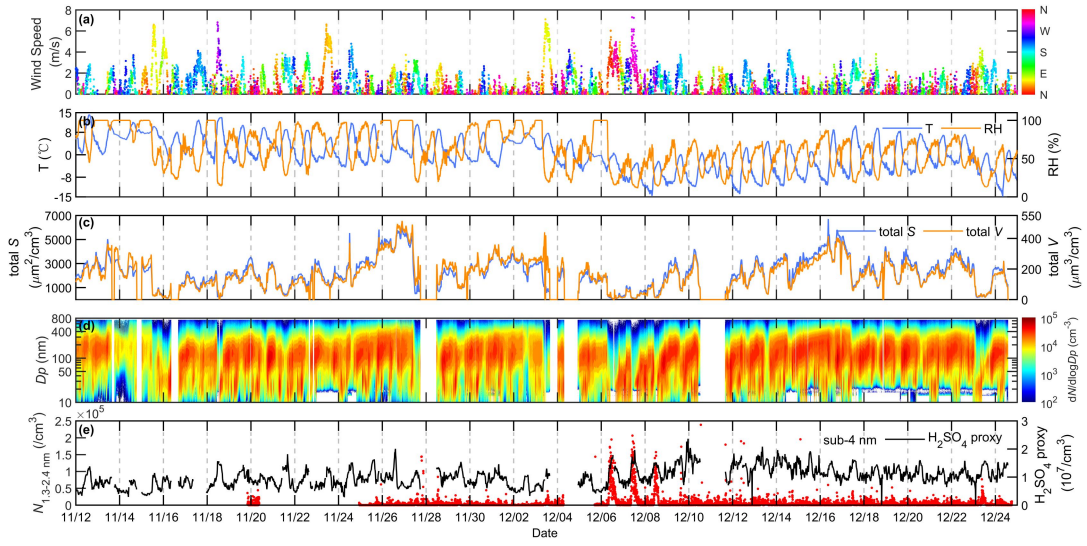

Figure 2. Time series of (a) wind speed and wind direction, (b) temperature, (*T*) and relative humidity (RH), (c) total particle surface and volume concentration calculated by using PNSD data, (d) measured PNSD in the size range of 10 - 800 nm, (e) particle number concentration in the range of 1.3 to 2.4 nm and H_2SO_4 proxy concentration during the entire measurement period (2018.11.12-2018.12.24). White portion indicates no data was available due to instrument maintenance or power failure. Note that white portion in the PNSD in the size range of 10 - 15 nm, indicating no available data, is due to the technical problems of our SMPS system; therefore data for that time period from a parallel SMPS covering sizes of 15 - 800 nm was used instead.

Figure 3 shows a typical NPF event on December 7 as an example. Northwest wind prevailed with elevated wind speed starting from around 8:00 o'clock, which was conducive to the diffusion of local pollutants, leading to a rapid decrease in CS

concurrently. At the same time, an obvious rise in H_2SO_4 concentration was observed, coinciding with a strong burst in the concentration of sub-3 nm clusters. Then, new particles with diameter larger than 10 nm, as shown in Fig. 3b, gradually formed by growth, exhibited as a visible banana shape in PNSD.

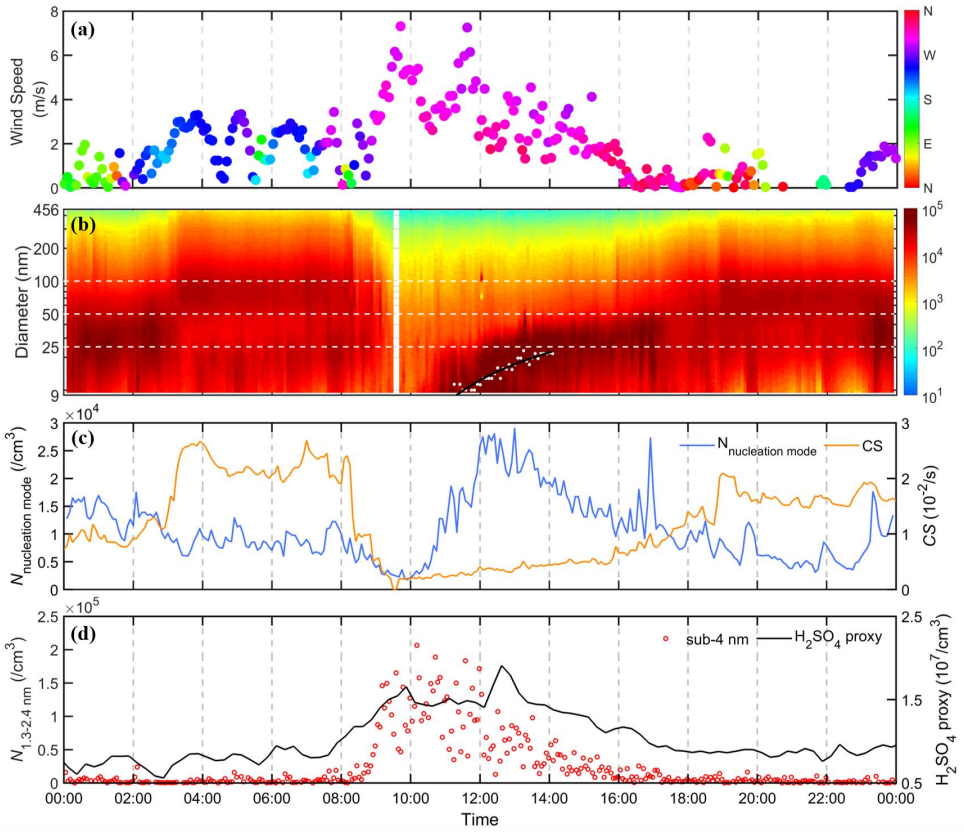

Figure 3. A case of NPF event on December 7 during this field campaign. Time series of (a) wind speed and wind directions, (b) the PNSD in the size range of 10 - 450 nm (The white dotted line represents the size with diameter at 25, 50, and 100 nm; black line represents the polynomial fit of the measured PNSD, (c) the particle number concentration of nucleation mode (9 - 25nm) and *CS*, (d) the number concentration of sub-3nm clusters and predicted concentration of sulfuric acid.

For all the identified NPF events, the formation rate of 1.3 nm ($J_{1.3}$) particles ranged from 6.0 $cm^{-3}\cdot s^{-1}$ to about 30.4 $cm^{-3}\cdot s^{-1}$ with an average value of 22.0 $cm^{-3}\cdot s^{-1}$ at our GC site during the measurement period. Note that most atmospheric formation rates reported in China were based on the measured formation rates at relatively larger size, i.e., 3-10 nm, which are so called the "apparent" particle formation rates. In order to derive the formation rates of critical clusters from the "apparent" particle formation rates(Kulmala et al., 2017), the nuclei GR or GR at

sub-3 nm is needed but usually remains unclear. Therefore, we focused more on the formation rate of particles at sizes below 3 nm in the following discussion. In principle, particle formation rate is inversely proportional to the CS, as the nucleation precursors or clusters would be scavenged more rapidly under higher CS conditions, leading to a slower nanoparticle formation with a lower *J*. However, as shown in Table 1, in spite of the higher CS, the particle formation rates at our site appear to be higher than those in clean environments. This kind of intensive NPF becomes more noticeable for those Chinese megacities, such as Shanghai, Beijing and Nanjing, having an even higher *J* and CS compared to that at our GC site. The most plausible explanation could be the higher abundance of nucleating precursors for NPF in those polluted atmospheres, which is indicated by the SA concentration, either measured in urban Shanghai and Nanjing or calculated in our study. To be specific, the mean SA proxy concentration during NPF at our GC site was around $1.4 \cdot 10^7$ cm^{-3}, a factor of around 30 higher than that at Hyytiälä in Finland (Nieminen et al., 2014). The SA concentration during NPF at Shanghai (Xiao et al., 2015) and Nanjing (Herrmann et al., 2014) was even higher, being around $4 \cdot 10^7$ cm^{-3}.

314 **Table 1.** Summaries of the parameters (average value) relevant for NPF event during wintertime in
315 China and other countries.

Station	Period	Frequency	J ($cm^{-3}·s^{-1}$)	*GR* ($nm·h^{-1}$)	*CS* ($10^{-2}·s^{-1}$)	*SA* ($10^{6}·cm^{-3}$)	Reference
GC [R]	2018.11.18	-	3.15 (J_{10})	4.3	4.7	12.5	This study
GC [R]	2018.12.06	-	29.7 ($J_{1.3}$)	1.8	0.7	14.4	This study
GC [R]	2018.12.07	-	30.4 ($J_{1.3}$)	4.1	0.8	14.7	This study
GC [R]	2018.12.08	-	21.8 ($J_{1.3}$)	8.1	2.7	13.5	This study
GC [R]	2018.12.23	-	6.0 ($J_{1.3}$)	1.2	1.6	14.3	This study
GC [R] (mean)	2018.11.12-12.24	12.8%	22.0 ($J_{1.3}$)	3.9	2.1	13.9	This study
Thissio [UB]	2015.8-2016.8, 2017.2-2018.2[a]	10.3%	1.55 (J_{10})	3.48	0.79	6.33	(Kalkavouras et al., 2020)
New Delhi [U]	2002.10.26-2002.11.9	53.3%	7.3 (J_3)	14.9	5.75	-	(Mönkkönen et al., 2005)
Panyu [U]	Winter of 2011	21.3%	0.89 (J_{10})	5.1	5.5	-	(Tan et al., 2016)
Shanghai [U]	2013.11.25-2014.1.25	21%	188 ($J_{1.34}$)	11.4	6.0	37	(Xiao et al., 2015)
Nanjing [U]	2011.11.18-2012.3.31	20%	33.2 (J_2)	8.5	2.4	45.3	(Herrmann et al., 2014)
Hongkong [U]	2010.10.25-2010.11.29	34.3%	2.94($J_{5.5}$)	3.86	0.8-6.2	9.17	(Guo et al., 2012)
Beijing [U]	2018.1.23-2018.3.31	51.5%	38 ($J_{1.5}$)	5.5	3.7	4.13	(Chu et al., 2021)
Ziyang [R]	2012.12.5-2013.1.5	23%	5.2(J_3)	3.6	7.4	6.7	(Chen et al., 2014)
Melpitz [R]	Winter of 2003-2006	3%	0.7 (J_3)	5.6	1.2	0.123	(Hamed et al., 2010)
Melpitz [R]	Winter of 1996-1997	10%	4.9(J_3)	4.1	0.9	0.259	(Hamed et al., 2010)
Pingyuan [R]	2017.11.3-2018.1.20	39.2%	164.2 ($J_{1.6}$)	3.9	1.9	2.45	(Fang et al., 2020)
Xinken [R]	2004.10.3-2004.11.5	25.9%	0.5-5.4(J_3)	2.2.-19.8	-	-	(Liu et al., 2008)
Solapur [R]	2018.10-2019.2	28.9%	0.22-10.07(J_{15})	1.2-13.8	0.6-3	-	(Varghese et al., 2020)
Cyprus [RB]	2018.1-2018.2	69%	16.4($J_{1.5}$)	9.97	1.2	-	(Baalbaki et al., 2020)
SEAS [O]	Winter of 2018	5%	2.95(J_{10})	14.35	4.5	-	(Kompalli et al., 2020)
SMEAR II [B]	Winter of 1996-2003	24.2%	0.2-1.1(J_3)	0.29-3.7	0.05-0.35	0.53	(Dal Maso et al., 2005)

316 SEAS: the southeastern Arabian Sea

317 R: rural site UB: urban background site RB: rural background site U: urban site. B: background site O: ocean

318 site

319 a: only in wintertime -: no number

Although the formation rate of 1.3 nm particles is relatively high, the newly-formed particles at our GC site usually cannot grow into very large particles within a short time, indicative by their low GR. The average value of $GR_{1.3\text{-}2.4}$ and $GR_{9\text{-}15}$ at our site was 0.5 $nm \cdot h^{-1}$ and 3.9 $nm \cdot h^{-1}$, respectively, being generally lower than many clean environments ($GR_{1\text{-}3}$ of 0.9 $nm \cdot h^{-1}$ for Hyytiälä (Kulmala, 2013), of 5.1 $nm \cdot h^{-1}$ for Jungfraujoch (Boulon et al., 2010)), but similar to those at urban Beijing (Chu et al., 2021) and rural Pingyuan (Fang et al., 2020). This could be attributed by the high CS or CoagS at those polluted environments as the growth of small particles is limited, which are more vulnerable to the coagulation scavenging. However, despite the high CoagS, the observed GR at Shanghai and Nanjing was still exceptionally high. This discrepancy suggests that besides the high concentration of precursors, mainly H_2SO_4, in polluted environments including both rural and urban sites, other precursors with different efficiency for nanoparticle growth, and other involving mechanisms, for instance, multiphase reactions, may all contribute to the nanoparticle growth, yet to be elucidated.

3.2. Potential mechanisms for NPF events in the rural NCP

To further understand the dominating nucleation mechanism in the rural atmosphere of NCP in China, we plotted the measured formation rate of 1.3 nm particles ($J_{1.3}$) against the simulated H_2SO_4 concentration and compared the results to previous studies conducted in different environments, as shown in Fig. 4. As illustrated by the significant correlation between the concentration of sulfuric acid and the particle formation rates, sulfuric acid is considered to be the driving species in the initial steps of NPF as confirmed conventionally. However, the obtained $J_{1.3}$-H_2SO_4 relationship for current environment appeared to deviate largely from those obtained by other studies. If only referring to the slope of the $J_{1.3}$-H_2SO_4 relationship, our results seem to approximate most to the ones measured by these CLOUD (The Cosmics Leaving OUtdoor Droplets chamber) experiments based on the mechanism of H_2SO_4-DMA nucleation. However, without the direct measurements of

other potential precursors, the molecules stabilizing H_2SO_4 clustering still remain unclear.

Comparing the particle formation rates reported in different environments in China, our results were of the similar magnitude as that in Beijing (Cai et al., 2021b), an urban site in the NCP. It has to be noted that their study was conducted during a much longer time and completely covered the measurement period of our study. More importantly, during the five days of events in our study, NPF concurrently occurred at their measurement site (Liu et al., 2020). Additionally, for these five event days air masses arriving at our site followed similar transport paths to that at urban Beijing (see Fig. S2 as an example in the supplement), both originating from Siberia areas, where concentration of gaseous pollutants and particulate matter was typically quite low, through the northwest of the observational sites. Taking both evidence, we hypothesis that NPF events during these days in this area might be a regional phenomenon, sharing the same or similar nucleation mechanism. Cai et al. (2021) and Yan et al. (2021) further concluded that H_2SO_4-DMA was the dominating nucleation mechanism for urban Beijing with an additional support from the measured C2-amine concentration. Considering the similarities between these two sites, we speculated that the clustering of H_2SO_4 with DMA may also dominate the nucleation process at our site during winter, though future work is needed to verify current hypothesis.

On the other hand, we noticed that our results deviate significantly from the measured formation rate at Pingyuan (Fang et al., 2020), another rural site in the NCP. They concluded that neither H_2SO_4-NH_3 nor H_2SO_4-DMA mechanisms could fully explain their observed particle formation rate but suggested that gaseous dicarboxylic acids were the dominating species for the initial step of H_2SO_4 clustering under diacid-rich environment. Being likewise the rural environment of NCP, we cannot completely rule out the contribution of dicarboxylic acids to the H_2SO_4 stabilizing. However, as illustrated in Fig. S4, the concentration of these four dicarboxylic acids during NPF events were in general lower than that during non-event days. Furthermore, during the daytime of events days when NPF was

typically initiated, the signals of these diacids obtained from the I-CIMS did not show clear increase, unlike sulfuric acid, but rather elevated during the night time (see Fig. S5), being obviously different from the case of Pingyuan. Hence, the involvements of diacids during the initial steps of nucleation under current rural atmosphere might not hold. This statement does not necessarily mean that our previous inference was incorrect, but on the other hand, provides some hints that though NPF events in the NCP is regional, there might be no uniform theory but multiple mechanisms coexisting to explain its feature with the dominating one varying upon different emission patterns or meteorological conditions.

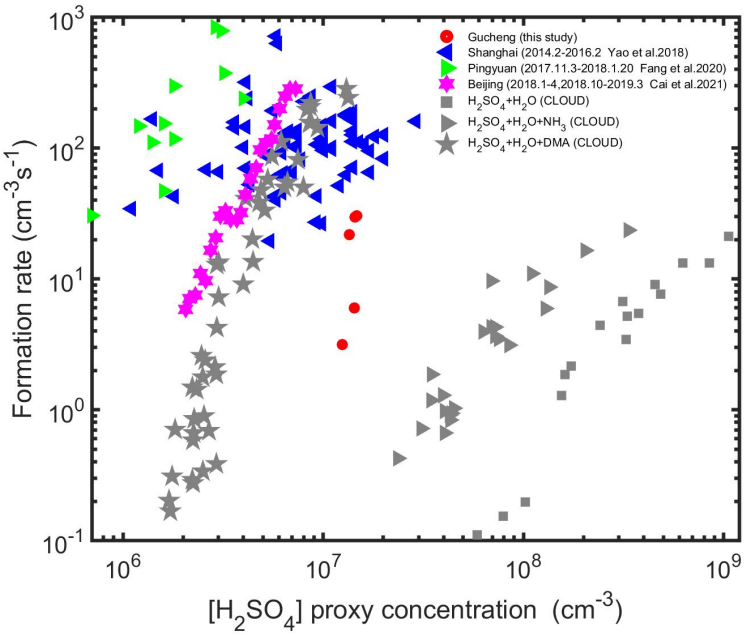

Figure 4. The particle formation rate ($J_{1.3}$) as a function of H_2SO_4 concentration for our study as well as for urban Shanghai (Yao et al., 2018), Beijing (Cai et al., 2021b), rural Pingyuan (Fang et al., 2020) and CLOUD measurements. Gray square, triangle, pentagram, and diamond represents the CLOUD data for H_2SO_4+H_2O, H_2SO_4+H_2O+NH_3, H_2SO_4+H_2O+DMA (Kirkby et al. (2011) and Riccobono et al. (2014)), where DMA represents dimethylamine.

3.3 Governing factors for the occurrence of NPF in rural NCP

The high concentration of SO_2, NH_3, NO_X, VOCs (Chu et al., 2019) as well as fine particles makes the NCP of China an unique condition for NPF compared to many other environments. In principle, the competition between how fast the

newly-formed clusters grow and how fast they are scavenged determines whether NPF will occur or not in the atmosphere. However, in the NCP, the concentration of SA was typically quite high, probably reaching its maximum rate to form clusters. Thus, CS or CoagS becomes the dominant factor controlling the occurrence of NPF. This was partly confirmed by existing observations, for instance, Cai et al. (2021) found that H_2SO_4 was high enough in urban Beijing, but not necessarily led to the occurrence of NPF there. They pointed out that as long as CS or CoagS was below a certain threshold (Cai et al., 2017), NPF is very likely take place.

Was this also true for rural atmosphere in the NCP? By comparing with non-event days at our site (see Fig. 5a), we noticed that H_2SO_4 level was not significantly higher but sometimes even lower than that during non-event days. In other words, the abundance of H_2SO_4 did not always lead to NPF; and it was only when CS was significantly lowered that the event became more likely to occur. This strongly demonstrates the similarity between our site with urban Beijing, that CS would be the limiting factor for the occurrence of NPF. However, we noticed that there were a very few cases (two cases) that CS was somewhat quite low, being quite close to that under those event days, yet NPF still did not occur. The most plausible explanation for this could be on the one hand the lowered H_2SO_4 concentration at these days (as shown in Fig. 5a) and on the other hand the other nucleating species rather than H_2SO_4 may not be always enough to initiate nucleation at this site.

As previously stated that the dimensionless criterion, *I*, is a good quantitative indicator to predict whether an NPF occurs or not during a certain day, we plotted *I* against the condensational sink for NPF days and other days under different H_2SO_4 level. Cai et al. (2021) found that the larger the *I* value, the higher frequency that NPF events occurred for both urban Beijing and Shanghai, which was also clearly revealed by our results. On the one hand, as shown in Fig. 5b, the largest *I* values were mostly observed for NPF days, confirming its feasibility in predicting the occurrence of NPF events. On the other hand, the obtained *I* anti-correlated with CS quite well, while the influence from the available H_2SO_4 was not obvious. This

strongly suggests that CS was the dominating factor governing the appearance of NPF events at current environment, being highly consistent with the feature in Beijing.

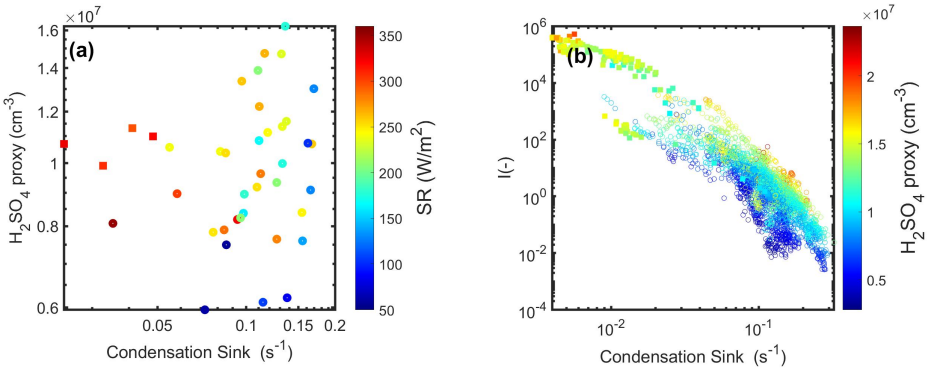

Figure 5. (a) H_2SO_4 concentration as a function of condensation sink during both event days (squares) and no-event days (circular dots) during our study. (b) The dimensionless indicator, *I*, as a function of the condensational sink. The colorbar indicates: solar radiation (left panel) and H_2SO_4 proxy concentration (right panel).

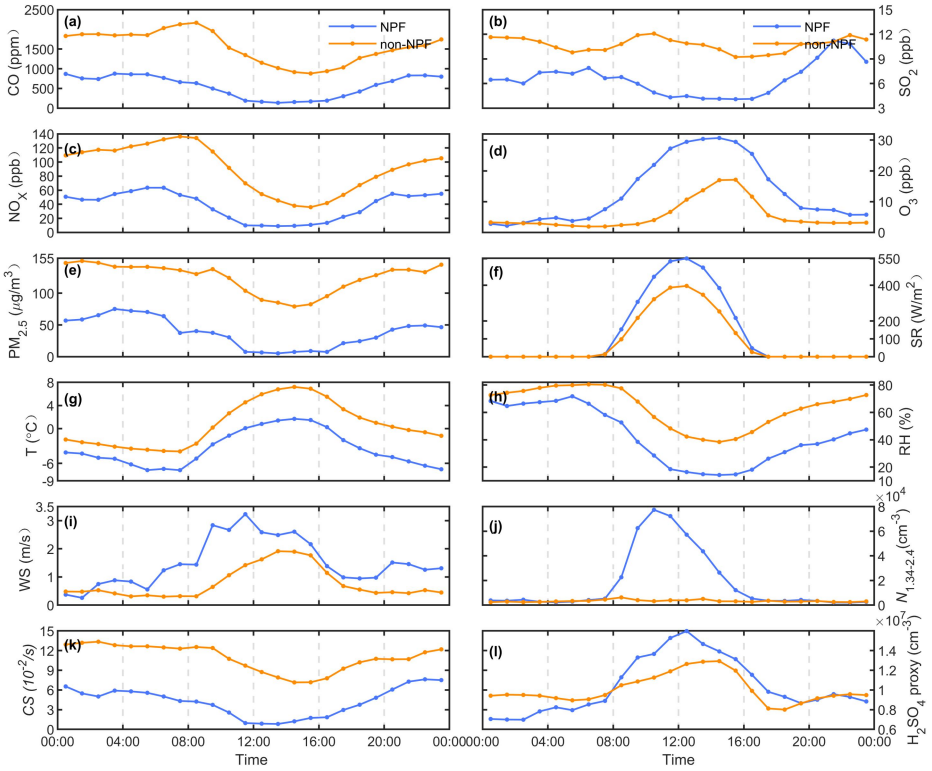

Figure 6. Diurnal variation of (a) CO, (b) SO_2, (c) NO_x, (d) O_3, (e) $PM_{2.5}$, (f) Solar radiation (SR), (g) *T*, (h) RH, (i) wind speed (WS), (j) number concentration of sub-3nm cluster, (k) *CS*, and (l) H_2SO_4 proxy during the NPF and non-NPF days during this field campaign. These values were averaged over the five NPF days and 28 non-event days, respectively.

On the other hand, we found that RH level under event days was generally lower than that on non-event days (see Fig. 6). This is similar to the cases that NPF was observed in Beijing by Yue et al. (2009), who suggested that photochemical reactions were faster on sunny days with low RH. In addition to this, ambient temperature during NPF was relatively lower than that on non-event days (Kirkby et al. (2011);Riccobono et al. (2014)). Yan et al. (2021) considered that temperature can affect the stability of H_2SO_4 clustering and thus influence NPF. Therefore, all these factors could be the potential reasons increase or decrease the probability of NPF to occur in current rural areas. It has to be noted that all these features, including reduced RH level as well as ambient *T* during event days, could be coincidence with reduced CS over clean days, for instance, being a consequence of air masses originating from the north and bringing dryer, colder and cleaner air to the site. Therefore, current discussion in this regard becomes ambiguous and may be inclusive, but should still be considered separately when larger datasets are available. Moreover, we observed that O_3 concentration was clearly higher during event days, implying that other condensable vapors, for instance, organics, that involve O_3, among others, in forming HOM, might also be important to NPF in this region. Although these organic compounds formed through O_3 oxidation (Mohr et al., 2019) may not necessarily participate in H_2SO_4 clustering, they may considerably contribute to the growth of newly-formed particles, which should not be ruled out in the study of NPF for this region and also need to be investigated in the future.

4. Summary and conclusions

Most previous studies dealing with NPF in China were mainly based on measurements of particles at larger sizes, typically above 3 nm, whereas detection of particles at sub-3 nm range was quite limited. In our study, by coupling a PSM with a traditional SMPS, We were able to measure the particle number size distribution down to 1.3 nm during NPF events in the wintertime at a rural site of the NCP. Correspondingly, formation rate of particles at 1.3 nm was obtained, widening the

data pool concerning the feature of NPF for this region. At current rural environment, high level of H_2SO_4 may not always initiate the occurrence of NPF. Only at the condition that the CS was considerably low, NPF events were more likely to take place. This feature is quite similar to that of the urban atmosphere of NCP, whereas NPF events were usually characterized with high formation rates, high CS and high H_2SO_4 concentration. However, as our H_2SO_4 concentration was predicted from empirical parameters, particular cautions regarding their associated uncertainties should be considered. Yang et al. (2021) demonstrated that the derived fitting parameters for the calculations of H_2SO_4 proxy may vary from site to site and between different seasons. For instance, they considered the products from the ozonolysis of alkenes were able to oxidize SO_2 to form gaseous H_2SO_4. Moreover, they pointed out that H_2SO_4 could be from primary emissions, such as vehicles or freshly emitted plumes. Sulfuric acid from these sources could account for 10% of the total H_2SO_4 in the atmosphere. These aspects were not comprehensively considered in our calculations, which could bring huge uncertainties or errors to the estimation. Thereby, direct measurements for the H_2SO_4 concentration should be implemented in the future before driving any further conclusion.

Declaration of interest statement.

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability.

The details data can be obtained from https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7326388 (Hong, 2022).

Author contributions.

JH collected the resources, wrote and finalized the manuscript, MT analyzed the data, plotted the figures and wrote the original draft, QQW and NM planned the study, collected the resources, reviewed the manuscript. SWZ, SBZ, XHP, LHX, GL, UK conducted the measurements, CY, JCT, YK, YH, YQZ, WYX, GSZ, BY, ZBW discussed the results. YFC and HS contributed to fund acquisition.

Competing interests.

Hang Su and Yafang Cheng are members of the editorial board of Atmospheric Chemistry and Physics

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