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High contribution of anthropogenic combustion sources to atmospheric inorganic reactive nitrogen in South China evidenced by isotopes

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Abstract: Due to the intense release of reactive nitrogen (Nr) from anthropogenic activity, the source layout of atmospheric nitrogen aerosol has changed. The inorganic nitrogen (NH_4^+ and NO_3^-) was essential part of atmospheric nitrogen aerosol and accounted for 69%. To comprehensively clarify the level, sources, and environmental fate of NH_4^+ and NO_3^-, their concentrations and stable isotopes ($\delta^{15}N$) in fine particulate matters ($PM_{2.5}$) were measured in a subtropical megacity of South China. N-NH_4^+ and N-NO_3^- contributed 45.8% and 23.2% to total nitrogen (TN), respectively. The source contributions of NH_4^+ and NO_3^- were estimated by $\delta^{15}N$, which suggested that anthropogenic combustion activities including coal combustion, biomass burning, and vehicles were dominant sources. Especially, biomass burning was the predominant source of NH_4^+ (27.9%). Whereas, coal combustion was the dominant source of NO_3^- (40.4%). This study emphasized the substantial impacts of human activities on inorganic Nr. With the rapid development of industry and transportation, nitrogen emissions will be even higher. The promotion of clean energy and efficient use of biomass would help reduce nitrogen emissions and alleviate air pollution.

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1. Introduction

Nitrogenous aerosols are ubiquitous in environment and play an important role as nutrients in ecosystems(Bhattarai et al., 2019). With the massive combustion of fossil fuels and the development of livestock, the proportion of TN in particulate matter (PM) ranges from 1.2% to 17.0% and has shown a rapid increase in the last few decades(Bhattarai et al., 2019; Galloway et al., 2004; Holland et al., 1999). Mostly nitrogenous aerosols formed from atmospheric Nr will be deposited into terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems(Huang et al., 2015). Excessive external nitrogen deposition accelerates nitrogen loss in soil, decreases species diversity, disturbs terrestrial ecosystems, and leads to eutrophication in aquatic ecosystems(Breemen, 2002; Wedin and Tilman, 1996; Yang et al., 2015). Furthermore, nitrogenous aerosols have adverse impacts on the climate, air quality, and human health(Bhattarai et al., 2019; Song et al., 2021).

$N\text{-}NO_3^-$ and $N\text{-}NH_4^+$ as inorganic Nr are dominant species in deposition of nitrogen(Zhu et al., 2015). $N\text{-}NH_4^+$ was the highest in nitrogen deposition, and NH_4^+ was gradually considered to be an important component of secondary inorganic aerosols (SIA)(Sun et al., 2021). NH_3, precursor of NH_4^+, is a vital atmospheric alkaline gas, which can participate in nucleation to promote the new particles generation, and can react with acid gas to produce ammonium sulfate and ammonium nitrate(Dunne et al., 2016; Fu et al., 2017). The excessive NH_3 emission from anthropogenic sources will partially offset the benefits of reducing SO_2 and NOx and trigger urban haze in China(Sun et al., 2021; Meng et al., 2018; Pan et al., 2018). In many urban environments, NO_3^- has replaced sulfate as the component with the highest proportion in SIA. NOx, precursors of NO_3^-, are also closely related to the formation of atmospheric oxidant and exert important effects on atmospheric oxidation. In addition, NH_4NO_3 in PM plays an increasingly important role in promoting the formation of sulfate and organic matter, and has profound effect on the physical and chemical properties of PM(Liu et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020; Hodas et al., 2014). Therefore, to mitigate the nitrogen deposition and air pollution, the control of NH_4^+ (NH_3) and NO_3^- (NOx) should not be neglected.

Considerable efforts have been made to comprehensive understand budget of atmospheric NH_4^+ and NO_3^-. $\delta^{15}N$ is effective to quantify sources contribution of nitrogenous species(Elliott

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et al., 2007). The anthropogenic combustion sources (combustion of coal, biomass, and gasoline) play a key role in the emission of NO_3^- (NOx) in many regions of China suggested by $\delta^{15}N$(Zong et al., 2020), which also have large effects on NH_3. NH_3 is released by agricultural source (agricultural activity and livestock) and non-agricultural source (fossil fuel combustion and vehicle)(Bhattarai et al., 2019). Previous study showed that agricultural source was the dominant source (80%-90%) of NH_3 in China(Kang et al., 2016). However, NH_3 emissions from agricultural source have been reduced due to intensive farming and efficient fertilization(Wang et al., 2022). Combustion sources were gradually becoming dominant sources of urban NH_3 in recent years verified by the methods of emission inventory and $\delta^{15}N$(Xiao et al., 2020; Meng et al., 2017). Especially, the incomplete burning of biomass leads to massive NH_3 emission and is gradually to be the second largest non-agricultural source of NH_3(Yu et al., 2020), which may be responsible for the lag of the decline in air pollutants deposition behind the reduction in emission of precursors(Zhao et al., 2022b). In addition, the super clean emission of coal-fired power plant and strict emission standards of vehicles will change the source layout of NH_4^+ and NO_3^-. Selective catalytic reduction technology equipped with vehicles and industrial boiler reduces NOx but increases NH_3 emissions(Meng et al., 2017; Pan et al., 2016). The occurrence of haze in North China was closely related to NH_3 emissions from combustion sources(Pan et al., 2018). NH_4^+ and NO_3^- are the main components of SIA and play a vital role in the formation of secondary aerosol(Meng et al., 2017), so it is necessary to revisit their sources.

Nr emissions from densely populated subtropical areas increased rapidly with the highly development of industry and transportation(Wang et al., 2013). Guangzhou is the core megacity in South subtropical region of China, where the atmospheric environment is complex and the atmospheric oxidation level is high(Tan et al., 2019). The high emissions of inorganic nitrogen form anthropogenic combustion sources have serious and profound impacts on the environment. In this study, we aimed to comprehensive clarify the level of inorganic Nr and revisit the source layout of atmospheric inorganic Nr.

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2. Experimental and theoretical methods

2.1. Sampling and Chemical concentration analysis

$PM_{2.5}$ samples (n=66) were collected from May 2017 to June 2018 in Guangzhou (23.13°N, 113.27°E). Details of sample collection can be found in our previous study(Jiang et al., 2021a). The chemical components including water-soluble ions (i.e., NH_4^+, K^+, Na^+, Ca^{2+}, Mg^{2+}, Cl^-, NO_3^-, and SO_4^{2-}), organic carbon (OC), element carbon (EC), and organic molecular markers (e.g., levoglucosan) were analyzed in our previous studies (**SI Text S1**)(Jiang et al., 2021a; Jiang et al., 2021b). Moreover, meteorological parameters (temperature, relative humidity (RH), atmosphere pressure, and wind speed) and the concentration of trace gases (CO, SO_2, NO, NO_2, and O_3) were acquired by online instruments (details shown in **SI Text S1**). A circular punch (r=1cm) of the sample filter was wrapped in a tin boat and then measured in an elemental analyzer to determine the concentrations of TN.

2.2. Isotope analysis

The $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NO_3^-$ and $\delta^{18}O\text{-}NO_3^-$ values in $PM_{2.5}$ was analyzed by methods of nitrous oxide (N_2O), which was described in previous study in detail(Zong et al., 2017). Briefly, NO_3^- was reduced to NO_2^- using cadmium powder and imidazole solution, and N_2O was made by adding NaN_3 to NO_2^- solution. The production of 75nmol N_2O gas was needed to measure. The N_2O gas produced by above processes was measured by MAT253 stable isotope mass spectrometer. The values of $\delta^{18}O$ and $\delta^{15}N$ were expressed in per mil (‰) shown in Eq. (1) and (2), relative to the international oxygen and nitrogen isotope standard, respectively.

$$\delta^{15}N = \left[\frac{(^{15}N/^{14}N)_{sample}}{(^{15}N/^{14}N)_{standard}} - 1\right] * 1000 \quad (1)$$

$$\delta^{18}O = \left[\frac{(^{18}O/^{16}O)_{sample}}{(^{18}O/^{16}O)_{standard}} - 1\right] * 1000 \quad (2)$$

The $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NH_4^+$ was measured by methods of hypobromite oxidation coupled with reduction of hydroxylamine hydrochloride(Sun et al., 2021). Briefly, NH_4^+ was oxidated to NO_2^- using alkaline hypobromite (BrO^-), and N_2O was made by adding sodium arsenite and hydrochloric acid to NO_2^- solution. The production of 120 nmol N_2O gas was needed to measure. The N_2O gas produced by above processes was measured by MAT253 stable isotope mass spectrometer. The values of $\delta^{15}N$ were expressed in per mil (‰), Eq. (1). ^7Be and ^{210}Pb

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were acquired and details shown in **SI Text S1**.

2.3. Bayesian mixing and IsoSource model

$\delta^{15}N$ were used for tracing source based on conservation of isotopic mass. Bayesian mixing model improved upon linear mixing models by explicitly considering uncertainty in prior information and isotopic equilibrium fractionation. Recently, Bayesian mixing model was applied to trace the sources of atmospheric pollutants(Zong et al., 2017; Zong et al., 2020). The model coupled with $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NO_3^-$ and $\delta^{18}O\text{-}NO_3^-$ were used to identify formation process and quantify the sources contribution of NO_3^- (details presented in **SI Text S2**).

IsoSource model was released by Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), could calculate ranges of source contributions to a mixture based on conservation of isotopic mass when number of sources is too large to permit a unique solution and provide the distribution of source proportions(Phillips et al., 2005). IsoSource model coupled with $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NH_4^+$ were applied to quantify the NH_4^+ source (details presented in **SI Text S2**).

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Concentration and seasonal variation of NH_4^+ and NO_3^-

The concentration of NH_4^+ and NO_3^- in $PM_{2.5}$ was 1.6±1.3 μg m^{-3} and 2.8±3.4 μg m^{-3}, contributed 18.7% and 32.6% to SIA. The concentration of $N\text{-}NH_4^+$ and $N\text{-}NO_3^-$ was 1.2±1.0 μg m^{-3} and 0.6±0.8 μg m^{-3}, contributed 45.8% and 23.2% to TN, respectively; thus, NH_4^+ and NO_3^- were essential part of nitrogen aerosols. NH_4^+ and NO_3^- showed similar seasonal variations with higher concentrations in winter than in summer (**Fig. 1**). During winter the air mass was often dry and cold with low wind speed, which meant the decrease of the atmospheric self-purification capability. In addition, primary combustion source related to fossil fuel and biomass burning always showed significant increase in North China in winter, which greatly increased the concentration of atmospheric pollutants in Guangzhou by long-range transportation. However, during summer, the air mass from sea was relatively clean with high wind speed facilitating the diffusion of pollutants. Moreover, high temperature in summer was conducive to the decomposition of NH_4NO_3(Song et al., 2008). Thus, the levels of NH_4^+ and

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NO_3^- were lower in summer. In addition, concentrations of NH_4^+ and NO_3^- in our study, were lower than North China [Beijing(Wu et al., 2019; Fan et al., 2022), Tianjin(Xiang et al., 2022), Shijiazhuang(Xiang et al., 2022), and Harbin(Sun et al., 2021)], East China [Nanchang(Xiao et al., 2020)], and Central China [Wuhan and Changsha(Xiao et al., 2020; Zong et al., 2020)], suggested the level of air pollution in Guangzhou has been alleviated to a certain extent. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct comprehensive study on the emission sources of NH_4^+ and NO_3^- to take more effective measures to mitigate air pollution.

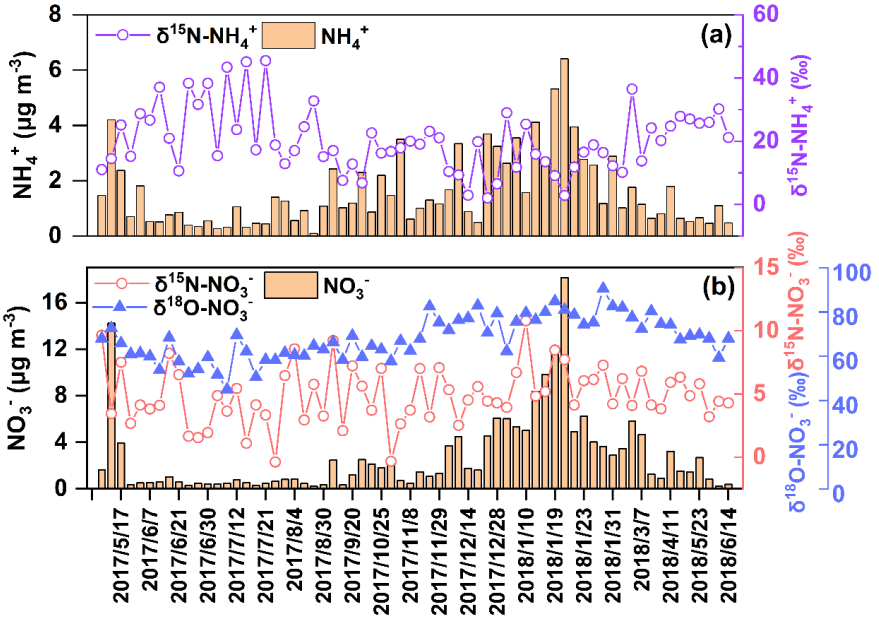

Figure 1. The concentration and $\delta^{15}N$ of NH_4^+ (a) and concentration, $\delta^{15}N$, and $\delta^{18}O$ of NO_3^- (b).

3.2. Characteristic and seasonal variation in $\delta^{15}N$-NH_4^+ and source apportionment of NH_4^+

The $\delta^{15}N$-NH_4^+ values over Guangzhou ranged from 2.1‰ to 45.5‰, with an annual mean of 20.2±10.1‰. In our study, the $\delta^{15}N$-NH_4^+ values were comparable to those at suburban sites (**Fig. S1**) such as sites in Japan (22.1±8.3‰, 16.1±6.6‰)(Kawashima and Kurahashi, 2011) and Korea (Jeju Island,17.4±4.9‰)(Kundu et al., 2010) but heavier than those in polluted regions, such as Heshan in Pearl River Delta (PRD) (average+7.17‰)(Liu et al., 2018) and Beijing (-37.1‰ to +5.8‰)(Pan et al., 2016). $\delta^{15}N$-NH_4^+ values were lower in autumn (17.3‰)

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and winter (14.4‰) than in spring (22.5‰) and summer (25.7‰), which was similar to the trends in Japan(Kawashima and Kurahashi, 2011).

The seasonal differences in $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NH_4^+$ values were significant between warm (summer/spring) and cool seasons (winter/fall) ($p < 0.05$). The $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NH_4^+$ was affected by the ratio of $NH_4^+/(NH_3+NH_4^+)$ (**Text S3**). A linear fitting equation was observed between $NH_4^+/(NH_3+NH_4^+)$ and $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NH_4^+$, and the absolute value of the slope (32.4) approximated the isotope equilibrium fractionation value (+33%) between atmospheric NH_3 and NH_4^+ (**Fig. S2**). The linear fitting suggested that the lower the NH_4^+ proportion was, the heavier the $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NH_4^+$ value. The lower NH_4^+ level was accordance with higher $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NH_4^+$ in summer, which was the opposite of winter. In addition, previous study suggested that the marked variation in $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NH_4^+$ values was largely controlled by the emission sources of NH_3, the precursor gas of NH_4^+(Liu et al., 2018). According to the $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NH_4^+$ results, the source of NH_4^+ was assigned as biomass burning (27.9±16.4%), coal combustion (16.0±3.9%), vehicles (19.8±5.3%), fertilizer (10.9±6.1%), livestock (12.7±5.8%), and urban waste (11.9±6.1%), shown in **Fig. 2a**.

In our study, non-agriculture sources were the dominators of NH_4^+ (75.1%). Unexpectedly, the contribution of biomass burning was the highest. Especially, from late June to July, the contribution of biomass burning enhanced, which possibly resulted from sugarcane leaf burning. The $\delta^{15}N$ in sugarcane leaf was as high as 38‰(Martinellia et al., 2002). The $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NH_4^+$ released from sugarcane leaf was estimated as 44.1‰ (**SI Text S4**), which coincided with the highest $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NH_4^+$ value in July (45.5‰ and 45.1‰). In PRD, south winds prevail in July and the sampling site is located downwind of sugarcane planting area. Therefore, the air mass to sampling site might carry the pollutants related to sugarcane leaf burning. K^+ is a typical biomass burning tracer(Cui et al., 2018). Considering the impact of primary emission intensity, $[NH_4^+/EC]$ and $[K^+/EC]$ were used to calculate the correlation coefficient ($r=0.435$, $p < 0.01$), which verified NH_4^+ was influenced by biomass burning. In recent years, biomass burning has been gradually identified as an important source of NH_4^+(Meng et al., 2017; Xiao et al., 2020). The results based on emission inventories showed that the contribution of residential biomass combustion to NH_3 ranged from 33% to 53% in China(Meng et al., 2017). According to $\delta^{15}N$, biomass burning contributed 18% [Harbin, East North China](Sun et al., 2021), 46%[Wuhan, South Central China], 40% [Changsha, South Central China](Xiao et al., 2020), 35%

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[Nanchang, East China](Xiao et al., 2020), and 23% [Guangzhou, South China](Chen et al., 2022) to NH_4^+. Particularly, in Guangzhou the contribution of biomass burning in ground was higher than that in Guangzhou tower with the height of 488 meters, suggested that the influence of regional biomass burning(Chen et al., 2022). Furthermore, ^7Be is mainly originated from upper atmosphere, whereas ^{210}Pb is derived from terrestrial surface(Jiang et al., 2021b). High level of ^7Be observed in ground suggested the sink influence of upper atmosphere. ^7Be and ^{210}Pb are chemically stable and with unique sources, which can effectively reflect the transport of continental air mass and the air exchange between stratosphere and troposphere. In our study, the correlation coefficient between NH_4^+ and ^{210}Pb ($r=0.701$, $p < 0.01$) was higher than that between NH_4^+ and ^7Be ($r=0.432$, $p < 0.01$), suggested that NH_4^+ was mainly affected by regional emission. Therefore, biomass burning exerted essential influence on NH_4^+ level, which should no longer be ignored.

In addition, with the acceleration of urbanization, combustion sources related to fossil fuels have become the main sources of NH_3. In previous studies, source of NH_x (NH_3+NH_4^+) was mainly from agriculture activity due to rough way of farming(Chang et al., 2016; Pan et al., 2020). However, with the improvement of efficient fertilization practices, agricultural NH_3 decreased significantly(Wang et al., 2022). Fossil fuels, such as coal and gasoline, are major energies for production and domestic using, and their contribution to NH_3 has become increasingly important. In North China, fossil fuel combustion contributed 92% to NH_3 during hazes(Zhang et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2016). In previous study of Guangzhou, the contribution of NH_3 from fossil source in ground observations (43%) was higher than the observed in Guangzhou tower (18%), indicated the importance of locally related fossil fuel combustion source(Chen et al., 2022). In our study, vehicle emission and coal combustion contributed 19.8±5.3% and 16.0±3.9% of NH_4^+ respectively, which was lower than the North China but higher than agricultural sources. The share of NH_3 from vehicle exhaust was estimated to be 18.8% based on the emission factor of NH_3 from on road vehicles in Guangzhou, which was similar to our results(Liu et al., 2014). The selective catalytic reduction process for vehicle can reduce NOx, but increased emission of NH_3, which has confirmed as an important source of NH_3(Heeb et al., 2006; Meng et al., 2017). Despite the efforts of government to promote electric vehicles in recent years, their share is still relatively low (about 5%). As increasing car

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ownership, this has an important impact on atmospheric NH_3. Coal combustion was the second most important source of fossil combustion after vehicle emissions in our study, although the contribution was lower than in North China(Wu et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2016). The absence of heating in Guangzhou may explain the lower contribution of coal combustion compared to the North. On an annual basis, the contribution of fossil fuel-related combustion sources in our study (35.8%) was comparable to that in North China (37%-52%)(Pan et al., 2018).

The source contributions of NH_4^+ in our study were compared to other regions, shown in **Fig. S3**. The combustion related sources (biomass burning, coal combustion, and vehicle) have gradually become the dominant source of urban atmospheric NH_3. Biomass burning and vehicle could emit massive carbon monoxide (CO)(Li and Wang, 2007; Wang et al., 2005). In Guangzhou, NH_4^+ was positively related to CO (r=0.637, p < 0.01), which confirmed combustion sources playing a key role in NH_4^+. From a historical perspective, NH_3 emissions from anthropogenic combustion and industry have been steadily increasing since 1960(Meng et al., 2017). The optimization of energy structure and encouragement of development new energy vehicle would be hopeful to reduce NH_3. The results of this study would be conducive to reduce NH_3 scientifically and effectively, and would relieve the pressure on the reduction from agricultural source.

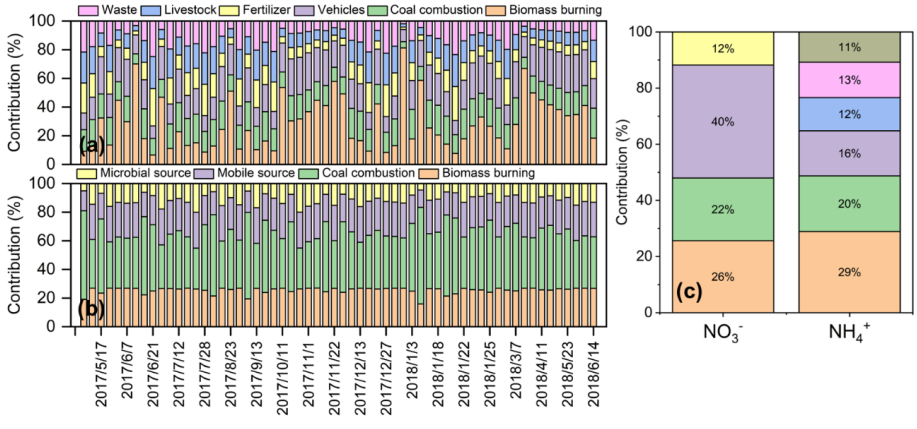

Figure 2. The sources apportionment results of atmospheric NH_4^+ (a) and NO_3^- (b) in Guangzhou, and the comparison of sources results between NH_4^+ and NO_3^- (c).

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3.3. Characteristic and seasonal variation in $\delta^{18}O\text{-}NO_3^-$ and $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NO_3^-$ and source apportionment of NO_3^-

3.3.1. Seasonal variation of $\delta^{18}O\text{-}NO_3^-$

The $\delta^{18}O\text{-}NO_3^-$ in Guangzhou was 68.1±9.7‰ (44.9‰ to 90.5‰) comparable to that in precipitation (66.3±2.8‰)(Fang et al., 2011), but lower than those regions with weak light intensity, such as BeiChengHuang Island (76.6±8.1‰)(Zong et al., 2017) and Bermuda Islands (71.1±3.0‰)(Hastings et al., 2003). In this study, $\delta^{18}O\text{-}NO_3^-$ was higher in winter and spring than in summer and autumn, which was similar to the seasonal variation in $\delta^{18}O\text{-}NO_3^-$ in previous studies (Fang et al., 2011; Gobel et al., 2013). On the one hand, $\delta^{18}O\text{-}NO_3^-$ value was associated with formation pathways of NO_3^-. The results simulated by Bayesian mixing model suggested that the contributions of N_2O_5 channel to NO_3^- were 56.8%, 58.9%, 29.2%, and 27.0% in winter, spring, fall, and summer, respectively. The $\delta^{18}O$ value of NO_3^- formed by N_2O_5 channel is higher than that by ·OH pathway (**SI Text S5**). The night in cold season was longer than that in warm season, which favored NO_3^- formation through N_2O_5 channel. In addition, the illumination intensity was weakened in cold season compared with that in warm season, which constrained the production of ·OH(Zong et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2017). Thus, the contribution of the N_2O_5 channel in cold season was higher than that in warm season. Furthermore, concentration of NO_3^- was high when contribution of N_2O_5 channel enhanced (**Fig. 3**), suggested NO_3^- pollution was related to N_2O_5 hydrolysis pathway. The air mass to Guangzhou was derived from the South China Sea in summer and the North continental region in winter. The higher $\delta^{18}O\text{-}NO_3^-$ and NO_3^- concentration might be affected by long-range and high-altitude transport from North China, which might carry abundant of precursors. Massive NO_3^- could formed by N_2O_5 hydrolysis at high altitude and transported to the ground. The index of $f(^7Be,^{210}Pb)$ was expressed in **SI Text S1** and could reflect the influence of atmospheric dynamic transport on aerosol pollutants(Jiang et al., 2021b). Generally, air masses with low values of $f(^7Be,^{210}Pb)$ suggested that pollutants were associated with continental surface emission, whereas high $f(^7Be,^{210}Pb)$ were influenced by long-range transport from upper air masses. The contribution of N_2O_5 channel was positively correlated with $f(^7Be,^{210}Pb)$ ($r=0.319$, $p < 0.05$), indicated the long-range transport influence of upper air mass on N_2O_5 channel. For example, on 25 January 2018, the contribution of N_2O_5 channel (nitrate) was 81.1% (3.6 μg m^-

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[3]), when the upper air mass was from the North China. However, on 7 July 2017, the N_2O_5 channel (nitrate) contributed only 5.7% (0.5 μg m^{-3}) corresponding to the air mass mainly from the South China Sea transported at low-altitude (**Fig. S4**).

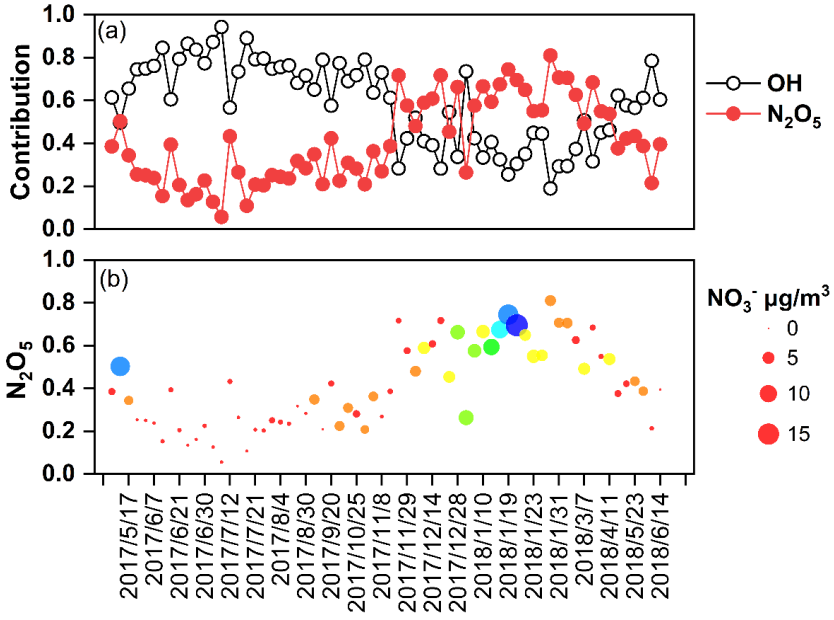

Figure 3. The contribution of the OH radical oxidation and N_2O_5 hydrolysis pathway to NO_3^- (a). The vertical position of dots corresponded to the contribution of N_2O_5 pathway and the size of the dots corresponded to the concentration of NO_3^- (b).

$\delta^{18}O\text{-}NO_3^-$ decreased from 76.7‰ in 2014 to 68.1‰ in 2017-2018(Zong et al., 2020), which indicated that ·OH channel became more important in Guangzhou. The enhanced contribution of ·OH pathway indicated the increasing atmospheric oxidation capacity. In recent years, although the concentration of $PM_{2.5}$ in Guangzhou has significantly decreased, the photochemical pollution caused by high O_3 concentrations was not optimistic(Tan et al., 2019). The O_3 concentration in the PRD showed a fluctuating upward trend from 2013 to 2020; especially in 2017-2018 O_3 concentrations were at high levels (Environmental Status Bulletin of Guangdong Province **Fig. S5**). In our study, the NO_3^- formation pathway inferred from $\delta^{18}O\text{-}NO_3^-$ proved the enhancement of atmospheric oxidation capacity.

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3.3.2. Seasonal variation of $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NO_3^-$ and source apportionment of NO_3^-

Seasonal variation of $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NO_3^-$. The $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NO_3^-$ in Guangzhou was 4.9±2.2‰ (-0.4‰ to 10.8‰), which was similar to the wet deposition(Fang et al., 2011). The $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NO_3^-$ was comparable to that from the Northeast United States (6.8‰)(Elliott et al., 2009), and lower than regions in China, where NO_3^- was predominantly derived from anthropogenic sources, such as Heshan in Guangdong (7.50±3.30‰)(Su et al., 2020), BeiChengHuang Island (8.20±6.20‰)(Zong et al., 2017), and Beijing (12.1±3.3‰)(Fan et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NO_3^-$ in this study was significantly higher than those from clean background regions, where NO_3^- was mainly from natural sources, such as the coast of Antarctica (-12.4±7.20‰)(Savarino et al., 2007) and Bermuda (-2.1±1.5‰ warm season, -5.9±3.3‰ cool season)(Hastings et al., 2003). The values of $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NO_3^-$ in winter, spring, summer, and autumn were 5.6‰, 5.3‰, 4.4‰, and 4.5‰, respectively. The $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NO_3^-$ in winter and summer showed significant difference ($p < 0.05$). The values of $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NO_3^-$ were influenced by atmospheric processes and emission sources(Elliott et al., 2009). For N_2O_5 channel, NO_3^- is characterized by higher $\delta^{15}N$ values(Freyer et al., 1993; Elliott et al., 2009). The N_2O_5 channel was the predominant formation pathway of NO_3^- in winter, which was in accordance with the seasonal variation in $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NO_3^-$. In addition, the difference in $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NO_3^-$ reflected the variation in the emission source of NO_3^-. $\delta^{15}N$-NOx from coal combustion was relatively high. In winter, the higher $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NO_3^-$ probably related to long-range transport from North, where coal combustion enhanced in winter.

Source apportionment of NO_3^-. Based on the Bayesian mixing model coupled with $\delta^{15}N\text{-}NO_3^-$, NO_3^- sources were assigned as coal combustion 40.4±8.7%, biomass burning 25.6±2.1%, mobile sources (vehicles) 22.3±3.1%, and microbial process 11.7±3.8%. **Figure 2b** and **Figure S6** showed the source contribution of NO_3^- in Guangzhou and other regions in China, respectively. Compared to earlier periods (2013-2014), concentration of NO_3^- from vehicle and coal combustion decreased significantly(Zong et al., 2020), which resulted from the stricter vehicle emission standard, promotion of new energy electric vehicles, and ultraclean transformation of coal combustion. However, almost all production and domestic segments rely on energy generated from coal combustion, which was still dominant source of NO_3^- in

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315 2017-2018. Coal combustion was affected not only by local emissions but also by external air
316 mass transmission. The contribution of coal combustion was higher in winter than in summer,
317 which probably related to the long-range transportation from North. Taking 10 January 2018
318 as an example, the contribution of coal combustion sources to NO_3^- was 67.5%, and the
319 corresponding air mass was from the North and transmitted to Guangzhou through high altitude.
320 However, the air mass on 26 July 2017 were mainly from the South China Sea, which was
321 transmitted through low-altitude to Guangzhou. The contribution of coal burning to NO_3^- on
322 26 July 2017 was 28.5% lower than that on 10 January 2018.

323 As non-fossil combustion source, biomass burning was also an important source of NO_3^-
324 and accounted for 25.6%. The contribution of biomass burning and vehicle was stable through
325 a year. Another non-fossil source is related to soil microbial activity and only contributed 11.7%
326 to NO_3^-, which unexpectedly lower than the results in earlier periods (2013-2014). Generally,
327 the microorganisms in soil emit NO through nitrification or denitrification, which was affected
328 by the amount of carbon and nitrogen nutrients in soil(Hall and Matson, 1996). In earlier
329 periods, due to the higher level of aerosols, the amount of nutrients settling in soil was also
330 higher, which was exemplified by the observation of dry and wet deposition in Guangzhou(He
331 et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2020). In addition, the reduction of cultivated land from 2013 to 2018
332 might also reduce the contribution of microbial source emissions. Therefore, emissions from
333 natural sources were also influenced by human activities to some extent. The contribution of
334 microbial process was higher in summer than in winter. In summer, higher RH and temperature
335 were favorable for intense activity of soil microorganisms(Zong et al., 2017). The contributions
336 of microbial processes to NO_3^- also decreased in winter compared with summer at regional
337 background sites and five Chinese megacities, including Guangzhou(Zong et al., 2017; Zong
338 et al., 2020).

339 The sources comparison between NO_3^- and NH_4^+ was shown in **Fig. 2c**. Coal combustion,
340 biomass burning, and vehicles were three significant sources of NO_3^- and NH_4^+. Coal
341 combustion and biomass burning were the dominant sources of NO_3^- and NH_4^+, respectively.
342 The vehicles were also important source of atmospheric inorganic Nr contributed to 22.3% and
343 19.8% to NO_3^- and NH_4^+, respectively. Recently, the government has actively taken many
344 measures to reduce the pollution from vehicles, such as stricter automobile emission standards

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and the promotion of new energy vehicles. However, due to the large vehicle ownership base, the pollutants emitted from vehicles are not optimistic. In addition, vehicles emissions could contribute half of the fresh secondary organic aerosol in urban environment(Zhang et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2022a).

4. Conclusions

A year-long field observation was conducted in Guangzhou to clarify the atmospheric fate of inorganic nitrogen aerosol. Inorganic nitrogen species were the most essential component of TN including NH_4^+ (45.8%) and NO_3^- (23.2%), which are also dominant components of SIA and play a key role in China haze. The $\delta^{15}N$ is a powerful tool to quantify the source contribution of NH_4^+ and NO_3^-, which suggested that anthropogenic combustion sources (coal combustion, biomass burning, and vehicles) were the dominant sources.

Anthropogenic combustion sources contributed 63.2% to NH_4^+ higher than agricultural sources (23.6%). NH_3 largely facilitates the formation of sulfate and nitrate. Meanwhile, sulfate and nitrate promote each other with positive feedback effect, which could trigger haze. In megacities of China, the focus of NH_3 reduction should be on anthropogenic combustion sources especially on biomass burning, which might be responsible for the lag of the decline in deposition of air pollutions behind the reduction in emission(Zhao et al., 2022b). In addition, anthropogenic combustion sources accounted for 88.3% of NO_3^-. Coal combustion and vehicles contributed 40.4% and 22.3% to NO_3^-, respectively. Despite a series of measures to reduce emissions of NOx, fossil fuels, as the main energy for production and living, will still inevitably emit a large amount of NOx. Our results emphasized that the emission of atmospheric inorganic nitrogen is largely related to anthropogenic combustion sources. The development and promotion of clean energy and efficient use of biomass are conducive to the deep reduction of atmospheric nitrogen.

Data availability

The original data of this research (stable nitrogen isotopes and inorganic nitrogen concentrations) are available at Mendeley data (Li and Li, 2023). The Iso Source model was

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download from Environmental Protection Agency, via their website: https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2015-11/isosourcev1_3_1.zip.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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