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# 1 Seasonal variations in the response of soil respiration to rainfall 2 events in a riparian poplar plantation

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## 15 Abstract

16 Rainfall events have profound influence on the soil carbon release in different  
17 forest ecosystems. However, seasonal variations in soil respiration (RS) response to  
18 rainfall events and associated regulatory processes are not well documented in  
19 riparian forest ecosystems to date. We continuously measured soil respiration in a  
20 riparian plantation ecosystem from 2015 to 2018 to explore the relationships between  
21 soil respiration and rainfall events. Across the 4 years, 83 individual rainfall events  
22 were identified for spring, summer and autumn. We found that mean RS rate after rain  
23 (post-RS) was significantly higher than that before rain (pre-RS) ( $p < 0.05$ ) in spring,

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24 and the relative change in soil respiration (RSrc) increased against rainfall size due to  
25 the stimulation by the significant increases in soil moisture content ( $\Delta SM$ ). In contrast,  
26 mean post-RS was lower than pre-RS and RSrc was significantly decreased with the  
27 increasing rainfall size ( $p < 0.01$ ) in summer and autumn. Reduced changes in soil  
28 temperature ( $\Delta TS$ ) and increased soil moisture content after rain (post-SM)  
29 contributed to the decreased RS due to frequently occurring heavy rain events in  
30 summer. Increased  $\Delta SM$  following rainfall events coupled with groundwater level  
31 increase suppressed RSrc in autumn, even though increased  $\Delta TS$  could offset the  
32 negative effects of SM on RS to some extent. In addition, we found that higher  
33 post-SM after large rainfall events ( $> 10 \text{ mm day}^{-1}$ ) changed the response of RS to soil  
34 temperature (TS) by reducing the temperature sensitivity ( $Q_{10}$ ) even in this riparian  
35 plantation ecosystem. Our study highlights the importance of integrating seasonal  
36 difference in soil respiration response to rainfall events and the impact of large rainfall  
37 events on soil C release for estimating forest soil carbon cycling at multiple scales.

38

39 **Keywords**

40 Carbon cycling; Riparian forest ecosystem; Rainfall regime; Soil moisture; Soil  
41 temperature

42

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## 43 1. Introduction

44 Soil respiration (RS), the second largest terrestrial carbon efflux from ecosystems  
45 to the atmosphere, consists mainly of autotrophic and heterotrophic respiration (Raich  
46 et al., 2002; Shabaga et al., 2015; Vargas et al., 2008). Numerous studies have shown  
47 that there are significant seasonal patterns in different forest ecosystems (DeForest et  
48 al., 2006; Gong et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2015) and these are regulated by many abiotic  
49 (e.g., soil moisture, temperature and substrate availability) and biotic factors (e.g.,  
50 microorganisms, fine roots, and photosynthesis) (Hanson et al., 2000; Liu et al., 2017;  
51 Ryan and Law, 2005). Among those factors, soil moisture (SM) and soil temperature  
52 (TS) are the main environmental factors that directly drive the seasonal variations of  
53 root and microbial activities (Shi et al., 2012; Yoon et al., 2014). However, the degree  
54 to which soil temperature and soil moisture affect RS depends on soil condition and  
55 seasonal climate (Afreen and Singh, 2019; Singh et al., 2017).

56 Most of the growing season rainfall in temperate monsoon climate regions is  
57 generated by discrete thunderstorm events (Chen et al., 2012; Xia et al., 2018), which  
58 can lead to rapid increase or decrease of RS (Deng et al., 2011; Niu et al., 2019). On  
59 one hand, rainfall events could alter SM and TS, which in turn affect RS (Afreen and  
60 Singh, 2019; Liu et al., 2019a). On the other hand, rainfall events may affect RS  
61 through physical degassing or absorption induced by changes in pressure gradient (Fa  
62 et al., 2015; Huxman et al., 2004). Therefore, episodic rainfall events may change the  
63 well-established response relationship between RS and TS on shorter timescales (Han

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64 et al., 2018) leading to the uncertainty and errors in quantifying soil carbon  
65 efflux(Drake et al., 2018; Ni et al., 2019; Yan et al., 2014). Due to a lack of  
66 understanding on the dynamic responses of RS to rainfall events, current  
67 process-based ecosystem models have not integrated the carbon cycling responses to  
68 the rainfall events (Liu et al., 2016). Often time, widely used empirical model of  
69 respiration and soil temperature does not fully incorporate the complexity of the soil  
70 processes, limiting its predictive ability, especially over short time scales (Curiel  
71 Yuste et al., 2005; Yan et al., 2019).

72 Previous field measurements and manipulation experiments have shown that, in  
73 most water-limited ecosystems, RS may be stimulated by rainfall events due to SM  
74 increase as this could lead to higher availability of substrates for microorganisms and  
75 enhanced ecosystem photosynthesis ( Knapp et al., 2008; Afreen and Singh, 2019;  
76 Wang et al., 2019). However, in water-rich ecosystems, RS can be depressed by  
77 rainfall events as the increased SM may lead to limitations on the diffusion of oxygen  
78 and microbial activity (Han et al., 2018; Luo and Zhou, 2006; Wang et al., 2012).  
79 Although prior studies have explored RS responses to rainfall events for different  
80 ecosystems, seasonal variations of such responses are not explicitly considered (Liu et  
81 al., 2016, 2019a; Peng et al., 2013). With changes in phenology (Radville et al., 2016)  
82 and precipitation distribution variability under climate change (Beier et al., 2012;  
83 IPCC, 2014; Pfahl et al., 2017), the uncertainty regarding the impact of rainfall events  
84 on soil carbon efflux will increase further.

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85 A recent meta-analysis found that increasing RS stimulated by rainfall events  
86 was consistently observed in regions where annual rainfall is lower than 800 mm (Ni  
87 et al., 2019). Nevertheless, SM of riparian ecosystems in semi-humid and semi-arid  
88 regions can be affected by both rainfall events and shallow groundwater (Perry et al.,  
89 2012; Smith et al., 2017). In addition, riparian forest ecosystems generally display  
90 higher biological activity and more gas diffusion compared with non-riparian  
91 ecosystems in semi-arid and semi-humid regions due to the seasonal hydrological  
92 fluctuation and frequent water infiltration (Chang et al., 2014; Poblador et al., 2017;  
93 Scott et al., 2004). In such systems, intra-annual switches between aerobic and  
94 anaerobic states are possible, which in turn affect the RS (Castelli et al., 2000; Han et  
95 al., 2018; Xu et al., 2018). Moreover, climate change is expected to have dramatic  
96 influence on the rainfall patterns and hydrological conditions such as changes in flow  
97 regime, groundwater supply, and plant-available water (Nilsson et al., 2013; Nunes et  
98 al., 2008). Such changes may also alter the species richness, disrupt nutritional and  
99 symbiotic interactions in dryland riparian ecosystems, and even widen /narrow the  
100 riparian zone (Perry et al., 2012; Stromberg et al., 2013). As a result, variations in  
101 carbon fluxes of riparian ecosystems are significant in global carbon cycling  
102 projections, especially as these systems are considered as early warning systems for  
103 climate change (Capon et al., 2013; Perry et al., 2012; Singh et al., 2017). Clearly,  
104 quantifying the impact of rainfall events on RS can improve our understanding of the  
105 biophysical changes in these ecosystems and enable our advances in model

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106 development for more accurate prediction of the role of riparian ecosystems in the  
107 global carbon cycle under changing rainfall patterns.

108 In this study, soil CO<sub>2</sub> fluxes were continuously measured in a riparian plantation  
109 ecosystem across four years (2015-2018). We hypothesized that the soil respiration  
110 responses to the rainfall events in the riparian plantation ecosystem have seasonal  
111 variations and governed by coupled interactions of rainfall regime and groundwater  
112 fluctuation. Specifically, our research objectives are to: (1) determine the seasonal  
113 variation in RS responses to rainfall events; (2) explore the regulatory mechanisms of  
114 RS response to rainfall events in different seasons, and (3) quantify the effects of  
115 rainfall size on RS.

116

## 117 **2. Materials and methods**

### 118 2.1 Site description

119 This study was conducted in a riparian poplar plantation along the Chaobai river  
120 in Gongqing Forest Park (40° 06' 30" N, 116° 42' 30" E, 9 m a.s.l.), located in  
121 Shunyi District, Beijing, China. The temperate continental monsoon climate is  
122 characterized by hot and humid summers, and cold and dry winters. Long-term  
123 observations (1985-2015) from the Shunyi Meteorological Station show that the  
124 average annual air temperature is 13.4°C, with a mean monthly temperature of -2.9°C  
125 in January and 26.8°C in July. Mean annual precipitation is 546 mm and about 94%  
126 falls between April and October, with over 67% occurring in summer (June-August)

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127 mainly resulted from locally intense convective storms. Study site is topographically  
128 flat and about 500 meters away from Chaobei River, where there was no over-bank  
129 flow occurred throughout the study period. The groundwater table depth was around  
130 2m, with seasonal fluctuation of about  $\pm 0.5$  m.

131 The field experiment was setup in a poplar (*Populus euramericana*) plantation  
132 which was approximately 35 years-old. Fine roots (<2mm) are mainly distributed at  
133 0-60 cm, and the fine root biomass decreases as the soil layer deepens. Stand density  
134 is 367 trees ha<sup>-1</sup> with mean tree height of  $17 \pm 1.2$  m (mean  $\pm$  SD) and mean diameter  
135 at breast height of  $26 \pm 4.3$  cm in 2016. The understory vegetation is dominated by  
136 *Swida alba* (L.) Opiz., *Pinus bungeana* Zucc. ex Endl., *Flos Caryophylli*, *Sabina*  
137 *vulgaris* Antoine, and *Gaillardia aristata* Pursh. The bulk density of the well-drained  
138 riparian sandy soil is  $1.51 \pm 0.05$  g cm<sup>-3</sup>. Soil texture was 92% sand, 2% silt, and 6%  
139 clay. Soil nutrient concentrations decrease with soil depth, and the average soil  
140 organic carbon and soil organic nitrogen at 0-30cm depth was  $2.79 \pm 0.23$  g kg<sup>-1</sup> and  
141  $0.13 \pm 0.01$  g kg<sup>-1</sup>, respectively. More details about the soil characteristics can be  
142 found in the study by Zhu et al. (2019).

143

## 144 2.2 Soil respiration measurement

145 Soil respiration was measured during the growing season (April-October) for  
146 four consecutive years from 2015 to 2018, using a LI-8100 automated RS  
147 measurement system and LI-8150 multiplexer with four 8100-104 long-term



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148 chambers (Li-Cor Inc, Lincoln, NE, USA). Four soil collars (11.4 cm in height and  
149 21.3 cm in diameter) were randomly distributed in the study site and inserted 3 cm  
150 into the soil one month before the first measurement. The soil collars were left in  
151 place throughout the study period, with measurements made at least once every 2  
152 hours. Each measurement took 120 seconds and the linear increase of CO<sub>2</sub>  
153 concentration in the chamber was used to estimate RS. Hourly means were computed  
154 as the mean of the 4 chambers, and daily means were computed as the average of the  
155 hourly means. During the entire study period, all living plants inside the collars were  
156 carefully clipped regularly from the soil surface to exclude aboveground plant  
157 respiration.

158

### 159 2.3 Meteorological measurement

160       Precipitation was measured using an IntelliMet Advantage Weather Station  
161 (Dynamax Inc., USA), which was located outside of the forest, about 200 m from the  
162 research site. Soil temperature and soil moisture were measured at depths of 10 cm  
163 and 5 cm by a LI-8150 system equipped with LI-8150-203 and LI-8150-202 sensors,  
164 respectively (Li-Cor Inc., Lincoln, NE, USA). Both TS and SM sensors were placed  
165 near the RS monitoring points. Furthermore, additional SM was measured by three  
166 soil moisture probes (CS616, Campbell Scientific Inc., USA) installed at depths of 25,  
167 60, 100 cm, respectively, in the center of the measurement field from 2016 to 2018.

168

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## 169 2.4 Data analyses

170 The growing season was defined as the period when average net ecosystem  
171 productivity (NEP) of three years (2015, 2016, and 2017) exceeded  $1 \text{ g C m}^{-2} \text{ d}^{-1}$   
172 (Richardson et al., 2010), which is from the day of the year (DOY) from 96 to 302. In  
173 addition, we divided the growing season into spring (DOY 96-151), summer (DOY  
174 152-243), and autumn (DOY 244-302). When analyzing the response of RS to rainfall  
175 event during the growing season, we focused on discrete rainfall episodes, i.e. events  
176 lasting less than a day, while rainfall events spanning more than one day were  
177 excluded. The relative change of soil respiration rate (RSrc) after rainfall event was  
178 calculated by the difference between daily soil respiration rate on the day after rainfall  
179 (post-RS) and the day before the rain (pre-RS) divided by pre-RS [i.e. (post-RS -  
180 pre-RS) / pre-RS]. To explore the influence of rainfall events on SM and TS, we  
181 calculated changes of soil moisture ( $\Delta\text{SM}$ ) and soil temperature ( $\Delta\text{TS}$ ) between the  
182 day after rainfall and the day before the rain. In addition, according to the  
183 classification standard of precipitation intensity issued by China National  
184 Meteorological Administration, the cumulative rainfall within 24 hours a day was  
185 divided into three levels: light ( $< 10 \text{ mm}$ ), moderate (10-25 mm), and heavy ( $> 25$   
186 mm).

187 Prior to statistical analysis the data was tested for normal distribution and the  
188 non-normal data was log or reciprocal transformed. Paired t-tests were used to  
189 analyze the differences in daily RS, TS, and SM before and after rainfall in each

---

190 season. However, soil temperature and moisture data among three seasons were still  
191 non-normally distributed after transformation. We therefore used non-parametric  
192 Kruskal-Wallis H test to conduct the analysis. One-way ANOVA was used to analyze  
193 the differences in daily mean RS among three seasons, before and after rainfall, and  
194 post hoc least significant differ (LSD) test if significant. Also, regression analysis was  
195 used to determine the effects of rainfall size on RSrc,  $\Delta$ SM, and  $\Delta$ TS. In order to  
196 understand the impacts of environmental variables on RSrc in different seasons,  
197 stepwise multiple regressions were performed, with RS as the dependent variable, and  
198 soil temperature before rain (pre-TS), soil temperature after rain (post-TS), soil  
199 moisture content before rain (pre-SM), soil moisture content after rain (post-SM),  
200  $\Delta$ SM,  $\Delta$ TS as the independent variables. Furthermore, Spearman rank correlation  
201 analysis was applied to identify the relationships between daily RS and SM and TS  
202 following rainfall events. . The relationship between daily RS and TS before and after  
203 rainfall was fitted using a simple empirical exponential model:  $RS = a \times e^{bTS}$ , (TS is  
204 the soil temperature ( $^{\circ}$ C), and a and b model parameters). After the exponential  
205 relationship was linearized, the difference of the regression relationship before and  
206 after rainfall was compared by covariance analysis. The temperature sensitivity ( $Q_{10}$ )  
207 was estimated from the classical equation:  $Q_{10} = e^{10b}$ . All analyses were performed  
208 using SPSS 19.0 for Windows (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL).

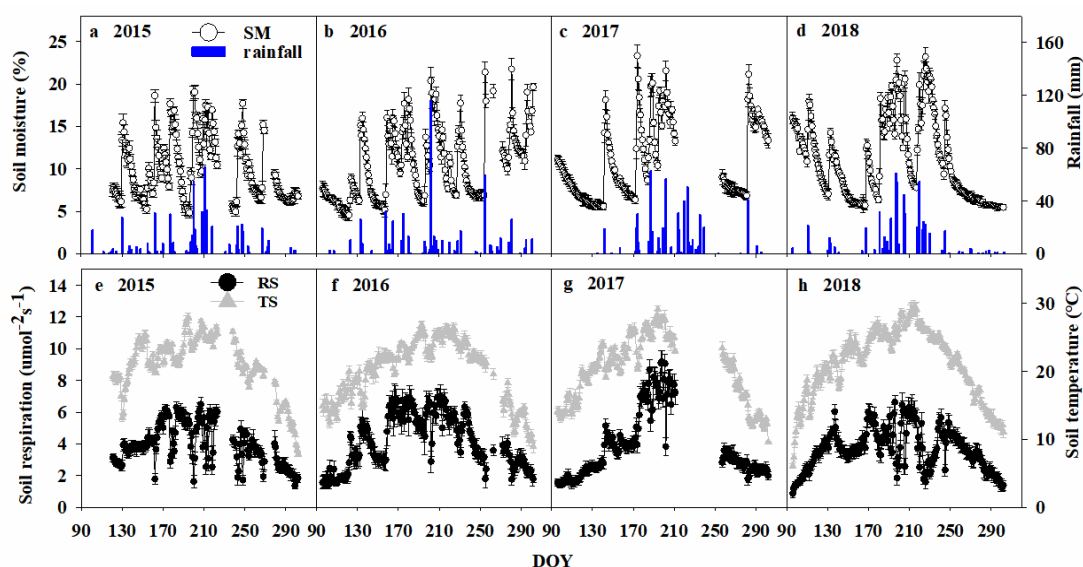
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210 **3. Results**

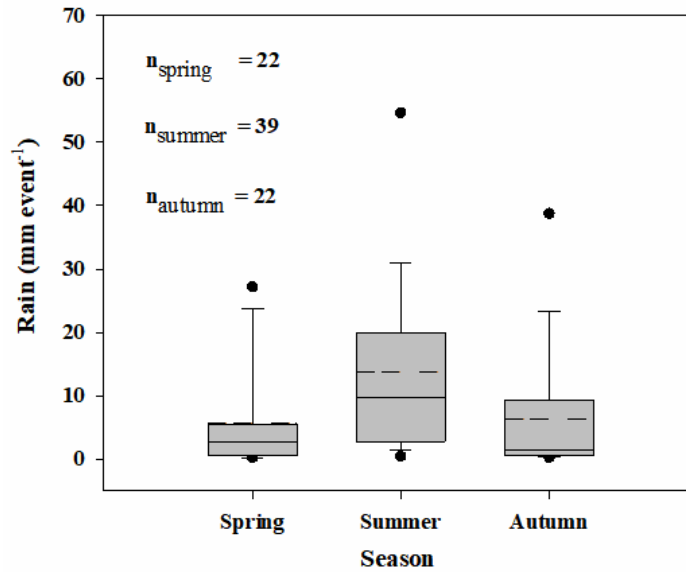
211 3.1 Environmental conditions and soil respiration in different seasons

212 The contribution of rainfall from June to August to the growing season total was  
213 relatively high in all four study years (Fig. 1). Eighty-three independent daily rainfall  
214 events were identified, with 22, 39, and 22 events occurring in spring, summer, and  
215 autumn, respectively (Fig. 2). The majority (75%) of rainfall events in spring  
216 amounted to less than 5 mm (Fig. 2). The variation of rainfall size in summer was the  
217 greatest, and more than 50% of the rainfall events exceeded 10 mm (Fig. 2). Although  
218 the mean and variation range of rainfall event size in autumn were larger than those in  
219 spring, more than 75% of rainfall events were light and less than 10mm (Fig. 2).



220

221 **Fig. 1** Daily rainfall and soil moisture (upper panel a-d) and averaged daily soil respiration and  
222 soil temperature (lower panel e-h) from 2015 to 2018. Vertical bars represent the standard error of  
223 four soil chambers (lower panel). Breaks in the connecting line indicate missing data due to  
224 instrument failure.



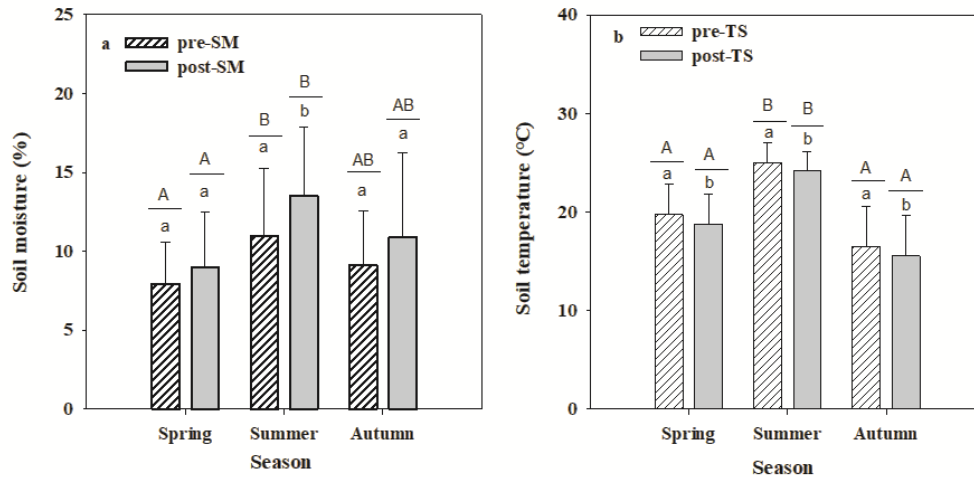
225

226 **Fig. 2** Distribution of 83 individual daily rainfall events in different seasons across the four-year  
 227 study period. The median, mean, 25<sup>th</sup>/75<sup>th</sup> percentile, 10<sup>th</sup>/90<sup>th</sup> percentile, and 5<sup>th</sup>/95<sup>th</sup> percentile are  
 228 shown as solid line, dashed line, box, whiskers and dots, respectively. The letter n represents the  
 229 number of rainfall events in each season.

230

231 Soil moisture at 5 cm depth was affected by rainfall events, with larger rainfall  
 232 sizes leading to stronger increases in SM (Fig. 1 and Fig.S.1). The average post-SM  
 233 was significantly higher than the average pre-SM in summer ( $p < 0.01$ , Fig. 3a).  
 234 Although the averaged post-SM was also higher than pre-SM in spring and autumn,  
 235 the difference was not significant (Fig. 3a) due to the small size of rainfall events  
 236 (Figs. 1 and 2). In addition, the three-year (2016, 2017, and 2018) averaged daily SM  
 237 at different soil depths (25cm, 60cm, and 100cm) showed obvious seasonal  
 238 fluctuation (Fig. S.2) governed by the temperate monsoon climate.

239



240

241 **Fig. 3** Averaged soil volumetric moisture content (SM± SD) (a) and soil temperature (TS± SD) (b)

242 before and after rainfall events in different seasons across the four years. Uppercase letters

243 indicate significant differences between seasons (pre-RS and post-RS, respectively). Lowercase

244 letters represent the differences between pre- and post-rain events within the same season. More

245 information about the analyses can be found in Tables S.1 and S.2.

246

247 Mean post-TS was lower than mean pre-TS in all seasons (Fig. 3b) indicating

248 that rainfall events had a significant effect on TS ( $p < 0.05$ , Fig. 2b and Fig. S.1d-f). In

249 addition, among the three seasons, the lowest averaged TS was in autumn (Fig. 3b).

250 The seasonal variations in RS were similar for each of the 4 years, increasing from

251 spring, peaking in summer, and then decreasing gradually in autumn (Fig. 1).

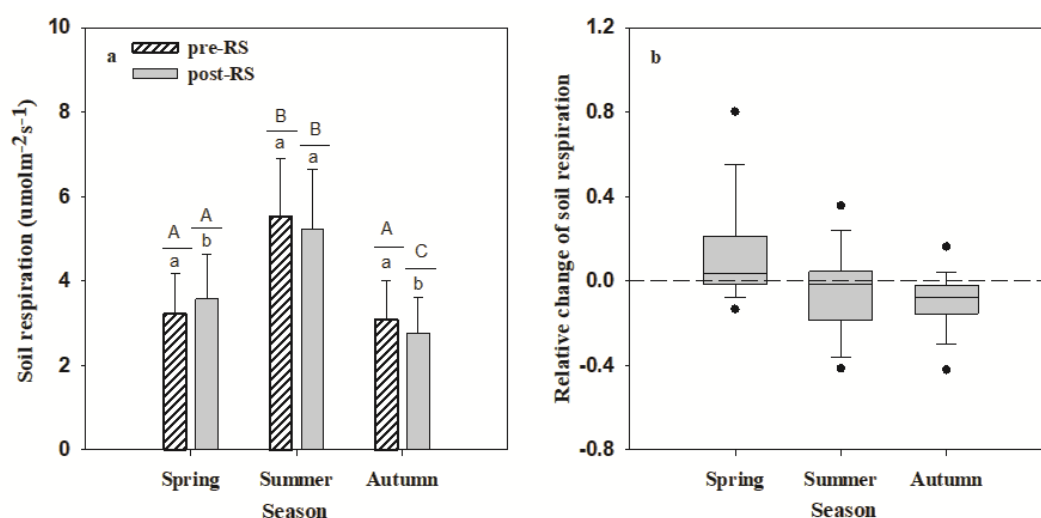
252

### 253 3.2 Soil respiration response to rainfall events

254 Although the seasonal variations in RS were in general consistent with the

255 seasonal changes in TS, there were distinct mismatched periods (many outliers of

256 daily RS) when rainfall events (especially large sized ones) occurred (Fig. 1). The  
 257 mean post-RS was significantly higher than the mean pre-RS in spring, while mean  
 258 post-RS was significantly lower than mean pre-RS in autumn ( $p < 0.05$ , Fig. 4a).  
 259 Although mean post-RS was also lower than mean pre-RS in summer, this difference  
 260 was not statistically significant (Fig. 4a).



261  
 262 **Fig. 4** Averaged daily soil respiration (a) and the relative change of soil respiration (RSrc) (b) in  
 263 different seasons. Uppercase letters indicate significant differences between seasons (pre-RS,  
 264 post-RS, respectively, lowercase letters refer to significant differences between pre- and post-rain  
 265 events within the same season ( $p < 0.05$ ). The median, 25<sup>th</sup>/75<sup>th</sup> percentile, 10<sup>th</sup>/90<sup>th</sup> percentile, and  
 266 5<sup>th</sup>/95<sup>th</sup> percentile are shown as solid line, box, whiskers and dots, respectively. Black short dash  
 267 line at RSrc = 0. More information about the analyses can be found in Tables S.1 and S.3.

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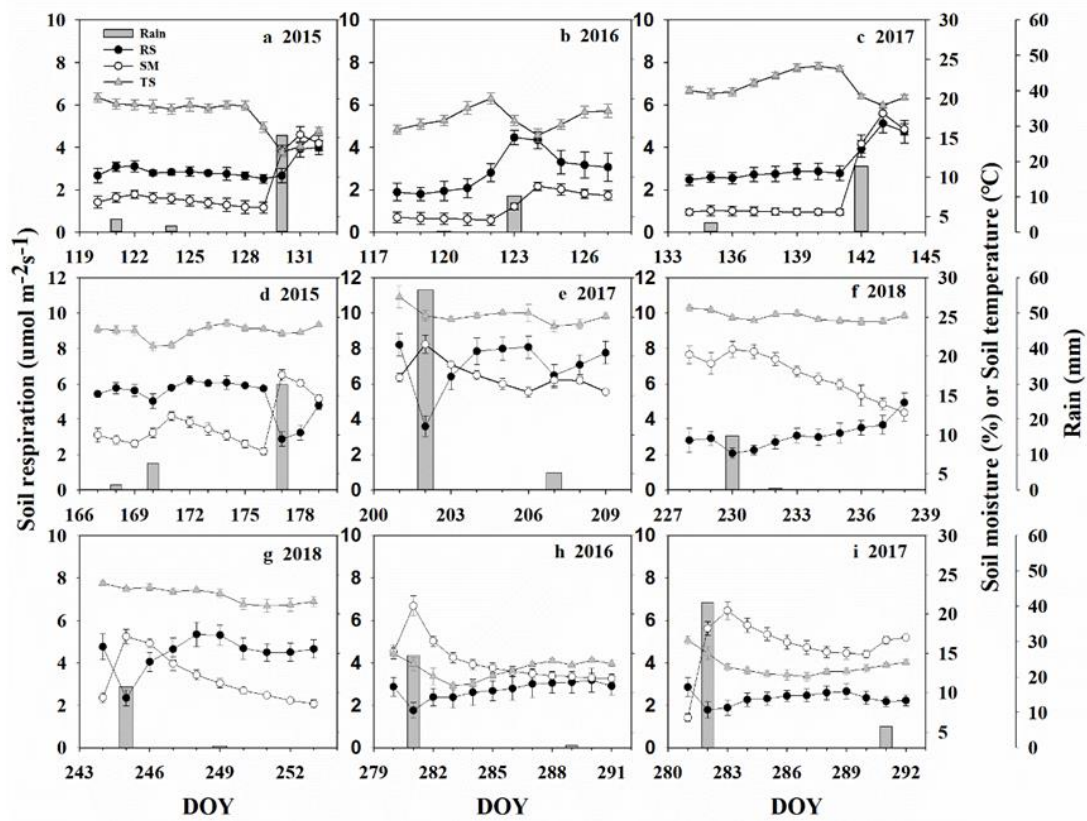
269 3.3 Effect of soil moisture and soil temperature on soil respiration following rainfall

270 events in different seasons

271       There was a significant positive correlation between RS and SM following  
272 rainfall events in spring (Table 1 and Fig. 5a-c ). However, the relationship between  
273 RS and TS was decoupled (Fig. 5a-c and Table 1). The change in SM after rainfall  
274 ( $\Delta$ SM) explained 82% of the variation in RSrc in spring, with the relationship  
275 between them being positive ( $p < 0.01$ , Table 2). In contrast to spring, RS  
276 significantly decreased as soil was wetter following rainfall in summer and autumn  
277 (Fig.5d-i and Table 1,). TS was not significantly correlated with RS after rainfall in  
278 summer (like in spring), though the lack of a significant relationship may have been  
279 caused by the small temperature range (unlike in spring) (Table 1 and Fig. 5). Indeed,  
280 when considering  $\Delta$ TS, we find a positive effect of temperature (Table 2). Taken  
281 together,  $\Delta$ TS (positive effect) and post-SM (negative impact) together explained 33%  
282 of changes in RSrc in summer ( $p < 0.01$ ). Finally, in autumn, we found a significant  
283 negative relationship between SM and RS after rain, and a significant positive  
284 relationship between TS and RS (Table 1). Together, 64% of the variance in RSrc  
285 could be accounted for by  $\Delta$ SM (negative effect,  $R^2 = 0.53$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and  $\Delta$ TS  
286 (positive effect,  $R^2 = 0.11$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) (Table 2).

287





288

289 **Fig. 5** Soil respiration, soil moisture, soil temperature and daily rainfall amount during the

290 sampling periods for the four years and spring (a-c), summer(d-f), autumn (g-i). Error bars

291 represent the standard error of four soil chambers. Our sampling periods generally contains more

292 than two rainfall sizes including light (< 10 mm), moderate (10-25 mm), and heavy (> 25 mm).

293 However, there were no distinct rainfall events >10mm occurring in the spring of 2018 and only

294 three years of data are presented here.

295

### 296 3.4 Effects of rainfall event size on soil respiration in different seasons

297 Soil respiration had different responses to the size of rainfall event in the three

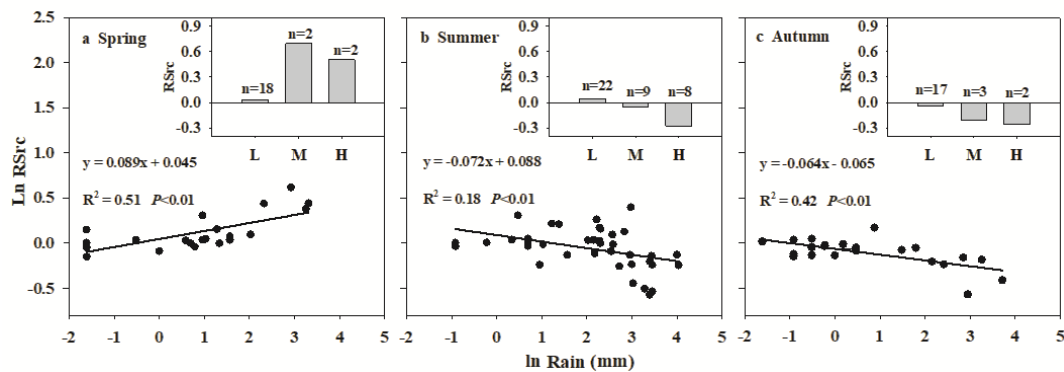
298 different seasons (Fig. 6 and Fig. 5). RSrc was stimulated more if the size of

299 precipitation events was larger in spring (Fig. 6a). In contrast, the correlation between

300 R<sub>Src</sub> and rainfall size was generally negative in summer and autumn (Fig. 6). In  
 301 summer, these suppressive effects especially occurred after heavy rainfall (> 25 mm)  
 302 events (inserted panels in Fig. 6b, c and Fig. 5 d, e, h, i).

303 Rare heavy rain events in spring and autumn made it impossible to perform  
 304 meaningful analysis on the seasonal difference in relationships between RS and TS  
 305 per rainfall class. Therefore, we pooled data over the three seasons for subsequent  
 306 analysis. Reflecting minor and insignificant difference in  $\Delta$ SM, the temperature  
 307 sensitivity ( $Q_{10}$ ) of RS before and after light rainfall (< 10 mm) was similar (Fig. 7a).  
 308 However, more intense rain events led to a significant increase in SM ( $p < 0.05$ )  
 309 (insets in Fig. 7a-c), and this was mirrored by a lower influence of temperature on RS  
 310 (lower  $Q_{10}$ ) especially after heavy rainfall (> 25 mm) (Fig. 7 b and c).

311



312

313 **Fig. 6** Relationship between the relative change in soil respiration (R<sub>Src</sub>) and the rainfall event

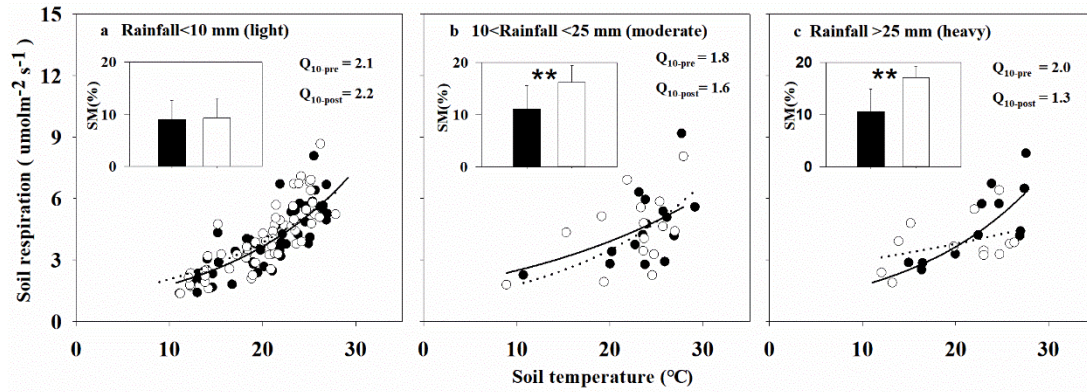
314 size. The insert panel shows the mean relative change in soil respiration for three rainfall size

315 classes L: light (< 10 mm), M: moderate (10-25 mm), H: heavy (> 25 mm) in each season. The

316 letter n represents the number of samples of rainfall events in each rainfall size class. Rain and

317 RSrc were log transformed (Ln) before regression analysis.

318



319

320 **Fig. 7** Comparison of relationships between soil respiration and soil temperature at 10 cm depth

321 before rainfall (pre-rain) (black circle) and after rainfall (post-rain) (white circle) in different

322 rainfall size level (a-c) for the four years. The equation  $y = ae^{bx}$  was used to describe the

323 relationship between soil temperature and soil respiration.  $Q_{10} = e^{10b}$ . The inset shows the mean

324 soil moisture with pre-rain (black column) and post-rain (white column), \*\* indicates significant

325 differences ( $p < 0.01$ ).

326

## 327 4. Discussion

### 328 4.1 Seasonality of soil respiration response to rainfall event

329 Soil respiration response to rainfall event varies due to the difference in

330 ecosystem types, climatic variability and soil biophysical properties (Han et al., 2018;

331 Liu et al., 2016; Niu et al., 2019). Our results indicated that the response of RS to

332 rainfall events was characterized by strong seasonality. RS was stimulated by rainfall

333 events in spring, but was generally reduced in summer and autumn, especially when

---

334 the rainfall events were large. Liu et al.(2019a) also suggested that there are seasonal  
335 changes in the impact of rainfall events on RS in a non-riparian ecosystem. Yet they  
336 found that rainfall events stimulated RS throughout the growing season, with only the  
337 degree of stimulation differing throughout the year (Liu et al., 2019a). The influence  
338 of rainfall events on RS mainly depends on the abiotic factors such as post-TS and  
339 pre-SM in the same ecosystem(Han et al., 2018; Yoon et al., 2014). In the present  
340 study, there were different the relative changes in RS following rainfall events due to  
341 the variations in the dominate role of  $\Delta$ SM, post-SM and  $\Delta$ TS in different seasons.  
342 Such factors are strongly regulated by rainfall events, and substantial change occurred  
343 when rainfall size increased. The  $\Delta$ SM, representing rapid changes in soil moisture or  
344 wetting intensity(Lado-Monserrat et al., 2014; Rey et al., 2017), plays an important  
345 role in driving the RS response to rainfall events in spring and autumn. The negative  
346 effects of SM on RS in summer and autumn were seemingly amended by a direct  
347 stimulation of biological activity under higher TS.

348       Regardless of seasonality, positive effects of rainfall events on RS have been  
349 found both in field studies and rainfall manipulation experiments conducted in a  
350 variety of ecosystems, even in humid and semi-humid areas (Peng et al., 2013; Liu et  
351 al., 2017b; Wang et al., 2019). In our study, RS was significantly increased by rainfall  
352 events and there was a significant positive correlation between RS and SM following  
353 rainfall events only in spring. This associated with a number of abiotic and biotic  
354 mechanisms. First, compared with other seasons, rainfall events in spring were

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355 relatively small, the interval between events was longer, and the mean season pre-SM  
356 of surface soils in spring was lowest of the three seasons. Although there is a  
357 relatively low groundwater tables in the riparian ecosystems, deep SM cannot be  
358 effectively replenished due to the size and frequency of rainfall events during spring  
359 (Fig.S.2). Low SM can inhibit soil microbial activity (Almagro et al., 2009), and  
360 increased available SM following rainfall events would induce RS through improved  
361 diffusion of substrates (Lado-Monserrat et al., 2014). Secondly, lower rainfall  
362 frequency in spring may increase the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> accumulated in soil pores (Liu et  
363 al., 2019b); with the occurrence of rainfall events, the CO<sub>2</sub> in the pores could be  
364 replaced by soil moisture, pushing the CO<sub>2</sub> out (Huxman et al., 2004). Thirdly,  
365 re-activated root growth in spring could imply higher sensitivity to SM (Schwinning  
366 et al., 2005), with increased SM after rainfall quickly stimulating root growth and  
367 induce RS (Liu et al., 2019a).

368       Conversely, RS decreased with increasing rainfall size in summer and autumn.  
369 Previous studies have shown that RS was inhibited when rainfall events occurred in a  
370 wet soil environment (McLain and Martens, 2006; Wang et al., 2012; Han et al.,  
371 2018). Increases in SM caused by rainfall events can reduce the soil oxygen  
372 concentration when the soil pore spaces are filled with water (Van Straaten et al.,  
373 2010). The ensuing anoxic stress would inhibit the activity of aerobic microorganisms  
374 and even suppress the metabolism of plants and aerobic respiration of roots, thus  
375 reducing RS production (Lado-Monserrat et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2017). Notably,

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376 riparian ecosystems are usually characterized by sandy soils in dryland regions, and  
377 the macropore space allows diffusion of atmospheric gases and even provides  
378 sufficient oxygen for aerobic microorganisms in the deep soil (McLain and Martens,  
379 2006; Schjønning et al., 2003). Also, coarse-textured soils have lower water holding  
380 capacity and higher permeability rate(Gao et al., 2018). Rainfall events are therefore  
381 more likely to cause anoxic conditions and inhibit decomposition and respiration in  
382 the riparian ecosystem. Furthermore, heavy (> 25mm) rainfall events occurred more  
383 frequently in summer than in spring and autumn, which resulted in high post-SM even  
384 if the pre-SM was low (Fig.5).On the other hand, the rainfall amount in summer  
385 accounts for a large proportion of the annual total, and the SM level in summer was  
386 relatively high, reaching 51-65% of the water holding capacity. The threshold value of  
387 SM at which RS begins to decline is near 60% of the field capacity(Shi et al., 2011).  
388 Taken together, this implies that the potential for suppression of RS by high SM  
389 values was highest in summer in our study system. Moreover, compared with silt and  
390 clay, the stability of sandy soil protective aggregates is poor, and heavy rainfall could  
391 therefore easily cause dissolved organic carbon leaching from the surface, thus  
392 reducing CO<sub>2</sub> efflux (Knapp et al., 2008).

393 Surprisingly, we found that RS was more easily suppressed by rainfall in autumn,  
394 although the seasonal mean SM of surface was lower than in summer, both before and  
395 after rainfall events. After the replenishment of frequent heavy rain events in the late  
396 summer, the groundwater level of the riparian ecosystem was increased, resulting in

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397 relatively high values of SM in the deep soil layers in autumn (Fig. S.2). In addition,  
398 poplar trees have high water consumption and root system with strong SM absorption  
399 capacity that can take up SM both from surface and deep soil layers (Liu et al., 2020;  
400 Lu et al., 2009). When deep SM supply is sufficient, on one hand, capillary rising  
401 water will supplement the SM of upper dry soil and fill the fine pore spaces (Han et  
402 al., 2018; Smith et al., 2017). On the other hand, hydraulic lift (i.e., upward  
403 redistribution of water by plant roots) increases water availability in the dry top soil,  
404 which would help maintain the activity of microbial communities and fine roots near  
405 the soil surface (Almeida-Rodriguez et al., 2011; Bauerle et al., 2008). Thus,  
406 additional water from rainfall events could suppress RS also in autumn, especially  
407 under more intense rainfall. Nevertheless, the deciduous poplar plantation could  
408 provide more fast-degradable carbon sources for microbial activity in autumn.  
409 However, relatively low TS and the reduction in the number of microbes following  
410 rainfall could negatively affect the decomposition of substrates immediately and  
411 inhibit RS (Lado-Monserrat et al., 2014; Peng et al., 2013; Rey et al., 2017). Our  
412 results indicate that the influence of rainfall on RS in this riparian forest ecosystems  
413 was not only related to the short-term effects of rainfall, but also to the interplay  
414 between longer term, rain-associated seasonal fluctuations in groundwater levels and  
415 immediate rain events.  
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## 417 4.2 Impact of rainfall size

418 While initial SM conditions, both at the surface and in the deeper layers, are  
419 important in affecting RS response, rainfall size was important as well (Table 2).  
420 Especially in spring and autumn, the  $\Delta$ SM (which depended on the rainfall size) was a  
421 major driver of soil carbon emissions. Other studies have also reported on the  
422 importance of rainfall size on RS (Rey et al., 2017; Zeppel et al., 2014). Furthermore,  
423 the size of rainfall events could also determine the magnitude of RS responses in  
424 different months (Niu et al., 2019). In our study, rainfall size seemed to mostly  
425 reinforce the seasonal trends: increased RS when rainfall was moderate or high in  
426 spring, decreased RS after moderate or high intensity events in summer and autumn.  
427 Light rainfall had only minor or insignificant effects. Moreover, our results also  
428 demonstrate that the sensitivity of soil respiration to soil temperature ( $Q_{10}$ ) can be  
429 decreased if daily precipitation intensity is higher. The water status of the riparian  
430 ecosystem is thought to in turn influence such effects (Suseela et al., 2012; Yu et al.,  
431 2020). In the last 50 years, the number of extreme rainfall events in China has  
432 increased in the period April-July, and slightly decreased in the late summer and  
433 autumn (Fu et al., 2013). As we have shown that rainfall size and seasonal factors can  
434 both influence RS, changes in rainfall patterns expected under climate change in  
435 China and elsewhere in the world (IPCC, 2014) may significantly alter soil respiration.  
436 Regional and global carbon budget assessments would thus benefit from more  
437 accurate quantification of the impact of different rainfall sizes on RS.



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438

439 **5. Conclusions**

440       Seasonal differences in response of soil respiration of a riparian poplar plantation  
441 ecosystem to individual rainfall events were found over the four years study period. In  
442 spring, characterized by dry background soil conditions, soil respiration was more  
443 significantly coupled with soil moisture than soil temperature. As a result, rainfall  
444 events generally stimulated RS during this season. In contrast, RS was reduced in  
445 summer and autumn after rainfall. Higher overall soil moisture levels in these seasons,  
446 including a higher water table in autumn, led to faster water saturation of the soil,  
447 especially when daily rainfall exceeded 25 mm. Regardless of season, heavy rainfall  
448 tended to decrease the sensitivity of RS to soil temperature. This suggests that  
449 changes in the seasonal distribution of rainfall or rainfall sizes will increase the  
450 uncertainty for evaluating terrestrial ecosystem carbon emission by current empirical  
451 and processes based models at multiple scales.

452

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