

1           **Vegetation dynamics and climate seasonality jointly control the interannual**  
2           **catchment water balance in the Loess Plateau under the Budyko framework**  
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11   **Abstract.** Within the Budyko framework, the controlling parameter ( $\omega$  in the Fu equation) is widely  
12   considered to represent landscape conditions in terms of vegetation coverage ( $M$ ); however, some  
13   qualitative studies have concluded that climate seasonality ( $S$ ) should be incorporated in  $\omega$ . Here, we  
14   discuss the relationship between  $\omega$ ,  $M$ , and  $S$ , and further develop an empirical equation so that the  
15   contributions from  $M$  to actual evapotranspiration ( $ET$ ) can be determined more accurately. Taking 13  
16   catchments in the Loess Plateau as examples,  $\omega$  was found to be well correlated with  $M$  and  $S$ . The  
17   developed empirical formula for  $\omega$  calculations at the annual scale performed well for estimating  $ET$  by  
18   the cross-validation approach. By combining the Budyko framework with the semi-empirical formula,  
19   the contributions of changes in  $\omega$  to  $ET$  variations were further decomposed as those of  $M$  and  $S$ .  
20   Results showed that the contributions of  $S$  to  $ET$  changes ranged from 0.1% to 65.5 % (absolute values);  
21   therefore, the impacts of climate seasonality on  $ET$  cannot be ignored. Otherwise, the contribution of  $M$   
22   to  $ET$  changes will be estimated with a large error. The developed empirical formula between  $\omega$ ,  $M$ , and  
23    $S$  provides an effective method to separate the contributions of  $M$  and  $S$  to  $ET$  changes.

24   **KEYWORDS:** Budyko framework; Controlling parameter; Vegetation dynamics; Climate seasonality;  
25   Loess Plateau  
26

## 27 **1. Introduction**

28 The water cycle has been influenced greatly by human activities and climate change since the  
29 1960s, and considerable variability in hydrological processes has been observed in many basins around  
30 the world; this has led to a series of problems concerning essential water resources (Stocker et al., 2014).  
31 Analyses of the mechanisms of the interactions among the water balance, climate, and catchment  
32 surface conditions are important for understanding these complex processes at different spatio-temporal  
33 scales (Zhang et al., 2008), and such work has practical significance in regard to the improvement of  
34 water resources and land management (Rodriguez-Iturbe, 2000; Xu et al., 2014).

35 Budyko (1948, 1974) postulated that precipitation ( $P$ , represents the water supply from the  
36 atmosphere) and potential evapotranspiration ( $ET_0$ , represents the demand by the atmosphere) are the  
37 two dominant variables that control the long-term average water balance. The Budyko framework is  
38 considered one of the most abiding frameworks linking climatic conditions to the runoff ( $R$ ) and actual  
39 evapotranspiration ( $ET$ ) of a catchment (Donohue et al., 2007), and it has been used successfully to  
40 investigate interactions between hydrological processes, climate variability, and landscape  
41 characteristics (e.g. (Milly, 1994; Woods, 2003; Yokoo et al., 2008; Yang et al., 2009)). A series of  
42 empirical formulas have been developed for the Budyko curve based on theoretical research and case  
43 studies of regional water balance over the past 50 years. Among them, the Fu (Fu, 1981; Zhang et al.,  
44 2004) and Choudhury–Yang equations (Choudhury, 1999; Yang et al., 2008) have been used widely;  
45 furthermore, the controlling parameters  $\omega$  (in the Fu equation) and  $n$  (in the Choudhury–Yang equation)  
46 are related linearly (Yang et al., 2008).

47 Deviations from the Budyko curve have been detected in previous studies, which indicates that in  
48 addition to climate conditions, other variables can also influence the variability of regional water  
49 balances (Yang et al., 2007; Wang and Alimohammadi, 2012). Two kinds of factors have been identified  
50 to be responsible for the deviations. The first type of factors are related to land surface conditions, and

51 these include vegetation dynamics (Donohue et al., 2007; Yang et al., 2009; Donohue et al., 2010; Li et  
52 al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2016), soil properties, and topography (Yang et al., 2007; Peel et al., 2010). The  
53 second type of factors include seasonal climate variability (in addition to  $P$  and  $ET_0$ ), such as storm  
54 depth (Donohue et al., 2012; Shao et al., 2012; Li et al., 2014), frequency of daily rainfall (Milly, 1994),  
55 and differences in the timing of  $P$  and  $ET_0$  (Budyko, 1961; Potter et al., 2005). All of these factors can  
56 be encoded into the controlling parameter of the Budyko equations (e.g.  $\omega$  in the Fu equation and  $n$  in  
57 the Choudhury–Yang equation). So far, a great deal of attention has been paid to the relationships  
58 between land surface conditions and the controlling parameter. Based on satellite products of vegetation  
59 such as the Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI), vegetation has been found to correlate  
60 well with the controlling parameter, and some empirical relationships have been successfully developed  
61 (Yang et al., 2009; Li et al., 2013). In particular, the controlling parameter can be better represented by  
62 vegetation when higher spatiotemporal resolution products are used. Therefore, the impacts of dynamic  
63 changes in vegetation on hydrology can be effectively quantified.

64 Many current studies attribute any effects of the controlling parameter to landscape characteristics  
65 (Roderick and Farquhar, 2011; Zhou et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2016). However, both empirical evidence  
66 and modelling tests have demonstrated the important function of climate seasonality on catchment water  
67 yield, and thereby, evidence exists that climate seasonality also strongly affects the controlling  
68 parameter in the Budyko equations (Berghuijs and Woods, 2016). Some indices and models have thus  
69 been developed to address this issue, and several potential solutions have been discussed (Milly, 1993,  
70 1994; Potter et al., 2005; Yokoo et al., 2008; Feng et al., 2012; Li, 2014). Yang et al. (2012) introduced  
71 the climate seasonality index into the Budyko framework and proposed an empirical equation to include  
72 its effect in the estimation of the long-term controlling parameters; however, by focusing on the mean  
73 annual scale, the effects of vegetation dynamics were not considered. Therefore, how the vegetation  
74 dynamics and climate seasonality jointly control the interannual variability in the controlling parameters  
75 needs further interpretation.

76           Therefore, the primary motivation behind this study was to detect the potential linkages between  
77 the controlling parameter and surface condition change, as well as climate seasonality at an annual scale.  
78 The specific objectives were to derive an appropriate analytic formula between parameter  $\omega$  in the Fu  
79 equation and the above two factors for typical catchments in the Loess Plateau, and then, quantify the  
80 impacts of vegetation change and climate seasonality variability on the catchment water balance.

## 81 **2. Methods**

### 82 **2.1. Annual water balance definition**

83           The Budyko framework assumes that the long-term average water balance is in a steady state  
84 (Wang and Alimohammadi, 2012), and the water storage change in a catchment can be negligible. The  
85 interannual variability of the water balance in individual basins can also be studied by overlooking the  
86 interannual variation of the catchment water storage (Sankarasubramanian and Vogel, 2002; Yang et al.,  
87 2007; Potter and Zhang, 2009). However, water storage change can be great when analysing the  
88 interannual variability of the water balance (Wang, 2012). To minimize the potential errors introduced  
89 by neglecting water storage variation, the hydrological year (Sivapalan et al., 2011; Carmona et al.,  
90 2014) and moving windows (Jiang et al., 2015) were introduced to the time series of annual  
91 hydrological variables. Similar to Sivapalan et al. (2011) and Carmona et al. (2014), the hydrological  
92 year rather than the calendar year is introduced to calculate the annual *ET*, and this is called the  
93 “measured” *ET* in the subsequent discussion. Specifically, as the study area has a semiarid climate with  
94 most rainfall occurring in summer and autumn (July–September), a hydrological year is defined as July  
95 to June of the following year. In this way, the water input occurs mainly at the beginning of the year and  
96 the water is consumed within that year.

## 97 2.2. Identification of factors determining parameter $\omega$ in Fu's equation

98 The Fu equation is used in this study with the following expressions:

$$\begin{aligned} 99 \quad \frac{ET}{P} &= 1 + \frac{ET_0}{P} - \left[ 1 + \left( \frac{ET_0}{P} \right)^\omega \right]^{1/\omega} \text{ or} \\ 100 \quad \frac{ET}{ET_0} &= 1 + \frac{P}{ET_0} - \left[ 1 + \left( \frac{P}{ET_0} \right)^\omega \right]^{1/\omega} \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

101 where  $\omega$  is the controlling parameter of the Budyko curve.  $ET_0$  is calculated by using the equation of  
102 Priestley and Taylor (1972).

103 The important issue regarding the parameterization of  $\omega$  in Fu's equation is to choose factors with  
104 physical meanings. According to the results from related studies, land surface conditions can be mainly  
105 represented by vegetation, which was also true in this study. With an arid to semiarid climate, water  
106 availability is the key factor that controls vegetation dynamics. Although soil properties and topography  
107 also influence vegetation growth, their impacts can be ignored on an annual scale because they would  
108 be expected to be almost constant over a year. Therefore, vegetation dynamics (i.e. vegetation coverage)  
109 were chosen to represent the variations in surface conditions. The vegetation coverage ( $M$ ) was  
110 estimated by the following equation (Yang et al. (2009)):

$$111 \quad M = \frac{NDVI - NDVI_{\min}}{NDVI_{\max} - NDVI_{\min}} \quad (2)$$

112 where  $NDVI_{\max}$  and  $NDVI_{\min}$  are the NDVI values of dense forest (0.80) and bare soil (0.05),  
113 respectively.

114 Two limiting conditions were used to illustrate the effects of seasonal variations in coupled water  
115 and energy on the regional water balance. If  $P$  and  $ET_0$  are in phase, the intra-annual distribution of  
116 precipitation is very symmetrical, and thus,  $R \rightarrow 0$  in non-humid regions and  $ET \rightarrow P$ . However, if  $P$   
117 and  $ET_0$  are out phase, the total precipitation of one year is concentrated at a certain moment, and thus,  
118  $R \rightarrow P$  and  $ET \rightarrow 0$ . Therefore, the impacts of seasonal variations in coupled water and energy on the  
119 regional water balance cannot be neglected, and they can only be reflected by the controlling parameter.

120 Solar radiation was considered as the dominant factor that controls the climate seasonality and thus the  
 121 seasonality of  $P$  and  $ET_0$  can be expressed by sine functions (Milly, 1994; Woods, 2003):

$$122 \quad P(t) = \bar{P}(1 + \delta_P \sin \omega t) \quad (3a)$$

$$123 \quad ET_0(t) = \overline{ET_0}(1 + \delta_{ET_0} \sin \omega t) \quad (3b)$$

124 where  $\delta_P$  and  $\delta_{ET_0}$  are the seasonal amplitude of precipitation and potential evapotranspiration,  
 125 respectively. The values of  $\delta_P$  and  $\delta_{ET_0}$  might both range from -1 to 1 because  $P$  and  $ET_0$  always have  
 126 positive value on physical grounds. Larger absolute values of  $\delta_P$  and  $\delta_{ET_0}$  mean larger variability of  
 127 climate seasonality.  $\varphi$  is the duration of the seasonal cycle,  $2\pi\varphi$  equal to 1 year. Woods (2003)  
 128 summarized the modelled climate of Eqs.(3a) and (3b) in dimensionless form and defined the climate  
 129 seasonality index ( $S$ ) and here it was used to reflect the non-uniformity in the annual distribution of  
 130 water and heat in our study:

$$131 \quad S = |\delta_P - \delta_{ET_0} \phi| \quad (4)$$

132 where  $\phi$  is the dryness index,  $\phi = \overline{ET_0}/\bar{P}$ . If  $S=0$ , there is no seasonal fluctuation of the difference  
 133 between  $P$  and  $ET_0$ . Larger values of  $S$  indicate that the larger changes in the balance between  $P$  and  $ET_0$   
 134 during the seasonal cycle.

### 135 **2.3. Evaluating the contributions of climate change and surface condition alterations to $ET$** 136 **changes**

137 Based on the climate elasticity method, which was introduced by (Schaake and Waggoner, 1990)  
 138 and improved by (Sankarasubramanian et al., 2001), the contribution of change for each climate factor  
 139 to runoff was defined as the product of the sensitivity coefficient and the variation of the climate factor  
 140 (Roderick and Farquhar, 2011):

$$141 \quad dR = \frac{\partial R}{\partial P} dP + \frac{\partial R}{\partial ET_0} + \frac{\partial R}{\partial \omega} d\omega \quad (5)$$

142 However, due to ignoring the higher orders of the Taylor expansion in equation (5), this method will  
 143 result in high errors (Yang et al., 2014b). Recently, Zhou et al. (2016) proposed a new method to  
 144 partition climate and catchment effect on the mean annual runoff based on the Budyko complementary  
 145 relationship, called “the complementary method”. The algebraic identities in their work can ensure that  
 146 the change in runoff can be decomposed into two components precisely without any residuals. Here, we  
 147 extend “the complementary method” to conduct attribution analysis of  $ET$  changes for each basin by  
 148 further incorporating the effects of vegetation coverage and climate seasonality:

$$149 \quad \Delta ET = \alpha \left[ \left( \frac{\partial ET}{\partial P} \right)_1 \Delta P + \left( \frac{\partial ET}{\partial ET_0} \right)_1 \Delta ET_0 + P_2 \Delta \left( \frac{\partial ET}{\partial P} \right) + ET_{0,2} \Delta \left( \frac{\partial ET}{\partial ET_0} \right) \right]$$

$$150 \quad + (1 - \alpha) \left[ \left( \frac{\partial ET}{\partial P} \right)_2 \Delta P + \left( \frac{\partial ET}{\partial ET_0} \right)_2 \Delta ET_0 + P_1 \Delta \left( \frac{\partial ET}{\partial P} \right) + ET_{0,1} \Delta \left( \frac{\partial ET}{\partial ET_0} \right) \right] \quad (6)$$

151 where  $\alpha$  is a weighting factor that varies from 0 to 1, which can determine the upper and lower bounds  
 152 of the climate and the controlling parameter effect. In this study, we defined  $\alpha=0.5$  according to the  
 153 recommendation of Zhou et al. (2016). The difference operator ( $\Delta$ ) refers to the difference of a variable  
 154 from period 1 (1981 to the changing point detected by Pettitt’s test (Pettitt, 1979)) to period 2 (period-1  
 155 end to 2012), e.g.,  $\Delta ET_0 = ET_{0,2} - ET_{0,1}$ . Then the contributions of  $P$ ,  $ET_0$ , and  $\omega$  changes to the  $ET$   
 156 changes can be expressed as follows:

$$157 \quad C_-(P) = \alpha \left[ \left( \frac{\partial ET}{\partial P} \right)_1 \Delta P \right] + (1 - \alpha) \left[ \left( \frac{\partial ET}{\partial P} \right)_2 \Delta P \right] \quad (7a)$$

$$158 \quad C_-(ET_0) = \alpha \left[ \left( \frac{\partial ET}{\partial ET_0} \right)_1 \Delta ET_0 \right] + (1 - \alpha) \left[ \left( \frac{\partial ET}{\partial ET_0} \right)_2 \Delta ET_0 \right] \quad (7b)$$

$$159 \quad C_-(\omega) = \alpha \left[ P_2 \Delta \left( \frac{\partial ET}{\partial P} \right) + ET_{0,2} \Delta \left( \frac{\partial ET}{\partial ET_0} \right) \right] + (1 - \alpha) \left[ P_1 \Delta \left( \frac{\partial ET}{\partial P} \right) + ET_{0,1} \Delta \left( \frac{\partial ET}{\partial ET_0} \right) \right] \quad (7c)$$

160 After obtaining the contribution of parameter  $\omega$  to the  $ET$  change, the contributions of vegetation  
 161 coverage ( $M$ ) and climate seasonality ( $S$ ) to  $ET$  change can be further decomposed as follows.

162 First, the contributions of  $M$  and  $S$  to parameter  $\omega$  are calculated by using the sensitivity method  
 163 similar to Eq. (5) based the relationship between  $\omega$  and  $M$  as well as  $S$  we built:

$$164 \quad \Delta \omega = \frac{\partial \omega}{\partial M} \Delta M + \frac{\partial \omega}{\partial S} \Delta S \quad (8)$$

165 Furthermore, the individual relative contributions (RC) of  $M$  and  $S$  to  $\omega$  can be calculated. Then,  
 166 the contributions of  $M$  ( $C_-(M)$ ) and  $S$  ( $C_-(S)$ ) to  $ET$  changes can be obtained as follows:

$$167 \quad C_-(M) = C_-(\omega) \times RC_-(M) \quad (9a)$$

$$168 \quad C_-(S) = C_-(\omega) \times RC_-(S) \quad (9b)$$

169 **3. Study area and data**

170 The Loess Plateau, which is located in the middle reaches of the Yellow River in China,  
171 experiences a sub-humid and semiarid continental monsoon climate (Ning et al., 2016). Frequent heavy  
172 summer storms, sparse vegetation coverage, easily erodible wind-deposited loess soil, and a long  
173 agricultural history have all contributed to severe drought and soil erosion problems in this region (Li et  
174 al., 2012). To recover and preserve the ecosystem, the Chinese government has launched numerous soil  
175 and conservation measures since the 1950s, and these include biologic measures (“Grain to Green”  
176 Project) and engineering measures (building terraces and sediment trapping dams) (Mu et al., 2007). As  
177 a result, the hydrological processes of this area have undergone significant changes (Huang and Zhang,  
178 2004; Zhang et al., 2008). Thirteen catchments on the Loess Plateau were selected as our study area  
179 (Figure 1).

180



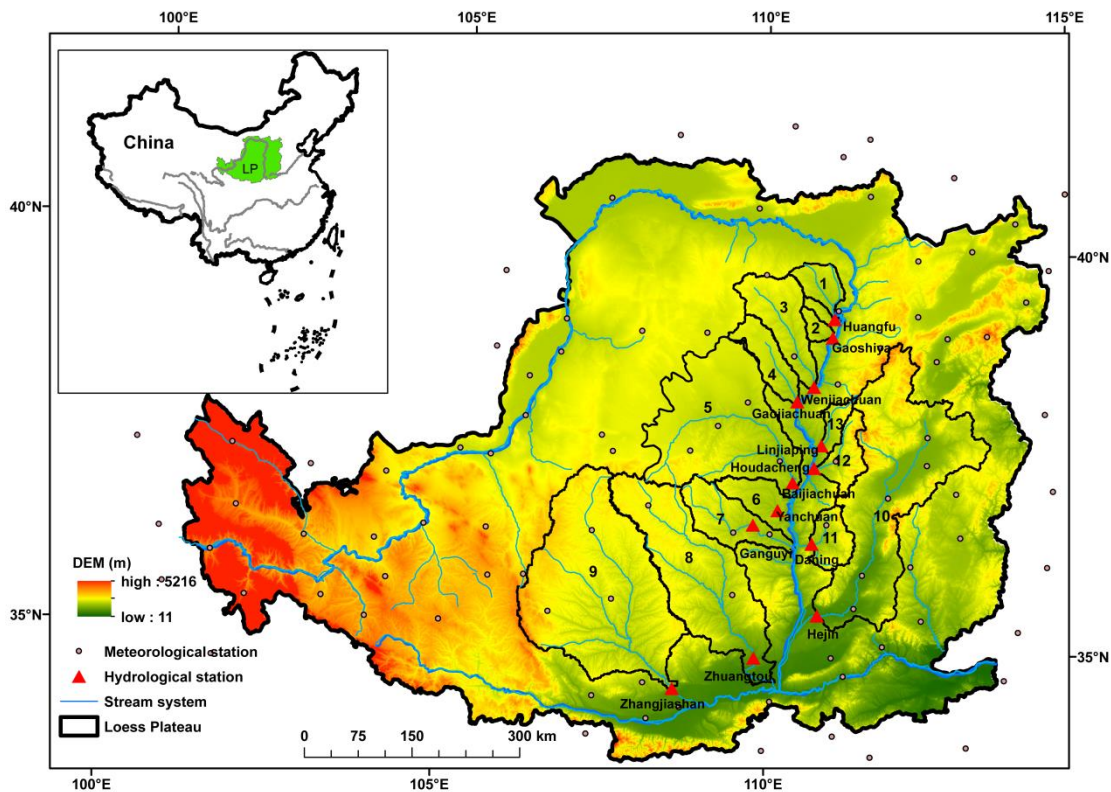


Figure 1. Locations of the study area and hydrometeorological stations.

Monthly runoff data for the 13 catchments were supplied by the Yellow River Conservancy Commission. Detailed information about the catchment characteristics and data durations are shown in Table 1. Daily meteorological data (1960–2012) comprised of precipitation, daily maximum and minimum temperatures, atmospheric pressures, wind speeds, mean relative humidity values, and sunshine durations, which were recorded at 96 stations, were provided by the China Meteorological Administration. The new NDVI third generation (NDVI3g) dataset was used to represent the vegetation characteristics of the study area, and detailed information about this dataset was presented earlier by Fensholt and Proud (2012). The maximum value compositing (MVC) procedure (Holben, 1986) was applied to produce the annual NDVI values.

Table 1. Long-term hydrometeorological characteristics and vegetation coverage (1981-2012)<sup>a</sup>.

ID	Basin	Data length, year	$P$ , mm/yr	$ET_0$ , mm/yr	$ET$ , mm/yr	$\omega$	$M$	$S$
1	Huangfu	32	372	972	347	3.15	0.42	0.94
2	Gushan	32	424	1078	394	2.74	0.47	0.90
3	Kuye	32	375	1018	333	2.45	0.43	0.99
4	Tuwei	32	383	1031	308	1.99	0.41	0.95
5	Wuding	32	385	1045	356	2.68	0.46	0.95
6	Qingjian	32	451	1009	417	3.00	0.60	0.60
7	Yan	32	462	984	433	3.21	0.70	0.51
8	Beiluo	28	502	960	475	3.76	0.88	0.34
9	Jing	32	529	936	497	3.74	0.59	0.51
10	Fen	29	465	982	452	4.21	0.87	0.43
11	Xinshui	32	478	992	458	3.77	0.87	0.45
12	Sanchuan	24	444	998	397	2.70	0.57	0.58
13	Qiushui	23	442	1006	418	3.33	0.67	0.60

193 <sup>a</sup>Because a few runoff data points were missing for several basins, the data length in these basins was less than 32. Each item represents the mean annual value.

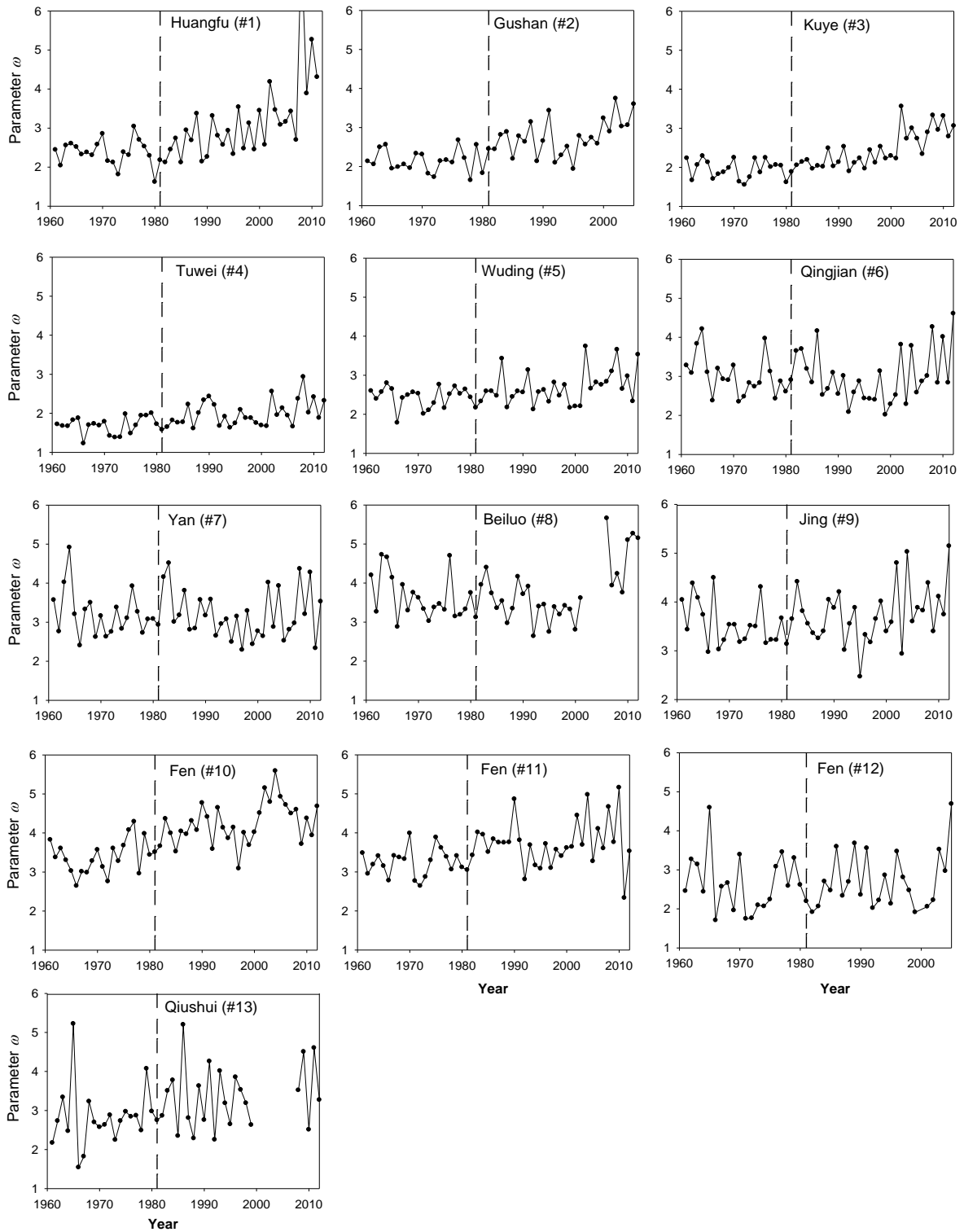
## 194 4. Results

### 195 4.1. The variability of parameter $\omega$

196 The Budyko framework is usually used for analyses of long-term average data on catchment-scale  
197 water balances; however, in this study, it was employed for the interpretation of the interannual  
198 variability of the water balances by using the hydrological year approach described earlier. To validate  
199 the feasibility of using Fu's equation for interannual variability, the evapotranspiration ratio ( $ET/P$ ) and  
200 dryness index ( $ET_0/P$ ) on an annual scale for 13 basins are presented in the supporting information  
201 (Figure S1), and it can be seen that almost all points are focused on Fu's curves in each basin. Therefore,  
202 Fu's equation was considered adequate for the analysis of the interannual variability of the water  
203 balance.

204 If the controlling parameter  $\omega$  on an annual scale can reflect the combined impacts of vegetation  
205 change and climate seasonality, it should also exhibit interannual variability with the seasonal variation

206 in vegetation and climate, especially in those basins affected significantly by climate change and human  
207 activities. Obviously, this is true for basins in Loess Plateau (Figure 2). During 1961–2012,  $\omega$  values in  
208 all 13 basins had an upward trend. Along with such a changing trend in  $\omega$ ,  $ET$  should increased for the  
209 same levels of  $P$  and  $ET_0$ . Before the 1980s, the variation in  $\omega$  for each basin was relatively gentle;  
210 however, since that time, it has increased dramatically.

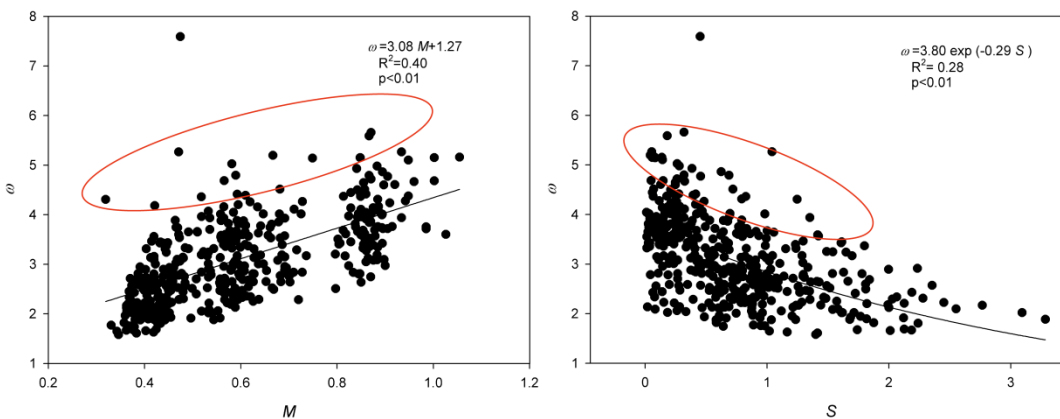


212

Figure 2. The variability of parameter  $\omega$  for 13 basins during 1961 to 2012.213 **4.2. Development of the semi-empirical formula for parameter  $\omega$** 

214 The relationships between the annual parameter  $\omega$  and vegetation coverage  $M$  as well as the  
 215 climate seasonality index  $S$  were first explored in each study basin during the period 1981–2012, and  
 216 the results are shown in Figures S2 and S3. We can see that the parameter  $\omega$  generally had a positive  
 217 correlation with  $M$ , which implies that evapotranspiration increased with improvements in the  
 218 vegetation conditions. However,  $\omega$  was correlated negatively with  $S$ , which means that larger seasonal  
 219 variations of coupled water and energy resulted in less evapotranspiration in this area. The relationships  
 220 between  $\omega$  and  $M$  as well as  $S$  imply that the annual variation in parameter  $\omega$  can be estimated by the  
 221 changes in vegetation dynamics and climate seasonality.

222 To expand the sample size and span a wider range of climate conditions, as well as to make the  
 223 derived semi-empirical formula of parameter  $\omega$  more representative, relationships were then developed  
 224 based on the combined dataset from the 13 basins (Figure 3). These results also indicate a good  
 225 relationship between  $\omega$  and  $M$  ( $R^2 = 0.40$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) as well as  $S$  ( $R^2 = 0.28$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).



226

227 Figure 3. Relationships between the (a) annual  $\omega$  and vegetation coverage ( $M$ ) and (b)  $\omega$  and climate seasonality  
228 index ( $S$ ) based on the combined dataset from 13 basins.

229 To develop the semi-empirical formula of parameter  $\omega$ , the limiting conditions of the two variables  
230 were considered as follows:

231 (1) If  $M \rightarrow 0$ , i.e. the land surface was bare, which indicates that the climate was extremely dry,  
232  $P \rightarrow 0$ ,  $ET \rightarrow 0$ , and thus,  $\omega \rightarrow 1$ ;

233 (2) If  $S \rightarrow \infty$ , i.e.  $\emptyset \rightarrow \infty$  and  $\delta_{ET_0} \neq 0$  in the equation (3), which means monthly  $ET_0$  is not  
234 uniform distributed within a year and  $P \rightarrow 0$ , thus  $ET \rightarrow 0$ , and  $\omega \rightarrow 1$ .

235 Considering the relationships shown in Figure 3 and given the above limiting conditions, the  
236 general form of parameter  $\omega$  can be expressed as follows:

$$237 \quad \omega = 1 + a \times M^b \times \exp(cS) \quad (10)$$

238 where  $a$ ,  $b$ , and  $c$  are constants. Using the least linear square regression method, the semi-empirical  
239 formula of parameter  $\omega$  is derived as follows:

$$240 \quad \omega = 1 + 3.525 \times M^{0.783} \times \exp(-0.218 S) \quad (11)$$

241 The coefficient of determination  $R^2$  and the statistics for the F test of the modelled  $\omega$  were 0.51 and  
242 218.94, respectively.

243 A cross-validation approach was chosen to calibrate and test the above semi-empirical formula for  
244 parameter  $\omega$ . Specifically, the dataset for the 13 basins in our study was separated into two groups. One  
245 was applied to build the semi-empirical formula, and it consisted of 12 basins for each time; the other  
246 was used for testing the performance of the semi-empirical formula, and it consisted of the remaining 1  
247 basin. In total, the cross-validation process was conducted 13 times. After building the semi-empirical  
248 formula by using the vegetation coverage data and climate seasonality index data for the 12 basins, the  
249 parameter  $\omega$  for the validated basin was modelled by using this fitted formula, and the annual  $ET$  for  
250 the validated basin was evaluated with the modelled  $\omega$ , which is referred to as the “modelled”  $ET$ . Then,

251 the “modelled” *ET* was compared with the “measured” *ET*.

252 Table 2 shows the cross-validation results for each basin. The model coefficients of each  
253 calibration formula for parameter  $\omega$  were very close with the coefficients of Eq. (11), which means the  
254 relationship between  $\omega$  and  $M$  as well as  $S$  we built is stable. Except for the basin #4 and #12, the  
255 MAE (mean absolute error) and RMSE (square root of the mean square error) values for each  
256 cross-validation process were relative low, with mean values of 13.5 mm and 16.8mm, respectively. The  
257 NSE coefficient (Nash–Sutcliffe coefficient of efficiency) for each process was greater than 0.8, thus  
258 suggesting that vegetation changes and climate seasonality can well explain the variation in the  
259 controlling parameter of the catchment water balance on the shorter time scale.

260 Table 2. Cross-validation results for each basin.

ID	Validated basin	Model coefficients			ET estimation accuracy		
		a	b	c	MAE	RMS	NSE
1	Huangfu	3.597	0.868	-0.228	22.3	23.8	0.88
2	Gushan	3.525	0.787	-0.231	16.3	21.3	0.90
3	Kuye	3.490	0.743	-0.233	17.4	22.7	0.88
4	Tuwei	3.350	0.627	-0.224	33.4	37.5	0.84
5	Wuding	3.525	0.803	-0.211	8.3	12.5	0.97
6	Qingjian	3.525	0.794	-0.206	13.9	18.1	0.96
7	Yan	3.560	0.803	-0.210	11.3	14.0	0.98
8	Beiluo	3.633	0.826	-0.213	10.2	11.9	0.97
9	Jing	3.456	0.814	-0.188	23.1	25.8	0.87
10	Fen	3.421	0.738	-0.223	6.3	8.9	0.98
11	Xinshui	3.560	0.803	-0.216	6.6	9.0	0.99
12	Sanchuan	3.561	0.782	-0.215	25.6	31.0	0.88
13	Qiushui	3.525	0.800	-0.204	12.5	16.4	0.96

### 261 4.3. Quantitative attribution of the variation in *ET*

262 The impacts of vegetation changes on *ET* have been widely studied with the Budyko framework by  
263 assuming surface conditions can be represented by the controlling parameter. However, according to the

264 developed relationships in our study, the controlling parameter is not only related to surface condition  
 265 change, but also to climate seasonality. The contributions of changes in climate ( $P$ ,  $ET_0$ , and  $S$ ) and  
 266 vegetation ( $M$ ) to the  $ET$  change were thus estimated by using the semi-empirical formula for parameter  
 267  $\omega$  in the context of Fu's framework.

268 Trend in hydrometeorological variables and vegetation coverage were first analyzed for each basin  
 269 (Table 3).  $ET_0$  and  $S$  in all basins exhibited an upward trend, though with different significances.  
 270 Similarly,  $M$  in most basins increased during past several decades. Based on the sensitivity coefficients  
 271 of  $ET$  (Table S1) and the changes in mean annual  $P$ ,  $ET_0$ ,  $\omega$ ,  $M$  and  $S$  from period I to period II (Table  
 272 4), the changes in  $ET$  due to those in  $P$ ,  $ET_0$ ,  $M$  and  $S$  were estimated using the method described in  
 273 Section 2.3. The contributions of four variables to  $ET$  change for each basin were presented in Table 4.  
 274 In basin #1, 3-4 and #6, the  $ET$  changes were controlled by vegetation improvement; however, in the  
 275 other basins, the dominant factor was precipitation. Except for basin #6, #9 and #12, elevated vegetation  
 276 in most basins positively contributed to  $ET$  changes, which is consistent with Feng et al. (2016).  $ET$  in  
 277 several basins showed a downward trend even though  $M$  positively contributed to  $ET$  changes; which is  
 278 due to the offsetting effect of the other factors.

279 Table 3. Trend analysis for the hydrometeorological variables and vegetation coverage<sup>b</sup>.

ID	Basin	$ET, \text{mm yr}^{-2}$	$ET_0, \text{mm yr}^{-2}$	$P, \text{mm yr}^{-2}$	$M$	$S$
1	Huangfu	1.89	1.16	0.61	0.002*	0.001
2	Gushan	0.76	3.85**	-0.01	0.004**	0.012
3	Kuye	2.34*	2.04*	0.53	0.004**	0.006
4	Tuwei	1.87	2.33**	0.53	0.005**	0.006
5	Wuding	0.88	1.17	0.31	0.006**	0.004
6	Qingjian	-0.45	1.78*	-0.94	0.007**	0.006
7	Yan	-1.62	2.03*	-1.99	0.005**	0.006
8	Beiluo	-5.4*	4.6*	-6.2*	0.0001	0.017
9	Jing	-0.97	1.47*	-1.79	0.002**	0.001
10	Fen	-0.72	1.93*	-1.16	0.002*	0.003
11	Xinshui	0.33	1.80	-0.12	0.003**	0.005
12	Sanchuan	1.49	1.84	0.09	-0.0004	0.004



13	Qiushui	-0.50	1.79	-0.83	0.002	0.008
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<sup>b\*</sup> and <sup>\*\*</sup> indicate the trend is significant at the level of  $p = 0.05$  and  $p = 0.01$  by the Mann–Kendall test, respectively.

It should be noted that the climate seasonality (represented by  $S$ ) played an important role in the catchment  $ET$  variation. The contributions of  $S$  to  $ET$  changes ranged from 0.1% to 65.5% (absolute values). Besides basin #6, #9 and #12, the climate seasonality had a negative effect on  $ET$  variation in most of the basins, which means that larger seasonality differences between seasonal water and heat will lead to smaller amounts of evapotranspiration. Accordingly, if  $\omega$  is supposed to only represent the landscape condition, the effects of landscape condition change on  $ET$  variation will be underestimated in basin #1, #3, #6-7, #9 and #11. Except for basin #9, the area of these basins is relative smaller; while its effects will be overestimated in the other basins, and the error would be equal to the contributions of  $S$  to  $ET$  changes.

Table 4. Attribution analysis for *ET* changes for each basin <sup>c</sup>

ID	Basin	Break point of ET	Change from Period 1 to Period 2					<i>ET</i> <sub>0</sub> / <i>P</i> / <i>M</i> / <i>S</i> induced ET change (mm)					Contribution to ET change (%)			
			$\Delta ET$	$\Delta ET_0$	$\Delta P$	$\Delta M$	$\Delta S$	$C_{-}(ET_0)$	$C_{-}(P)$	$C_{-}(\omega)$	$C_{-}(M)$	$C_{-}(S)$	$\varphi_{-}(ET_0)$	$\varphi_{-}(P)$	$\varphi_{-}(M)$	$\varphi_{-}(S)$
1	Huangfu	2001(ns)	41.7	7.0	22.2	0.03	0.01	0.28	18.67	22.70	22.73	-0.04	0.7	44.8	54.6	-0.1
2	Gushan	2000(ns)	33.6	64.9	20.6	0.07	-0.10	2.81	17.01	13.77	8.87	4.90	8.4	50.6	26.4	14.6
3	Kuye	2000(**)	51.4	32.0	17.3	0.06	0.05	1.54	13.34	36.48	55.95	-19.47	3.0	26.0	108.9	-37.9
4	Tuwei	2000(**)	43.2	39.6	24.0	0.07	-0.03	2.57	15.28	25.35	21.85	3.49	5.9	35.4	50.6	8.1
5	Wuding	2000(*)	35.2	17.6	26.9	0.09	-0.12	0.77	21.82	12.64	8.24	4.40	2.2	61.9	23.4	12.5
6	Qingjian	1988(**)	-50.1	32.0	-48.0	0.08	0.19	2.06	-37.80	-14.31	-47.09	32.78	-4.1	75.5	94.08	-65.5
7	Yan	1985(**)	-82.3	44.6	-86.9	0.05	0.30	3.19	-69.52	-15.96	22.19	-38.14	-3.9	84.5	-27.0	46.4
8	Beiluo	1985(**)	-65.1	49.4	-79.8	0.01	0.19	4.33	-62.9	-6.75	3.69	-10.43	-6.6	96.3	-5.7	16.0
9	Jing	1990(**)	-33.7	43.0	-47.8	0.03	0.11	4.1	-37.2	-0.61	-8.23	7.61	-12.2	110.3	24.4	-22.6
10	Fen	2005(ns)	23.1	8.5	21.2	0.07	-0.20	0.33	19.00	3.81	2.13	1.68	1.4	82.1	9.2	7.3
11	Xinshui	1990(**)	-19.1	39.7	-24.7	0.02	0.09	2.06	-21.08	-0.14	0.41	-0.55	-10.8	110.1	-2.1	2.9
12	Sanchuan	1996(ns)	-27.0	45.4	-43.4	-0.01	0.22	3.01	-32.52	2.56	0.20	2.36	-11.2	120.6	-0.7	-8.8
13	Qiushui	1996(ns)	-80.3	77.5	-103.5	-0.01	0.68	3.76	-83.68	-0.40	-0.02	-0.37	-4.7	104.2	0.1	0.5

<sup>c</sup>The relative contribution of a certain variable to the *ET* change ( $\varphi(x)$ ) was calculated as follows:  $\varphi(x) = (C_{-}(x)/\Delta ET) \times 100\%$ , where  $C_{-}(x)$  represents the contribution of each variable.

305 **5. Discussion**

306 Although the controlling parameter  $\omega$  showed a good relationship with the vegetation change and  
307 climate seasonality index, two groups of deviations around the regressed curves were detected (Figure  
308 3). The deviation points for the relationship between  $\omega$  and  $M$  were mainly located at the top of the  
309 curve, i.e. corresponding to the same  $M$  values, where  $\omega$  values were greater. We checked those points  
310 and found that precipitation and vegetation coverage in those years were normal, but runoff was very  
311 low compared to normal years. Excluding abrupt climate change, possible reasons for the extremely low  
312 runoff in those years include dam and reservoir operations, as well as irrigation diversions. A study  
313 conducted by Liang et al. (2015) on the same basins that we investigated in the Loess Plateau showed  
314 that check-dams increased continuously starting from the 1960s. By the year 2006, the numbers of dams  
315 along the basin #10 and #5 reached up to 482 and 181, respectively. Dams can intercept stormwater  
316 runoff for a short period during flood seasons and allow more time for infiltration (Polyakov et al.,  
317 2014). A total of 21 large and 136 medium-sized reservoirs were installed along the Yellow River by  
318 2001. Such infrastructure can also influence the runoff change by controlling the flooding, regulating  
319 the water discharge, and diverting the water to other regions (Chen et al., 2005). Agricultural production  
320 is heavily dependent on irrigation throughout the entire Yellow River basin, and it has been reported that  
321 water consumption by agricultural irrigation accounted for nearly 80.0% of the entire water consumed  
322 from 1998 to 2011 (Wang et al., 2014). Thereby, water withdrawn for irrigation also plays an important  
323 role in the changing trends in runoff. In this study, the deviation points around the relationship curve  
324 between the annual  $\omega$  and  $S$  fell in the upper left, and they were likely influenced by the low runoff.  
325 However, separation of the impacts on runoff from vegetation change, climate seasonality, and  
326 engineering works will have to await future work.

327 The relationships of parameter  $\omega$  with vegetation dynamics and climate seasonality in some  
328 single basins were not significant in this study. Similarly, Yang et al. (2014a) also found a weak  
329 relationship between parameter  $n$  and vegetation coverage in 201 basins in China. This implies that the  
330 parameter  $\omega$  might represent the combined effects of some other factors. For example, strong  
331 interactions among vegetation, climate, and soil conditions will lead to specific hydrologic partitioning  
332 at the catchment scale. In dry years, with low soil water contents, plants are trying to adapt by making  
333 use of hydrological processes, e.g. ground water dynamics and plant water storage mechanisms, etc.  
334 (Renger and Wessolek, 2010). Therefore, the relationship between the parameter  $\omega$  and vegetation  
335 dynamics can be influenced by climate and soil conditions. However, it is difficult to separate the  
336 climatic and soil components from the vegetation change. Moreover, Zhang et al. (2001) reported that  
337 the impact of different vegetation types on catchment water balance can be vastly different, and the  
338 plant-available water coefficient in their function, which is similar to parameter  $\omega$  in Fu's equation, is  
339 related to vegetation type. Therefore, the vegetation type may also be an important variable that  
340 influences the parameter  $\omega$ .

341 Despite that catchment-scale water storage changes are usually assumed to be zero on long-term  
342 scale, the interannual variability of storage change can be an important component in annual water  
343 budget during dry or wet years (Wang and Alimohammadi, 2012), and cannot be ignored. However, the  
344 Loess Plateau has a subhumid to semiarid climate, the water storage and its annual variation are  
345 relatively small compared with humid regions (see Figure 5 from Mo et al., 2016). For example, using  
346 GRACE (Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment), the water storage variations in the Yangtze,  
347 Yellow and Zhujiang from 2003 to 2008 were analyzed by Zhao et al. (2011), and the values for the  
348 Yangtze and Zhujiang basins were 37.8 mm and 65.2 mm, while no clear annual variations are observed  
349 in the Yellow River basin (3.0 mm). Furthermore, Mo et al. (2016) found that the water storage in  
350 Yellow River kept decreasing from 2004 to 2011, whereas it was changing slowly with a rate of 1.3 mm  
351  $\text{yr}^{-1}$ . Therefore, considering the small water storage change in study area, ignoring water storage change

352 in a period of hydrologic year is reasonable.

353 Errors still exhibited in the attribution analysis of ET changes. As the changes in  
354 evapotranspiration has been decomposed without residual by the complementary method (Equation 6-7),  
355 the errors were induced from the developed empirical formula for  $w$  (Equation 11). It suggested that  $\omega$   
356 cannot be completely explained by  $M$  and  $S$ , and it might include some other factors. Therefore,  
357 discussing more factors influencing  $\omega$  remains future work.

358

## 359 **6. Conclusions**

360 This study explored the concomitant effects of vegetation dynamics and climate seasonality on the  
361 variation in interannual controlling parameter  $\omega$  from Fu's equation within the Loess Plateau. First, to  
362 reduce the impact of ignoring the water storage change on annual catchment water balance, the  
363 hydrological year approach was introduced to examine the interannual variability of the controlling  
364 parameter  $\omega$  for the 13 basins in the Loess Plateau from 1961 to 2012. The findings showed that  
365 parameter  $\omega$  in all these basins presented an increasing trend, especially after the 1980s. Furthermore,  
366 we checked the relationship between  $\omega$  and vegetation dynamics (represented by the annual vegetation  
367 coverage,  $M$ ) as well as climate seasonality (represented by the climate seasonality index,  $S$ ). The  
368 interannual changes of parameter  $\omega$  were found to be related strongly to  $M$  and  $S$ . As such, a  
369 semi-empirical formula for the annual value of  $\omega$  was developed based on these two parameters, and it  
370 was proven superior for estimating the actual evapotranspiration ( $ET$ ) by a cross-validation approach.  
371 Finally, based on the proposed semi-empirical formula for parameter  $\omega$ , the contributions of changes in  
372 climate ( $P$ ,  $ET_0$ , and  $S$ ) and vegetation ( $M$ ) to  $ET$  variations were estimated. The results showed that the  
373 improved vegetation conditions in all basins made a positive contribution to the  $ET$  change, but  
374 these effects were largely offset by other variables in some basins. The contribution of landscape

375 condition changes to *ET* variation will be estimated with a large error if the effects of climate  
376 seasonality were ignored.

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