Moisture modes, cloud-radiative feedbacks and the MJO

Adam Sobel

Eric Maloney

with bits from Shuguang Wang, Jim Benedict; thanks also Gilles Bellon, Dargan Frierson, Daehyun Kim…

EUCLIPSE summer school
Ecole de Physique des Houches
July 3, 2013

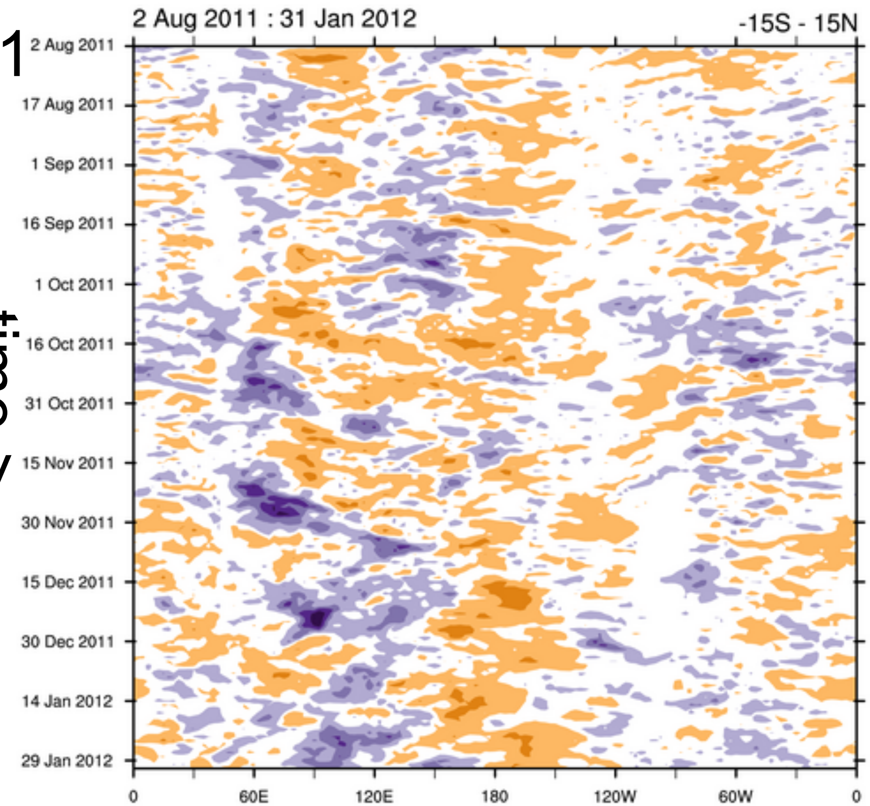
The Madden-Julian oscillation – a natural fluctuation of the tropical climate

Outgoing longwave radiation 15S-15N

Blue = rainy
Orange = clear

Aug 2011
Sep
Oct
Nov
Dec
Jan

time->



longitude

Source: Matt Wheeler, Centre for Australian Climate and Weather Research
cawcr.gov.au

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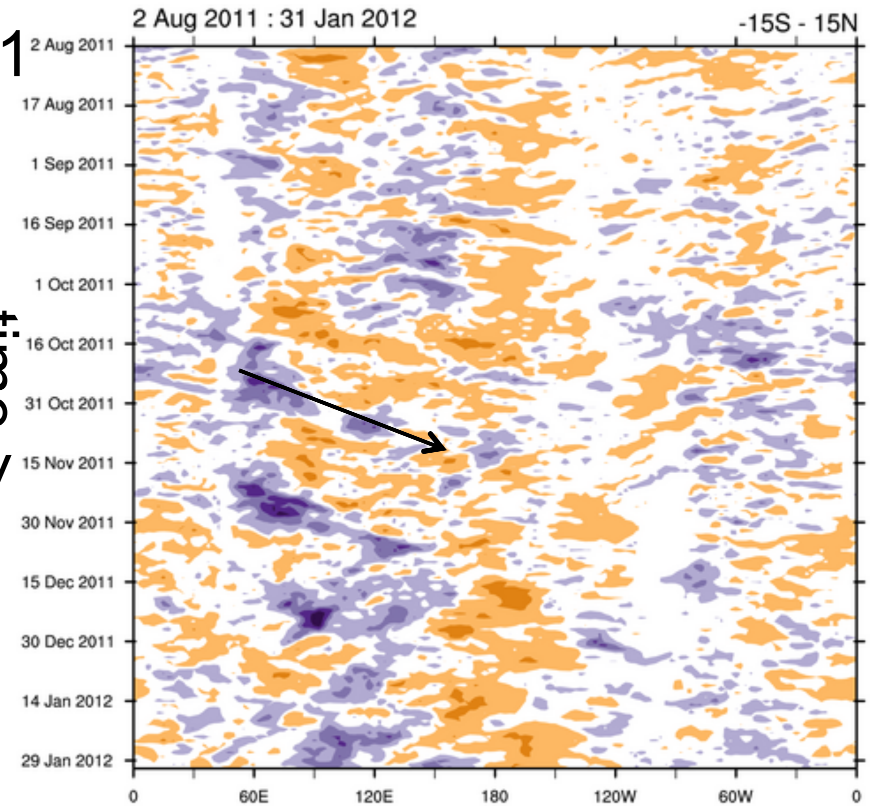

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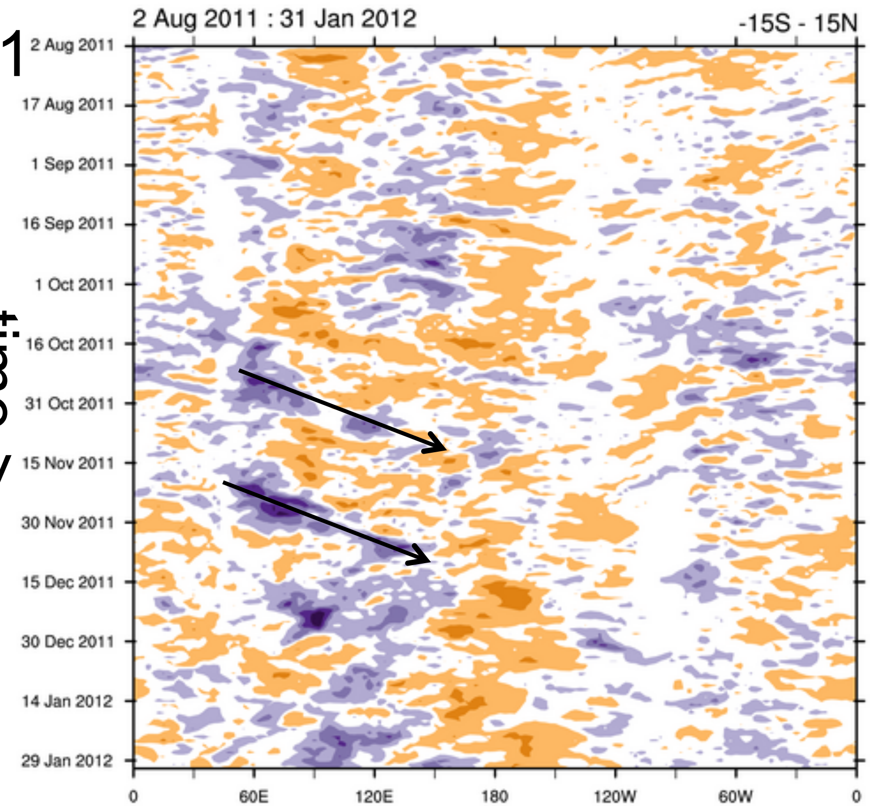

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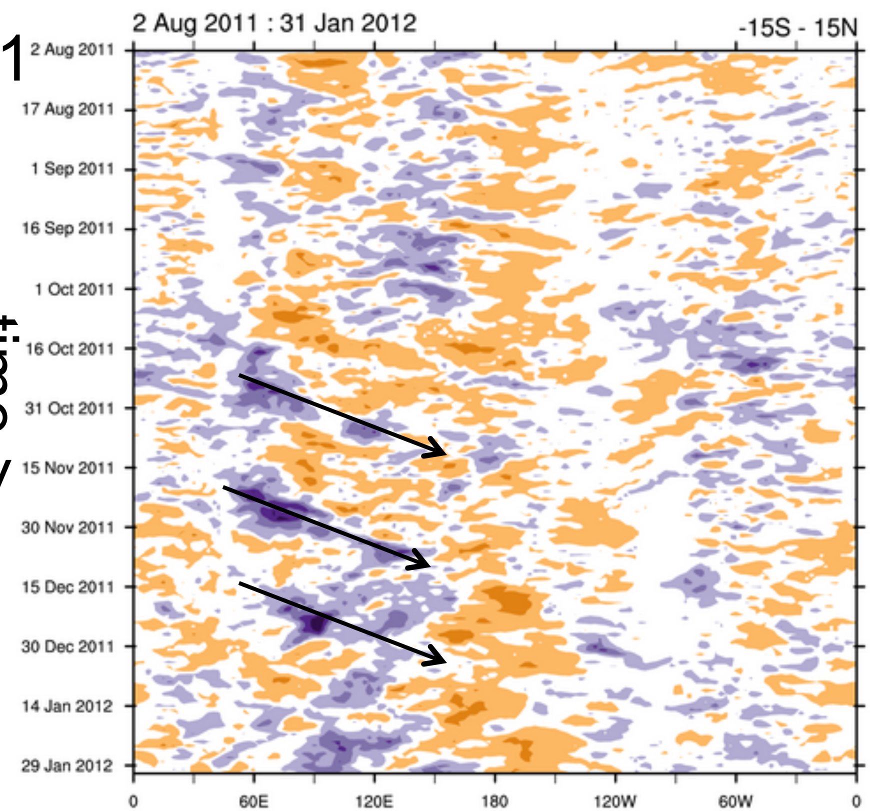

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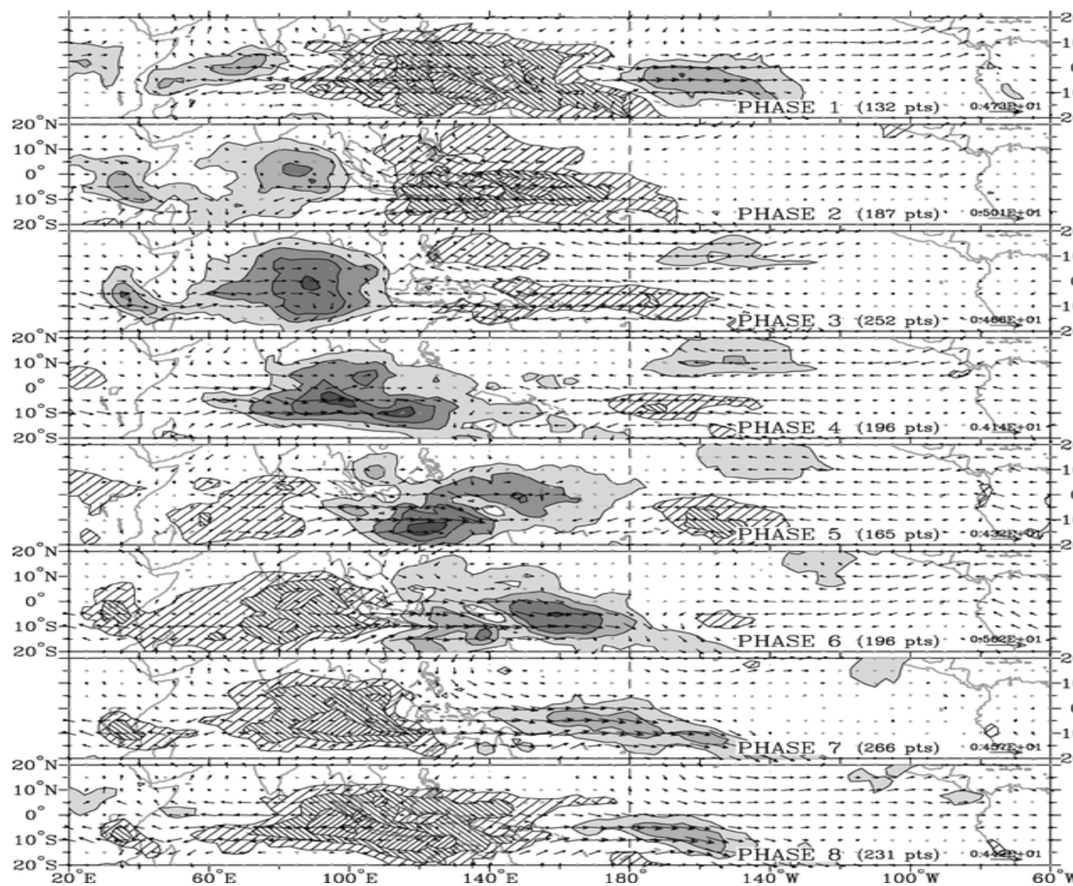
The “Madden-Julian oscillation” (MJO) propagates eastward in a belt around the equator

Statistical composite MJO in outgoing longwave radiation and lower tropospheric wind (Wheeler and Hendon 2004)



time

latitude

longitude

Adam
good luck on your
work
Rol

Reprinted from JOURNAL OF ATMOSPHERIC SCIENCES, Vol. 28, No. 5, July 1971, pp. 702–708
American Meteorological Society
Printed in U. S. A.

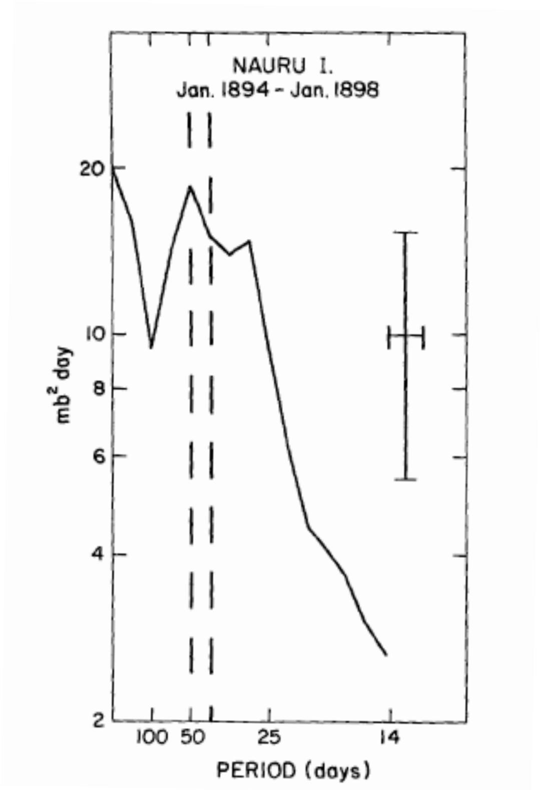
DETECTION OF A 40–50 DAY OSCILLATION IN THE ZONAL WIND IN THE TROPICAL PACIFIC

ROLAND A. MADDEN AND PAUL R. JULIAN

National Center for Atmospheric Research, Boulder, Colo.

Numerical simulations are not so bad any more… but there is no agreement on the basic mechanisms despite ~4 decades of study

Surface pressure spectrum,
Nauru Island, tropical Pacific

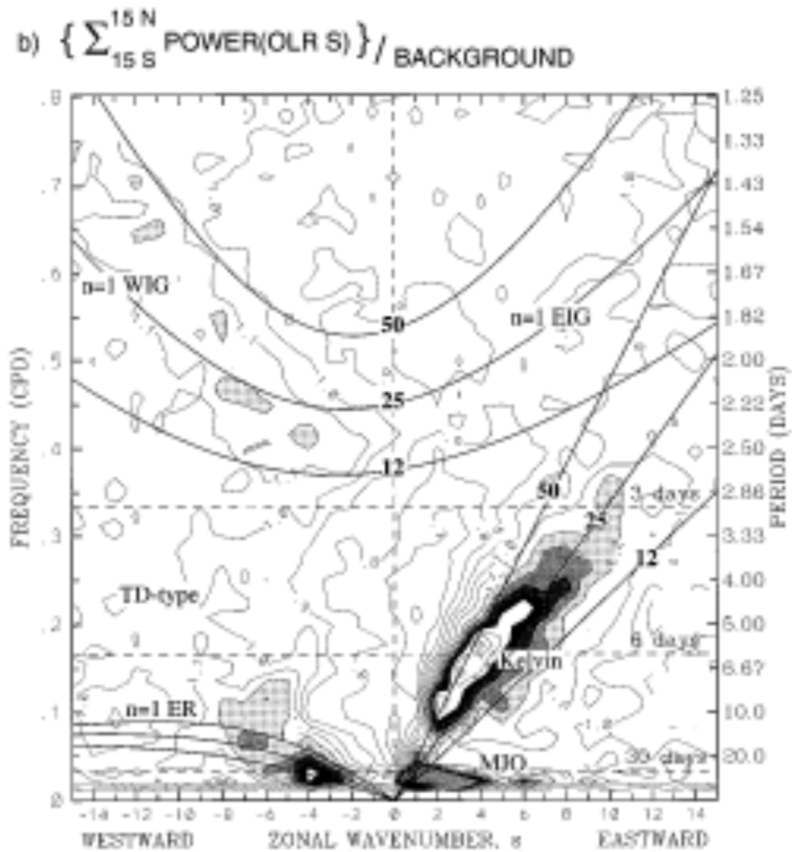


Madden and Julian 1972

Helium spectral lines

wikipedia

Spectral analysis shows that the MJO is not a Kelvin wave… so what is it?



frequency

wave number

Wheeler and Kiladis 1999

Questions

- What is the MJO? What are the fundamental dynamics?
- What sets the scales: spatial scale, and frequency or phase speed?
- Why does it go eastward?
- What is the energy source?

I will argue that cloud-radiative feedbacks are essential to the existence of the MJO.

This is not a new idea (e.g., Raymond 2000, Bony and Emanuel 2005), but is probably not broadly accepted yet.

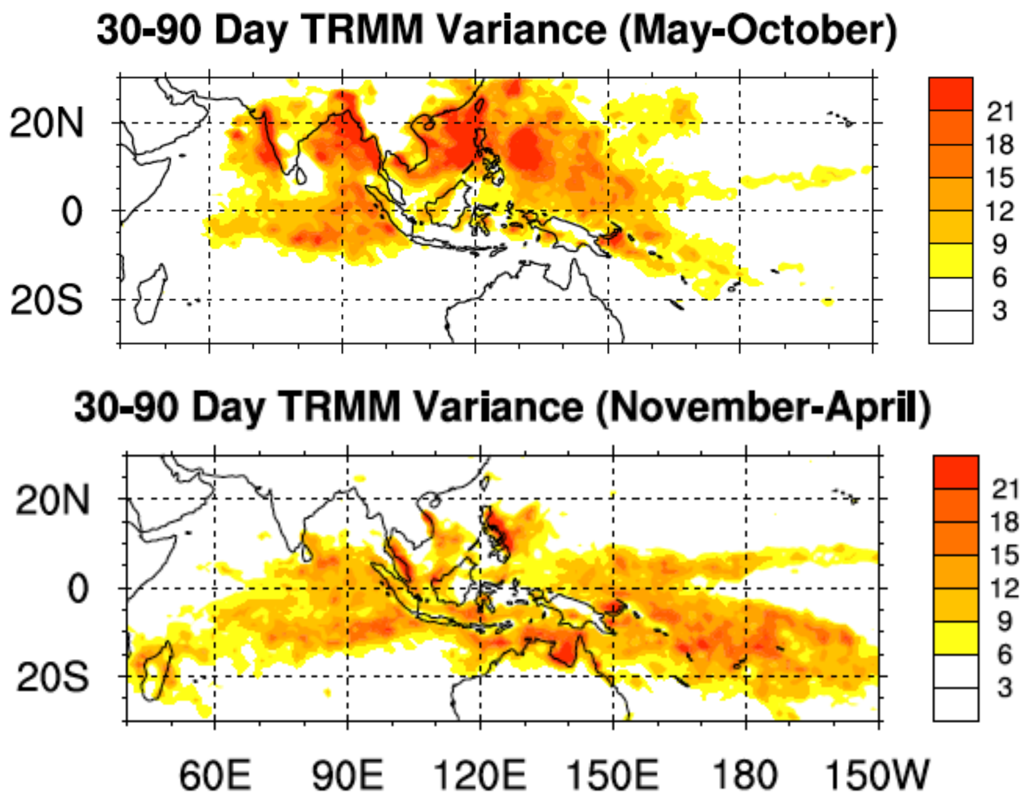
Historically nearly *all* theories of transient meteorological phenomena (MJO, waves, TCs…) over tropical oceans ignore cloud-radiative feedbacks.

Presumably this is because radiative cooling variations are << convective (condensation) heating variations.

But if conserved variables (MSE, moist entropy) are what matter then condensation heating is irrelevant!

Observation: Intraseasonal rainfall variance is greater over ocean than land. Suggests a role for net surface heat flux.

Intraseasonal rain variance



Northern Summer

Southern Summer

Sobel, Maloney, Bellon, and Frierson 2008: *Nature Geosci.,* **1**, 653-657.

Why total surface heat flux is relevant to the atmosphere:

Radiative cooling of atmosphere is net surface rad flux minus net TOA rad flux

High tropical clouds associated with precip have ~zero net TOA flux perturbation (LW = - SW)

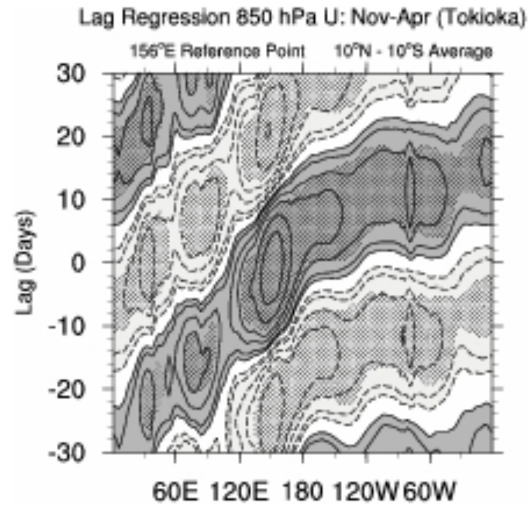
LW perturbation warms the atmosphere, SW cools the ocean – together, they act just like a surface flux

Thus total surface flux (incl. SW) is relevant to atmosphere even though there is not much atmospheric SW absorption

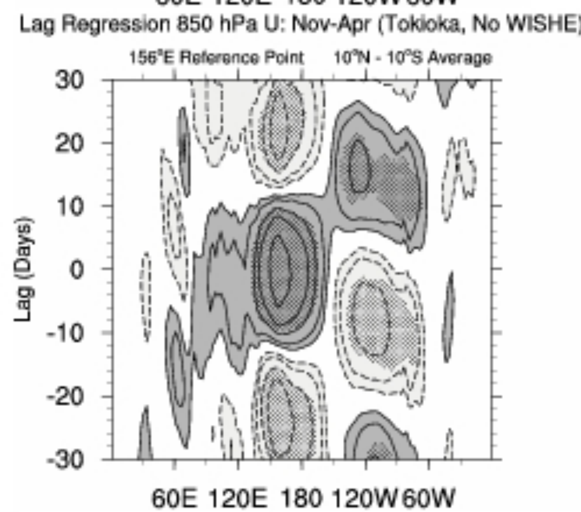
Total surface flux has both radiative (SW, LW) and turbulent (LH, SH) components.

In a number of models, surface fluxes are important to the MJO – e.g. GFDL AM2 (after Tokioka fix)

control

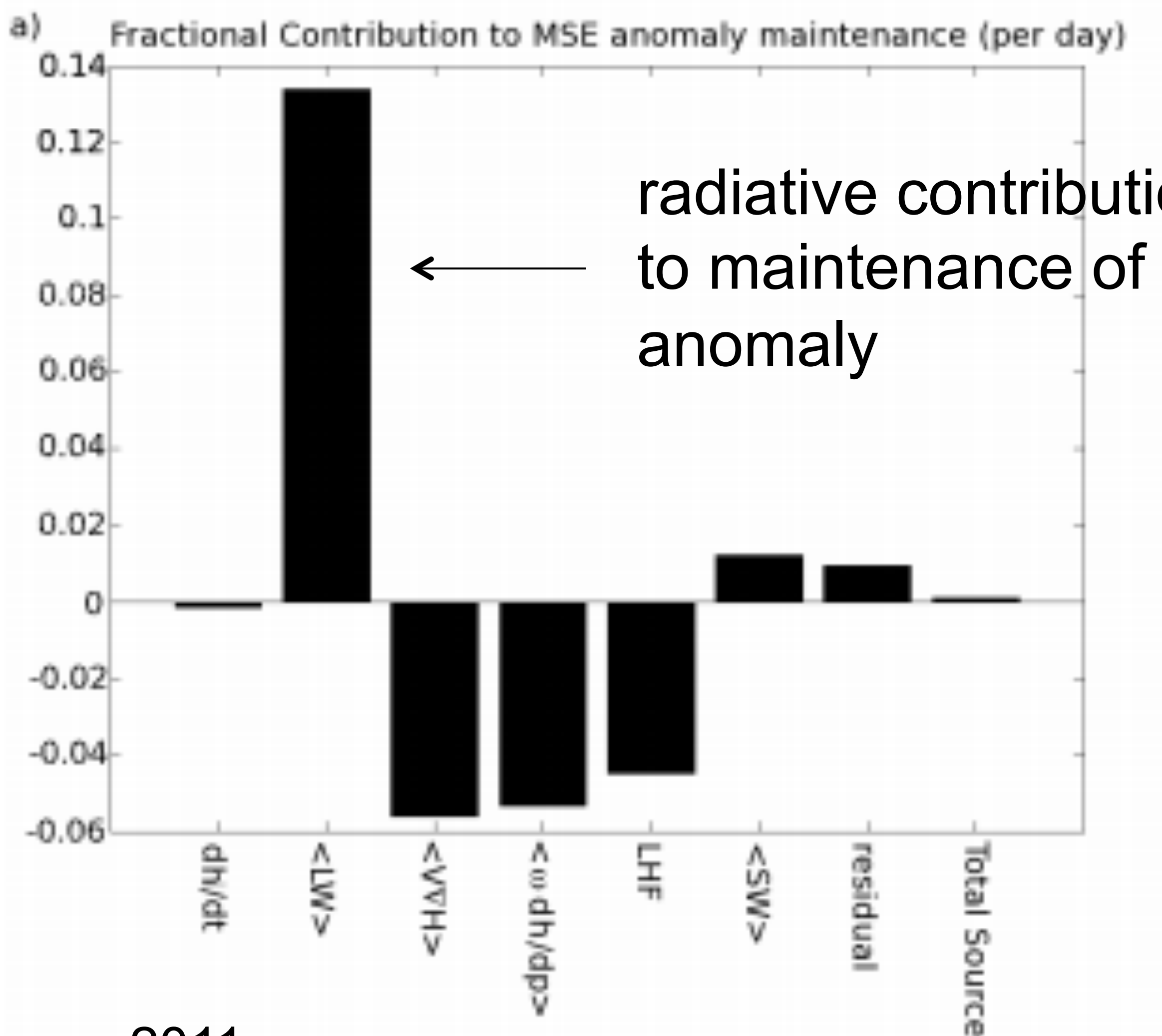


No-WISHE (const sfc wind speed)



Sobel et al. 2010 – calculations by Dargan Frierson

In other models, radiative feedbacks are important while surface turbulent flux feedbacks are not – but both are MSE sources

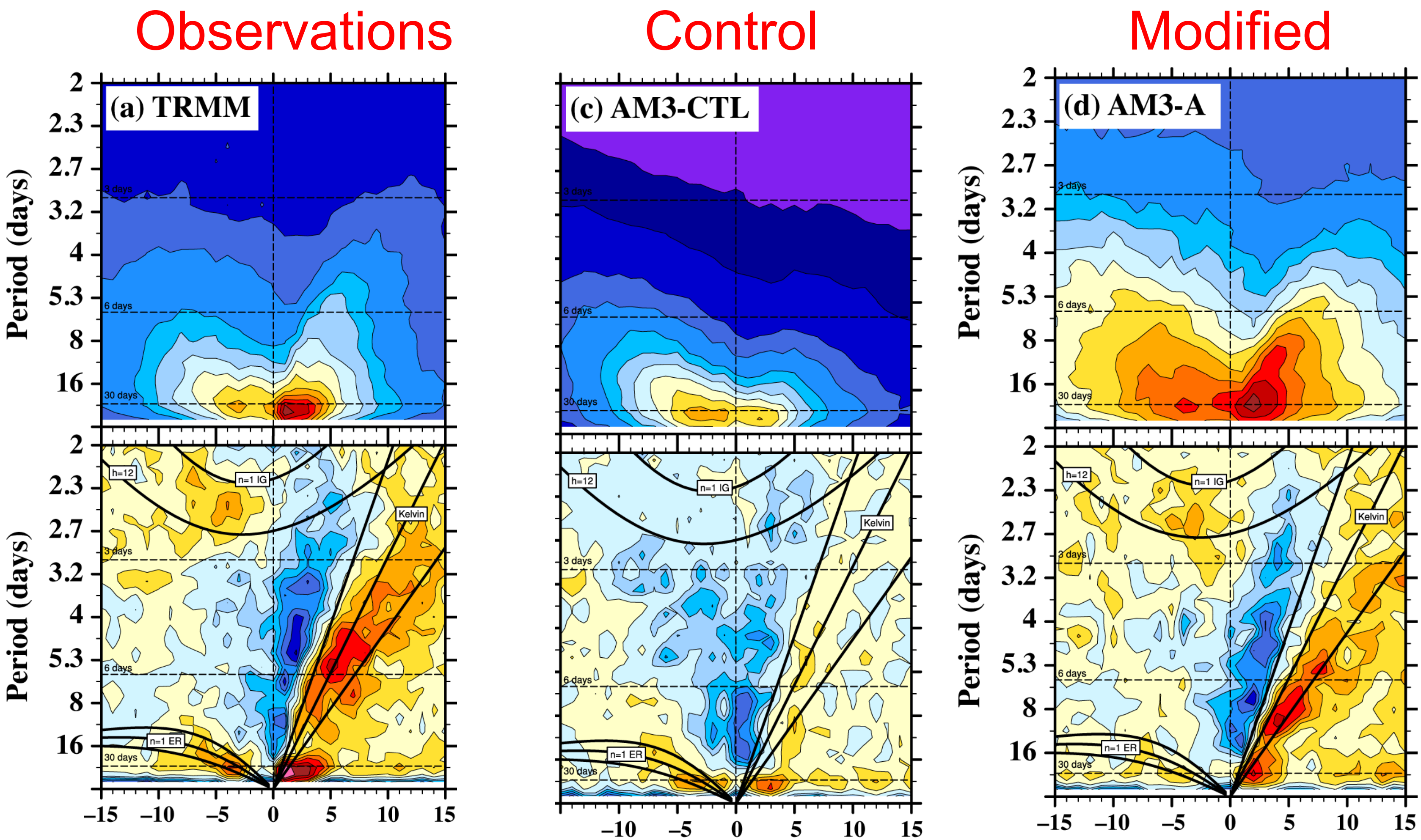


Andersen and Kuang 2011

Moisture/convection feedback

In many models (maybe all that have been tried), a weak MJO can be strengthened by making deep convection more sensitive to free-tropospheric humidity – that is, inhibited by dry air above the PBL.

E.g., AM3 – Donner et al. (2011), Benedict et al. (2011)



The improvement in intraseasonal variability comes at the cost of biases, similar to other models (Kim et al. 2011)

So, the MJO is…

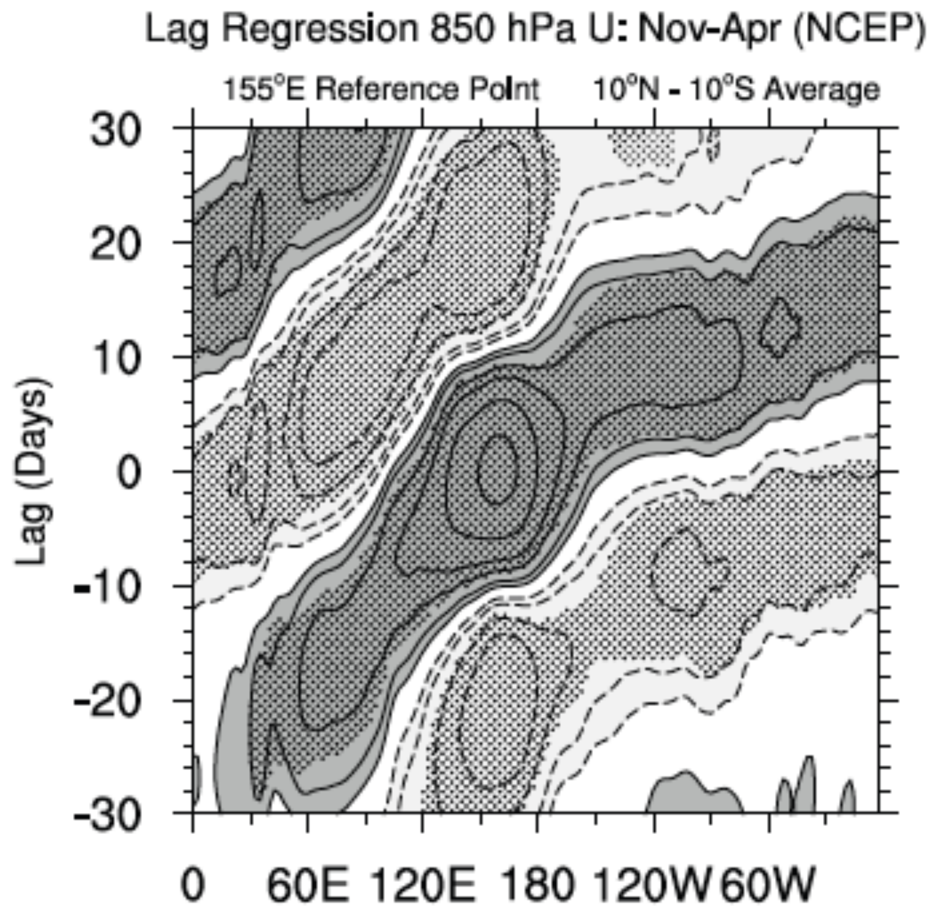
- Not a Kelvin wave
- Has convection controlled by surface fluxes and radiation
- Sensitive to moisture

So, the MJO is…

- Not a Kelvin wave
- Has convection controlled by surface fluxes and radiation
- Sensitive to moisture

Sounds like what we call a "moisture mode"
(Neelin and Yu 1994; Sobel et al. 2001; Fuchs & Raymond, Majda & Stechmann, Kuang, Sobel & Maloney 2012, 2013)

Aside: the MJO accelerates once it reaches the Pacific, and becomes more Kelvin-like. If there is a pure moisture mode, it's in the Indian ocean, & maybe western-most Pacific.



By "moisture mode" we mean (at a minimum) a dynamical mode which depends on prognostic moisture:

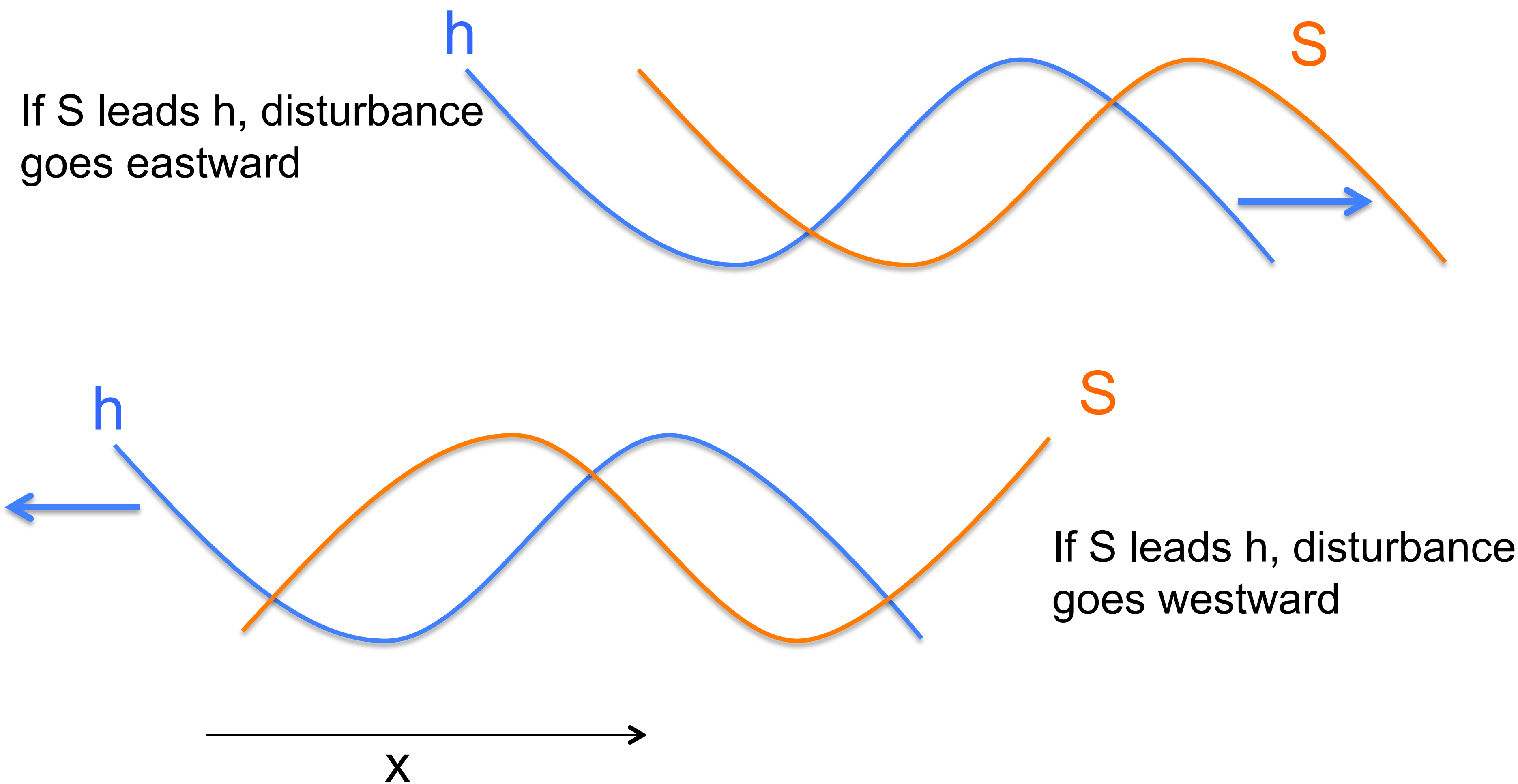
$\partial T/\partial t = \ldots$
$\partial \mathbf{u}/\partial t = \ldots$
$\partial q/\partial t = \ldots$

not, e.g.,

$\partial T/\partial t = \ldots$
$\partial \mathbf{u}/\partial t = \ldots$
$q = q(T)$

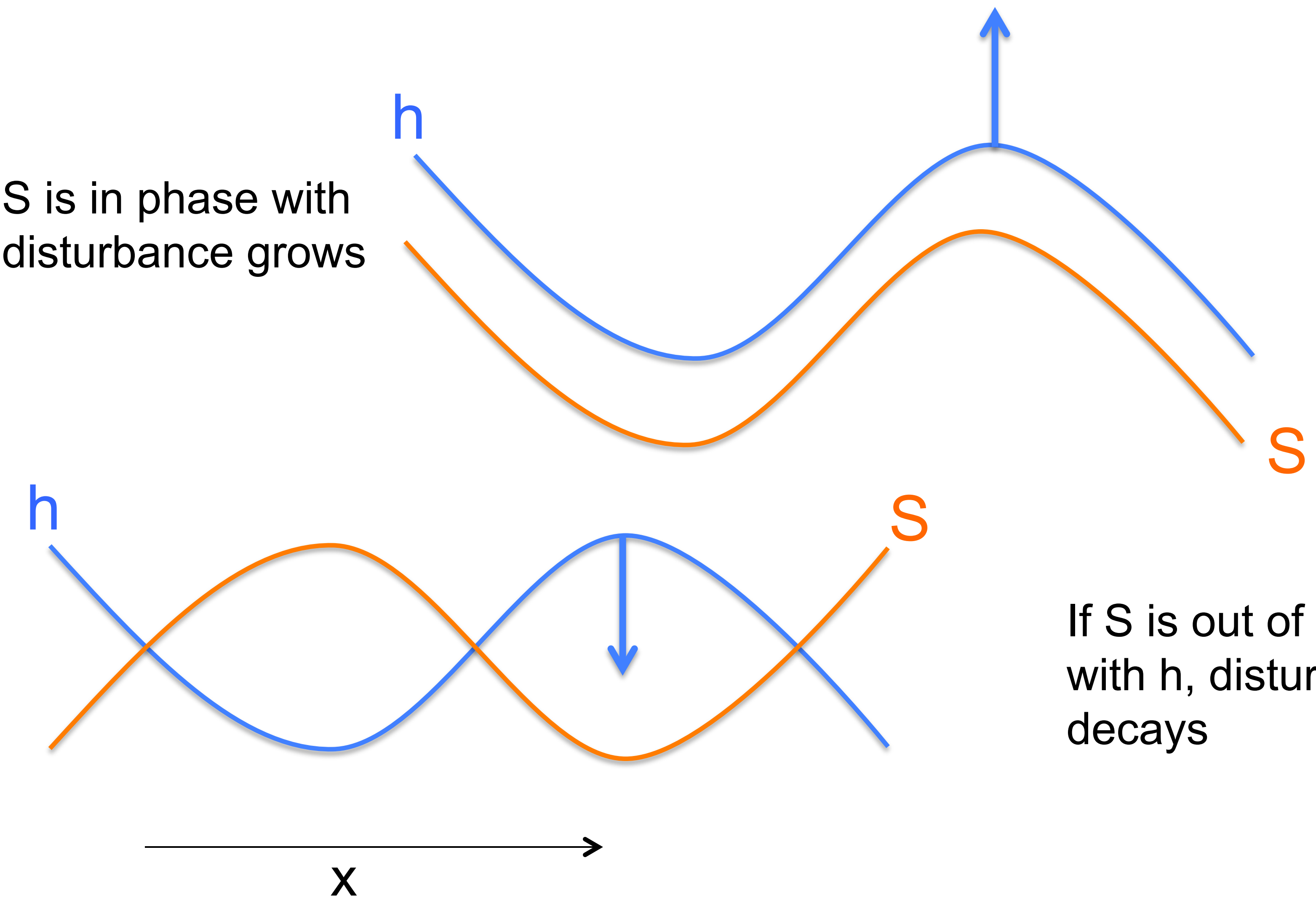
The majority of idealized tropical dynamics models are of the latter form, truncating out the moisture mode.

Consider a moist static energy equation of the form $dh/dt=S$, where S is sum of advection, surface fluxes, radiation… and h is function of (x,t)



Consider a moist static energy equation of the form dh/dt=S, where S is sum of advection, surface fluxes, radiation… and h is function of (x,t)

If S is in phase with h, disturbance grows



If S is out of phase with h, disturbance decays

A semi-empirical moisture mode theory

Sobel and Maloney 2012, 2013 (JAS)

The linear model in a nutshell

$$\frac{\partial W'}{\partial t} + U\frac{\partial W'}{\partial x} = -\tilde{M}P' + E' - (1-\tilde{M})R'$$

W' is perturbation column moist static energy;
U is constant background wind;
P' = P' (W') – in linear case W' /τ_c;
E' = cu '; zonal wind anomaly is computed diagnostically from P' using projection (Green's) function;

$$u(x,t) = \int G(x|x')P(x',t)dx'.$$ (I'll explain more in a moment)

R' = rP' ;
Normalized gross moist stability $\tilde{M}$ is constant, <1.

A note on the dynamical role of radiation, via the single-column limit. Our MSE equation is:

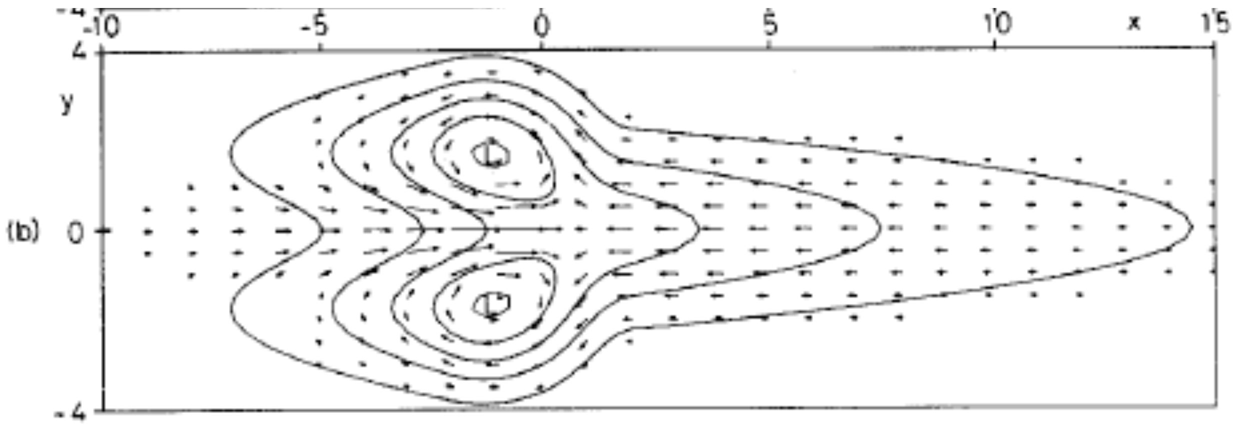
$$\frac{\partial W'}{\partial t} + U\frac{\partial W'}{\partial x} = -\tilde{M}P' + E' - (1-\tilde{M})R'$$

Now assume steady state and neglect advection, we can solve for precipitation:

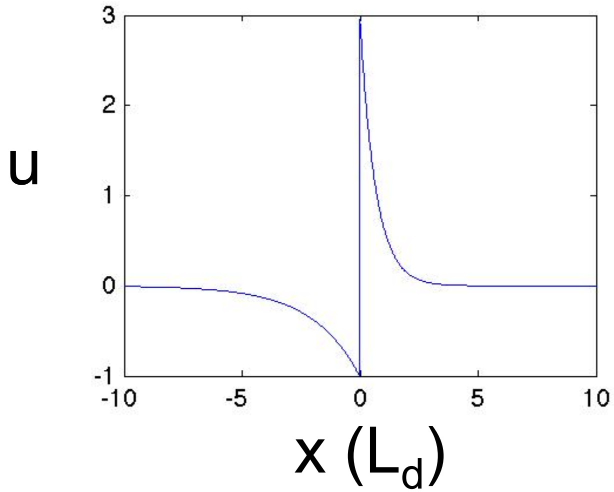
$$P' = \tilde{M}^{-1}[E' - (1-\tilde{M})R']$$

Now we know $\tilde{M} < 1$, maybe << 1
Remember R is radiative cooling (= minus radiative heating);
So a *decrease* in radiative cooling leads to an *increase* in precipitation. This is the *opposite* of what happens in radiative-convective equilibrium! Dynamics changes everything, RCE is a *bad* model locally.

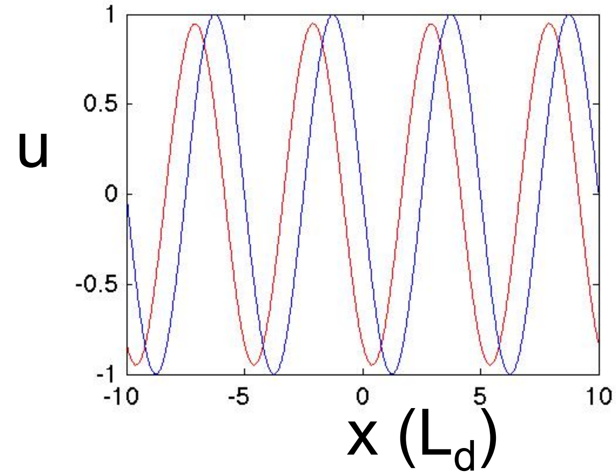
Gill (1980) wind and geopotential for localized heating (at 0,0)
linear, damped, steady dynamics on equatorial beta plane



Equatorial zonal wind response to equatorial delta function (in x) heating



Equatorial zonal wind response (red) to sinusoidal heating (blue) - westerlies lag heating



Compute zonal wind *u* from precipitation *P* via a projection operator:

$$u(x,t) = \int G(x|x')P(x',t)dx'.$$

Using Gill dynamics:

$$G(x|x') = -Ae^{-(x-x')/L}, \quad x > x',$$

$$G(x|x') = 3Ae^{3(x-x')/L}, \quad x < x'.$$

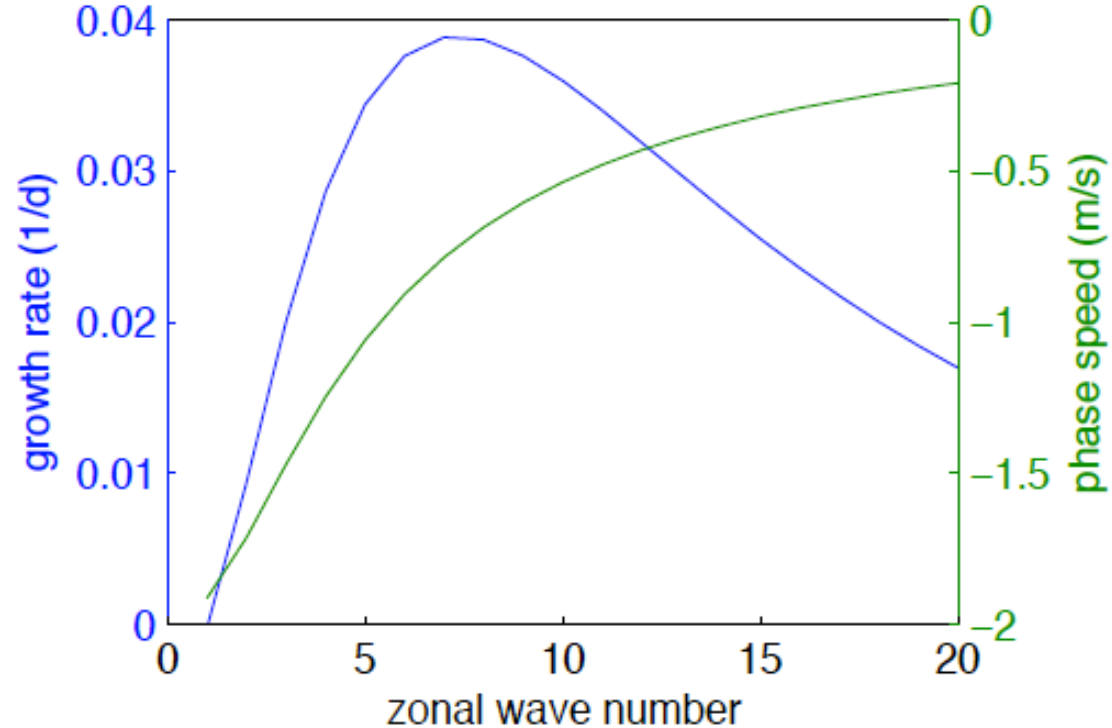
Length scale *L* = group velocity of free Kelvin wave * damping time scale.

Now put that all together, linearize (assuming background low-level westerly winds), and compute the growth rates and phase speeds of the normal modes as function of zonal wave number.

If this is a good model for the MJO, we would like to see an unstable mode (positive growth rate), maximizing at low wave number (long wavelength), with a slow eastward phase speed.

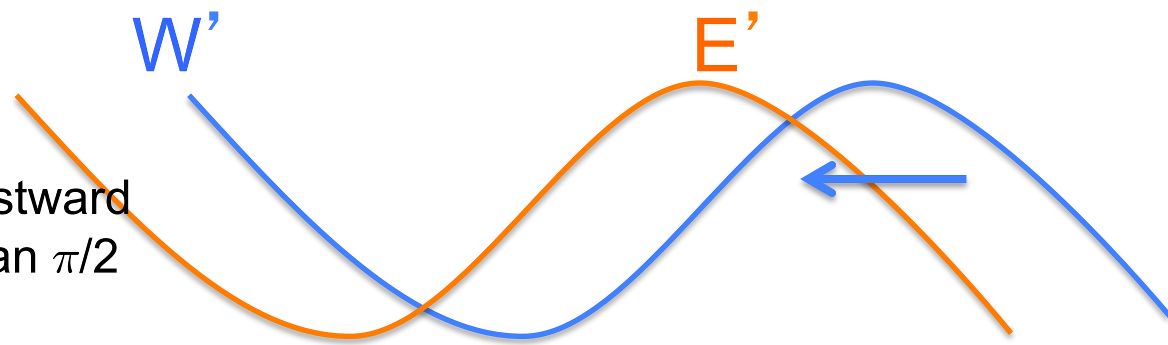
Linear model: all modes are unstable due to WISHE, but westward-propagating (in mean westerlies)

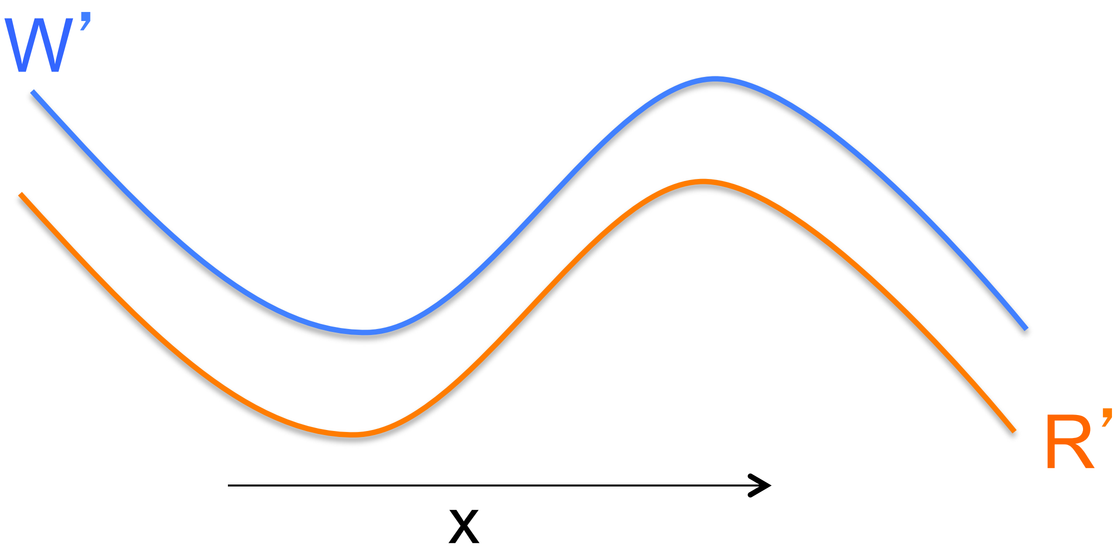
Most unstable wavelength is ~decay length scale for stationary response to heating L (here 1500 km); at this wavelength LH flux and humidity most in phase



Wind-evaporation feedback induces growth and westward propagation; cloud-radiative feedback induces growth and no propagation

Surface flux lags convection,
thus lags moisture, so drives westward
progagation; but lags by less than $\pi/2$
so also causes growth





Since radiative heating
~ precipitation ~ moisture,
cloud-radiative feedback
is destabilizing. No phase lead
or lag, so doesn’t
cause propagation

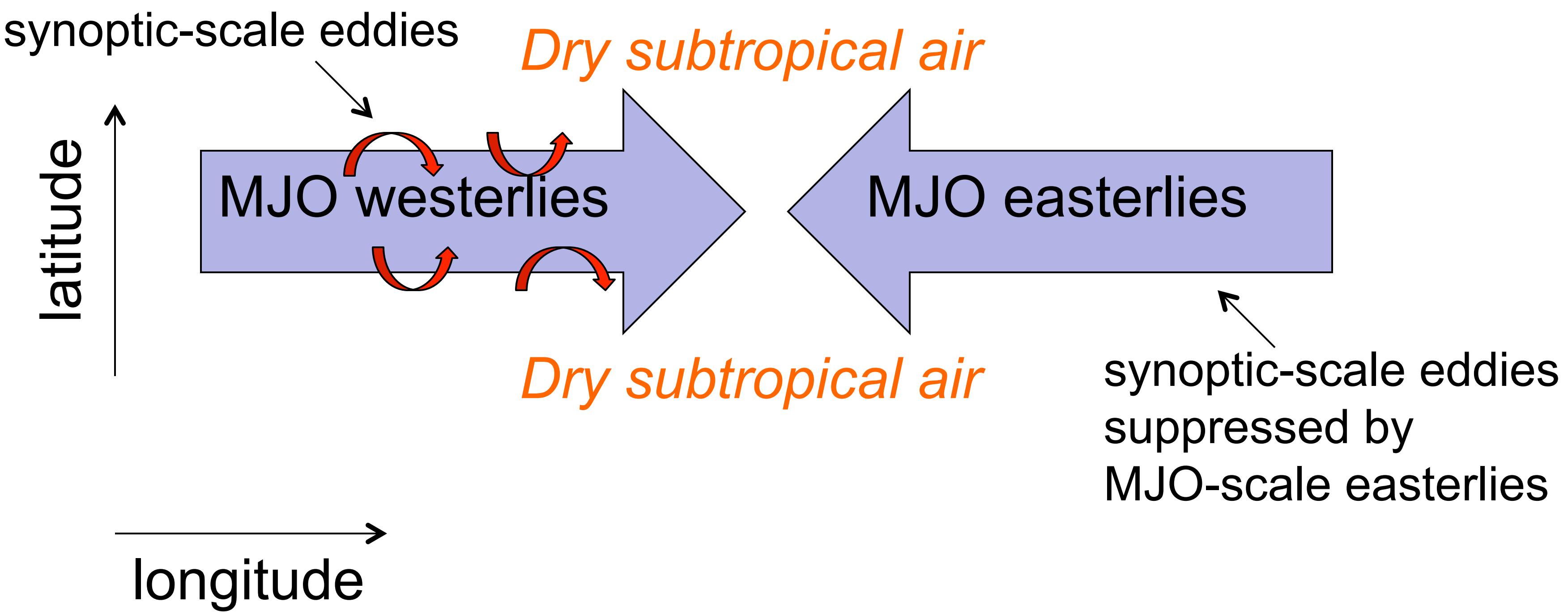
We need an MSE source that *leads* convection to the east, to produce eastward propagation.

Frictional convergence in easterlies (Wang 1988) is one possibility. We expect this to induce shallow ascent, which is a net source of MSE, i.e. $\tilde{M}$ <0.

Zonal advection will also work, if we have a +ve mean background zonal gradient (q increases to east). Then, easterlies are moistening. We saw this in DYNAMO.

Or…

In simulations, MJO modulation of dry air advection by synoptic-scale transients has been found to act as anomalous MSE source that leads convection (Maloney 2009, Andersen and Kuang 2012)



We can add any of these processes to our idealized model very crudely as an MSE source proportional to minus MJO (‘) zonal wind. E.g. if ‘’ is a synoptic-scale perturbation

$-\partial_y(v'' q'') = -ku'$ (k>0 gives relative moistening in easterlies)

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But also surface flux is proportional to zonal wind.

$E' = cu'$, so net $E - \partial_y(v'q') = (c-k)u'$

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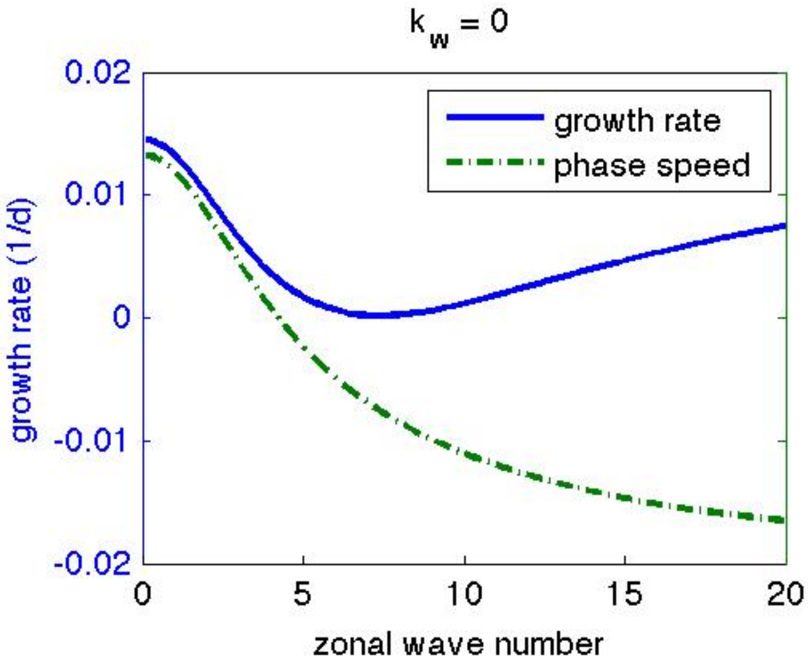
To cause eastward propagation, the advection has to be stronger than the surface fluxes, $(c-k)<0$.
In that case it also causes damping, since u' and P' are positively correlated.

Thus we have to make the radiative feedback strong enough to overcome this if the mode is to be unstable – sufficiently large feedback parameter *r.*

If we do all this, we get eastward propagation, and largest growth rates at shortest and longest wavelengths



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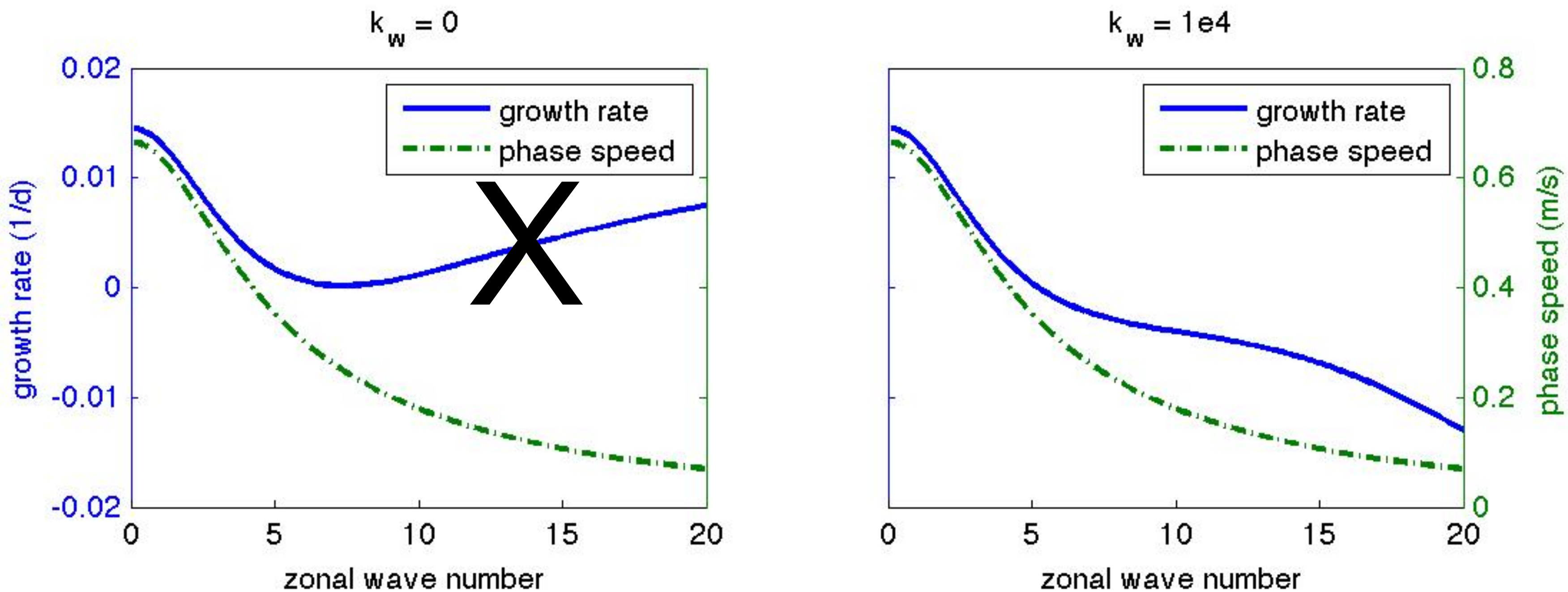
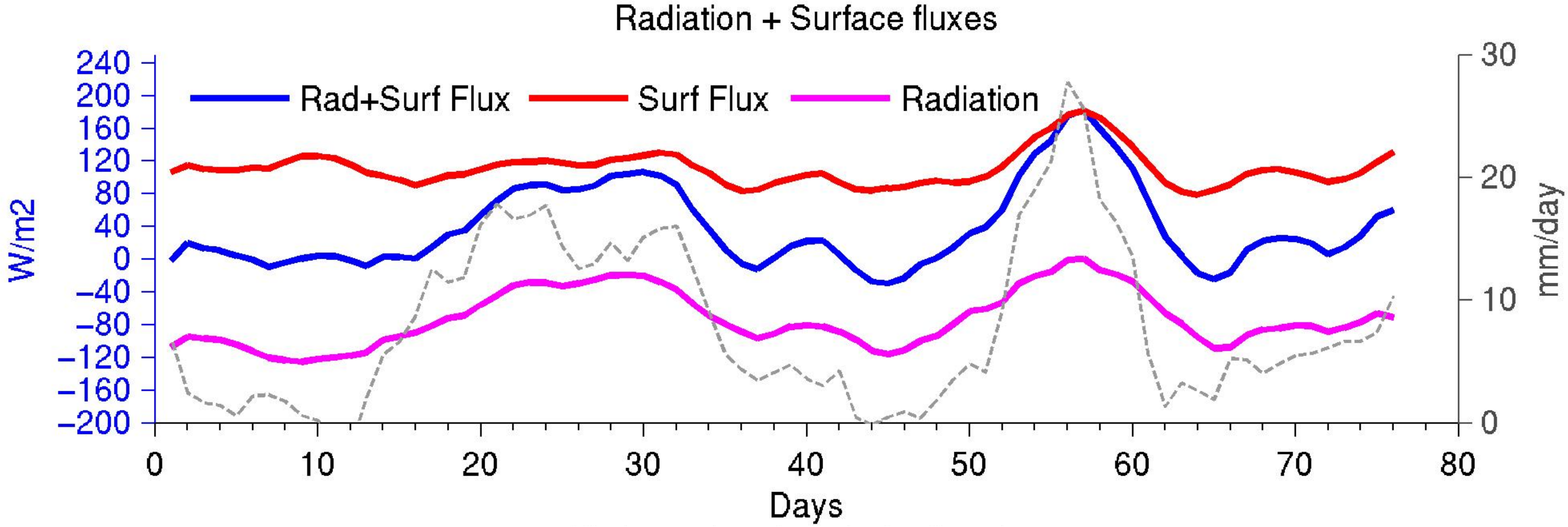
Small amount of horizontal diffusion is enough to kill small-scale instability. Then only largest scales are selected.



What do MSE budgets look like for the real MJO?

Some field obs. & CRM results (analysis by Shuguang Wang)

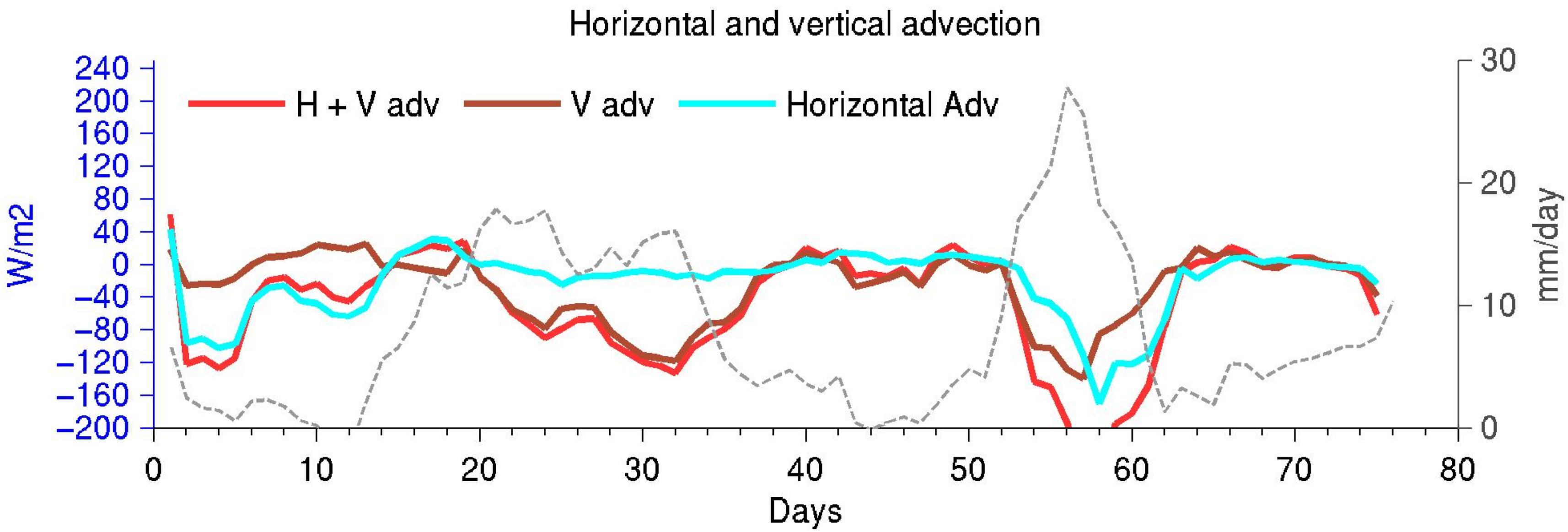
MSE budget from DYNAMO: radiation ≥ surface flux



Data: sounding array (R. Johnson, P. Ciesielski), OAflux, CERES

analysis by Shuguang Wang

MSE budget from DYNAMO: +ve advection (esp horizontal) leads convection in 1 case; -ve shuts it down in the other.



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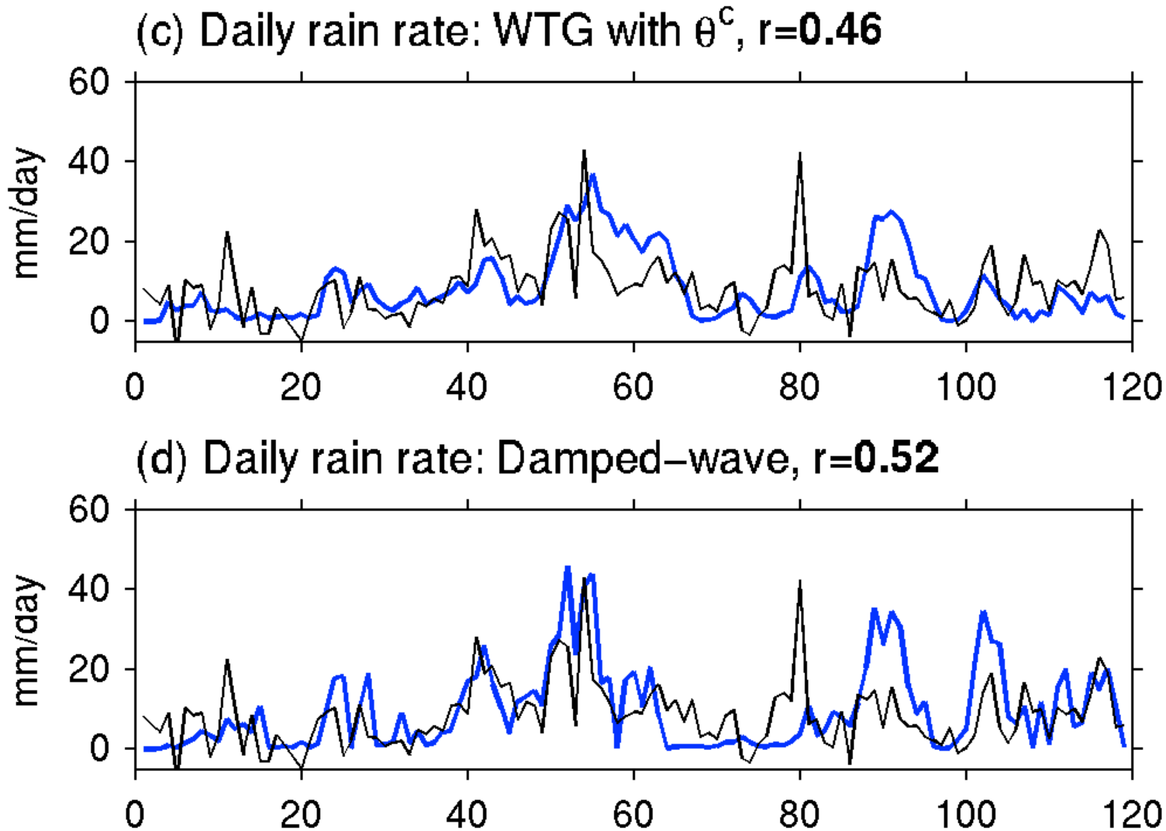
analysis by Shuguang Wang

TOGA-COARE precip simulated by CRM with parameterized large-scale dynamics, radiative cooling specified

$$wS = (\theta_{eq} - \theta)/\tau$$

$$\frac{\partial}{\partial p}\left(\frac{f^2 + a_m^2}{a_m}\frac{\partial \omega'}{\partial p}\right) \approx \frac{k^2 R_d}{p} T_v{}'$$



Wang, Sobel and Kuang, *JGR*, in press

TOGA-COARE precip simulated by CRM with parameterized large-scale dynamics, radiative cooling specified

Doesn't work with interactive radiation!

(at least not yet)

$$wS = (\theta_{eq} - \theta)/\tau$$

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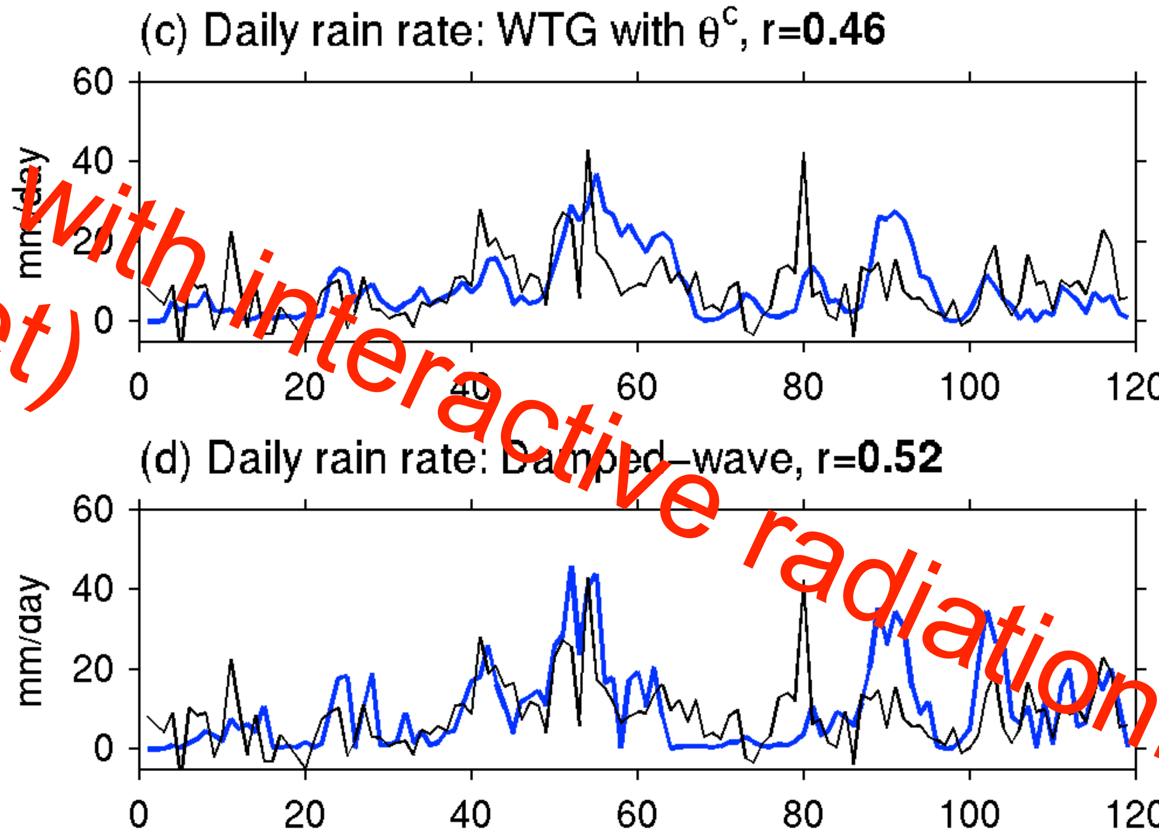

Wang, Sobel and Kuang, *JGR*, in press

Conclusions

- We argue the MJO is a moisture mode.
- This means that sources and sinks of moist static energy control both the growth and propagation of the mode.
- Need moistening in easterlies for eastward propagation – has to be advection of some kind, but several possibilities,
- Cloud-radiative feedback is necessary to destabilize the mode. That is, the MJO wouldn't exist without it.

How does a reduction in radiative cooling really stimulate convection?

- It's obvious from the point of view of the MSE budget, but that's not so satisfying.
- Hypothesis: reduction of cooling rate in non-precipitating columns slows descent there, reducing rate of drying. Humid anomalies remain in place to favor more convection.


In the suppressed phase you see skies like this
Nov. 19, 2011, Addu Atoll, Maldives


While in the active phase you see skies like this
Nov. 26, 2011, Addu Atoll, Maldives


Or this
Nov. 25, 2011, Addu Atoll, Maldives