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Review Paper

Occurrence mechanism of shale oil in laminated shale reservoirs: A review

Qian Sang [a,b,*], Xue-Qiang Guo [a,b], Ming-Zhe Dong [c]

[a] College of Petroleum Engineering, China University of Petroleum (East China), Qingdao, 266580, Shandong, China
[b] State Key Laboratory of Deep Oil and Gas, China University of Petroleum (East China), Qingdao, 266580, Shandong, China
[c] Department of Chemical and Petroleum Engineering, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, T2N 1N4, Canada

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Shale oil is an important unconventional resource. In-depth exploration of the shale oil occurrence mechanism is beneficial for the selection of sweet spots and the innovation of production technologies. Shale oil in laminated reservoirs shows commercial potential, yet systematic reviews on its occurrence mechanism remain scarce. This article provides a comprehensive summary of the occurrence mechanism of shale oil from four aspects. These include occurrence states, occurrence space, influencing factors and enrichment patterns. In addition, the formation, classification, and controlling factors of laminae, and their significance for shale oil enrichment are discussed. Finally, the challenges facing shale oil occurrence mechanism are described, and the next research work is prospected. The formation of laminae in fine-grained sedimentary rocks is associated with processes such as suspension settling, gravity flow, bottom currents, volcanism, hydrothermal activity, and microbial processes. Two-dimensional nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) offers the advantages of being non-destructive and rapid in characterizing the occurrence state of shale oil, as well as providing information on pore structure and fluid distribution within shale. Due to the influence of sedimentary tectonics and diagenesis, there are significant differences in the occurrence spaces and formation mechanisms of various types of laminated shales. Compared to the massive reservoirs, laminated shale reservoirs have larger macropore volume, better connectivity, and more developed microfractures. Pure shales and organic-rich laminated shales mainly accumulate adsorbed oil within organic matter nanopores, exhibiting high hydrocarbon generation potential. In contrast, rigid laminated shales tend to accumulate free oil in intergranular mineral pores and fractures, demonstrating greater development potential.

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1. Introduction

Shale oil has become a hot spot for exploration and development worldwide (Hu et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2022). According to statistics, the global technically recoverable shale oil resources amount to 251.2 × 10^9 t (Zou et al., 2023). Russia and the United States, in particular, hold significant resource reserves advantages. China's shale oil resources are estimated at (80–100) × 10^9 t (Sun et al., 2025b; Yang, 2024). According to statistics from the National Energy Administration, China's shale oil production exceeded 6 × 10^6 t in 2024, representing a year-on-year increase of more than 30% (Sun et al., 2025b). Shale oil has the potential to play a crucial role in alleviating energy crises and promoting economic development (Fu and He, 2024; Shi et al., 2024).

Shale oil reservoirs are rich in organic matter (OM) and clay minerals, with developed micro-to nano-scale pores, exhibiting the characteristic of "self-generation and self-storage" (Wei et al., 2023a, 2023b; Yan et al., 2023). Among them, laminated shale reservoirs have been proven to be favorable lithofacies with the potential for commercial development (Niu et al., 2025). A thin layer with a sandstone thickness of no more than 1 cm is defined as a lamina (Jiang et al., 2023). Currently, research on laminae mainly focuses on analyzing the continuity of the laminae, mineral composition, interface morphology, classification schemes, controlling factors, sedimentary

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: 20190005@upc.edu.cn (Q. Sang).
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environment, and formation mechanisms (Lazar et al., 2015a; Li et al., 2020d; Xie et al., 2024; Yawar and Schieber, 2017; Zhu et al., 2022). Current issues mainly lie in the lack of a unified standard for the classification of laminae. The formation mechanisms of different laminae also present challenges. In addition, the occurrence and migration of shale oil between different laminae remain significant difficulties.

Shale oil exists in different pore spaces in the form of free, adsorbed, and dissolved states (Wang et al., 2019c). Shale oil has a complex composition, with interactions occurring between its molecules (Wang et al., 2025c). There is still a lack of thorough research on quantitatively characterizing the adsorbed and free oil content in shale (Li et al., 2017). Currently popular methods include rock pyrolysis (Li et al., 2024b), solvent extraction (Tian et al., 2024a), molecular dynamics simulation (Fei et al., 2023), and nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) (Zhang et al., 2024), among others. Due to the unique nature of shale, both OM and inorganic minerals collectively determine the occurrence characteristics of hydrocarbons (Zhao et al., 2023). However, individual methods have their limitations, necessitating further exploration of new approaches to evaluate the states of shale oil. Due to the low porosity and permeability of shale reservoirs, only a small amount (approximately 10%) of free oil can be extracted using natural energy, while adsorbed oil is nearly inaccessible. However, the amount of adsorbed oil is still considerable (Li et al., 2019b). Therefore, the quantitative characterization of both adsorbed oil and free oil content remains significant. Currently, horizontal well volume fracturing has become an important extraction method for shale reservoirs (Liu et al., 2023c). Volume fracturing creates a complex network of fractures that can facilitate the migration of shale oil (Fan et al., 2025; Gao et al., 2020, 2024). Laminated shale reservoirs commonly contains a large number of natural fractures, and the cross-flow between the laminae can enhance the production of free oil (Dong et al., 2019).

Exploring the occurrence spaces of shale oil is valuable for understanding its accumulation, flow, and production (Zhang et al., 2023d). Loucks et al. (2012) found that the main classification criteria include organic pores, intergranular pores (InterP), intragranular pores (IntraP), and microfractures. The formation and development of shale pore space are primarily controlled by diagenetic processes such as calcite recrystallization, carbonate dissolution, mechanical compaction, dehydration shrinkage, and the transformation of clay minerals (Liu et al., 2022). The occurrence spaces in interlaminar zones and at the interface between laminae and massive shale exhibit certain differences. For instance, laminated shale generally outperforms massive shale in terms of pore size distribution, porosity, pore connectivity, and pore structure (Xin et al., 2022b). The current techniques for characterizing micro-scale pores in shale include image analysis, fluid invasion methods, and non-interference methods (Wei et al., 2023b). As shown in Fig. 1, image analysis primarily includes focused ion beam scanning electron microscopy (FIB-SEM), broad ion beam scanning electron microscopy (BIB-SEM), field emission scanning electron microscopy (FE-SEM), atomic force microscopy (AFM), and transmission electron microscopy (TEM) (Rezaeyan et al., 2023; Tian et al., 2024b; Xu et al., 2024; Yasin et al., 2024). The non-interference methods primarily include NMR, nano-CT, micro-CT, small angle neutron scattering (SANS), ultra small angle neutron scattering (USANS), and small angle X-ray scattering (SAXS) (Rezaeyan et al., 2023; Wan et al., 2024). The fluid invasion methods primarily include CO_2 adsorption, N_2 adsorption, and high-pressure mercury intrusion (HPMI) (Rezaeyan et al., 2023). Relying solely on a single experimental technique cannot comprehensively reflect the pore size, morphology, distribution, and connectivity of shale reservoirs (Yan, 2023). Therefore, using multiple methods to characterize pore structure is important.

Fig. 1. Characterization methods for pore structure (Klaver et al., 2015; Loucks et al., 2012; Neil et al., 2023; Tian et al., 2024b; Wan et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2024; Yasin et al., 2024).

Till now, many factors influencing the occurrence of shale oil have been identified. These mainly include OM, mineral composition, shale oil components, temperature and pressure, burial history and depth, pore size, and formation water (Fei et al., 2023; He et al., 2025c; Li et al., 2020e; Sun et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2019c, 2025c; Yang et al., 2024). Understanding the mechanisms of influence of various factors is crucial for designing development plans for shale oil. Currently, research on the occurrence mechanisms of shale oil in shale reservoirs mainly includes their states, occurrence spaces, influencing factors, and enrichment patterns (Lv et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2019c; Zhang et al., 2023c, 2023d). NMR has become the most popular method for studying the occurrence mechanisms of shale oil, especially the two-dimensional T_1–T_2 NMR. This is due to the fact that the two-dimensional T_1–T_2 NMR technique can identify different occurrence states of fluids and their distribution in various pore sizes (Zhang et al., 2024). Zhang et al. (2023d) studied the occurrence mechanisms of shale oil in shale nanopores based on two-dimensional NMR and thermogravimetric experiments. The results elucidated the content, distribution, and enrichment patterns of shale oil in different occurrence states. The laminated shale reservoirs exhibit high heterogeneity and a rich system of fractures and pores, making their occurrence mechanisms more complex. However, the occurrence mechanisms of shale oil in laminated shale reservoirs still lack systematic research.

The target of this paper is to clarify the shale oil occurrence mechanism in laminated shale reservoirs, providing theoretical references for sweet spot selection, mobility, and extraction technologies of shale oil. First, the paper briefly summarizes the formation, classification, and controlling factors of laminae, and their significance in shale oil enrichment. Next, it outlines the states of shale oil and the quantitative characterization methods. It elaborates on the occurrence space in laminated shale reservoirs, the characteristics of pore sizes, and the factors influencing shale oil occurrence. Additionally, it summarizes the enrichment models of oil in pure shale and laminated shale reservoirs. Finally, the paper discusses the challenges currently faced by the research on

occurrence mechanisms of shale oil and offers prospects for future research.

2. Formation, controlling factors and classification of laminae

2.1. Formation of laminae

Stratified water bodies are most conducive to the deposition of laminae (Larsen and MacDonald, 1993). Water stratification mainly refers to the chemical stratification (Wang and Mei, 1998) caused by differences in salinity between the surface and bottom waters, and the thermal stratification (Liu et al., 1998) caused by differences in temperature between the surface and bottom. The main depositional mechanisms of laminae include biological processes (Hay et al., 1990), chemical processes (Wang and Zhong, 2004), biogeochemical processes (Thompson et al., 2003), and mechanical processes (Kong et al., 2016). Schieber et al. (2007) used a flume to simulate the formation process of laminae and proposed the flocculation mechanism for laminae formation: clay in the water easily undergoes flocculation with fine detrital particles to form floccules. These floccules continuously envelop detrital particles during transport until reaching the maximum floccule size at mechanical equilibrium. In flume experiments, as hydrodynamics gradually weaken, larger or heavier detrital particles within the floccules are selectively settled first, forming sandy laminated structures. Meanwhile, clay-sized particles and a small amount of fine sand particles continue to be transported, forming flocculent ripple-like structures that move, aggregate, and deposit on the bed to create muddy laminated structures. When the flocculent ripples and sandy particles move simultaneously, they can form laminated structures with alternating mud and sand layers.

The traditional view holds that fine-grained materials generally settle slowly in low-energy, quiet environments, leading to the formation of laminae due to sedimentary interruptions (Schimmelmann et al., 2016). However, flume experiments, observations of marine sedimentation, and detailed examinations of marine mudstones have shown that fine-grained materials can be transported and deposited through various mechanisms, including bottom currents (Yawar and Schieber, 2017), density flow (Wilson and Schieber, 2014), storm flow (Lazar et al., 2015b), and wave-controlled gravity flow (Macquaker et al., 2010a, 2010b), resulting in a diverse range of laminae types (Schieber, 2016). The formation mechanisms mentioned above primarily focus on marine environments. In contrast, the formation of laminae in fine-grained sedimentary rocks is associated with processes such as suspension settling, gravity flow, bottom currents, volcanism, hydrothermal activity, and microbial processes (Hage et al., 2019; Praet et al., 2020; Schieber et al., 2007; Shanmugam, 2008; Xi et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2019a). Suspension settling can generate seasonal varves and plume flow laminae (Hage et al., 2019; Ojala et al., 2012). Gravity flow can form collapse-type turbidite laminae, density current laminae, and wave-controlled sediment gravity flow laminae (Heard, 2008; Macquaker et al., 2010a; Praet et al., 2020). In lakes, there are three types of bottom currents: wind-driven currents, thermohaline currents, and storm currents. These bottom currents resuspend, transport, and deposit sediments, leading to the formation of laminae (Shanmugam, 2008).

High-quality terrestrial lacustrine source rocks in basins like the Junggar Basin and the Ordos Basin are often associated with volcanic–hydrothermal activities. And volcanic eruptions produce tuffaceous material that settles in deep water, forming tuff or zeolite laminae (Jiang et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2017). When magma or hydrothermal fluids erupt underwater and come into contact with lake water, they generate steam and release energy, producing extremely fine-grained clastic particles. This process leads to the formation of hydrothermal eruption rock laminae (Liu et al., 2018). At the same time, the nutrient elements brought by volcanic eruptions promote algal blooms, resulting in the formation of organic matter laminae (Frogner et al., 2001). In the shallow water environments of the Eocene Green River Formation in North America and the Quaternary lakes of the Qaidam Basin in China, microbial activity produces a large amount of viscous extracellular polymers that capture, aggregate, block, and bind fine-grained materials, leading to the formation of stromatolites or microbial mat laminae (Awramik and Buchheim, 2015; Schieber et al., 2007). Additionally, the settling and burial of calcareous or siliceous biological remains from the surface layer of the lake water can also lead to the formation of bioclastic laminae (Liu and Wang, 2013).

2.2. Controlling factors of laminae

The formation of laminae is primarily controlled by paleoclimate and paleogeography (Anderson and Dean, 1988; Larsen and MacDonald, 1993; Ma et al., 2016). Paleoclimate includes elements such as temperature, precipitation, salinity, and wind field, while paleogeography controls the distribution patterns of laminae through factors like water depth, tectonic features, and material sources (Fig. 2) (Yu, 2023). Temperature affects the continuity, morphology and composition of laminae by controlling waterstratification (Boehrer and Schultze, 2008). Sunlight causes the low-density warm surface water to float on top of the high-density cold water at the bottom, creating thermal stratification in the lake water. This stratification facilitates the suspension and settling of materials to form laminae (Wang and Zhong, 2004). In addition, temperature can also change the composition of laminae by controlling biological activities or evaporation. High temperatures drive water evaporation and enhance biological activity in summer, which can saturate dissolved salts and lead to the formation of carbonate or evaporite laminae. The subsequent death and deposition of organisms in autumn and winter contribute to the formation of OM or clay laminae (Kong et al., 2017).

Humidity and precipitation affect the water medium and the internal and external source material supply, thus controlling the laminar composition. Under a humid climate, denudation is strengthened, terrigenous input is increased, and quartz or clay lamination is formed. Under an arid climate, carbonate and salt laminae are relatively enriched (Ben Dor et al., 2019). In addition, humidity and precipitation affect the laminar type and distribution of gravity flow by controlling lake-level changes (Liu et al., 2020b; Zavala et al., 2021).

Wind field controls the movement of water at different depths, leading to changes in the morphology and grain size of laminae. Plate-like laminae are mostly formed under the conditions of strong-energy underflow or suspended sedimentation. The curved laminae are often related to underflow or waves, where the water body energy is higher. Wavy laminae are often associated with waves, and the current energy is moderate to low (Shi et al., 2018). In terms of particle size, it is easy to deposit clay fine mud laminae (.8 μm) under weak hydrodynamic conditions, to form medium mud laminae dominated by fine silt and carbonate (8–32 μm) under medium to weak hydrodynamic conditions, and to form coarse mud laminae composed of silt and biological debris (32–62.5 μm) under medium to strong hydrodynamic conditions (Lazar et al., 2015a).

Adequate water depth is a favorable condition for resisting wind and waves, maintaining water stratification, and allowing for the slow settling of materials. A greater water depth is more

Fig. 2. Controlling factors of laminae (Yu, 2023).

conducive to the formation of laminae (Yu, 2019). Tectonic uplift and subsidence activities control the distribution of source areas and sedimentary zones, thereby influencing the quantity and direction of material supply (Gao et al., 2015; Li et al., 2021). This has a significant impact on the preferential sedimentation patterns of different substances. At the same time, basins with different tectonic types may develop various kinds of laminae. For instance, when density flows advance along the central axis of a rift basin, they can create a stacked sedimentary pattern consisting of thick-bedded sandstone interbedded with laminated sandstone (Irwin, 1965). Regional geological structures can influence the frequency of fluid occurrences in lakes (such as traction flow, bottom flow, and turbidity flow) (Baas et al., 2009; Hampton, 1975; Jiang, 2010; Li et al., 2021; Tylmann and Zolitschka, 2020; Wang et al., 2019d). These fluids can undergo multiple transformations under different conditions, promoting the development of interbedded or layered mixed sedimentary systems.

2.3. Classification of laminae

Identifying and distinguishing the types and genesis mechanisms of shale laminae has always been a focal point and challenge in the analysis of shale sedimentation and reservoir characteristics. The strong heterogeneity of shale has led to the absence of a unified standard for classification schemes (Hua et al., 2021, 2022b). Previous researchers have classified the types of laminae in different blocks based on classification criteria such as lamina thickness (Fu et al., 2022; Li et al., 2020a; Wang et al., 2019a; Zhao et al., 2025), lamina morphology (Liu et al., 2014b; Ma et al., 2024b; Shi et al., 2022; Yawar and Schieber, 2017), sedimentary characteristics (Tang et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2019b; Zeng et al., 2018), lamina composition (Hua et al., 2022a; Liu et al., 2023b; Niu et al., 2025; Xie et al., 2024) and lamina color and brightness (Ma et al., 2017; Sun et al., 2025a). The specific classification can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
Summary of lamina classification criteria.

Basis for classification	References	Classification results
Lamina thickness	Wang et al. (2019a)	Low density–low thickness; low density–high thickness; high density–high thickness.
	Li et al. (2020f)	Thin lamina (.1 mm); thick lamina (1 mm).
	Fu et al. (2022)	High bedding density (2000 layers/m); medium bedding density (1000–2000 layers/m); low bedding density (.1000 layers/m).
	Zhao et al. (2025)	Laminated rocks; layered rocks; massive rocks.
Lamina morphology	Liu et al. (2014b)	Wavy laminae; straight laminae.
	Yawar and Schieber (2017)	Low-angle ripple lamination; cross-lamination; parallel laminae.
	Shi et al. (2022)	Thin parallel laminae; thick parallel laminae; wavy laminae; lenticular laminae; weak laminae; sandy laminae.
	Ma et al. (2024b)	Continuous; parallel; plate-like laminae.
Sedimentary characteristics	Zeng et al. (2018)	Finely laminated; widely laminated; discontinuously laminated.
	Wang et al. (2019b)	Horizontal laminae; heterolithic laminae; graded laminae; erosional cross-laminae; wedge-shaped cross-laminae.
	Tang et al. (2019)	Wave to cross bedding; horizontal bedding; weak horizontal bedding; massive structure.
Lamina composition	Hua et al. (2022a)	Clay laminae; calcareous laminae; felsic laminae.
	Liu et al. (2023b)	Mud-rich laminae; carbonate laminae; felsic laminae.
	Xie et al. (2024)	Felsic laminae; graywacke laminae; clay laminae; zeolitic laminae; mixed laminae.
	Niu et al. (2025)	Tuffaceous laminated shale; sandy laminated shale; organic-rich laminated shale.
Color and brightness	Ma et al. (2017)	Yellowish layers of aragonite laminae; grayish layers of aragonite laminae.
	Sun et al. (2025a)	Bright laminae; dark laminae.

There are certain differences in the formation process of different laminae. During the autumn–winter seasons, the dry climate enhances the physical weathering of source rocks, promoting the input of terrigenous clastic sediments into the lacustrine basin and leading to the development of clastic laminae (Zolitschka et al., 2015). Sandy laminae are related to turbidity current transport and bottom current activity, and are formed in relatively turbulent water bodies with strong clastic input. Terrigenous clay-grade material enters the lake through surface flow, interflow, or bottom current, and subsequently settles slowly to form muddy laminae. In a saline to brackish lacustrine depositional system, the hot and arid conditions of summer, together with elevated lake-water salinity, promote algal blooms that induce carbonate precipitation, resulting in the formation of carbonate laminae (Schieber et al., 2013). The formation of organic-rich laminae depends on biological productivity and preservation conditions under stratified anoxia. The formation of tuffaceous laminae is related to frequent volcanic activity and these laminae

often occur interbedded with organic-rich laminae (Niu et al., 2025). The formation mechanism of felsic laminae involves the re-erosion, suspension, and transportation of felsic silt, which subsequently settles to the lake floor together with flocs, resulting in a laminar structure characterized by alternating mud-rich and sand-rich layers (Wang et al., 2023c). Clay laminae develop in relatively high-energy hydrodynamic environments, and their formation mechanism is primarily controlled by the transport processes driven by flocculation of detrital clay particles (Schieber et al., 2007).

Morphologically classified laminae are closely associated with variations in fluid properties, hydrodynamic regimes, and sedimentation processes (Shi et al., 2018, 2022). Planar laminae commonly develop under conditions of relatively strong unidirectional currents or during suspension settling in still water. Curved laminae are often associated with bedload transport under unidirectional currents or with wave oscillation, reflecting relatively high-energy conditions in the water body. Wavy laminae are formed in quiet, reducing water bodies under weak hydrodynamic conditions, and are often related to wave oscillatory flows, which indicate moderate to relatively low energy levels. Thin parallel laminae are formed in quiet, stratified water bodies and exhibit pronounced seasonal variations. Thick parallel laminae are mainly formed in quiet, stratified water bodies with sufficient clastic input. Lenticular laminae are formed under periodic hydrodynamic conditions, where microcrystalline calcite is redeposited due to changes in fluid dynamics.

2.4. Development characteristics of shale laminae in different basins

In China, shale laminae are predominantly developed in several key oil-bearing basins, including the Bohai Bay, Ordos, Junggar, and Songliao basins. Notable differences exist among basins in terms of lamina classification, lamina thickness, and lamina composition. For example, in the Bohai Bay Basin and the Ordos Basin, lamina classification considers factors such as lamina composition, morphology, color, and brightness (Liu et al., 2014b, 2015; Niu et al., 2025; Shi et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2025a; Xin et al., 2022b). In the Songliao Basin and the Junggar Basin, laminae are classified mainly based on composition (He et al., 2025a; Pang, 2023). In the Bohai Bay Basin, the dominant lamina types include felsic laminae, clay laminae, carbonate laminae (calcite laminae and dolomitic laminae), and organic matter laminae. In the Ordos Basin, the dominant lamina types include organic matter laminae, felsic laminae, clay laminae, and tuffaceous laminae. In the Songliao Basin, the dominant lamina types are clay laminae and felsic laminae. In the Junggar Basin, the dominant lamina types consist mainly of combinations of clay laminae, felsic laminae, and carbonate laminae.

The lamina composition in the Bohai Bay Basin mainly consists of clay, OM, dolomite, calcite, feldspar, and quartz (Chen, 2024; Xie et al., 2024). The lamina composition in the Ordos Basin is mainly clay, OM, feldspar, and quartz (Hua, 2023; Xi et al., 2020). The lamina composition in the Songliao Basin is mainly clay, feldspar, and quartz (Chen and Fu, 2025; Yu, 2023). The lamina composition in the Junggar Basin is mainly clay, feldspar, quartz, dolomite, and calcite (Wang, 2022; Xi et al., 2023). The laminae are usually thin (micron-to millimeter-scale) and highly heterogeneous. In the Bohai Bay Basin, the thickness of individual laminae ranges from 20 μm to 1000 μm (Sun et al., 2025a; Xin et al., 2022b). In the Ordos Basin, the thickness of individual laminae ranges from 50 μm to 4000 μm (An, 2023; Hua, 2023). In the Songliao Basin, the thickness of individual laminae ranges from 50 μm to 2000 μm (Hua, 2023; Hua et al., 2022a). In the Junggar Basin, the thickness of individual laminae ranges from 100 μm to 1000 μm (Wu et al., 2022a; Xi et al., 2023). The Ordos Basin exhibits the largest range of lamina thickness, followed by the Songliao Basin, with the Bohai Bay and Junggar basins showing similar ranges.

2.5. The significance of laminae for shale oil enrichment

The significance of laminae development for the enrichment of shale oil mainly lies in its enhancement of storage space. The formation of bedding fractures between laminae is more likely, enhancing the storage capacity of shale oil (Jiang et al., 2013). The laminae composed of specific mineral components have well-developed pores and fractures. For example, laminae composed of carbonate minerals contain more micropores and fractures that have been dissolved by organic acids and formation water (Kong et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2022d). Laminae formed by brittle minerals are more resistant to mechanical compaction and have a better ability to preserve pores during the evolution of pore structure than shale with underdeveloped laminae (Loucks and Ruppel, 2007). Shale with a high brittleness index is more likely to form a network of fractures during the fracturing process, which significantly enhances the production capacity of shale oil (Wang et al., 2015a). For organic-rich laminae, micropores and fractures develop after OM evolution and become the occurrence space for shale oil. The high pressure generated by hydrocarbon generation from OM can also alter the pore structure of adjacent layers (Qiu, 2023). Organic and inorganic pores along laminae enhance the migration and retention capacity of shale oil during the hydrocarbon generation process (Song et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2022a).

3. Occurrence state and characterization methods

3.1. Occurrence state

Currently, there is a consensus in the industry that in-situ shale oil primarily exists in the forms of adsorbed, free, and dissolved states (Shi et al., 2019). Adsorbed oil interacts with OM and inorganic minerals through van der Waals forces and Coulombic forces, resulting in a strong adsorption affinity (Guo et al., 2025). It exists in a "solid-like" form within the pores of OM, inorganic pores, and on the surfaces of microfractures, resulting in low mobility (Li et al., 2016; Ning et al., 2017). Dissolved oil has very low solubility in water and natural gas (Hu et al., 2021). Free oil is lighter and has greater mobility, making it the primary contributor to production in shale reservoirs (Wang et al., 2019c). Song et al. (2024) indicated that in micropores (r , 2 nm), shale oil primarily exists in an adsorbed state (Fig. 3(a)). As shown in Fig. 3(b), shale oil exists simultaneously in both adsorbed and free states within pores of sizes (2 nm , r , 100 nm). When r 10 nm (Fig. 3(c)), the flow of oil is no longer affected by pore diameter. Movable oil is primarily found in larger mesopores and macropores.

3.2. Solvent extraction

The characterization techniques for the occurrence state of hydrocarbons are mainly divided into qualitative observation and quantitative characterization methods. Qualitative observation methods include environmental scanning electron microscopy, computed tomography (CT), laser confocal microscopy, energy spectrum identification, FE-SEM, and focused ion beam etching techniques (Gou et al., 2019; Wan et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023c). These methods allow for the direct observation of the occurrence state of residual oil, elucidating its morphology, location, and spatial size. Currently, the observation scale has been developed from the micron level to the nanometer level. Quantitative

Fig. 3. Occurrence states in different pore types (Song et al., 2024).

characterization methods mainly include solvent extraction, rock pyrolysis, vacuum imbibition, molecular simulation and NMR. This article focuses on the quantitative characterization methods.

The solvent extraction method extracts hydrocarbons in different occurrence states using solvents of varying polarities (Tian et al., 2024a; Zhang et al., 2025). The principle lies in the compositional differences between adsorbed and free hydrocarbons; free hydrocarbons are generally dominated by lighter components, while the adsorbed state primarily consists of larger polar molecules or heteroatom compounds. Table 2 lists the organic solvents used in the extraction of shale oil. Dichloromethane (DCM) is the most commonly used among them. However, DCM extraction can easily remain on the surfaces of OM and inorganic minerals, leading to sample losses (Li et al., 2016). The proportions of solvents vary. The types of extracted hydrocarbons primarily include free and adsorbed hydrocarbons.

Table 2
Summary of solvent extraction cases.

References	Solvent types	Types of extracts
Abourriche et al. (2004)	Toluene/phenol	Maltenes; asphaltenes
Chen and Zhang (2017)	DCM, n-hexane and trichloromethane (TCM)	Free hydrocarbon; adsorbed hydrocarbon
Alharthy et al. (2018)	Chloride/acetone	Produced oil; residual oil
Liu et al. (2021b)	DCM/TCM	Free hydrocarbon; adsorbed hydrocarbon
Hou et al. (2021)	DCM and chloroform	Hydrocarbons of different molecular weights
Amer et al. (2022)	Supercritical propane with tetrahydrofuran	Aliphatic hydrocarbons; ethers; carbonyls and sulfur-oxygen compounds
Sun et al. (2022)	DCM/methanol (93:7); DCM/methanol/acetone (50:25:25)	Free state; adsorbed-miscible state; adsorbed state
Zhang et al. (2022)	Chloroform	Inorganic mineral adsorbed oil amount; inorganic pore free oil amount
Yang et al. (2023)	Ternary organic solvent (38:32:30)	Saturates; aromatics; resins; asphaltenes
Tian et al. (2024a)	DCM	Adsorbed oil
Zhang et al. (2025)	DCM/methanol (93:7)	Free oil; adsorbed oil

3.3. Rock pyrolysis

The basis of rock pyrolysis is the differences in thermal volatilization of the various components of shale oil (Xu et al., 2022). The principle is that free hydrocarbons have smaller molecular weights than adsorbed hydrocarbons, making them more thermally volatile and easier to release (Li et al., 2019c). Currently, pyrolysis methods are divided into the traditional pyrolysis method and the multistep Rock-Eval pyrolysis method (MREPM) (Fig. 4) (Li et al., 2024b). The traditional pyrolysis method involves maintaining the temperature at 300 °C for 3 min to obtain the S_1 peak, which is regarded as the free oil amount (Wang et al., 2025a). Then, the temperature is increased to 600 °C to obtain the S_2 peak, which is considered the kerogen pyrolytic hydrocarbon amount. Due to the adsorption of crude oil onto OM and the restrictions posed by pore spaces, the S_1 value obtained from conventional methods does not fully represent the free oil amount. Additionally, as S_2 contains both free and adsorbed oil, using only S_1 and S_2 cannot accurately characterize the quantities of each state of oil (Jiang et al., 2016b; Li et al., 2019c).

The MREPM has gradually replaced the conventional pyrolysis method. Li et al. (2020b) proposed that the sum of $S_{1\text{-}1}$ and $S_{1\text{-}2}$ represents the free hydrocarbons; $S_{2\text{-}1}$ corresponds to the adsorbed hydrocarbons, and $S_{2\text{-}2}$ represents the kerogen cracking hydrocarbons. Currently, researchers have gradually improved the heating program of Rock-Eval pyrolysis by separating the S_1 and S_2 peaks to quantify the amounts of free oil, adsorbed oil, and total oil content in shale formations. Examples include the Extended Slow Heating method developed in Canada (Li et al., 2022), the Rock-Eval Shale Play method developed in France (Ma et al., 2020), the HAWK Petroleum Assessment Method designed by Wildcat Technology (Li et al., 2020c), and the pyrolysis method developed by Sinopec (He et al., 2025b).

3.4. Vacuum imbibition

Sang et al. (2018) first proposed a vacuum imbibition method to characterize the amounts of oil present in OM and inorganic pores. The principle is based on the differences in wettability between organic and inorganic pores, allowing oil and water to enter

different pore spaces. When oil or water is drawn into a hydro-

include Grand Canonical Monte Carlo (GCMC), Molecular Dynamics (MD), and MD-GCMC (Sui and Yao, 2016; Wang and Chang, 2024). Among them, MD is the most common. Table 3 lists the components, pore types, force fields, and characterization methods of the fluid occurrence states. The characterization methods mainly include density distribution, viscosity distribution, self-diffusion coefficient, and adsorption layer molecular orientation, among which the density distribution is the most widely used (Fang et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2019; Wang and Chang, 2024; Wang et al., 2016). In addition, molecular models have gradually evolved from being single-component and single-pore type based to being based on multi-components and multi-pore types.

3.6. NMR technology

NMR technology is an effective method to research the various states of shale oil (Fleury and Romero-Sarmiento, 2016; Liu et al., 2020c). Shale contains kerogen, bitumen, oil, and water (Xu et al., 2022). When using one-dimensional NMR to characterize fluid states, signal overlap can occur, making it difficult to distinguish between different fluids (Mukhametdinova et al., 2021). Two-dimensional NMR technology (including D–T_2 and T_1–T_2) improves the separation of different proton components, allowing for higher resolution (Fleury and Romero-Sarmiento, 2016). In conventional reservoirs, D–T_2 can identify oil and water within the pores (Li et al., 2018; Mukhametdinova et al., 2021). However, in mud shale, the development of micro-nano pore throats results in negligible diffusion of liquid fluids. As a result, the D–T_2 method cannot systematically differentiate the fluid signals in shale reservoirs (Birdwell and Washburn, 2015).

Currently, the two-dimensional T_1–T_2 NMR technique is widely used (Fleury and Romero-Sarmiento, 2016; Li et al., 2018, 2019a). According to the Bloembergen-Purcell-Pound theory, T_1 and T_2 are related to the viscosity and density of fluids (Khatibi et al., 2019). T_1 reflects the mobility of a fluid, and the larger the T_1 value, the poorer the mobility (Bloembergen et al., 1948; Fleury and Romero-Sarmiento, 2016). The first prerequisite of this method is to determine the distribution region of fluids on the T_1–T_2 spectrum (Fig. 7) (Li et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2020c; Nie et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023b). Li et al. (2018) found that the T_1/T_2 ratios of oil and asphalt are higher than those of water. The T_1/T_2 ratios of adsorbed or bound state fluids are higher than those of free state fluids. In addition, the T_1/T_2 ratio of kerogen is the highest (T_1/T_2 100). The higher the NMR frequency, the better the oil–water separation effect (Korb et al., 2014). Therefore, establishing a T_1–T_2 spectrum suitable for the study area is important.

When quantitatively characterizing the oil volume under different states, it is usually necessary to combine other methods for comprehensive characterization. Zhang et al. (2023d) characterized the content of various types of shale oil by combining thermogravimetric experiments with NMR, based on the volatility discrepancies of components in different states. Li et al. (2020b) extracted the T_2 spectrum of organic hydrogen (from OM) from the T_1–T_2 diagram and obtained the T_2 cutoff values for free and adsorbed oil in conjunction with rock pyrolysis experiments. They further calibrated the signal intensity of the T_1–T_2 spectrum using pyrolysis parameters, allowing for a quantitative assessment of the oil content in various states. Zhang et al. (2024) calibrated the oil content of saturated oil shale cores with the signal intensity of the T_1–T_2 spectrum, allowing for the quantitative calculation of the t T524)3]4TTffl

hydrocarbons from shale samples can occur up to C_{15} (Jiang et al., 2016a). Therefore, correction procedures should be implemented when using these parameters to evaluate oil content. Restoration of light hydrocarbons is commonly achieved through a range of techniques, including closed extraction (Wang, 2015), pressure-retained coring and liquid nitrogen freezing (Shao et al., 2024), gas chromatography (Song et al., 2013), pyrolysis (Zhu et al., 2015), hydrocarbon generation kinetic component simulation (Xue et al., 2016), formation energy analysis (Chen and Jiang, 2020), hydrocarbon generation and expulsion mass balance method (Chen et al., 2018b), and well-site mobile full-diameter core (MFDC) NMR (Shi et al., 2023).

At present, there are four methods to calculate the original oil saturation. (1) Direct method. Directly obtain the original fluid saturation from special core samples (pressure-retained coring or sealed coring). (2) Indirect method. First, the residual oil saturation of the core was measured using methods such as distillation, extraction, and NMR, and then the original oil saturation was obtained through loss correction (Fu et al., 2020; Handwerger et al., 2011; Spears et al., 2011; Tan et al., 2018). (3) Logging method. Using a fluid saturation interpretation model suitable for shale reservoirs, well log data (including resistivity logging, dielectric logging, and NMR logging) were inverted to obtain the original oil saturation (Tan et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2022b). (4) Laboratory simulation. By restoring cores saturated with different fluids to their in-situ state, the original fluid saturation can then be determined using instruments such as NMR or nano-CT (Ali et al., 2020). The laser confocal technique excites oil-bearing shale samples using a laser light source and measures the fluorescence intensity to extract fluorescence characteristics. By separating and recombining multiple fluorescence signals, three-dimensional digital imaging and quantitative analysis of crude oil in micron-to nanometer-scale pores was achieved (Shao et al., 2020). This method can rapidly and finely characterize the distribution of light and heavy oils within pores and identify micro-migration phenomena (Gentzis et al., 2021; Lu et al., 2023). However, the presence of fluorescent minerals may lead to an overestimation of oil content.

The logging method usually calculates oil content using the density logging curve (Liu et al., 2014a). Using logging methods can provide continuous oil content data, but it is necessary to consider the influence of data quality and prediction models on the accuracy of the results. In contrast, NMR logging provides information about pores and fluids, offering unique advantages for the evaluation of complex reservoirs (Liu et al., 2021c). NMR logging combined with pyrolysis has become a commonly used approach for determining oil saturation (Piedrahita and Aguilera, 2017). The material balance method is based on the principle that the mass of oil-generating OM in shale remains constant throughout the process of thermal evolution. Li et al. (2020a) used a hydrocarbon generation statistical model to simulate the variations of the hydrogen index and hydrocarbon generation potential index during shale evolution, and proposed a quantifiable oil and gas expulsion efficiency. The formation energy method evaluates crude oil content and mobility by measuring and inverting the energy state of oil and gas within the shale pore system in the subsurface. The NMR technique q

kerogen hydrocarbon generation and the cracking of crude oil into gas (Curtis, 2002). Its pore diameter mainly ranges from 10 nm to 200 nm (Gao, 2019). The development degree and connectivity of organic pores are controlled by factors such as lithofacies, mineral composition, type of OM, thermal evolution degree, structural deformation, and stress intensity (Mastalerz et al., 2013; Wu et al., 2019). During the processes of OM accumulation and thermal evolution, numerous tiny pores and fractures continuously form within the OM. High maturity leads to a longer hydrocarbon expulsion time, which promotes the development of pores (Yang et al., 2013). Organic-rich shale has more microporous space compared to organic-poor shale, allowing it to retain more liquid hydrocarbons (Rexer et al., 2013).

Inorganic pores include InterP and IntraP (Loucks et al., 2012). InterP are formed by the gaps that remain after mineral particles or mineral aggregates undergo compaction during the diagenesis. These pores are primarily influenced by sedimentation and diagenesis (Dou et al., 2023). InterP are distributed within the accumulation of mineral particles, with pore sizes mostly at the micron level. These pores are relatively large and have good connectivity, providing ample space for the storage of oil. IntraP are the pores located within inorganic mineral particles, primarily distributed in minerals with unstable chemical properties (Zheng et al., 2019). There are two main types of IntraP. One type is the intercrystalline pores found in inorganic minerals, as well as the pyrite intercrystalline pores. The other type is the dissolution pores formed within minerals due to organic acids released during hydrocarbon generation (Kong, 2023).

Microfractures serve as the main microscopic pathways for oil migration and also provide the storage space. Microfractures are typically dominated by diagenetic shrinkage fractures, intergranular fractures in mineral particles, clay shrinkage fractures, hydrocarbon generation pressure fractures, inter-laminar fractures, and structural fractures (Dou et al., 2023; Kong, 2023; Niu et al., 2025). The factors controlling the formation of microfractures are very complex. External factors include tectonic stress, diagenesis, and hydrocarbon generation pressure, while internal factors include rock properties, lithofacies, and mineral composition.

It is widely accepted in the petroleum industry that bedding fractures occur within shale formations under high-pressure conditions. These fractures generally develop along lamination contacts, bedding planes, and lithologic boundaries (Lai et al., 2022; Li et al., 2024c; Zeng et al., 2016). In high-pressure subsurface formations, bedding fractures are generally closed or semi-closed (Pang et al., 2023b; Zhang et al., 2021). Nevertheless, they may become open under specific conditions, including hydrocarbon generation-induced overpressure, abnormally high pore pressures, tectonic activities (e.g., within fault and fold zones), magmatic activities, dissolution of fracture-filling materials, and hydraulic fracturing (Cobbold et al., 2013; Ismat, 2012; Liu et al., 2023a; Matthaei et al., 1995; Xin et al., 2022b).The opening width of bedding fractures is highly variable, with apertures commonly filled by bitumen, OM, and a variety of inorganic minerals (Lash and Engelder, 2005; Pang, 2023). As the degree of filling increases, the effectiveness of natural fractures gradually decreases, thus reducing their contribution to reservoir productivity (Laubach et al., 2004; Liu et al., 2021a). The development of matrix-type shale oil reservoirs is challenging, and their productivity is generally low without hydraulic fracturing. Fracture-type shale oil reservoirs are characterized by high hydrocarbon enrichment, high initial production rates, and a rapid decline in productivity (Zhang et al., 2021). Therefore, fractures are closely related to the development of shale oil.

Fig. 9. Shale oil occurrence spaces: **(a)** organic pores; **(b)** InterP; **(c)** clay intercrystalline pores; **(d)** pyrite intercrystalline pores; **(e)** calcite dissolution pores; **(f)** feldspar dissolution pores; **(g)** structural fracture; **(h)** diagenetic shrinkage fracture; **(i)** interlayer fractures; **(j)** abnormal pressure fractures; **(k)** clay shrinkage fractures; **(l)** intergranular fracture in minerals. AL: argillaceous laminae; CCL: calcareous laminae; Cal.: calcite; F: feldspar; Q: quartz. (Chen et al., 2019a; Li et al., 2019d; Liu et al., 2020a; Loucks et al., 2012; Rao et al., 2024; Xiao et al., 2024; Xin et al., 2022b; Yang et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2021).

Shi et al. (2022) found that different pore spaces have varying pore sizes. The pore diameter of calcite intercrystalline pores generally ranges from 10 μm to 30 μm, with a maximum pore diameter reaching several hundred micrometers. The intercrystalline pores of dolomite are well-developed due to the high resistance of dolomite crystals to compaction, with diameters ranging from 0.6 μm to 4 μm. The intercrystalline pores of clay minerals are plate-like and thin, with very small pore diameters (,1 μm); they develop in thin parallel laminae and weakly laminated layers (Shi et al., 2022). The diameter of pyrite intercrystalline pores typically ranges from 1 to 3 mm.

section focuses on the impact of sedimentary tectonics and diagenesis on the occurrence space of shale oil.

4.3.1. Sedimentary tectonics

Sedimentary tectonics control the occurrence space through changes in the sedimentary environment (Qu et al., 2024). The interaction between OM and inorganic matter in shale controls the evolution of pores (Curtis, 1978). The thermal evolution of OM generates CO_2 and organic acids (Xin et al., 2022a). Organic acids can dissolve aluminosilicate minerals and carbonate minerals, forming secondary pores such as dissolution pores and microfractures (Zhang et al., 2009). Generally, there are more dissolution pores in laminated shale reservoirs compared to massive shale reservoirs. This may be due to the more limited fluid migration distance in the massive shale reservoirs. In contrast, fluids can migrate more easily laterally along the interfaces of the laminated shale reservoirs (Heydari and Wade, 2002; Liang et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2016).

Xin et al. (2022b) discovered that laminated shale exhibits better continuity and a higher density of microfractures compared to massive shale in the Bohai Bay Basin (Fig. 13). Moreover, microfractures in the region are widely developed parallel to the laminae. The dehydration of clay minerals, differential compaction, pressure-solution, OM contraction, and overpressure resulting from hydrocarbon generation all contribute to the forG5frNLflT.N3fl5Gflfihe 3flGkG[5flFIG5bute 3x.FfiG5.InPnes3IxFIG5ervoers 3fi(FxG5(3]T@G'

Fig. 12. Pore size distribution curves of laminated samples and massive samples from the Bohai Bay Basin: **(a)** mercury intrusion–extrusion curves of laminated samples; **(b)** mercury intrusion–extrusion curves of massive samples; **(c)** pore size distribution curves of laminated samples; **(d)** pore size distribution curves of massive samples (Xin et al., 2022b).

Fig. 13. Photomicrographs of the microfracture distribution in the shale samples from Bohai Bay Basin. **(a)–(f)** laminated samples; **(g)** massive sample (Xin et al., 2022b).

Fig. 14. Backscattered electron images of horizontal fractures in a shale sample from Bohai Bay Basin: **(a)** a horizontal fracture containing incompletely corroded silicate and carbonate mineral particles (yellow rectangle); **(b)** a horizontal fracture containing incompletely corroded feldspar (yellow rectangle) (Xin et al., 2022b).

storage capacity of the shale (Sun, 2017). During the thermal evolution of OM, oxygen-containing functional groups are removed, resulting in the production of organic acids and the release of carbon dioxide (Heydari and Wade, 2002; Zhang et al., 1994). The neutralization effect of organic acids causes the dissolution of aluminosilicate minerals and carbonate minerals, resulting in the generation of secondary pores (Heydari and Wade, 2002; Wan et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2009).

4.4. Pore size of shale oil occurrence

4.4.1. Main pore size for shale oil occurrence

Clearly identifying the main pore sizes in which shale oil is stored is crucial for its production (Chen et al., 2018a). Typically, changes in shale pore size before and after organic solvent extraction are used to determine the main pore size range for shale oil (Chen et al., 2018a; Liu et al., 2020a; Wu et al., 2022b). Table 5 summarizes the main pore sizes for oil storage in different lithofacies of shale. There are certain discrepancies in the main pore size range of shale reservoirs, typically ranging from a few nanometers to several hundred nanometers. In addition, the main pore size range in laminated shale reservoirs is greater than that in massive shale reservoirs. The pore sizes in quartz-rich siltstone laminae and carbonate mineral laminae are larger than those in clay mineral laminae. Siltstone laminae have larger pore sizes compared to mudstone laminae, organic-rich laminae, and tuff laminae.

4.4.2. Lower limit of pore size

Various methods are typically employed, including solvent extraction, stepwise pyrolysis, NMR, centrifugation, N_2 adsorption, ESEM, and FE-SEM, to determine the pore size lower limits for movable oil and free oil (Bao, 2018; Guo et al., 2023, 2024; Sun et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2019c; Wu et al., 2022b). Table 6 summarizes the lower limit of pore size (LLPS). The LLPS of movable oil and free oil differs slightly, usually from a few nanometers to several hundred nanometers. The LLPS of movable oil in massive shale reservoirs is 3.5–40 nm, and the LLPS of free oil in pure shale reservoirs is 3–15 nm. The LLPS of movable oil in laminated shale is 88.4–217.22 nm. The LLPS of movable oil in lamellar shale is between 150 and 300 nm, while the LLPS of free oil in these reservoirs is 30–40 nm. The LLPS of movable oil is ranked as follows: lamellar shale laminated shale pure shale. The LLPS of free oil in lamellar shale reservoirs is significantly greater than that in pure shale.

5. Influencing factors of shale oil occurrence

5.1. Organic matter

5.1.1. Abundance of OM

The total organic carbon (TOC) content is used to represent the abundance of OM (Xu et al., 2022). The TOC content determines

Table 5
Summary of the main pore sizes for oil storage in shale. CI: confidence intervals.

References	Reservoirs	Lithofacies	Main pore size
Rylander et al. (2013)	Eagle Ford	Shale	≥250 nm (n = 10, 95% CI)
Saraji and Piri (2015)	Bakken	Shale	10–100 nm (n = 8, 95% CI)
Chen et al. (2018a)	Bohai Bay Basin	Shale	2–30 nm (n = 2, 95% CI)
Goral et al. (2019)	Vaca Muerta	Shale	5–75 nm (n = 2, 95% CI)
Dang et al. (2022)	Ordos Basin	Shale	2–25 nm (n = 16, 95% CI)
Wu (2023)	Junggar Basin	Felsic shale	5–40 nm (n = 18, 95% CI)
		Carbonate shale	6–50 nm (n = 18, 95% CI)
		Mixed shale	3–10 nm (n = 18, 95% CI)
Zhu et al. (2024)	Junggar Basin	Shale	300 nm (n = 17, 95% CI)
Wang et al. (2019c)	Bohai Bay Basin	Organic-rich shale/laminae	100 nm (n = 29, 95% CI)
An (2023)	Ordos Basin	Homogeneous shale	30–80 nm (n = 4, 95% CI)
		Felsic laminated shale	3–100 nm (n = 4, 95% CI)
		Tuffaceous laminated shale	7–30 nm (n = 4, 95% CI)
Wu et al. (2022a)	Junggar Basin	Quartz-rich siltstone laminae	15–20 μm
		Carbonate mineral laminae	15–20 μm
		Clay mineral laminae	50–200 nm
Wu et al. (2022a)	Ordos Basin	Felsic sandstone laminae	500 nm
		Clay mineral laminae	30–300 nm
Xie et al. (2024)	Bohai Bay Basin	Laminated gray dolomitic shale	19.57–47.51 nm (n = 5, 95% CI)
		Laminated felsic shale	11.59–36.41 nm (n = 3, 95% CI)
		Massive shale	6.41–8.92 nm (n = 3, 95% CI)

Table 6
Summary of the LLPS for shale oil occurrence./: no data.

References	Basins	Lithofacies	LLPS of movable oil, nm	LLPS of free oil, nm
Sun et al. (2017)	Bohai Bay Basin	Shale	10–25	/
Bao (2018)	Bohai Bay Basin	Shale	/	10
Wang et al. (2019c)	Bohai Bay Basin	Shale	30	5
Wu et al. (2022b)	Junggar Basin	Shale	3.5–19	/
Wu (2023)	Junggar Basin	Felsic shale	8	5
		Carbonate shale	13	6
		Mixed shale	28	3
Guo et al. (2023)	Santanghu Basin	Massive shale	10	/
Guo et al. (2024)	Kailu Basin	Shale	40	15
Hua (2023)	Ordos Basin	Organic-rich laminae	194.30	/
		Felsic laminae	217.22	/
		Tuffaceous laminae	155.70	/
		Clay laminae	120.72	/
Hua (2023)	Songliao Basin	Clay laminae	88.40	/
		Calcareous laminae	163.15	/
		Felsic laminae	83.97	/
Yu (2023)	Songliao Basin	Lamellar shale	150–300	30–40

shale oil generation potential (Pang et al., 2023a). From Fig. 15, with the increase of TOC values, the contents of both free oil and adsorbed oil also increase. However, the correlation coefficient between adsorbed oil with TOC is greater than that of free oil. The adsorption capacity of OM is reflected in three aspects (Dang et al., 2022; Li et al., 2020d; Qu et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2024). (1) The residual hydrocarbon generation pores developed in OM can provide a certain storage space for adsorbed oil. (2) OM typically has a large specific surface area, which can provide numerous sites for the adsorption of shale oil. (3) The surface of OM is rich in oil-affinitive groups, which can produce high-energy adsorption sites.

5.1.2. Maturity of OM

Maturity controls the adsorption capacity of fluids (Xu et al., 2022). In the early stage of hydrocarbon generation, the degree of compaction is low, and the formation has relatively high porosity. At this time, the generated hydrocarbons are rich in heavy hydrocarbons, especially non-hydrocarbons and asphaltenes. Shale oil predominantly exists in an adsorbed state on the surfaces of kerogen and minerals (Bagri et al., 2010; Dang et al., 2022). As thermal maturity increases, kerogen undergoes cracking. Consequently, more light oil (saturated hydrocarbons and aromatic hydrocarbons) is generated, and the content of adsorbed oil discreases (Jiang et al., 2016b; Li et al., 2023a; Wang et al., 2019c).

Maturity controls the content of free oil by influencing the oil and gas content and pore structure (Xu et al., 2022). When R_o , 0.5%, bitumen and a small amount of poorly flowing free oil/gas are generated (Fig. 16) (Zhang et al., 2019f). When 0.5% , R_o , 0.7%, the thermal degradation capacity gradually increases, leading to a gradual increase in the amount of generated oil and gas. When 0.7% , R_o , 1.0%, it is the main phase for the significant generation of hydrocarbons from source rocks (Zhao et al., 2020). When 1.0% , R_o , 1.3%, macromolecular OM undergoes cracking to generate light hydrocarbons. When R_o 1.3%, residual liquid hydrocarbons and heavy gaseous hydrocarbons are further cracked, ultimately producing stable methane gas, carbonaceous asphaltene, and graphite (Xu et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2019f).

5.2. Inorganic mineral

The influence of mineral composition on the occurrence of shale oil mainly includes the adsorption capacity of the minerals (Loucks et al., 2012; Wang and Chang, 2024) and the developmental characteristics of the storage space (Gong et al., 2024). Generally, the adsorption capacity of OM and clay minerals for oil is stronger than that of inorganic minerals (such as feldspar, quartz, and calcite) (Chen et al., 2021; Liang et al., 2022b; Zhu et al., 2023). Li et al. (2016) found that the adsorption capacity follows the order: clay minerals quartz carbonate minerals, as clay minerals have a larger pore surface area compared to non-clay minerals, thus providing more adsorption sites (Xu et al., 2022). Additionally, illite has the strongest adsorption capacity for shale oil among clay minerals, followed by montmorillonite (Cooles et al., 1986; Zhang et al., 2015).

The differences in mineral composition of shale directly affect the development and preservation of shale pores (Loucks et al., 2012). Gou et al. (2023) proposed a model illustrating the occurrence space and mineral composition. Their research indicates that the mineral distribution in dolomitic and siliceous shales is

Fig. 15. Relationship between shale oil content and TOC in the Gaoyou Sag, Subei Basin (multi-temperature pyrolysis experiment results) (Gong et al., 2024).

Fig. 16. Evolution model of hydrocarbon generation and expulsion in argillutite in China (modified from Zhang et al., 2019f).

uniform, retaining a significant amount of original InterP. Therefore, dolomitic and siliceous shales have a higher number of pores and larger pore diameters. Argillaceous shales have relatively weak resistance to compaction, but during their evolution, mineral transformations and dehydration shrinkage occur, generating numerous pores and microfractures within the clay minerals (Sun et al., 2021; Wan et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2022). For mixed shales, fine-grained clay particles fill the spaces between quartz and carbonates. As a result, most of the InterP get blocked, leading to smaller pore diameters.

5.3. Burial history and depth

The increase in burial depth leads to higher formation temperatures and pressures, which affect hydrocarbon generation and storage capacity, further influencing the occurrence states and space. Increased pressure reduces porosity in shale (Rimstidt et al., 2017). In addition, rising temperatures promote the pyrolysis of OM and increase the amount of hydrocarbons (Yang et al., 2020). Porosity typically undergoes three evolutionary stages with increasing burial depth (Li et al., 2016; Pang et al., 2023a). From Fig. 17(a), the porosity gradually decreases at burial depths of less than 2.5 km, increases between 2.5 km and 3 km, and then decreases again at depths greater than 3 km (Li et al., 2016). The reasons for this can be analyzed in three stages. In the early stage, the decrease in shale porosity is primarily due to the compaction and cementation processes, which cause larger pores to transform into smaller pores (Zhang et al., 2019c). In the next stage, the shale reservoir enters the 'oil window' phase, where OM pores begin to develop. Hydrocarbon generation causes a sharp increase in fluid pressure, which counteracts the effective stress of the overlying rock, thereby enhancing the porosity of the shale (Zhang et al., 2014). In addition, during the pyrolysis of kerogen, acidic fluids dissolve unstable minerals, promoting the formation of pores (Deng et al., 2020). Therefore, the porosity increases with increasing burial depth. In the final stage, the pyrolysis of shale oil leads to a reduction in molecular weight, facilitating flow and decreasing reservoir pressure. At the same time, the intensified compaction and pressure release together result in a decrease in reservoir porosity. Fig. 17 (b) presents the variation of adsorbed oil ratio with depth. It can be observed that with increasing burial depth, adsorbed oil ratio in both lamellar and laminae shale gradually decreases. Wang et al. (2019c) suggested that with increasing depth, the viscosity/density of oil decreases, the saturated hydrocarbon content increases (resulting in lighter oil). This weakens the capacity of oil to adhere to the pore wall surfaces.

The tectonic activity can also have a certain impact on the occurrence of shale oil. Fault activity generates a large number of fractures, allowing shale gas to escape along these fractures, which reduces formation pressure and causes organic pores to close under compaction (Xiang et al., 2024). Fu et al. (2023) found that the shale oil productivity is higher inside fault systems than outside them. The reason is that many fractures develop within fault systems, improving the connectivity of the shale reservoir and facilitating the occurrence of shale oil. The inversion structure formed by tectonic uplift can break shale along mechanically weak positions, generating bedding fractures that facilitate the migration of shale oil (Fu et al., 2023). Additionally, the later the tectonic uplift occurs, the longer the burial history of the source rocks, leading to higher maturity and a greater accumulation of free oil.

The rigid basement of the Huangling uplift (granite) has an impact on the thermal evolution of OM (Ge et al., 2013). The insulating effect of the rigid basement results in a lower thermal maturity of the source rocks surrounding the Huangling uplift, with an average maturity of about 2% (Xiang et al., 2024). When the thermal maturity exceeds 3.5%, the carbonization of OM leads to a reduction in organic pores (Xiang et al., 2024). Therefore, the insulating effect of the rigid basement allows the thermal evolution of OM to remain in a favorable stage. At the same time, the rigid basement protects the shale pores from damage during tectonic movements (Bao et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2019b). Tectonic activity also affects the TOC content and the type of OM. When tectonic activity is active, the TOC content increases, and the OM is predominantly Type I. As tectonic activity weakens, the TOC content decreases, and the OM is Type II_1-II_2 (Huang et al., 2015).

5.4. Pore size

Pore size controls the occurrence state and flow of shale oil (Jin et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2019c). Small pores have a larger specific

Fig. 17. Variation in porosity and adsorbed oil ratio with depth in the Bohai Bay Basin: **(a)** porosity (Li et al., 2016); **(b)** adsorbed oil ratio (stepwise pyrolysis experiment results modified from Wang et al., 2019c).

surface area and a higher proportion of adsorbed oil, while large pores have a higher content of free oil (Jiang et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2019c). Sun et al. (2024) found that only adsorbed fluids exist in pores of 3 nm. However, in pores of 5 nm and 8 nm, both adsorbed fluid and bulk phase fluid coexist. This can be analyzed from the perspective of fluid forces. As shown in Fig. 18, in smaller pores, fluid molecules experience opposing forces from interactions between fluid near-wall (INW) and fluid far-wall force, which partially cancels out the INW force. Fluid molecules are all adsorbed onto the pore surface, with no bulk phase fluid present. As the pore increases, the alkane molecules move further away from the surface, and the forces exerted by the surface on the fluid weaken. Free oil appears at the center of the pore.

5.5. Reservoir temperature and pressure

Fei et al. (2023) found that an increase in temperature leads to a decrease in the density of n-octane (Fig. 19(a)–(e)). High temperatures intensify the thermodynamic motion of hydrocarbon molecules and enhance their diffusion capacity. This indicates that hydrocarbon molecules are more easily desorbed from kerogen, and the adsorbed layer gradually disappears (Guo et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023a). In addition, the increase in temperature promotes the absorption of hydrocarbons by kerogen while reducing the number of adsorbed hydrocarbons (Fig. 19(f) and (g)). From molecular simulations, pressure has almost no effect on the adsorption of oil (Pernyeszi et al., 1998; Wu, 2018). However, under high-pressure conditions in the formation, some gas may dissolve in oil, which enhances its mobility but decreases its adsorption capacity (Wang et al., 2019c; Zhang et al., 2019e).

5.6. Shale oil components

Alkanes, aromatics, resins, and asphaltenes are the main components of shale oil (Cao et al., 2021). These components interact and affect the states of each other (Jin et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2019c, 2025c). Typically, light components exist in a free state in the pores, while heavier components are more easily adsorbed onto the walls (Wang et al., 2022c). The adsorption mechanisms of each component differ. Non-polar components and oil molecules with polar functional groups are adsorbed on kerogen through van der Waals forces and Coulombic forces, respectively (Fei et al., 2023). Previous studies have found that kerogen preferentially adsorbs indole, nonanone, methyl octyl sulfide, and molecules containing benzene rings (Sun et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023f). Asphaltenes have a stronger affinity for kerogen compared to methane (a light component) (Yang et al., 2020).

5.7. Formation water

Formation water also affects the states of oil in nanopores (Li et al., 2020c). High concentrations of formation water cause water molecules to aggregate in clusters, forming water bridges (Fig. 20(a)) (Xiong et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2019e). Water bridges can inhibit the adsorption and diffusion of oil (Li et al., 2023c). Water film weakens the interactions between oil and the pore surfaces, facilitating the flow of oil (Zhang et al., 2019d). Kim and Devegowda (2022) found that hydrogen bonds formed between polar components and water cause asphaltenes/resins to exhibit affinity for water. (Fig. 20(b)). In addition, high salinity leads to a reduction in the thickness of the water bridge while causing ion aggregation, which hinders the flow of oil (Xiong and Devegowda, 2022). Saltwater can coat the surface of montmorillonite, leading to the distribution of non-polar components in the nanopores (Zhang et al., 2019d). Na^+ and Cl^- adsorb on the surface of calcite, enhancing the hydrophilicity of calcite and weakening its adsorption of oil molecules (Zhao et al., 2019). Fei et al. (2023) found that under aqueous conditions, water clusters form and adsorb near the N, S, and O-containing groups on the surface of kerogen, which blocks the matrix pores and reduces the content of absorbed oil.

5.8. Shale wettability

The distribution of fluids in oil-bearing shales is strongly influenced by wettability. Variability in wettability due to heterogeneous compositions and pore systems significantly affects the occurrence state of shale oil (e.g., pore-size distribution, storage sites, and free-to-adsorbed ratio) (Li et al., 2023b; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Suekuni et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023e). Typically, in water-wet shale formations, water occupies the small pores as a continuous phase, whereas hydrocarbons tend to accumulate in the larger pores (Pan et al., 2020). In contrast, in oil-wet shale formations, oil is often adsorbed onto the pore walls. Due to the complex mineral composition and abundant OM in shale, its wettability exhibits strong heterogeneity. Therefore, the mechanisms of oil-water coexistence within shale pores remain challenging to elucidate.

Gao et al. (2023) used laser scanning confocal microscopy (LSCM) combined with saturated oil experiment to measure the oil content of shale samples with different wettability from the Mahu Sag, Junggar Basin. As shown in Fig. 21, samples 2 and 4 (oil-wet)

opposite trend. This indicates that heavy components interact more strongly with oil-wet inorganic minerals and OM, and are therefore more significantly affected by wettability.

6. The enrichment patterns of shale oil

Due to differences in thermal maturity, burial depth, lithology, OM content, mineral composition, pore structure, diagenesis, formation water content, and laminae types, the occurrence mechanism of shale oil is complex. Currently, the research on the occurrence mechanism of shale oil is conducted by establishing occurrence models (Fan et al., 2023; Gong et al., 2023; He et al., 2025c; Li et al., 2022, 2024a; Liang et al., 2022a; Ma et al., 2024a; Niu et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2019c; Zhang et al., 2023a). This section summarizes the enrichment patterns of shale oil in both pure shale and laminated shale reservoirs. The main storage space of the Permian Lucaogou Formation in eastern Junggar Basin is a heterogeneous pore-throat system composed of InterP and solution pores (Fig. 22(a)–I, II) (He et al., 2025c). Micropores mainly contain adsorbed and irreducible oil. Mesopores contain significant amounts of irreducible oil, moderate amounts of movable oil, and small quantities of adsorbed oil. Macropores primarily accommodate movable oil (Fig. 22(a)–IV). In addition, the presence of abundant OM and carbonate minerals increases the content of free oil and adsorbed oil.

The pore water and retained oil in the marine-continental transitional shale reservoir are stored competitively in non-micropores, significantly affecting the enrichment of retained oil (Fig. 22(b)) (Fan et al., 2023). Pore water is mainly present in the pores ,2 nm, 2–10 nm, and 10 nm of inorganic substances in the forms of filling, adsorption and water-clusters, respectively. Retained oil primarily exists in a filling or dissolved state in the micropores and small non-micropores of OM, while in the large non-micropores, it mainly exists in the form of oil-clusters. Li et al. (2022) found that the oil occurrence state in the Bohai Bay Basin varies significantly with depth. The Es^3 member contains a significant amount of kerogen-absorbed oil and a small portion of clay-adsorbed oil, which decreases with increasing depth (Fig. 22c q_.Gce@GHTI_.GIGTfG.kfiNI

Fig. 20. (a) Equilibrium configurations and number density profiles in the 5 nm pore; **(b)** the mixed-wet system and the fluid-saturated mixed-wet system after equilibration. C_w: concentration of water (Kim and Devegowda, 2022; Xiong et al., 2020).

Fig. 21. Shale oil content and wettability in Mahu Sag, Junggar Basin (LSCM combined with saturated oil experiment) (Gao et al., 2023).

Zhang et al. (2023a) established four shale oil occurrence models for different lithologies (Fig. 22(d)). Mudstone has a high OM content, primarily storing adsorbed oil in kerogen and mineral surfaces. The highest amount of adsorbed oil is found in the tuffaceous/silty mudstone. Mudstone exhibits limited development of dissolution pores; therefore, free oil is primarily hosted in the bedding fractures. In contrast, siltstone and carbonate rocks have a higher oil content than mudstone, with free oil hosted in fractures and dissolution pores. In summary, the Lucaogou Formation mudstone has considerable hydrocarbon generation potential and contains abundant adsorbed oil. Siltstone and carbonate rocks, contain significant amounts of free oil and have considerable development potential.

The reservoir types of the Fengcheng Formation in Junggar Basin include sandwich-type shale oil reservoirs (STSOR) and laminated-type shale oil reservoirs (LTSOR) (Fig. 23(a)) (Gong et al., 2023). They are primarily characterized by inorganic intercrystalline pores and dissolved pores, with STSOR also developing microfractures. The free oil content in STSOR is higher than the adsorbed oil content, while in LTSOR, the free oil content is similar to the adsorbed oil content. STSOR contains more free oil, and its storage capacity is significantly better than that of LTSOR. Liang et al. (2022a) found that hydrocarbons in lacustrine shale reservoirs exist in a free state within dissolved pores, recrystallized intercrystalline pores, and various fractures, while they are present in an adsorbed state within organic pores, pyrite intercrystalline pores, and flocculation pores (Fig. 23(b)). When R_o 0.5%, hydrocarbons are in an adsorbed state within OM. As R_o continues to increase, more hydrocarbons are expelled into adjacent recrystallized intercrystalline pores and structural fractures in a free state. The remaining hydrocarbons are adsorbed onto the surfaces of organic pores and mineral particles (R_o 1.3%), while also existing in a free state within fractures (Fig. 23(b)).

The differential occurrence of crude oil in the Chang 7_3 submember of laminated shale is characterized by the following features (Fig. 23(c)) (Niu et al., 2025): (1) In the organic-rich laminated shale, hydrocarbon generation-induced fractures and bedding fractures are the main occurrence space for lighter components. (2) In the rigid laminae (sandy laminae, tuffaceous laminae, and mixed laminae), abundant interparticle pores, dissolution pores, bedding fractures, hydrocarbon generation-induced fractures, and microfractures serve as the primary spaces for the migration and accumulation of shale oil. (3) Heavy oil in various types of laminated formations is primarily adsorbed onto OM or the surfaces of dissolution pores. (4) The spatial superposition of different laminae and the combination patterns of multi-scale pores and fractures jointly determine the degree of oil enrichment between laminae. When the maturity of the Kongdian Formation shale reservoir in Bohai Bay Basin is low (Fig. 23(d)–I), the content of adsorbed oil is higher than that of free oil (Ma et al., 2024a). As thermal maturity increases, the amount of light oil increases, while the amount of heavy hydrocarbons decreases. This promotes the migration of oil into the larger pores of the mineral matrix (Fig. 23(d)–II).

7. Occurrence mechanisms guide development practices

A deeper understanding of the occurrence mechanisms of shale oil can guide field development and improve resource utilization efficiency. The guidance provided by the shale oil occurrence mechanisms primarily manifests in resource assessment, drilling site selection, completion design, and development strategies. The

Fig. 22. Shale oil occurrence model in pure shale reservoirs (modified from Fan et al., 2023; He et al., 2025c; Li et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023a).

occurrence state of shale oil directly affects its recoverability and resource potential. Niu et al. (2025) used a multi-solvent stepwise continuous extraction method combined with weighing to calculate the free, transitional, and adsorbed shale oil content from over 80 shale cores taken from more than 20 wells in the Chang 7_3 sub-member of the Ordos Basin. In non-laminated shale, shale oil is primarily distributed in microfractures, with a content ranging from 1.084 mg/g to 8.759 mg/g, and the free state accounts

Fig. 23. Shale oil occurrence model in laminated shale reservoirs (modified from (Gong et al., 2023; Liang et al., 2022a; Ma et al., 2024a; Niu et al., 2025)).

for 29%. In sandy laminated shale, shale oil (which is relatively lighter) is predominantly found in dissolution pores, with a content ranging from 2.958 mg/g to 17.654 mg/g, and the free state accounts for 42%. In tuffaceous laminated shale, shale oil is primarily distributed in hydrocarbon generation-induced fractures and bedding fractures, with a content ranging from 5.008 mg/g to 16.211 mg/g, and the free state accounts for 35%. In organic-rich laminated shale, shale oil mainly occurs in the interlayer fractures of clay minerals and a small number of dissolution pores. The shale oil content ranges from 3.527 mg/g to 12.536 mg/g, with the free state accounting for 17%. The micro-nano pore fractures in rigid laminated shales, such as sandy and tuffaceous laminae, provide advantageous storage space for light oil. In contrast, the oil quality in organic-rich laminated shales is relatively heavier.

It is evident that sandy and tuffaceous laminated shales have significant development potential and should be prioritized for development. For the non-laminated shales and tuffaceous laminated shales, where the storage space is primarily fractures, development strategies should focus on enhancing the conductivity of these fractures. Additionally, hydraulic fracturing is also necessary to connect natural fractures and create a complex fracture network. Fu et al. (2023) found that the Qingshankou Formation in the Songliao Basin is characterized by the development of high-density faults. The presence of numerous fractures near faults promotes the accumulation and mobility of shale oil. Therefore, drilling within the fault system should be prioritized, as it can increase shale oil recovery and reduce development costs.

8. Challenges and recommendations

According to our review, existing studies seem to have addressed all issues related to the occurrence mechanisms of shale oil in laminated shale reservoirs. However, there are still some challenges in reality. There are multiple schemes for the classification of shale laminae, and there is no consensus on classification standards and focal points. Currently, there are various methods for studying the states of oil in shale pores, but each individual method has inherent limitations, making precise characterization difficult. The oil content in different types of laminae, especially the content, location, and LLPS in various states within the laminae, remains to be explored. The micro-scale migration of oil between laminae through the kerogen, inorganic pore, and microfractures should not be overlooked. It remains to be investigated whether there exists a micro-migration and enrichment pattern between adjacent shale laminae.

In response to the challenges mentioned above, it is recommended to strengthen theoretical research in the following areas: (1) Establish classification standards for millimeter-scale laminae. The scheme proposed by Hua (2023), which classifies millimeter-scale laminae based on X-ray diffraction fluorescence spectroscopy and key elements, can be referenced. (2) In the quantitative characterization of the states of shale oil, it is important to combine multiple methods, particularly utilizing 2D NMR technology. (3) The distribution and migration of shale oil between different laminae can be studied from both experimental and simulation perspectives. High-resolution techniques such as SEM,

CT, and NMR can be used to accurately characterize the pore structure, connectivity, and oil distribution characteristics of laminae. On the basis of understanding the occurrence of shale oil, further studies on the migration of shale oil between different laminae can be conducted using online NMR core flooding experiments and microfluidic chip experiments. In particular, the combination of two-dimensional NMR T_1–T_2, NMR interface scanning, and NMR imaging techniques represents the most promising approach for studying fluid crossflow between laminae. Finally, based on experimental parameters and findings, a multi-scale, multi-physics numerical simulation model can be established to simulate the mechanisms of fluid migration between laminae.

9. Conclusions

1) The main deposition mechanisms of laminae include biological processes, chemical processes, biogeochemical processes, and mechanical processes. The formation of laminae are influenced by paleoclimate and paleogeography. The classification schemes for shale laminae have not been standardized. In major shale oil-bearing basins in China, such as the Bohai Bay, Songliao, Ordos, and Junggar basins, the classification methods primarily focus on lamina composition.
2) There are many quantitative evaluation methods for the oil content and mobility of shale. At present, two-dimensional NMR combined with other methods has become the main characterization approach. The main pore size range for shale oil occurrence varies, generally from a few nanometers to several hundred nanometers. The lower limit of pore size for free oil and movable oil in laminated shale reservoirs is significantly greater than that in pure shale.
3) The discrepancies in the occurrence space of different laminated shale reservoirs are primarily controlled by mineral composition, sedimentary structure, and diagenesis. In high-pressure subsurface formations, bedding fractures are generally closed or semi-closed. They may become open under specific conditions, including hydrocarbon generation-induced overpressure, abnormally high pore pressure, tectonic activities, magmatic activities, dissolution of fracture-filling materials, and hydraulic fracturing.
4) The main factors influencing shale oil occurrence include organic matter, inorganic minerals, burial depth, pore size, temperature, fluid components, shale wettability and formation water. Pure shales and organic-rich laminated shales mainly accumulate adsorbed oil within organic matter nanopores, exhibiting high hydrocarbon generation potential. In contrast, rigid laminated shales tend to accumulate free oil in intergranular mineral pores and fractures, demonstrating greater development potential.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Qian Sang: Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. **Xue-Qiang Guo:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Ming-Zhe Dong:** Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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