

Graphene oxide induced pH alteration, iron overload and subsequent oxidative damage in rice (*Oryza. sativa* L.)

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Contaminants in Aquatic and Terrestrial Environments

Graphene Oxide Induced pH Alteration, Iron Overload and Subsequent Oxidative Damage in Rice (*Oryza. sativa* L.): A New Mechanism of Nanomaterial Phytotoxicity

Peng Zhang, Zhiling Guo, Wenhe Luo, Fazel Abdolahpur Monikh, Changjian Xie, Eugenia Valsami-Jones, Iseult Lynch, and Zhiyong Zhang

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1 **Graphene Oxide Induced pH Alteration, Iron Overload and Subsequent**
2 **Oxidative Damage in Rice (*Oryza. sativa* L.): A New Mechanism of**
3 **Nanomaterial Phytotoxicity**

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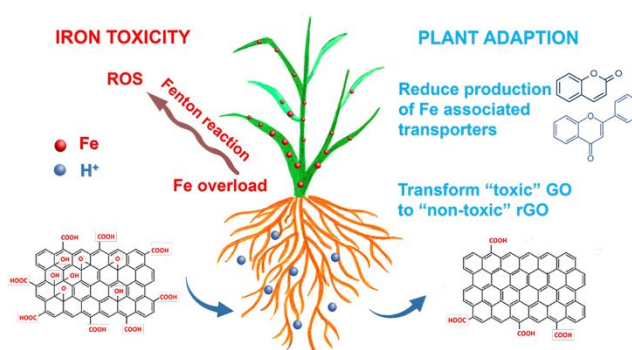
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23

24 ABSTRACT

25 The mechanism of graphene-based nanomaterial (GBM) induced phytotoxicity and its
26 association with the GBM physicochemical properties are not yet fully understood. The present
27 study compared the effects of graphene oxide (GO) and reduced GO(rGO) on rice seedling
28 growth under hydroponic condition for 3 weeks. GO at 100 and 250 mg/L reduced shoot
29 biomass (by 25% and 34%, respectively) and shoot elongation (by 17% and 43%, respectively),
30 and caused oxidative damage, while rGO exhibited no overt effect except for the enhancement
31 of the antioxidant enzyme activities, suggesting that surface oxygen content is a critical factor
32 affecting the biological impacts of GBMs. GO treatments (100 mg/L and 250 mg/L) enhanced
33 the iron (Fe) translocation and caused excessive Fe accumulation in shoots (2.2 and 3.6 times
34 higher than control), which was found to be the main reason for the oxidative damage in shoots.
35 GO-induced acidification of the nutrient solution was the main driver for the Fe overload in
36 plants. In addition to the antioxidant regulators, the plants triggered other pathways to defend
37 against the Fe toxicity, *via* downregulation of the Fe transport associated metabolites (mainly
38 coumarins and flavonoids). Plant root exudates facilitated the reduction of toxic GO to non-toxic
39 rGO, acting as another route for plant adaption to GO induced phytotoxicity. This study provides
40 new insights into the mechanism of the phytotoxicity of GBMs. It also provides implications for
41 agricultural application of GBM that the impacts of GBMs on the uptake of multiple nutrients in
42 plants should be assessed simultaneously and reduced forms of GBMs are preferential to avoid
43 toxicity.

44 TABLE OF CONTENTS



45
46
47

48 INTRODUCTION

49 Graphene is a two-dimensional carbon-based nanomaterial composed of a single layer of sp^2
50 hybridized carbon atoms.¹ It is considered one of the most promising engineered nanomaterials
51 (ENM) with the potential to be used in various sectors such as electronics, medical, energy and
52 environment,²⁻⁴ due to its unique electronic, thermal and mechanical properties. The increasing
53 production and use of graphene-based materials (GBMs) will inevitably increase the likelihood
54 of their release into the environment, and thus their potential adverse impacts on
55 environmental and human safety need to be fully assessed.⁵

56 There have been extensive studies regarding the toxicity of GBMs on cells and
57 microorganisms,^{6,7} while knowledge of the potential impacts of GBMs on the growth of higher
58 plants is still lacking. There is concern that GBMs may affect plant growth and /or accumulate
59 in crops or vegetables,⁸ causing potential risks to human health. Recent studies showed that
60 GBMs have the potential to be used as a carrier for fertilizers to enable slow release of the
61 nutrients and thus enhance the nutrient use efficiency by plants;⁹⁻¹¹ however, such applications
62 in real agriculture are not currently pursued partially due to the concerns over the potential
63 adverse impacts of GBMs on the overall agricultural ecosystem, including soil functioning (e.g.,
64 bacterial community, enzyme activity),¹²⁻¹⁴ the potential trophic transfer of GBMs¹⁵ and
65 cumulative effects of GBMs after repeated application and over multiple growing seasons.

66 Overt toxicity of GBMs to plant such as inhibition of biomass production, shoot or root
67 elongation have been reported at high exposure concentrations.^{16, 17} However, a number of
68 studies also reported that GBMs induced physiological alterations (e.g., hormone levels,
69 nutrient uptake)^{17, 18} or oxidative stress (e.g., enhanced antioxidant enzymatic activities, lipid
70 peroxidation, or H_2O_2 over-accumulation)^{16, 19} even at environmentally relevant concentrations
71 (0.01~1mg/L),²⁰ suggesting that subtle physiological processes are more sensitive indices than
72 apparent toxicity indices (e.g., biomass, root/shoot length) for evaluating the phytotoxicity of
73 GBMs.²¹ In addition to the negative effects, positive effects resulting from exposure to GBMs on
74 plant growth are also reported. For example, hydrated graphene ribbons promoted the
75 germination of wheat seeds, upregulated carbohydrate, amino acids and fatty acids metabolism

76 during the germination and enhanced the tolerance of seeds to oxidative stress.²² Due to the
77 hydrophilic nature of GO, it can act as a water transporter to promote the seed germination.²³

78 There are several reasons that may contribute to the inconsistent reports regarding the
79 phytotoxicity of GBMs. Firstly, phytotoxicity of ENMs are species-dependent,²⁴ cross-species
80 comparison is not always suitable. Secondly, using different culture media such as soil,²³ agar²⁵
81 and hydroponic solutions¹⁹ which have different compositions, can affect the behaviour, fate
82 and toxicity of the GBMs. GBM in soil and agar media usually have low mobility and accessibility
83 to plants, thereby lowering their impacts on plant growth found in such media when compared
84 with those observed in hydroponic media. However, this might be not always true. For example,
85 CeO₂ ENMs were reported to be more toxic to *Lactuca* plants in agar medium than in water,
86 which is due to that *Lactuca* plants are more sensitive in agar than in water to the toxicity of
87 Ce³⁺ ions released from CeO₂ ENMs.²⁶ Lastly, the physicochemical properties of the GBMs used
88 in the previous studies are very diverse and are not fully described in many cases. In reviewing
89 the studies on the effects of GBMs on higher plants (Table S1), more than half of the papers
90 considered did not provide sufficient characterization data including lateral size, thickness and
91 surface oxygen content, which are critical characteristics determining the biological effects of
92 GBMs.⁵ Where provided, the given properties were very varied: the lateral size used in these
93 studies ranged from 30 nm to 6.5 μm, the layer thickness ranged from 0.3 nm to 3.5 nm, and the
94 surface oxygen contents ranged from 3.51% to 38.8%. Clearly, more studies are required to
95 provide sufficient data for cross comparison and elucidating the mechanism(s) of action of
96 GBMs, and to determine the ranges of GBMs' properties that can be used safely to enhance plant
97 growth and /or soil quality and nutrient cycling.

98 Common forms of graphene, including graphene (G), graphene oxide (GO) and reduced
99 graphene oxide (rGO), are distinct in their surface oxygen contents. GO is the oxidized form of
100 graphene, which contains abundant functional groups including carboxyl, hydroxyl, epoxy, and
101 carbonyl groups.²⁷ These functional groups endow GO with high water dispersity and can be
102 used for further functionalization of GO for different applications.³ Previous studies have
103 suggested that GO and rGO have distinct antibacterial activities,²⁸ which is attributed to the

104 different modes of interaction of GO and rGO with cell membranes. We hypothesize that
105 comparing the phytotoxicity of GO and rGO, which is yet to be studied, will allow acquisition of
106 a mechanistic understanding of the actions of GBMs in plants. To do so, we investigated the
107 impacts of GO and rGO on the growth of rice plants. Oxidative stress, perturbation of the uptake
108 of macro- and micro- elements in plants, metabolic alteration and the transformation of GO and
109 rGO in rice plants were compared to explore the mechanisms of the interaction of GO and rGO
110 with plants and their consequences for plant health.

111

112 **2. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

113 **2.1. Chemicals and Seeds**

114 GO and rGO were purchased from Chengdu Organic Chemicals Co. Ltd (Chengdu, China).
115 Morphology, lateral size, height, chemical structure, Zeta potential and hydrodynamic sizes of
116 GO and rGO were characterized, details of which are described in the Supporting Information
117 (Section 1). All other commercial chemicals were purchased from Sinopharm Chemical Reagent
118 Co., Ltd (Shanghai, China). Rice (*Oryza. sativa* L.) seeds were purchased from the Chinese
119 Academy of Agricultural Sciences.

120 **2.2. Plant Culture and Exposure**

121 Rice seeds were germinated in the dark for 5 days after sterilization with 10% NaClO . Uniform
122 seedlings were then selected and each seedling was anchored by a plastic foam with a hole and
123 transferred into a 250 mL beaker containing 100 mL of modified 1/4 strength Hoagland
124 solution. All the beakers were wrapped with black plastic bags to simulate the dark
125 environment in soil. Six replicates were set for each treatment. The seedlings were allowed to
126 grow in a growth chamber (PRX-450C, Saifu, China) with a day/night temperature of 28 °C /20
127 °C, day/night humidity of 50%/70% and a 14 h photoperiod for 10 days before treatment. GO
128 and rGO were then added into freshly prepared nutrient solution to obtain suspensions with
129 concentrations of 5, 50, 100 and 250 mg/L followed by ultrasonic pre-treatment for 10 min.
130 The seedlings were then exposed to the GO and rGO suspensions and allowed to grow for three

131 weeks. The suspensions were replenished to 100 mL with fresh nutrient solution every two
132 days.

133 **2.3. Biomass Production, Seedling Length and Nutrient Content**

134 After three weeks of exposure to the GBMs, rice seedlings were gently lifted from the
135 suspensions, and the roots were rinsed with deionized water repeatedly. GO and rGO that were
136 attached to the roots were rinsed off with deionized water for further analysis. Residual GO and
137 rGO in the beakers were also collected for characterization. The roots and shoots were
138 separated and blotted with clean tissues, and the fresh weights were measured immediately.
139 The seedlings were then lyophilized, and the dry weights of the roots and shoots were
140 measured. To quantify the nutrient content (Fe, Cu, Mn, Zn, K, Ca, Mg, P) in plants, dried roots
141 and shoots were ground into fine powders and digested with a 3:1 mixture of HNO₃ and H₂O₂
142 on a heating plate (80°C for 1 h, 120 °C for 3 h, and 160 °C for 0.5 h). Elemental concentrations
143 in the digestion solution were then analyzed by inductively coupled plasma optical emission
144 spectroscopy (ICP-OES, Thermo, USA). Multi-element standard solutions (0.5~50 mg/L)
145 containing all the selected elements were used for external calibration. Blanks were analysed
146 between every six samples. Spiking recovery experiments and analysis of certified reference
147 material (GBW 07602 Bush Branches and Leaves) were performed for analytical method
148 validation. Recoveries and detection limits for all the elements are reported in Table S2.

149 **2.4. Stress Response of Rice to GO and rGO**

150 Fresh roots and shoots were excised, homogenized with cold PBS (50 mM, pH 7.8), and
151 centrifuged at 10,000 g and 4 °C for 10 min. The supernatants were collected for analyses of
152 superoxide dismutase (SOD) and peroxidase (POD) activities and malondialdehyde (MDA)
153 content using assay kits purchased from Nanjing Jiancheng Bioengineering Institute (Nanjing,
154 China). Reactive oxygen species (ROS) accumulation in roots and leaves was examined by a
155 DCFH-DA staining method. Fresh leaves and roots were excised and incubated in DCFH-DA (10
156 mM in PBS) for 2 h followed by rinsing with PBS three times. ROS accumulation was imaged on
157 a fluorescence microscope (Olympus IX70) with an ex/em of 485nm/522nm. QA/QC for the
158 assays are described in Section 1, SI.

159 **2.5. Characterization of GO and rGO After Interaction with Plants**

160 After harvesting of the plants, GO and rGO that were attached to the root surface were washed
161 off from the roots using ddH₂O (named "GO-W and rGO-W) and collected by centrifugation
162 (10,000 g, 30 min). The pellets were then rinsed with hydrochloric acid and ethanol repeatedly
163 to remove salts and organic components.²⁹ The obtained pellets were then freeze-dried for
164 analysis. The residual solutions in the beaker after removal of the plants were also collected
165 and rinsed by the same procedure described above. GO and rGO incubated in nutrient solution
166 for three weeks without the presence of plants were also collected for comparison. All the
167 materials described above (washed and residual) were analyzed by Raman (Horiba Scientific,
168 Japan), FTIR (Bruker Tensor 27 spectrometer, Germany), UV-vis spectroscopy (Purkinje
169 General, Beijing), and XPS (ESCALAB 250Xi, Thermo Scientific, USA). To analyze the GO and rGO
170 on the root surface *in situ*, fresh root apices were freeze-dried and analysed on a Raman
171 spectrometer (Horiba Scientific, Japan). Fresh root apices were also excised, fixed and
172 sectioned for TEM observation (see details in the Supporting Information).

173 **2.6. Xylem Sap Collection and Fe concentration Analysis**

174 Rice seedlings were exposed to GO and rGO for 3 weeks as per the exposure procedure in
175 section 2.2 and then cut off at 2 cm above the root-shoot interface. The cut surface of the shoot
176 was cleaned with DI water and then a silicon tube was fit to the stump (Fig. S1). The xylem sap
177 was collected after 24 h with a pipette and digested in HNO₃ (70%). Iron concentrations in the
178 xylem saps were analysed by ICP-OES (Thermo, USA).

179 **2.7. Metabolomics analysis of rice leaves**

180 The fresh rice leaves were thoroughly rinsed with ddH₂O after harvest and ground into powder
181 in liquid nitrogen. For each sample, 100 mg powder was transferred to a 1.5 mL Eppendorf tube
182 and mixed with 2 mL methanol by vortexing vigorously. Samples were ultrasonicated for 1 hour
183 min at 4°C and dried under a stream of N₂. Then, 500 µL of cold methanol was added to each
184 sample. The samples were mixed by vigorous vortexing followed by centrifugation at 12,000
185 rpm for 10 min at 4°C. A 300 µL aliquot of supernatant was then transferred into a glass

186 sampling vial for analysis. Samples were then analysed by liquid chromatography-tandem MS
187 (LC-MS/MS). Details of the measurement and data analysis are described in the Supporting
188 Information.

189 **2.8. Data processing**

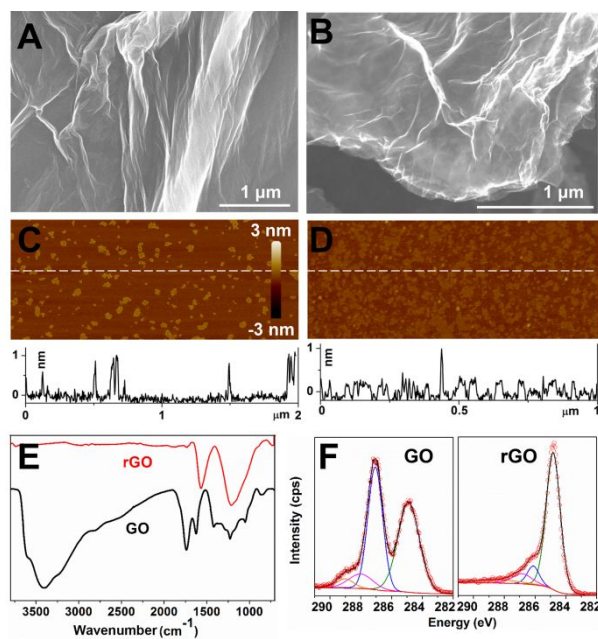
190 All statistical data were presented as means \pm standard deviation. Statistical analysis was
191 performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 19. One way ANOVA with a Tukey's test was applied after
192 testing the data for normality and homoscedasticity, to analyse whether there were significant
193 differences for the data of biomass, root length, stress response, and elemental concentrations
194 between exposure conditions. $P < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

195

196 **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

197 **3.1. Characterization of GO and rGO**

198 SEM images show the morphology of GO and rGO sheets (Fig. 1A and 1B). The average sizes of
199 GO ($0.089 \pm 0.023 \mu\text{m}$) and rGO ($0.078 \pm 0.034 \mu\text{m}$) are not significantly different (Fig. 1C and
200 1D). The size distributions are shown in Fig. S2. AFM height profiles show that GO and rGO
201 sheets have a thickness of 0.78 ± 0.26 and 0.44 ± 0.23 nm, respectively. FTIR spectra confirm
202 that GO has a significantly higher amount of oxygen-containing groups (O-H group at 3400 cm^{-1} ,
203 C=O group at 1726 cm^{-1} , C-O group at 1416 and 1052 cm^{-1}) than rGO. XPS survey analysis shows
204 34.6% and 7.8% of atomic oxygen in GO and rGO, respectively (Fig. S3). Peak fitting analysis of
205 high-resolution XPS spectra suggests that the amount of oxygen containing groups in GO and
206 rGO are 61% and 23%, respectively. DLS analysis suggests that rGO shows a positive charge in
207 both water and nutrient solution, while GO is negatively charged (Table S3). The hydrodynamic
208 diameters of GO and rGO were larger in nutrient solution (1398 ± 347 nm and 1599 ± 368 nm)
209 than in deionized water (1194 ± 123 nm and 865 ± 98 nm), indicating agglomeration of GO and
210 rGO in nutrient solution, and the sizes of GO and rGO in nutrient solution were similar. The high
211 salinity of the nutrient solution contributed to the compression of the double electric layer on
212 the surface of nanomaterials and subsequent aggregation.³⁰



213

214 **Fig. 1.** Characterization of GO and rGO. SEM images of GO (A) and rGO (B); AFM images and
 215 height profiles of GO (C) and rGO (D); FTIR spectra of GO and rGO (E); XPS spectra of GO and
 216 rGO (F).

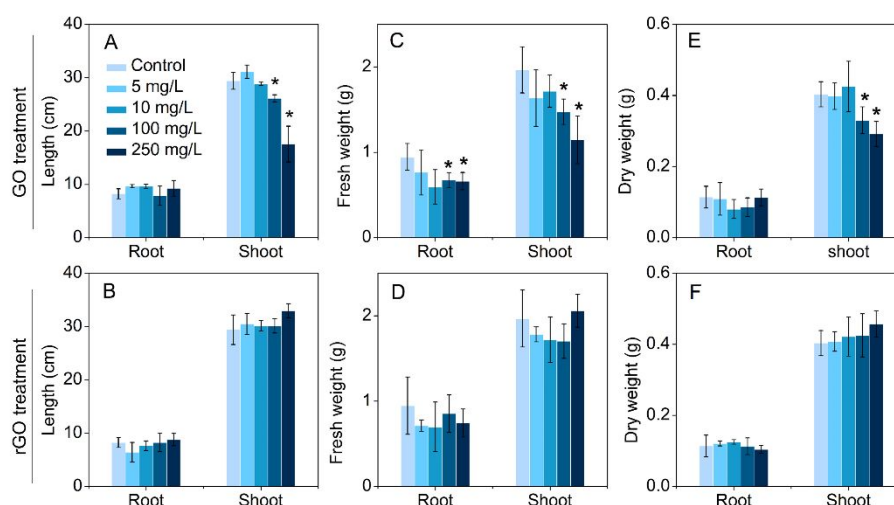
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218 3.2. GO and rGO showed distinct effects on rice seedling growth

219 As shown in Fig. 2, GO and rGO showed distinct impacts on the seedling growth of rice plants.
 220 GO showed no effect on root elongation after three weeks of dosing, but significantly reduced
 221 the shoot length by 11% at 100 mg/L and by 40% at 250 mg/L (Fig. 2A). GO at 100 mg/L and
 222 250 mg/L also reduced the fresh biomass of both roots and shoots (Fig. 2C), and the dry weight
 223 of shoots at 100 mg/L and 250 mg/L (Fig. 2E). In contrast, rGO showed no effect on seedling
 224 elongation and biomass production at all concentrations (Fig. 2B, 2D and 2F).

225 Since the lateral size and hydrodynamic size of GO and rGO are not significantly different,
 226 they are not related to the different toxicity between GO and rGO. The thicknesses of GO and
 227 rGO are slightly different. It has been reported that increasing the thickness would decrease the
 228 sharpness of the edge thus weakening the “nanoknife” effect,³¹ that is, GO with a bigger
 229 thickness should show lower effects on plant growths than rGO. However, our result is the

230 opposite, suggesting that thickness is also not a determining factor. These indicate that
 231 phytotoxicity of GBMs is mainly dependent on their surface oxygen content.



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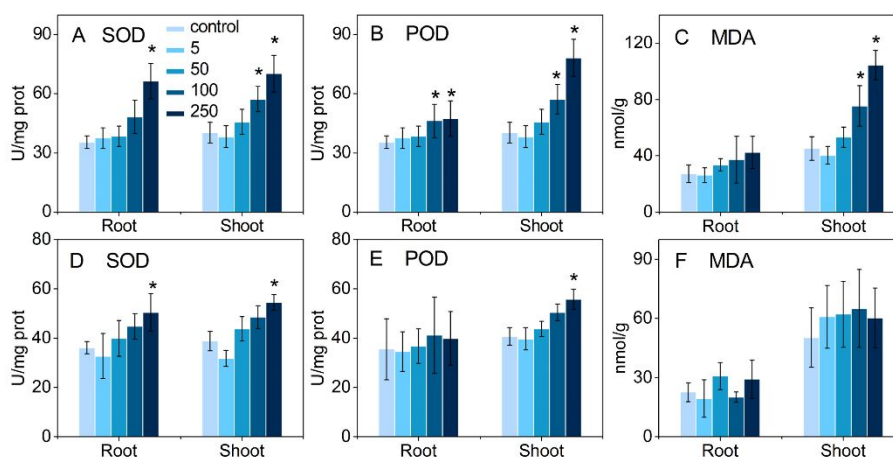
233 **Fig. 2.** Seedling lengths (A and B), fresh weights (C and D), and dry weights (E and F) of rice
 234 seedlings after exposure to different concentrations of GO and rGO for 3 weeks. Top row shows
 235 GO treatments, bottom row shows rGO treatments. * indicates a significant difference compared
 236 with control at $P < 0.05$.

237

238 3.3. Oxidative stress responses induced by GO and rGO

239 To further explore the underlying mechanisms of the different responses of rice seedlings and
 240 plants to GO and rGO, we examined the oxidative stress responses of rice seedlings to GO and
 241 rGO exposure (Fig. 3). The activities of antioxidant enzymes including SOD (Fig. 3A) and POD
 242 (Fig. 3B) in shoots following GO treatment were significantly enhanced at 100 mg/L and 250
 243 mg/L whilst the MDA contents in shoots increased by 37% and 70% (Fig. 3C), respectively. No
 244 obvious changes of SOD, POD and MDA were observed in roots. In rGO treatments, SOD and
 245 POD activity only increased at the highest exposure concentration (250 mg/L) (Fig. 3D and 3E),
 246 and there was no alteration of MDA content in either roots or shoots (Fig. 3F). Significant
 247 overproduction of ROS was found in shoots with GO treatment while no obvious change was
 248 found with rGO treatment (Fig. S4). The enhanced activities of antioxidant enzymes represents
 249 a defence mechanism of plants against ambient stress. Both GO and rGO triggered the stress

250 response of plants, with the enzymatic antioxidant system failing to protect the plants against
 251 the GO exposure, with the evidence showing that ROS and MDA over accumulated in GO-
 252 exposed plants. Notably, the most overt over accumulation of MDA and ROS in response to GO
 253 treatment was found in shoots rather than roots. A similar phenomenon was also reported with
 254 maize plants where leaves were more sensitive than roots to the oxidative stress induced by
 255 sulfonated graphene;³² the MDA content in roots was increased only by the highest GO
 256 concentration (500 mg/L) while that in leaves was enhanced by GO concentrations ranging
 257 from 100 ~ 500 mg/L. The underlying mechanism was explored in the following studies.



258

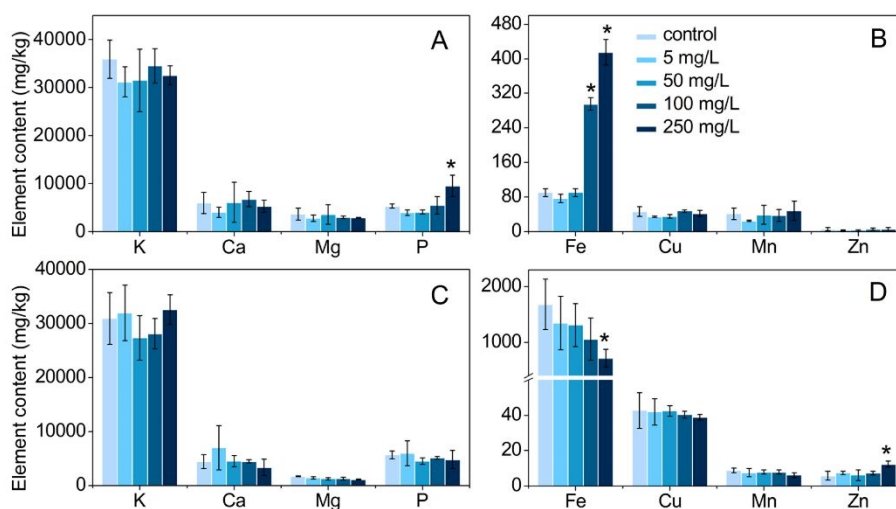
259 **Fig. 3.** SOD (A and D) and POD (B and E) activities, and MDA (C and F) contents in rice after
 260 exposure to GO and rGO for 3 weeks. Top row: GO treatments, bottom row: rGO treatments. *
 261 indicates significant difference compared with control at $P < 0.05$.

262

263 3.4. Alteration of the uptake of macro- and micro- elements in plants

264 To further examine the impact of GO and rGO on plant growth, we measured the uptake of
 265 several key nutrients that are essential for plant growth. rGO decreased the Cu level in plant
 266 tissues at 50 mg/L but showed no effects on the level of other elements (Fig. S5); however, GO
 267 induced alteration of the levels of several elements including P and Fe in shoots and Fe and Zn
 268 in roots (Fig. 4). Surprisingly, the Fe level in shoot (415 mg/kg) treated with 250 mg/L of GO
 269 was enhanced by 3.6 times as compared with that in the control plants (90 mg/kg). Rice plants
 270 usually maintain 60~300 mg/kg of Fe; when the Fe content exceeds 400 mg/kg the plant will

271 experience toxicity due to Fe overload.³³ The excessive Fe is translocated upwards and
272 accumulated in leaves, impairing the physiological processes of plants by generating ROS via
273 the Haber-Weiss or Fenton reactions.³⁴ In our study, the total Fe content in the GO-exposed
274 plants was not significantly changed (Fig. S6A); however, the translocation of Fe from root to
275 shoot was greatly enhanced (Fig. S6B). The Fe level in shoots was increased up to 415 mg/kg
276 by the 250 mg/L GO treatment, which is correlated with the over accumulation of ROS and
277 altered antioxidant enzymatic activities in plant leaves. These results suggested that GO
278 induced Fe overload and consequent oxidative stress in leaves is one possible mechanism
279 causing the phytotoxicity observed. The increased P level (Fig. 4A) was unlikely to be the driver
280 of the toxicity because the highest P level in the shoot (9.5 mg/g) was still below the
281 concentration (>13 mg/g) at which P may become toxic to gramineous plants.³⁵ Additionally,
282 the toxicity in shoots occurred at 100 mg/L when there is no change of P levels, suggesting that
283 P was not necessary for the occurrence of the toxicity.



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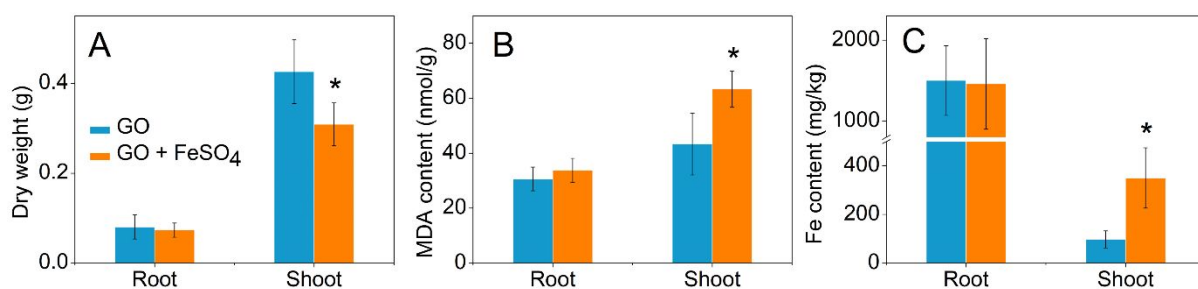
285 **Fig. 4.** Macronutrient and micronutrient contents in shoots (A and B) and roots (C and D) of
286 plants after exposure to different concentrations of GO for 3 weeks. * indicates significant
287 difference compared with control at $P < 0.05$.

288

289 **3.5. Iron overload contributes more than GO *per se* to the GO induced phytotoxicity**

290 Since both GO *per se* and Fe overload may induce oxidative stress in plants, a follow-up question
 291 is to understand the contributions of GO and Fe overload to the induced oxidative stress and
 292 phytotoxicity. In our study, the oxidative stress, lipid peroxidation and overt phytotoxicity
 293 (reduction of biomass and seedling length) were found for leaves rather than roots; this pattern
 294 is similar with that found in Fe overloaded plants rather than graphene or other ENM treated
 295 plants. For example, it was reported that excessive FeSO₄ treatment enhanced the MDA content
 296 in rice leaves by 134% while having no effect on the MDA levels in roots.³⁶ While for ENMs, the
 297 roots are usually more sensitive than the leaves to ENM-induced toxicity, which might be due
 298 to the fact that most of the ENMs are adsorbed onto the root surface while the upward
 299 translocation of ENMs is limited.³⁷

300 Therefore, we deduced that excessive Fe uptake might be the main contributor to the toxicity
 301 found in this study rather than GO *per se*. To prove this hypothesis, we added an excessive
 302 amount of Fe (4 mM FeSO₄) to the 50 mg/L GO suspension and examined the rice seedlings
 303 growth. As compared with GO treatment alone, the dry weight of leaves was reduced by 27%
 304 (Fig. 5A) and the MDA content in leaves was upregulated by 46% (Fig. 5B) after exposure to
 305 GO+FeSO₄, which are correlated with a significantly enhanced Fe level in leaves (Fig. 5C). These
 306 results suggest that Fe overload contributed more than GO *per se* to the oxidative stress and
 307 subsequent toxicity in rice plants, although the effects of GO and rGO cannot be simply ignored
 308 since GO and rGO *per se* may generate ROS.³⁸



310 **Fig. 5.** Dry weight (A), MDA content (B) and Fe content (C) in rice plants after exposure to GO
 311 (50 mg/L) and a mixture of GO (50 mg/L) and FeSO₄ (4 mM) for 3 weeks. * indicates significant
 312 difference compared with GO treatment at P < 0.05.

313

314 **3.6. Mechanisms involved in the overload of Fe in leaves**

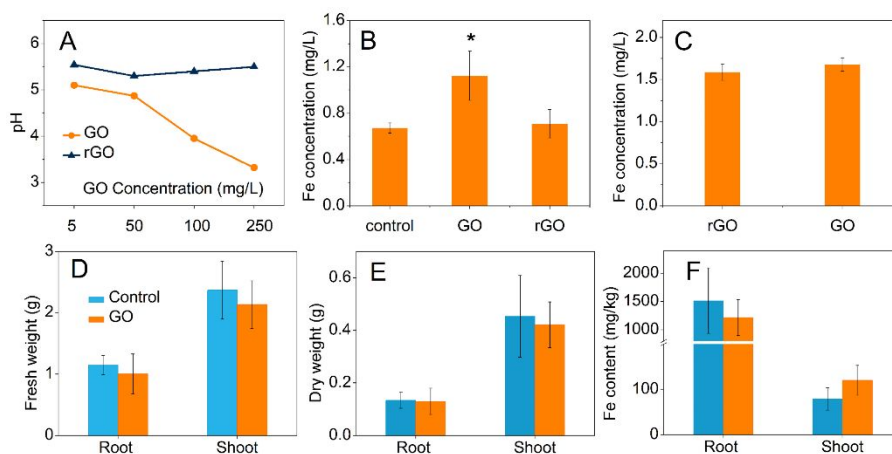
315 Under anaerobic conditions, e.g. in paddy fields, Fe usually exists in the form of Fe^{2+} which is
316 bioavailable for plant uptake. To avoid over accumulation of Fe, rice roots can release oxygen
317 and oxidase to oxidize the Fe^{2+} to Fe^{3+} , which precipitates to form a coating on the roots named
318 “Fe plaque”.³³ The Fe plaque can prevent not only the uptake of excessive Fe^{2+} but also the entry
319 of toxic heavy metals into plants. However, a decrease of pH can significantly promote the
320 reduction of insoluble Fe^{3+} to Fe^{2+} that eventually leads to Fe toxicity, which affects a significant
321 proportion of rice fields in many developing countries.³³

322 The pH mediated Fe uptake not only applies for plants cultured in soil but also applies for
323 hydroponic culture. It was also reported that low pH can significantly promote Fe^{2+} uptake by
324 plants.³⁹ We found that GO acidified the nutrient solution while rGO didn't change the pH
325 significantly (Fig. 6A). The pH of the GO suspensions decreased with increasing GO
326 concentration. The pH values for 100 mg/L and 250 mg/L of GO in NS are 3.95 and 3.32,
327 respectively, which are much lower than that of the normal NS (pH 5.5). The low pH itself was
328 unlikely the main reason for the toxicity based on two reasons: 1) Rice is relatively tolerant of
329 acidic conditions. Previous studies showed that rice can grow normally at pHs as low as 3.4, but
330 the growth can be greatly impaired if Fe contents in the soil increased.⁴⁰ 2) Impairment of the
331 root growth should be also observed if pH was the reason for the toxicity. However in our study
332 only the growth of shoots was impaired. Therefore, the low pH itself is not the main driver of
333 the toxicity. Instead, the GO induced decrease of pH can increase Fe mobilization and cause the
334 observed Fe overload in the shoots.³⁹ Fig. 6B further showed that the Fe content flux in the
335 xylem sap was significantly enhanced by GO treatment.

336 Considering the high capacity for absorption of GBMs which results from their high surface
337 area, we further examined another possibility, which is that GO may enrich Fe on their surface
338 by adsorption and then translocate to the leaves which may enhance the Fe uptake. To do so,
339 we compared the adsorption of Fe on GO and rGO (see method in Section 1, SI). The amount of
340 Fe adsorbed onto GO and rGO was 1.22 mg/L and 1.31 mg/L (Fig. 6C), respectively, which was
341 nearly half of the Fe present in the nutrient solution (2.9 mg/L). We then estimated the amount

342 of Fe that can be translocated with the GO and rGO to the shoots (see method for estimation of
 343 uptake in Section 1, SI). Only 0.098 mg/kg of Fe can be attributed to transport into the plants
 344 *via* adsorption onto the GO or rGO. This is negligible compared with the total amount of Fe that
 345 was accumulated in the leaves (325 mg/kg), suggesting that the contribution of this mechanism
 346 to Fe overload is negligible.

347 When the pH of the GO suspension was adjusted back to normal pH (5.5) (see details of
 348 methods in SI), the phytotoxicity was eliminated (Fig. 6D and 6E) and the Fe content in shoots
 349 was normal (Fig. 6F). These results provide solid evidence that Fe overload is the main cause
 350 of the GO induced toxicity.



351

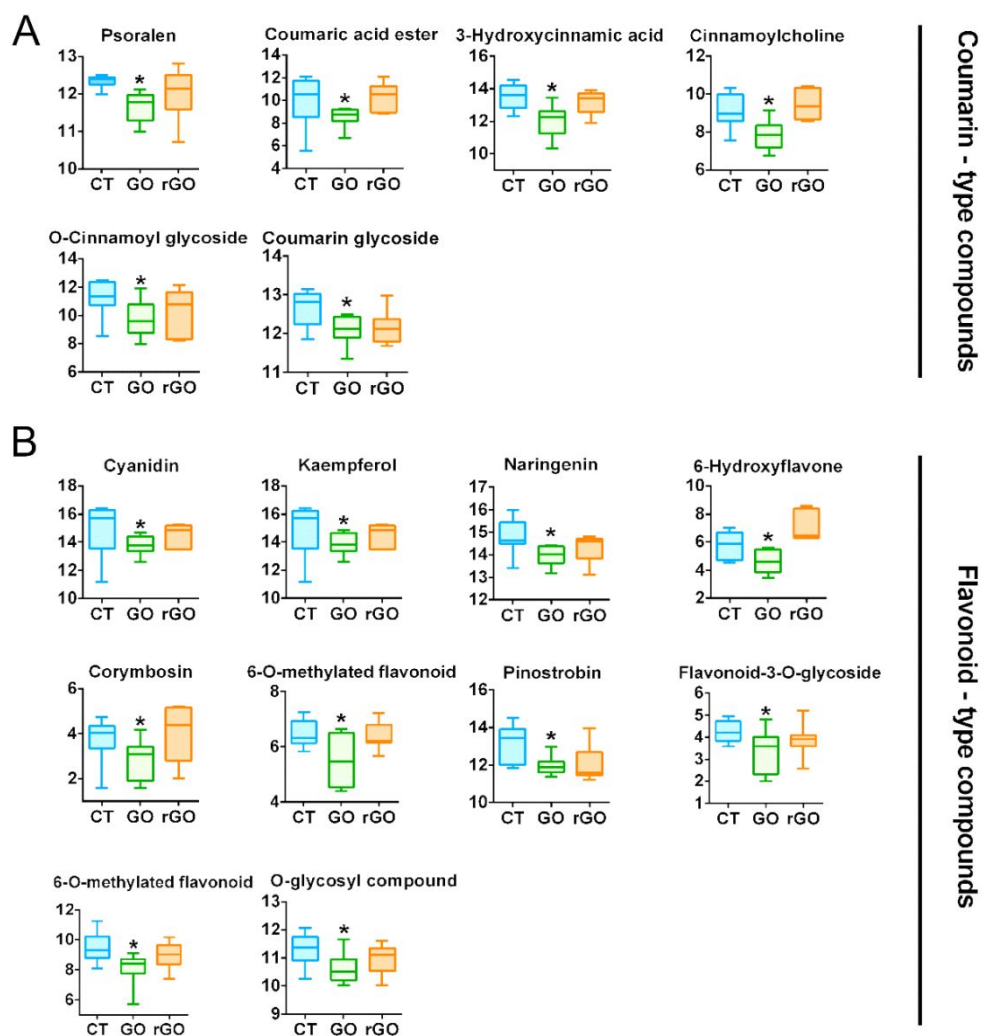
352 **Fig. 6.** pH values of GO and rGO suspensions in nutrient solution (A), the free Fe concentration
 353 in collected xylem saps (B), and the free Fe concentration in nutrient solution after incubation
 354 with GO and rGO (C) from a starting concentration of 2.9 mg/L. Fresh weight (D) and dry weight
 355 (E) of plant and Fe content (F) in plant after exposure to pH adjusted GO suspension (250 mg/L,
 356 pH 5.5) for 3 weeks. * indicates significant difference compared with control at $P < 0.05$.

357

358 3.7. Plant defence against Fe overload via reduced production of Fe transport associated 359 metabolites

360 In our study, we found depressed production or excretion of iron-mobilizing coumarin-type
 361 compounds and iron-chelating flavonoid-type compounds (Fig. 7) in the leaves of GO treated
 362 plants, which may act as an important component of the iron depletion strategy in response to

363 Fe overload. Coumarin-derived phenolics or their corresponding glycosides were all
364 dramatically depressed in the GO treated plants. For example, psoralen, a linear
365 furanocoumarin, was decreased by 36% (Fig. 7A). The coumaric acid ester, 3-hydroxycinnamic
366 acid, and cinnamoylcholine (a cinnamic acid ester), which are intermediates in the coumarin
367 biosynthetic pathway, were significantly decreased by 78%, 62%, and 60%, respectively. The
368 glycosides, such as coumarin glycoside (4-methylumbelliferyl glucuronide) and cinnamoyl
369 glycoside, were also significantly decreased. In addition, an array of flavonoid-derived
370 compounds, including flavonoids (e.g. flavanones, flavones, flavonols, anthocyanidin), the
371 methylated derivatives, and their glycosides were all downregulated in the GO exposed plants
372 (Fig. 7B). For example, the concentrations of cyanidin (a type of anthocyanidin), kaempferol (a
373 natural flavonol), naringenin (a flavanone), 6-hydroxyflavone (a flavone), and corymbosin (a
374 flavone), were depressed by 70%, 66%, 48%, 56% and 44%, respectively. The decrement for
375 other flavonoid derivatives ranged from 41% to 65%. These data suggest that regulatory
376 mechanisms at the metabolic level were evoked in leaves in order to sustain the iron
377 homeostasis in response to GO-induced Fe overload.



378

379 **Fig. 7.** Box plots of relative abundance of coumarin-type compounds (A) and flavonoid-type
 380 compounds (B) in the leaves of rice treated with 250 mg/L GO and rGO compared to the
 381 untreated controls (n=8). * indicates significant difference compared with control.

382

383 3.8. Biotransformation of GO as a pathway to alleviate GO-induced phytotoxicity

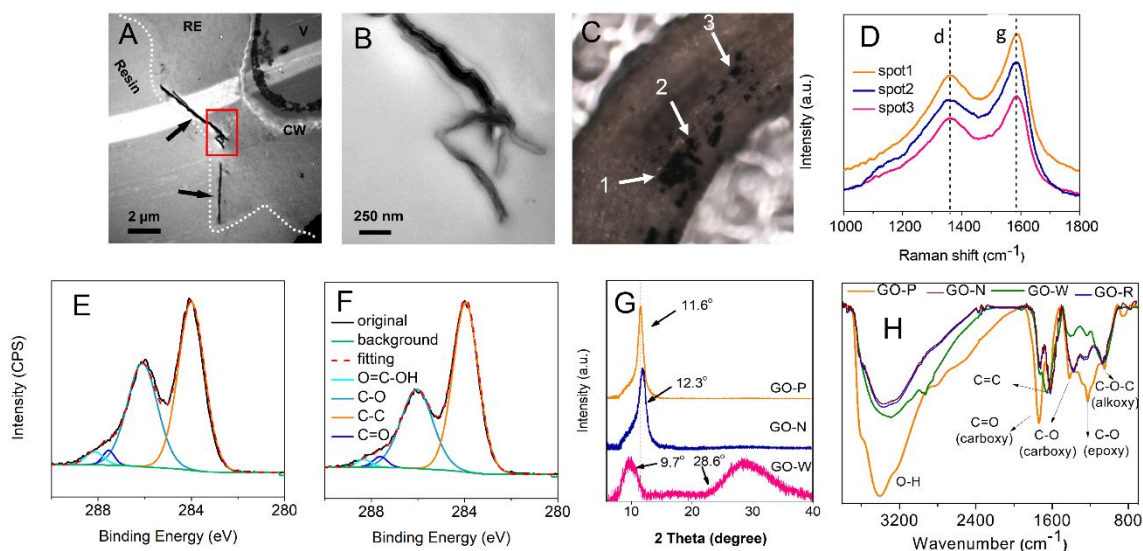
384 ENMs may transform by interaction with plants, the process of which may determine their
 385 subsequent behaviour, fate and toxicity in plants. CeO₂ ENMs are reported to be transformed in
 386 many plant species,^{41, 42} being reduced and releasing Ce³⁺, which is found to be responsible for
 387 the toxicity of CeO₂ ENMs to *Lactuca* plants.⁴² The released Ce³⁺ can bind with phosphates,
 388 which could be a detoxification process.^{43, 44} Transformation of graphene materials has been
 389 reported in bacteria,²⁸ plants⁴⁵ and in water under sunlight.⁴⁶ Free radicals (OH•) were

390 reported to be involved in the transformation of graphene into CO₂ in plant leaves, the process
391 of which contributed to the elimination of graphene from plants following uptake and may thus
392 reduce graphene induced phytotoxicity.⁴⁵ Immobilization of root exudates onto GO and
393 formation of ligand-GO complexes were also reported, which decreased the surface charge and
394 increased the unpaired electrons and the toxicity of the GO to zebrafish.⁴⁷

395 We found that GO adsorbed onto the root surface, with a significant change of morphology
396 from sheet to a folded shape (Fig. 8A and 8B). A root exudate (RE) layer between the GO and
397 the root epidermis cells can be observed, which might act as a barrier to prevent the GO from
398 entering the roots. Adsorption of GO onto the root surface was also clearly visible under the
399 Raman microscope (Fig. 8C). The Id/Ig ratios (0.715-0.783) of the Raman spectra, collected
400 from three spots on the roots (Figure 8D), were significantly lower than that of pristine GO
401 (0.98, Fig. S7, Table S4), suggesting that roots enhanced the disorder in the structure of GO.⁴⁷
402 The O/C ratios of GO decreased significantly after interaction with plants (Fig. 8E and 8F, Table
403 S4), suggesting the partial transformation of GO into rGO. GO-W (which were washed from the
404 root surface) showed a higher reduction degree (O/C, 0.31) than GO-R (O/C, 0.4), suggesting
405 that direct contact with the plant roots accelerated the reduction of GO. XRD analysis further
406 confirmed the transformation of GO into rGO (Fig. 8G). Incubation in nutrient solution (GO-N)
407 only induced a slight shift of the (002) peak of GO from 11.6° to 12.3°, suggesting no alteration
408 of the crystal structure but a decrease of the lattice spacing. However, interaction of GO with
409 roots (GO-W) not only induced a shift of the (002) peak to 9.7° but also led to the formation of
410 a new peak at 28.6° which is attributed to the (002) peak of rGO, suggesting the reduction of
411 GO.⁴⁸ In agreement with the XPS and XRD results, FTIR showed that GO-W was reduced to a
412 higher degree than GO-R, suggesting that contact of GO with plant roots facilitated the
413 transformation of GO to rGO (Fig. 8H). The transformation of “toxic” GO into a relatively low-
414 toxic “rGO” might act as a pathway to alleviate the toxicity of GO. The potential role of root-
415 associated microbes in the transformation process remains to be explored.

416 Adsorption of rGO onto the root surface was also observed by TEM (Fig. S9). FTIR spectra
417 (Fig. S10) showed increased intensity of surface oxygen content after interaction with plant

418 roots (rGO-W), suggesting partial oxidation of rGO. However, XRD analysis showed that the
 419 main peak (002) of rGO has not shifted (Fig. S11), suggesting no changes to the crystal structure.
 420 The increased surface oxygen content observed by FTIR might be due to the adsorption of
 421 organic compounds from root exudates.



422

423 **Fig. 8.** Characterization of GO after interaction with plants for 3 weeks. (A and B) TEM images
 424 of root sections; B is the magnified image of the rectangle area shown in A. RE indicates the root
 425 exudate, CW indicates the cell wall. (C) Optical image of roots. (D) Raman spectra collected at
 426 the three spots shown in C; d and g indicate the d band at 1363 cm^{-1} and g band at 1593 cm^{-1} ,
 427 respectively. The intensity ratios of d to g, i.e. I_d/I_g ratios, were 0.715 (spot 1), 0.723 (spot 2)
 428 and 0.783 (spot 3), respectively. (E) XPS spectra of GO-R (GO in residual NS after removal of
 429 plants). (F) Raman spectra of GO-W (GO washed off from roots). (G) XRD spectra of GO-P
 430 (pristine GO), GO-N (GO incubated in nutrient solution for 3 weeks) and GO-W. (H) FTIR spectra
 431 of GO-P, GO-N, GO-W and GO-R.

432

433 The present study reports for the first time a new mechanism of ENM induced phytotoxicity,
 434 i.e. GO induced pH alteration of nutrient solution and subsequent Fe over accumulation and
 435 oxidative damage in plant leaves. Some previous studies have suggested that ENMs can disturb
 436 the macro and micro element distribution in plants, however, a clear interpretation of these
 437 findings are lacking. The present study indicates that ENMs may cause toxicity to plants

438 indirectly by altering the micronutrient uptake. The apparently different impact of GO and rGO
439 on plant growth suggests that the phytotoxicity of GBMs is highly related to their surface oxygen
440 content. The inconsistent use of GO or rGO with different surface oxygen densities might be one
441 of the reasons that explain the inconsistency in current literature. It should be noted that this
442 is a short term study carried out in hydroponic condition. Effects of GBMs on plant in realistic
443 soil environment over longer exposure time might be different and the mechanisms involved
444 will be complicated by the soil components, which requires further studies.

445

446 **ASSOCIATED CONTENT**

447 The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications website. It
448 includes additional experimental details and results.

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456 **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

457 The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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