

## DOCTORAL THESIS

### The effects of mariculture on mercury distribution, speciation and transformation in the aquatic system around Hong Kong coastlines

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**The Effects of Mariculture on Mercury Distribution,  
Speciation and Transformation in the Aquatic System  
around Hong Kong Coastlines**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

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## Abstract

The objectives of this study were to investigate the influence of mariculture on mercury (Hg) distribution, speciation, transformation, adsorption/desorption and chemical fractionations of Hg on sediments around Hong Kong and adjacent mainland China coastlines. In addition, the influences of salinity and humic acid on inorganic mercury ( $\text{Hg}^{2+}$ ) adsorption by different iron (Fe) and manganese (Mn) oxides were evaluated. At last, the possible human risk on methylmercury (MeHg) exposure through consumption of Hg contained in cultured fish was assessed.

Sediments were collected from six mariculture sites, and the corresponding reference sites, 200 - 300 m away from the mariculture sites. Total Hg (THg) concentrations, organic matter (OM), carbon, nitrogen and sulfur contents in mariculture sediments (MS) were significantly higher ( $p < 0.05$ ) than reference sediments (RS), possibly due to the accumulation of unconsumed fish feed and fish metabolisms. However, MeHg concentrations and the ratio of MeHg to THg (%MeHg) were significantly lower ( $p < 0.05$ ) in MS than RS. The %MeHg in sediments was negatively correlated ( $r = -0.579$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) with OM contents among all sites, indicating that the accumulation of OM may inhibit MeHg production in sediments. This is due to the complexation of Hg with OM in MS reduced Hg bioavailability to methylation bacteria, further leading to the decline of MeHg production in sediment.

The simulation experiments demonstrated that the higher the  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  concentrations spiked in the sediment, the more MeHg was produced in sediment. This can be explained by the link between THg concentration in sediment and Hg bioavailability for methylation bacteria. MeHg levels in water and sediments decreased with time during the sediment culture period, which might be due to the decrease of methylation of  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  or demethylation of MeHg in sediment and water. The decreasing percentages of MeHg were decreased with the increase of spiked  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  concentration in sediment, which might be due to the *mer*-specific

function was inhibited by the high Hg concentration. The increase of salinity in the overlying water inhibited MeHg production in sediment and porewater, due to sea salt anions, such as  $\text{Cl}^-$ ,  $\text{S}^{2-}$ ,  $\text{CO}_3^{2-}$ , which inhibited Hg methylation by complexing with  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  to form inorganic complex compounds, e.g.,  $\text{HgCl}_2$ ,  $\text{HgS}$  and  $\text{HgCO}_3$ . Significantly higher ( $p < 0.05$ ) fluxes of THg and MeHg in MS than RS indicated that newly added  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  and newly formed MeHg were easier to be evaporated in MS than RS.

The amount of adsorption and binding energy of  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  were significantly higher ( $p < 0.05$ ) on MS than RS. This may be explained by the strong complexation role that exists between  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  and OM, which can be derived from unconsumed fish feed and fish metabolites. The amount of  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  binding with Fe and Mn hydroxides in MS was significantly lower ( $p < 0.01$ ) than in RS, which may have been caused by the decreasing amount of Fe and Mn hydroxide in MS, leading to the decrease of  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  bound to them. On the contrary, the amount of residual  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  was significantly higher ( $p < 0.01$ ) in MS than in RS, which suggests that newly adsorbed  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  was more stable in MS than in RS.

The adsorption of  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  on Fe and Mn hydroxides in the marine system was significantly lower ( $p < 0.01$ ) than the freshwater system, possibly due to the strong complexation between  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  and  $\text{Cl}^-$ . The formation of stable, nonsorbing aqueous  $\text{HgCl}_2$  complexes in solution would limit the amount of free  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  available for sorption. The adsorption of  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  on Fe and Mn hydroxides decreased with the increase of dissolved humic acid (DHA) concentrations in the freshwater system. The inhibition role of DHA on the adsorption of  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  to Fe and Mn hydroxides might be attributed to the competition role between  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  and DHA on adsorption to Fe and Mn hydroxides. In contrast, the adsorption of  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  on Fe and Mn hydroxides decreased with the increase of DHA concentrations in the marine system, which means that DHA promoted the adsorption of  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  on Fe and Mn hydroxides. This might be due to the addition of DHA resulted in the reaction between  $\text{Cl}^-$

and DHA. The reduction of  $\text{Cl}^-$  promoted more  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  to be adsorbed on the Fe and Mn hydroxides. As a result, the fish culture in the fresh water environment inhibited the adsorption of  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  on the Fe and Mn hydroxides, but promoted the adsorption of  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  on Fe and Mn hydroxides in the marine environment.

The fish consumption rate of the studied population was significantly correlated with THg and MeHg concentrations in human blood plasma, indicating that human blood plasma can serve as a biomarker for MeHg intake via fish consumption. The mean values of  $\text{EDI}_{\text{Fish}}$  and  $\text{EDI}_{\text{Blood}}$  were 0.47 and 0.39  $\mu\text{g}/\text{kg}/\text{week}$ , respectively. Both of them were lower than the Provisional Tolerable Weekly Intake level (PTWI) of 1.6  $\mu\text{g}/\text{kg}/\text{week}$  established by The Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA) and Reference Dose (RfD) of 0.7  $\mu\text{g}/\text{kg}/\text{week}$  established by USEPA. Based on RfD of 0.7  $\mu\text{g}/\text{kg}/\text{week}$  and a one-component biokinetic model, the potential human risk would be caused for Hong Kong residents when Hg concentration in blood exceeds 2.80  $\mu\text{g}/\text{L}$ . Thus, this study recommended a reference value of 2.8  $\mu\text{g}/\text{L}$  Hg concentration in whole blood for Hong Kong residents.

On the whole, the mariculture activities increased the accumulation of OM in sediments through the deposition of unconsumed fish feed and fish metabolisms, leading to higher accumulation and adsorption of Hg on sediment and metal hydroxides, but inhibit MeHg production in sediment. Through the consumption of mariculture fish, MeHg exposure for Hong Kong resident was lower than the PTWI of 1.6  $\mu\text{g}/\text{kg}/\text{week}$  established by JECFA and RfD of 0.7  $\mu\text{g}/\text{kg}/\text{week}$  established by USEPA.

## Table of Contents

Declaration.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	v
List of Tables .....	xii
List of Figures.....	xv
Abbreviation .....	xviii
CHAPTER 1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION .....	1
1.1 Research background.....	1
1.2 Characteristics of Hg.....	2
1.3 Hg biogeochemical cycling.....	3
1.3.1 Hg sources.....	3
1.3.2 Hg transport in air .....	4
1.3.3 Hg transform in aquatic system .....	6
1.3.3.1 Hg reduction and oxidation.....	6
1.3.3.2 Hg methylation and MeHg demethylation.....	7
1.3.4 Bioaccumulation and biomagnifications of Hg .....	10
1.4 Toxicity of Hg.....	10
1.4.1 Hg <sup>0</sup> .....	10
1.4.2 Hg <sup>2+</sup> .....	11
1.4.3 MeHg .....	11
1.5 Global aquaculture activities.....	12
1.5.1 Aquaculture in Hong Kong.....	14
1.5.2 Environment issues from aquaculture activities .....	14

1.6 Research objectives.....	15
1.7 Framework.....	16
CHAPTER 2 THE INFLUENCE OF MARICULTURE ON HG DISTRIBUTION IN SEDIMENTS AND FISH AROUND HONG KONG AND ADJACENT MAINLAND CHINA WATERS .....	
2.1 Introduction.....	18
2.2 Materials and methods .....	20
2.2.1 Study area.....	20
2.2.2 Sampling procedures.....	20
2.2.3 Sample analysis.....	24
2.2.3.1 Analysis of THg.....	24
2.2.3.2 Analysis of MeHg.....	24
2.2.4 Quality assurance of sample analysis .....	25
2.2.5 Data analyses .....	25
2.3 Results and discussion .....	27
2.3.1 Spatial and temporal distribution of Hg in sediments.....	27
2.3.1.1 Spatial distribution.....	27
2.3.1.2 Vertical distribution .....	32
2.3.2 Mariculture on Hg speciation.....	35
2.3.2.1 Mariculture increasing THg loading.....	35
2.3.2.2 Mariculture decreased MeHg production .....	35
2.3.3 Hg in cultured fish .....	40
2.3.3.1 Hg levels in tissues of cultured fish.....	40
2.3.3.2 Hg level in fish feed.....	42

2.3.3.3 Correlation between Hg levels and fish size.....	43
2.3.3.4 Do contaminated areas increase fish Hg levels?.....	43
2.4 Conclusions.....	45
CHAPTER 3 FORMATION AND TRANSPORTATION OF MEHG IN SEDIMENTS OF A MARICULTURE SITE: A MESOCOSM STUDY .....	46
3.1 Introduction.....	46
3.2 Materials and methods .....	47
3.2.1 Experimental setup.....	47
3.2.2 Sample collection.....	48
3.2.3 Analytical methods .....	50
3.2.4 QA/QC results.....	51
3.2.5 Data analyses .....	51
3.3 Result and discussion.....	51
3.3.1 Effect of THg concentration on Hg <sup>2+</sup> methylation .....	51
3.3.2 MeHg degradation in the culture period .....	54
3.3.3 OM on MeHg formation and degradation .....	63
3.3.4 The effect of salinity and temperature on net MeHg production.....	66
3.3.5 Flux of MeHg for mariculture activities .....	66
3.3.6 Sediment-water partitioning of Hg species.....	68
3.4 Conclusions.....	71
CHAPTER 4 THE EFFECTS OF MARINE AQUACULTURE ACTIVITIES ON THE ADSORPTION/DESORPTION AND CHEMICAL FRACTIONATIONS OF Hg <sup>2+</sup> ON SEDIMENTS .....	72
4. 1 Introduction.....	72
4. 2 Materials and method.....	73



4.2.1 Sediment samples.....	73
4.2.2 Adsorption/desorption experiments.....	74
4.2.3 BCR extraction procedure.....	74
4.2.4 Hg determination.....	75
4.3. Results and discussion.....	75
4.3.1 Properties of sediment.....	75
4.3.2 Adsorption/desorption of Hg <sup>2+</sup> on sediments.....	77
4.3.3 BCR extraction.....	84
4.4 Conclusions.....	92
CHAPTER 5 EFFECTS OF SALINITY AND HUMIC ACID ON THE SORPTION OF HG TO FE AND MN HYDROXIDES.....	93
5.1 Introduction.....	93
5.2 Materials and method.....	95
5.2.1 Preparation of Fe and Mn hydroxide.....	95
5.2.2 Adsorption experiment.....	95
5.2.3 Hg determination.....	96
5.3 Results and discussions.....	97
5.3.1 The characteristics of Fe and Mn hydroxides.....	97
5.3.2 Effects of salinity on Hg <sup>2+</sup> adsorption to different hydroxides.....	97
5.3.3 Effects of dissolved humic acid (DHA) on Hg <sup>2+</sup> adsorption.....	105
5.3.4 Differences among all hydroxides.....	113
5.4 Conclusions.....	114
CHAPTER 6 HEALTH RISK ASSESSMENT OF HG EXPOSURE FOR HONG KONG RESIDENTS: BLOOD HG LEVEL AND DIETARY HG INTAKE.....	115
6.1 Introduction.....	115

6.2 Materials and methods .....	117
6.2.1 Human blood samples.....	117
6.2.2 Analysis of Hg .....	117
6.2.3 Estimation of Hg species in whole blood and erythrocytes.....	118
6.2.4 Human MeHg exposure estimate.....	119
6.3 Results and discussions.....	120
6.3.1 Demographic characteristics.....	120
6.3.2 Human blood plasma Hg level in Hong Kong residents.....	122
6.3.3 Difference in gender and age .....	122
6.3.3.1 Human blood plasma Hg level in the two gender groups.....	122
6.3.3.2 Human blood plasma Hg level in age groups .....	125
6.3.4 Fish consumption on Hg species in blood plasma .....	128
6.3.5 Estimation of Hg species in erythrocytes and whole blood.....	130
6.3.6 Comparison of Hg species in different studies .....	132
6.3.7 Human MeHg exposure .....	134
6.3.7.1 Human MeHg exposure through fish consumption .....	134
6.3.7.2 Human MeHg exposure based on MeHg metabolism .....	141
6.4 Conclusions.....	145
CHAPTER 7 GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS .....	146
7.1 Introduction.....	146
7.2 Hg distribution in sediment and fish in mariculture zones .....	147
7.2.1 Hg distribution in sediment.....	147
7.2.2 Hg concentrations in fish and fish feeds .....	150
7.2.3 Do contaminated areas increase fish Hg levels?.....	151
7.3 MeHg formation and transportation in sediment.....	151

7.3.1 Effects of THg concentration on Hg <sup>2+</sup> methylation .....	151
7.3.2 MeHg degradation during the culture period .....	152
7.3.3 OM inhibited MeHg production in sediment .....	152
7.3.4 Environmental factors on MeHg production .....	153
7.3.5 Flux of MeHg for mariculture activities .....	153
7.4 Adsorption of Hg <sup>2+</sup> on sediment .....	155
7.4.1 Adsorption/desorption characteristics of Hg <sup>2+</sup> on sediment .....	155
7.4.2 BCR extraction .....	156
7.5 Effect of salinity and humic acid on Hg <sup>2+</sup> adsorption to Fe and Mn hydroxides .....	157
7.5.1 Effect of salinity on Hg <sup>2+</sup> adsorption to Fe and Mn hydroxides .....	157
7.5.2 Effects of DHA on Hg <sup>2+</sup> adsorption .....	158
7.6 Human risk assessment .....	159
7.6.1 Human blood plasma Hg level in Hong Kong residents .....	159
7.6.2 Fish consumption on Hg species in blood plasma .....	159
7.6.3 Human MeHg exposure .....	160
7.7 Conclusions .....	161
7.8 Limitations of this study .....	165
7.9 Future work .....	166
References .....	168
List of Publications .....	191
Curriculum Vitae .....	193