

## DOCTORAL THESIS

### Nitrogen conservation by struvite formation during composting process with food wastes

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## ABSTRACT

Food waste as a dominant fraction of municipal solid waste was in most of cases buried in landfills creating a burden on big cities with large populations such as Hong Kong. Composting provided an environmentally viable technology to divert food waste to resource utilization for the production of valuable organic fertilizer. The main problem associated with food waste composting was the intensive acidification prior the commencement of the composting process, which is commonly adjusted by the addition of alkaline materials such as lime. However, more than 50% of the initial nitrogen will be lost as ammonia, which not just reduces the nutrient value of the compost but also leads to serious odour generation. Therefore the objective of this study was to develop means to reduce the nitrogen loss through struvite formation.

The first experiment of this research investigated the feasibility of controlling the nitrogen loss through struvite formation during food waste composting. Struvite forms when magnesium (Mg), phosphorus (P) and nitrogen (N) salts exist in equimolar ratio at a slightly alkaline pH. Thus to fix the ammonia, MgO and  $K_2HPO_4$  were added to food waste indifferent molar ratios (P1, 0.05M/kg MgO and 0.05M/kg  $K_2HPO_4$ ; P2, 0.05M/kg MgO and 0.1M/kg  $K_2HPO_4$ ) to induce struvite formation that can fix the compost-borne ammonia during composting. The pH of the composting mass of P1 was below 5 for more than one. However, the pH of P2 was controlled in a narrow range from 6.8 to 8.7. This slightly alkaline pH ensured a good microbial activity and improved the degradation rate as well as the precipitation of struvite. In treatment P2, the formation of struvite effectively reduced the nitrogen loss from 40.8% to 23.3% when compared to treatment with lime amendment. However, electrical conductivity (EC) of the compost increased to 6.4 mS/cm due to the addition of Mg and P salts. High salinity of the compost retarded seed germination which required further investigation to reduce the salinity while maintaining good nitrogen removal.

To overcome this issue, lime as the more effective alkaline amendment, was supplemented in different concentrations along with struvite salts (to P1 treatment having less Mg salt that could reduce the salinity) to alleviate the low pH and struvite formation. The pH of the composting masses were effectively increased with increasing lime dosages and 2.25% lime was sufficient to maintain the pH in alkaline condition that significantly improved the degradation of active organic compounds resulting in increased dissolved organic carbon (DOC) and soluble organic nitrogen (SON) contents. With 2.25% lime and struvite salts, ammonia emission was significantly reduced from 44.3 to 27.4% through struvite formation compared with lime alone treatment. Furthermore, the EC were also decreased from 5.21 to 3.40 mS/cm when lime amendment rate increased from 0.75% to 3%. However, the ammonia emission increased with an increase in lime dosage.

Interfering ions such as calcium and potassium were reported to affect the struvite formation and pH control. Therefore, in the subsequent experiment, the influence of different types of P salts was investigated to reduce the salinity as well as N loss. When  $K_2HPO_4$ ,  $Na_2HPO_4$  and  $H_3PO_4$  were used as the supplementary P salts, there were no significant differences on nitrogen conservation. In addition, the results indicated that  $K^+$  and  $Na^+$  were attached on the surface of struvite rather than constituted the crystal structure. Compared with other P salts, the presence of  $K^+$  in  $K_2HPO_4$  also made a contribution to total nutrient content that benefited the final product. When CaO was gradually

substituted with MgO as pH amendment, ammonia emission was significantly reduced implying that  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  ions would influence the struvite formation, either by competing for phosphate ions or by interfering with the crystallization. However, this negative effect could be ignored when the  $\text{Ca}^{2+}/\text{Mg}^{2+}$  ratio was below 1:2. Considering the cost of MgO, supplementation of  $\text{Ca}^{2+}/\text{Mg}^{2+}$  ratio at 1:2 (0.15M CaO and 0.3M MgO) with 0.05M  $\text{K}_2\text{HPO}_4$  was identified as the optimum conditions (Treatment M0.3) that effectively reduced the nitrogen loss to 28% in contrast to 46% with lime addition.

The significant reduction of ammonia emission through struvite formation was observed with the optimum condition that the odour unit (OU) of ammonia emission was reduced to  $1.8 \times 10^4$  when compared with lime treatment ( $3.0 \times 10^4$ ) indicating a significant reduction of  $\text{OI}_{\text{MAX}}$  (maximum odour index). Meanwhile, the well-controlled pH of this technology ensured the effective decomposition of organic matter that significantly reduced the emission of volatile fatty acids (VFAs) also. The population of total bacteria was also improved due to the addition of phosphate salts.

The total nutrient content of struvite composts of treatment with optimum condition (M0.3) was 4.14% (1.5% N, 0.44% P and 2.2% K) that was higher than normal lime treated compost 2.92% (1.3% N, 0.34% P and 1.28% K). In pot experiment, soil was amended with composts at 0, 2.5%, 5% or 10% (w/w dry wt. basis). At the same application rate, the biomass yields of Chinese cabbage and cherry tomato plants were improved by struvite compost when compared tonormal compost. Considering the increasing salinity of soil with high application rate, the optimum dosage of 5% struvite compost is recommended.

To conclude, a food waste composting technology was developed to achieve good nitrogen conservation and decomposition that alleviated odour issue and produced compost with higher nutrient contents, which increased its application value.

## Table of Contents

DECLARATION.....	I
ABSTRACT.....	1
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	IV
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	V
LIST OF TABLES.....	X
LIST OF FIGURES.....	XIII
ABBREVIATIONS.....	XX
CHAPTER ONE .....	1
INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES.....	1
1.1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND OUTLINE OF THE PRESENT STUDY.....	5
1.3. OUTLINE OF THESIS .....	7
CHAPTER TWO .....	10
LITERATURE REVIEW .....	10
2.1. PRINCIPLE OF COMPOSTING .....	10
2.2. FOOD WASTE COMPOSTING.....	12
2.3. THE PRINCIPLE OF NITROGEN TRANSFORMATION AND AMMONIUM OXIDIZING MICROORGANISMS .....	17
2.3.1. The way and the principle of nitrogen transformation.....	17
2.3.2. Ammonia oxidizing microorganisms .....	20
2.3.3. Influencing factor of nitrogen loss.....	26
2.4. STRUVITE .....	31
2.4.1. Application of struvite formation to removal nitrogen in waste water system .....	37
2.4.2. Control nitrogen loss by struvite formation during composting.....	40
CHAPTER THREE.....	45
MATERIALS AND METHODS.....	45

3.1. COMPOSTING REACTOR .....	45
3.2. CHARACTERISTICS OF FOOD WASTE .....	46
3.3. ANALYTICAL METHODS .....	49
3.3.1. Physico-chemical Analyses .....	49
3.3.2. Microbiological methodology .....	51
CHAPTER FOUR.....	54
NITROGEN CONSERVATION AND ACIDITY CONTROL DURING FOOD WASTES COMPOSTING THROUGH STRUVITE FORMATION .....	54
4.1. INTRODUCTION .....	54
4.2. MATERIALS AND METHODS .....	56
4.2.1. Composting and feedstock materials .....	57
4.2.2. Experimental methods.....	57
4.2.3. Data analysis.....	59
4.3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.....	59
4.3.1. Temperature and carbon dioxide evolution .....	59
4.3.2. pH and electrical conductivity .....	61
4.3.3. Nitrogen dynamics during composting process.....	64
4.3.4. Struvite identification.....	65
4.3.5. Compost maturity.....	69
4.4. CONCLUSIONS .....	73
CHAPTER FIVE.....	74
INFLUENCE OF LIME DOSAGES ON FOOD WASTE COMPOSTING PROCESS AND NITROGEN CONSERVATION BY STRUVITE FORMATION.....	74
5.1. INTRODUCTION .....	74
5.2. MATERIALS AND METHODS.....	76
5.2.1. Food waste and treatment.....	76
5.2.2. Composting and analytical methods .....	76
5.2.3. Data analysis.....	78
5.3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.....	78
5.3.1. Temperature and CO <sub>2</sub> evolution .....	78
5.3.2. pH and electrical conductivity .....	81
5.3.3. Ammonia emission during composting.....	83

5.3.4. Maturity evaluation.....	86
5.4. CONCLUSIONS .....	94
CHAPTER SIX.....	95
NITROGEN CONSERVATION THROUGH STRUVITE FORMATION DURING FOOD WASTE COMPOSTING: INFLUENCE OF DIFFERENT PHOSPHORUS SOURCES .....	95
6.1. INTRODUCTION .....	95
6.2. MATERIALS AND METHODS .....	98
6.2.1. Experimental setup and materials .....	99
6.2.2. Experimental methods and analytical methods .....	99
6.2.3. Data analysis.....	100
6.3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.....	100
6.3.1. Temperature and carbon dioxide evolution .....	100
6.3.2. pH and electrical conductivity .....	103
6.3.3. Maturity evaluation.....	105
6.3.4. Nitrogen dynamics during composting .....	105
6.3.5. Struvite identification.....	111
6.4. CONCLUSIONS .....	114
CHAPTER SEVEN.....	115
ENHANCE NITROGEN CONSERVATION EFFICIENCY OF STRUVITE DURING FOOD WASTE COMPOSTING WITH MGO SUBSTITUTE CAO AS PH AMENDMENT.....	115
7.1. INTRODUCTION .....	115
7.2. MATERIALS AND METHODS.....	118
7.2.1. Food waste and treatment.....	118
7.2.2. Experimental and analytical methods .....	119
7.2.3. Data analysis.....	120
7.3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.....	120
7.3.1. pH and electrical conductivity .....	121
7.3.2. Temperature and carbon dioxide evolution .....	123
7.3.3. Ammonia emission and nitrogen dynamic changes during composting process .....	127

7.3.4. Nitrogen balance .....	135
7.3.5. Germination index .....	136
7.4. CONCLUSION .....	137
CHAPTER EIGHT.....	139
MICROBIAL COMMUNITY SUCCESSION AND ODOUR EMISSION DURING FOOD WASTE COMPOSTING COUPLING STRUVITE PRECIPITATION .....	139
8.1. INTRODUCTION .....	139
8.2. MATERIALS AND METHODS.....	140
8.2.1. Test conditions and requirements.....	140
8.2.2. Food waste composting coupling struvite precipitation and monitoring	141
8.3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION .....	143
8.3.1. Temperature and pH changes during composting.....	144
8.3.2. Odour emission during food waste composting incorporated struvite precipitation.....	145
8.3.3. NOx emission during composting incorporated struvite .....	151
8.3.4. Microbial diversity analysis through Denaturing Gradient Gel Electrophoresis (DGGE).....	154
8.3.5. Redundancy analyses .....	157
8.4. CONCLUSIONS .....	160
CHAPTER NINE.....	161
SOIL NUTRIENT TRANSFORMATION AND PLANT GROWTH UPON STRUVITE COMPOST AMENDMENT.....	161
9.1. INTRODUCTION .....	161
9.2. MATERIALS AND METHODS .....	163
9.2.1. Substrates preparation and characterization .....	163
9.2.2. Soil incubation study.....	164
9.2.3. Greenhouse experiment.....	165
9.2.4. Analytical methods.....	166
9.2.5. Data analysis.....	167
9.3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.....	167
9.3.1. Soil incubation study with lime and struvite compost amendments..	167

9.3.1.1. pH and EC of soil samples with compost amendment.....	167
9.3.1.2. Nutrient transformation in soil with compost amendment.....	170
9.3.1.3. Carbon mineralization in soil with compost amendments .....	174
9.3.2. Greenhouse experiment.....	176
9.3.2.1. Soil water properties in Chinese cabbage experiment. ....	176
9.3.2.2. Cabbage plant development.....	181
9.3.2.3. Soil properties changes over cherry tomato harvest .....	184
9.3.2.4. Cherry tomato plant development with compost amendments.....	187
9.4. CONCLUSIONS .....	190
CHAPTER TEN.....	191
SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS.....	191
10.1. INTRODUCTION .....	191
10.2. PHASE I (CHAPTER 4): STUDY FINDINGS AND MAJOR OUTCOMES .....	194
10.3. PHASE II (CHAPTER 5-7):STUDY FINDINGS AND MAJOR OUTCOMES.....	195
10.4. PHASE III (CHAPTER 8): STUDY FINDINGS AND MAJOR OUTCOMES .....	197
10.5. PHASE IV (CHAPTER 9): STUDY FINDINGS AND MAJOR OUTCOMES.....	199
10.6. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION .....	200
REFERENCES.....	202
PUBLICATIONS.....	235
CURRICULUM VITAE.....	236