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# ICP-MS/MS as a tool to study abiotic methylation of inorganic mercury reacting with VOCs

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## ABSTRACT

Methylmercury (CH<sub>3</sub>Hg) has been registered as one of the most widespread toxic contaminants. Although the formation of CH<sub>3</sub>Hg in aqueous environment has been widely investigated, little information was available on direct antropogenic or natural emissions of CH<sub>3</sub>Hg to the atmosphere. In this work, ICP-MS/MS was chosen as a tool for the first time to study abiotic methylation of inorganic mercury reacting with VOCs in gas environment. We found that the gaseous Hg<sup>+</sup> ions would be transformed to the more toxic species of CH<sub>3</sub>Hg<sup>+</sup> ions instantaneously when collided with some VOCs. Several VOCs, e.g. methyl iodide (CH<sub>3</sub>I), methylbenzene, acetic acid and ethyl acetate, exhibited good methylation of Hg<sup>+</sup> ions with productivities of 1.77%, 1.28%, 1.35% and 1.18%, respectively. Four isotope peaks of CH<sub>3</sub><sup>199</sup>Hg (M=214), CH<sub>3</sub><sup>200</sup>Hg (M=215), CH<sub>3</sub><sup>201</sup>Hg (M=216) and CH<sub>3</sub><sup>202</sup>Hg (M=217) were well identified when Hg<sup>+</sup> ions were collided with CH<sub>3</sub>I, and the methyl group in CH<sub>3</sub>Hg<sup>+</sup> had been validated by the source of CD<sub>3</sub>I, indicated that the CH<sub>3</sub>Hg<sup>+</sup> ions were formed. This study might reveal that the abiotic methylation of Hg<sup>+</sup> ions would potentially occur when contact with the VOCs in the atmosphere environment, leading to the secondary environment pollution.

## 1. Introduction

Mercury (Hg) compounds have long been of great public concern because of their adverse effect on wildlife and humans. It is well known that the toxicity of mercury compounds depends on their species, which include inorganic, methyl, ethyl and phenyl mercury. Among these compounds, methylmercury ( $\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}$ ) is the most toxic form in the environment. The lipophilic nature of  $\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}$  enhances its ability to be bioaccumulated in comparison with inorganic Hg, and results in enhanced biomagnification of  $\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}$  in the food chain.<sup>1</sup>

Methylmercury can be formed naturally by two general pathways in environment: microbial metabolism (biotic processes) and chemical methylation (abiotic processes). Biotic methylation was shown to be carried out by sulfate-reducing bacteria,<sup>2, 3</sup> iron-reducing bacteria,<sup>4</sup> or other microbes.<sup>5-8</sup> Abiotic methylation of inorganic mercury can occur only if suitable methyl donors exist in the environment. Abiotic formation of  $\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}$  in aquatic systems has been widely investigated by a variety of environmental factors such as humic substances,<sup>9</sup> fulvic acids,<sup>10</sup> dissolved organic matter (DOM),<sup>11</sup> acetic acid,<sup>12</sup> methylcobalt (III),<sup>13-15</sup> methyltin (IV) compounds<sup>15</sup> and methyl iodide,<sup>15, 16</sup> etc. However, little information was reported on the abiotic methylation of atmosphere mercury. Although  $\text{Hg}^0$  is the dominant mercury specie in the troposphere, the methylation productivity of  $\text{Hg}^0$  is low,<sup>17-19</sup> perhaps attributed to the low reaction activity of  $\text{Hg}^0$ . Nevertheless, the mercury ions with higher reaction activity also exist in the atmosphere,<sup>20,21</sup> with the ions content in the magnitude of  $\text{pg m}^{-3}$ ,<sup>22,23</sup> which are easily adsorbed on the surface of the fine particle matter or floating dust and following deposited to the ground. Munthe et al.<sup>24</sup> implied that atmospheric deposition can be an important source of  $\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}$  in terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. While in today's society, more and more VOCs were emitted to the atmosphere by automobile exhaust, petrochemical industry, coal combustion and so on, such as alkanes and benzene series with the contents in the magnitude of  $\mu\text{g m}^{-3}$ .<sup>25,26</sup> Whether the VOCs in the atmosphere contain methyl donor can be reacted with mercury ions to form the more poisonous  $\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}$  is of great significance to study.

1 In order to study the methylation reaction of mercury ions and VOCs in gas  
2 environment, we need to design a reactor to mix the gaseous mercury ions and gaseous  
3 VOCs together to generate a methylated reaction and then detect this product in time.  
4 Fortunately, an instrument called triple quadrupole ICP-MS/MS has been  
5 commercially available as the ideal reactor and detector. This configuration consists  
6 of a tandem mass spectrometer with an octopole reaction cell (ORS<sup>3</sup>) located  
7 in-between two quadrupole mass analyzers. When Hg<sup>2+</sup> standard solution was  
8 introduced to the ICP, the ions with m/z ratio different from the target nuclide of Hg<sup>+</sup>  
9 ions (e.g. m/z 202) were all removed by the first quadrupole mass analyzer (Q1). And  
10 then the gaseous <sup>202</sup>Hg<sup>+</sup> ions were entered into the ORS<sup>3</sup> mixed with the gaseous VOCs  
11 introduced from another inlet of the ORS<sup>3</sup>. After a controlled process of  
12 ion-molecules collision in the ORS<sup>3</sup>, the products were promptly collected by the  
13 second quadrupole mass analyzer (Q2) and following detected online.

14 In this work, we demonstrate at the first time that the ICP-MS/MS is a useful tool  
15 to study the abiotic methylation of inorganic mercury reacting with VOCs. We used  
16 four mercury isotopes (<sup>199</sup>Hg, <sup>200</sup>Hg, <sup>201</sup>Hg and <sup>202</sup>Hg) to examine the possible  
17 methylation of Hg<sup>+</sup> ions by CH<sub>3</sub>I in gas environment. CD<sub>3</sub>I was used to validate the  
18 source of the methyl group in CH<sub>3</sub>Hg<sup>+</sup>. The effects of experiment parameters on the  
19 methylation productivities of Hg<sup>+</sup> ions were also investigated. This study might reveal  
20 that the Hg<sup>+</sup> ions would be potentially transformed into more toxic species of CH<sub>3</sub>Hg<sup>+</sup>  
21 ions when contact with the VOCs in the atmosphere, leading to the secondary  
22 environment pollution.

## 23 **2. Experimental**

### 24 **2.1 Instrumentation**

25 The Agilent 8800 triple quadrupole ICP-MS/MS instrument (Agilent  
26 Technologies, Japan) was chosen to model this methylation reaction. Fig.1 showed  
27 the schematic diagram of the instrumental system and the procedure for the  
28 methylation of gaseous Hg<sup>+</sup> ion using VOCs. The helium (He) gas was used not only to  
29 accelerate the liquid VOCs reagent from the liquid phase vaporized to the gas phase,

1 but also to carry the gas phase VOCs to the third inlet of the ORS<sup>3</sup> through a  
2 T-junction gas mixing system. The liquid phase VOCs was stored in a 1 mL injector  
3 and pushed to the T-junction gas mixing system by a micro-injection pump (Pump 11  
4 Elite, Harvard) in a predetermined speed. The concentration of the VOCs was  
5 regulated according to the ratio of VOCs with He gas. The operational parameters of  
6 the instrument were shown in Table 1. In order to study the reactions between VOCs  
7 and Hg<sup>+</sup> ions, product ion scanning was used. In ICP-MS/MS, Q1 is set to the mass of  
8 the target nuclide itself and Q2 to that of the corresponding reaction product ion. For  
9 Hg, a ratio of m/z setting as 202 in Q1 is selected because this is the most abundant  
10 nuclide of Hg and m/z setting from 202 to 260 in Q2 are selected to identify the  
11 reaction products of Hg throughout this work, except mentioned specially.

## 12 **2.2 Reagents and Standards**

13 All chemicals used in this work were of analytical-reagent grade including CH<sub>3</sub>I,  
14 CD<sub>3</sub>I, ether, methylbenzene, acetaldehyde, acetic acid, hexane, methanol, ethyl acetate  
15 and acetone except of nitric acid with electronic grade. The stock standard solution of  
16 Hg<sup>2+</sup> was purchased from SPEX Certiprep (USA). Stock solutions of Hg<sup>2+</sup> was stored  
17 in pre-cleaned glass vials and kept at 4 °C. Working standard solution was prepared  
18 daily by stepwise dilution of the stock solutions with 1% (v/v) nitric acid.

19 The nature gas with the main component of methane (≥90%) was collected from  
20 the household nature gas pipeline with a 4 L gas collecting bag. Then part of the  
21 nature gas was transferred to a 50 mL injector and pushed manually to the T-junction  
22 gas mixing system with He as the carrier gas to investigate the possibility of abiotic  
23 methylation of Hg<sup>+</sup> ions by the methane.

## 24 **3 Results and discussion**

### 25 **3.1 Identification of CH<sub>3</sub>Hg<sup>+</sup> ions**

26 In order to identify the methylation reaction, four isotopic Hg<sup>+</sup> ions (<sup>199</sup>Hg, <sup>200</sup>Hg,  
27 <sup>201</sup>Hg and <sup>202</sup>Hg) were reacted with CH<sub>3</sub>I, a kind of VOC, which has been reported as  
28 a methylating reagent for inorganic Hg methylation in aqueous environment.<sup>15, 16</sup> The  
29 results of mass spectra of methylation of different Hg<sup>+</sup> isotope ions by CH<sub>3</sub>I were

1 shown in Fig.2. In Fig.2a-b, no methylation product was existed whether the CH<sub>3</sub>I or  
2 the Hg<sup>+</sup> ions was absent. While when the CH<sub>3</sub>I and Hg<sup>+</sup> ions were all existed in the  
3 ORS<sup>3</sup>, the peaks with the m/z of M+15 (199->214, 200->215, 201->216 and  
4 202->217) were all produced in the products of each Hg<sup>+</sup> isotope in Fig.2e-g and  
5 Fig.2c, indicated that a species of Hg-compound ion was produced with a 15 mass  
6 larger than Hg ion.

7 To further identify the species of Hg-compound was CH<sub>3</sub>Hg<sup>+</sup>, CD<sub>3</sub>I was used to  
8 validate it with the same way as CH<sub>3</sub>I. As shown in Fig.2d, a peak with the m/z of  
9 M+18 (202->220) was produced, indicated that the source of 15 mass in the  
10 Hg-compound was CH<sub>3</sub>. Therefore, it can be confirmed that CH<sub>3</sub>Hg<sup>+</sup> ions were  
11 produced when Hg<sup>+</sup> ions were reacted with CH<sub>3</sub>I in gas environment.

12 In addition to the peak of CH<sub>3</sub>Hg<sup>+</sup>, another peak with the m/z of 204 with the  
13 signal intensity higher than CH<sub>3</sub>Hg<sup>+</sup> had been always existed in Fig.2 e-g and Fig.2c.  
14 As can be seen that the peak with the m/z of 204 was also found in Fig.2a, but not  
15 found in Fig.2b, it could be deduced that this peak was only related to the methylating  
16 reagent of CH<sub>3</sub>I or its impurity. At the same time, a peak with a m/z of 207 was  
17 appeared instead of 204 when CD<sub>3</sub>I was used in Fig.2d. Therefore, it could be further  
18 speculated that the specie with the m/z of 204 had “H<sub>3</sub>” in its component.  
19 Unfortunately, the synthesis process of the reagent of CH<sub>3</sub>I used in this work was  
20 unknown, thus the definite component of this specie could not be given. Except the  
21 two peaks mentioned above, other peaks in Fig.2 always had lower signal intensities  
22 and appeared at random, which might be instrument noise.

### 23 3.2 Effects of the experiment parameters

24 The effects of the experiment parameters on the CH<sub>3</sub>Hg<sup>+</sup> productivity were also  
25 investigated with CH<sub>3</sub>I as methylation reagent, including concentrations of the Hg<sup>2+</sup>  
26 ions, the flow rates of CH<sub>3</sub>I and the carrier gas of He.

27 Fig.3 presented the effect of Hg<sup>2+</sup> concentration settings on the signal intensities  
28 of <sup>217</sup>CH<sub>3</sub>Hg<sup>+</sup> and <sup>202</sup>Hg<sup>+</sup>. It was found that the signal intensities of <sup>202</sup>Hg<sup>+</sup> and  
29 <sup>217</sup>CH<sub>3</sub>Hg<sup>+</sup> were increased synchronously with the increase of the Hg<sup>2+</sup> concentrations  
30 from 0.01 to 20 μg L<sup>-1</sup>. Therefore, the <sup>217</sup>CH<sub>3</sub>Hg<sup>+</sup> productivities (calculated by the

1 signal intensity ratios of  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+ / ^{202}\text{Hg}^+$ ) were not affected by the  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$   
2 concentrations. In addition, the lowest  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  concentration with visible  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$   
3 signal was found to be  $0.5 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$  in this system. For the purpose to compare the signal  
4 intensities of  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$  more clearly, a  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  concentration of  $10 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$  was chosen  
5 for the further study.

6 The effect of  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$  flow rate settings on  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$  productivity was also studied.  
7 As shown in Fig.4, the signal intensities of  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$  were increased when the  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$   
8 flow rates increased from  $0.05$  to  $5 \mu\text{L min}^{-1}$  and then kept constant when the  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$   
9 flow rate increased from  $5$  to  $7.5 \mu\text{L min}^{-1}$ , but finally reduced sharply when the  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$   
10 flow rate increased from  $7.5$  to  $10 \mu\text{L min}^{-1}$ . The decrease of  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$  signal  
11 intensities with the higher flow rate of  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$  might due to another mercury compound  
12 ion had been produced. In addition, it was found that the signal intensities of  $^{202}\text{Hg}^+$   
13 were not affected by the flow rates of  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$ , so the  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$  productivity calculated  
14 by the signal intensity ratios of  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+ / ^{202}\text{Hg}^+$  were changed synchronously with  
15 the change of  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$  as shown in Fig.4. Moreover, the lowest flow rate of  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$   
16 with visible  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$  signal was found to be  $0.1 \mu\text{L min}^{-1}$ . At last, a  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$  flow rate  
17 of  $5 \mu\text{L min}^{-1}$  was chosen with a  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$  productivity of  $0.49\%$ .

18 Bolea-Fernandez, et al<sup>27</sup> has reported that the productivities of  $\text{AsCH}_2^+$  and  
19  $\text{SeCH}_2^+$  were significantly influenced by the collision gas flow rates in ICP-MS/MS.  
20 So another experiment was conducted to investigate the effect of He flow rate settings  
21 on  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$  productivity in this work. The He flow rates were only investigated  
22 from  $0.05$  to  $0.3 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ , for the lowest He flow rate could be set was  $0.05 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$   
23 and no signal intensity of  $^{202}\text{Hg}^+$  and  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$  could be detected when the He flow  
24 rate was set up to  $0.3 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ . It could be clearly seen from Fig.5 that the signal  
25 intensities of  $^{202}\text{Hg}^+$  gradually decreased with the increase of He flow rates from  $0.05$   
26 to  $0.3 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ , which probably due to the diluting and collision effect. At the same  
27 time, the signal intensities of  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$  were nearly constant when the He flow rate  
28 increased from  $0.05$  to  $0.15 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$  and then reduced sharply with the He flow rates  
29 up to  $0.3 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ . According to the signal intensities of  $^{202}\text{Hg}^+$  and  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$ , the  
30 productivities of  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$  calculated by the intensity ratios of  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+ / ^{202}\text{Hg}^+$

1 were shown in the inset picture of Fig.5. The productivities of  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$  were found  
2 to be increased with the increase of He flow rate from 0.05 to 0.15 mL min<sup>-1</sup> and then  
3 reached a platform with the He flow rate between 0.15 and 0.25 mL min<sup>-1</sup>, but finally  
4 reduced to zero with the He flow rate up to 0.3 mL min<sup>-1</sup>. Therefore, a He flow rate of  
5 0.15 mL min<sup>-1</sup> with a  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$  productivity of 1.77% was chosen.

### 6 **3.3 Methylating productivities of Hg<sup>+</sup> ions with individual VOCs**

7 In order to confirm the fact that VOCs could methylate the Hg<sup>+</sup> ions in gas phase,  
8 the reactions between the Hg<sup>+</sup> ions and individual VOCs containing methyl donors  
9 were investigated, including ether, methylbenzene, acetaldehyde, acetic acid, hexane,  
10 methanol, ethyl acetate, acetone and methane with the same way as CH<sub>3</sub>I. The results  
11 were shown in Table 2. The  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$  productivities (%) were calculated by the  
12 signal intensity ratios of  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+ / ^{202}\text{Hg}^+$  with individual VOCs as methylating  
13 reagent with the same Hg<sup>2+</sup> concentration. Among the nine VOCs investigated, only  
14 three of them (methylbenzene, acetic acid and ethyl acetate) exhibited good  
15 methylation with productivities of 1.28%, 1.35% and 1.18%, respectively. No  
16 CH<sub>3</sub><sup>202</sup>Hg<sup>+</sup> (M=217) signal was detected by other VOCs (ether, acetaldehyde, hexane,  
17 methanol, acetone and methane), which might due to the stable character of these  
18 VOCs themselves or other reasons. These results indicated that the abiotic  
19 methylation of the gaseous Hg<sup>+</sup> ions could be realized by some VOCs species.

### 20 **3.4 Possible mechanism for the methylation of Hg<sup>+</sup> ions by individually VOCs**

21 According to the literature reported by Craig and Rapsomanikis,<sup>28</sup> methyl iodide  
22 (CH<sub>3</sub>I) is expected to dissociate to CH<sub>3</sub>·/I<sup>-</sup> or CH<sub>3</sub><sup>+</sup>/I<sup>-</sup>, but not CH<sub>3</sub><sup>-</sup>/I<sup>+</sup> in aqueous media  
23 and then the CH<sub>3</sub>· and CH<sub>3</sub><sup>+</sup> can methylate Hg<sup>+</sup> or Hg<sup>0</sup>. And in our work, CH<sub>3</sub><sup>+</sup>  
24 (m/z=15) and CH<sub>3</sub>I<sup>+</sup> (m/z=142) were all found in gas environment in the ORS<sup>3</sup>.  
25 However, since CH<sub>3</sub>·/I<sup>-</sup> did not have charges, they could not be detected in our work.  
26 For the reaction between CH<sub>3</sub>I and Hg<sup>+</sup> ion in the ORS<sup>3</sup>, collision in the He  
27 atmosphere would accelerate the decomposition of CH<sub>3</sub>I into CH<sub>3</sub>· and CH<sub>3</sub><sup>+</sup> without  
28 UV irradiation. Then the group of CH<sub>3</sub>· was transferred to the Hg<sup>+</sup> ion to form the  
29 product ion of CH<sub>3</sub>Hg<sup>+</sup> according to the following mechanism.



1 Acetic acid with a good methylation effect was also reported by other groups in  
2 aqueous environment.<sup>12, 29</sup> The methylation property of acetic acid was explained by  
3 decarboxylated into CO<sub>2</sub> and a methyl group, which was transferred to the present  
4 Hg<sup>2+</sup> in the solution to form CH<sub>3</sub>Hg<sup>+</sup>.<sup>29</sup> In this work, the reaction between acetic acid  
5 and Hg<sup>+</sup> in gas atmosphere was speculated to be realized with the same methylation  
6 property as in solution. The methylation process of methylbenzene was speculated to  
7 be decomposed by the collision in the He atmosphere into a benzene ring and a  
8 methyl group. While the methylation process of ethyl acetate might have two ways,  
9 which to be decomposed into CO<sub>2</sub> and two methyl groups or a carboxyl group and a  
10 single methyl group. These mechanism need to be further explored in the future.

### 11 3.5 Further discussion

12 Many literatures has reported that UV irradiation is a necessary condition for  
13 producing obvious CH<sub>3</sub>Hg whether in aqueous environment<sup>11, 16</sup> or gaseous  
14 environment.<sup>18</sup> However, our work demonstrated that the obvious gaseous CH<sub>3</sub>Hg<sup>+</sup>  
15 ions can be produced just through a collision reaction between the ions and molecules  
16 in a dark reactor, which had not been reported before. The productivities of the gaseous  
17 CH<sub>3</sub>Hg<sup>+</sup> ions by CH<sub>3</sub>I in the dark reactor in our work is close to the productivities of  
18 the aqueous CH<sub>3</sub>Hg<sup>+</sup> ions by CH<sub>3</sub>I by UV irradiation reported by Yin, et al.<sup>16</sup>

19 In addition, our work had also demonstrated that this methylation reaction can be  
20 occurred even in an extremely low gas pressure, for the ORS<sup>3</sup> in the ICP-MS/MS is  
21 set in nearly vacuum condition. Therefore, it can be deduced that this methylation  
22 reaction can still occur even in the high altitude, although the gas pressure in the high  
23 altitude is much lower than the ground.

24 The triple quadrupole ICP-MS/MS is often used to convert the target ion not the  
25 interfering ion reacted with gas molecules in the ORS<sup>3</sup> to a novel ionic species that  
26 can be measured at a different mass/charge ratio to increase element selectivity and  
27 sensitivity.<sup>27, 30-33</sup> While in this study, we have used a ICP-MS/MS instrument as the  
28 tool to study the inorganic mercury methylation, which expand the application range  
29 of ICP-MS/MS for elements determination. However, since the contents of <sup>202</sup>Hg<sup>+</sup>  
30 ions and CH<sub>3</sub>I in the ORS<sup>3</sup> are calculated to be 2.72 pg m<sup>-3</sup> and 152 mg m<sup>-3</sup>,

1 respectively, which are much higher than the real content of  $\text{Hg}^+$  ions<sup>20</sup> and  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$  with  
2 a concentration of 1~4 ppt<sup>34</sup> in the atmosphere. Therefore, the otherness is still existed  
3 between the instrument model and the real atmosphere environment, although this  
4 instrument satisfies the requirement for the model study of element methylation.

#### 5 **4 Conclusion**

6 In this work, ICP-MS/MS was chosen as a tool for the first time to study abiotic  
7 methylation of inorganic mercury reacting with VOCs in gas environment. It was  
8 demonstrated that the gaseous  $\text{Hg}^+$  ions would be transformed to the more toxic species  
9 of  $\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$  ions instantaneously when collided with some VOCs in gas environment  
10 using ICP-MS/MS. Several VOCs, e.g. methyl iodide, methylbenzene, acetic acid and  
11 ethyl acetate, exhibited good methylation of  $\text{Hg}^+$  ions. This study might reveal that the  
12 abiotic methylation of  $\text{Hg}^+$  ions in the atmosphere environment would potentially  
13 occur when contact with the VOCs in the atmosphere, leading to the secondary  
14 environment pollution.

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## 1     **Figures and Tables**

2     Fig.1 The schematic representation of ICP–MS/MS operation in the methylation of  
3     gaseous  $\text{Hg}^+$  ion using VOCs / He as reaction gas.

4     Fig.2 The products scan results of methylation of the gaseous  $\text{Hg}^+$  ions. a) The  
5     products scan mass spectrum of  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$  only without  $^{202}\text{Hg}^+$  ions; b) The products scan  
6     mass spectrum of  $^{202}\text{Hg}^+$  ions only without  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$ ; c) The products scan mass spectrum  
7     of  $^{202}\text{Hg}^+$  ions reacted with  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$ ; d) The products scan mass spectrum of  $^{202}\text{Hg}^+$  ions  
8     reacted with  $\text{CD}_3\text{I}$ ; e) The products scan mass spectrum of  $^{199}\text{Hg}^+$  ions reacted with  
9      $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$ ; f) The products scan mass spectrum of  $^{200}\text{Hg}^+$  ions reacted with  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$ ; g) The  
10    products scan mass spectrum of  $^{201}\text{Hg}^+$  ions reacted with  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$ . (Experiment  
11    conditions:  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  concentration,  $10 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ ;  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}/\text{CD}_3\text{I}$  flow rate,  $5 \mu\text{L min}^{-1}$ ; He flow  
12    rate,  $0.05 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ )

13    Fig.3 The effect of  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  concentration settings on the species of  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$  and  
14     $^{202}\text{Hg}^+$ . All the tests were conducted in triplicate, and the error bars indicate the s.d. of  
15    three repeated measurements. (Experiment conditions:  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$  flow rate,  $5 \mu\text{L min}^{-1}$ ; He  
16    flow rate,  $0.05 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ )

17    Fig.4 The effect of  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$  flow rate settings on the species of  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$  and the ratios  
18    of  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+ / ^{202}\text{Hg}^+$ . All the tests were conducted in triplicate, and the error bars  
19    indicate the s.d. of three repeated measurements. (Experiment conditions:  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$   
20    concentration,  $10 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ ; He flow rate,  $0.05 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ )

21    Fig.5 The effect of He flow rate settings on the species of  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$  and  $^{202}\text{Hg}^+$  and  
22    the ratios of  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+ / ^{202}\text{Hg}^+$  (inset). All the tests were conducted in triplicate, and  
23    the error bars indicate the s.d. of three repeated measurements. (Experiment  
24    conditions:  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  concentration,  $10 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ ;  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$  flow rate,  $5 \mu\text{L min}^{-1}$ )

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26    Table 1 Instrument settings for the Agilent 8800 ICP–MS/MS instrument.

27    Table 2 The results of the methylation experiments of gaseous  $\text{Hg}^+$  ions with  
28    individually VOCs. (Experiment conditions:  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  concentration,  $10 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ ; VOCs  
29    flow rate,  $5 \mu\text{L min}^{-1}$ , He flow rate,  $0.15 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ )

1 Table 1 Instrument settings for the Agilent 8800 ICP-MS/MS instrument.

Parameter	Value
Reaction gas	VOCs/He
Scan type	MS/MS
RF power(W)	1550
Extract 1 (V)	0
Q1 bias (V)	1.0
Q1→Q2	202→202~260
Octopole bias (V)	-5.0
Octopole RF (V)	150
Energy discrimination (V)	-7.0
Extract 2 (V)	-165
Wait time offset (ms)	2
Sweeps / replicate	10
Integration time / mass (s)	0.1
Replicates	3

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2  
3 Table 2 The results of the methylation experiments of gaseous  $\text{Hg}^+$  ions with  
4 individually VOCs. (Experiment conditions:  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  concentration,  $10 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ ; VOCs  
5 flow rate,  $5 \mu\text{L min}^{-1}$ , He flow rate,  $0.15 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ )  
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Species	Productivities of $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$ (%)
Methyl iodide	$1.77 \pm 0.14$
Ether	ND <sup>1</sup>
Methylbenzene	$1.28 \pm 0.06$
Acetaldehyde	ND <sup>1</sup>
Acetic Acid	$1.35 \pm 0.09$
Hexane	ND <sup>1</sup>
Methanol	ND <sup>1</sup>
Ethyl Acetate	$1.18 \pm 0.14$
Acetone	ND <sup>1</sup>
Methane	ND <sup>1</sup>

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27 4 <sup>1</sup>ND: not detected.  
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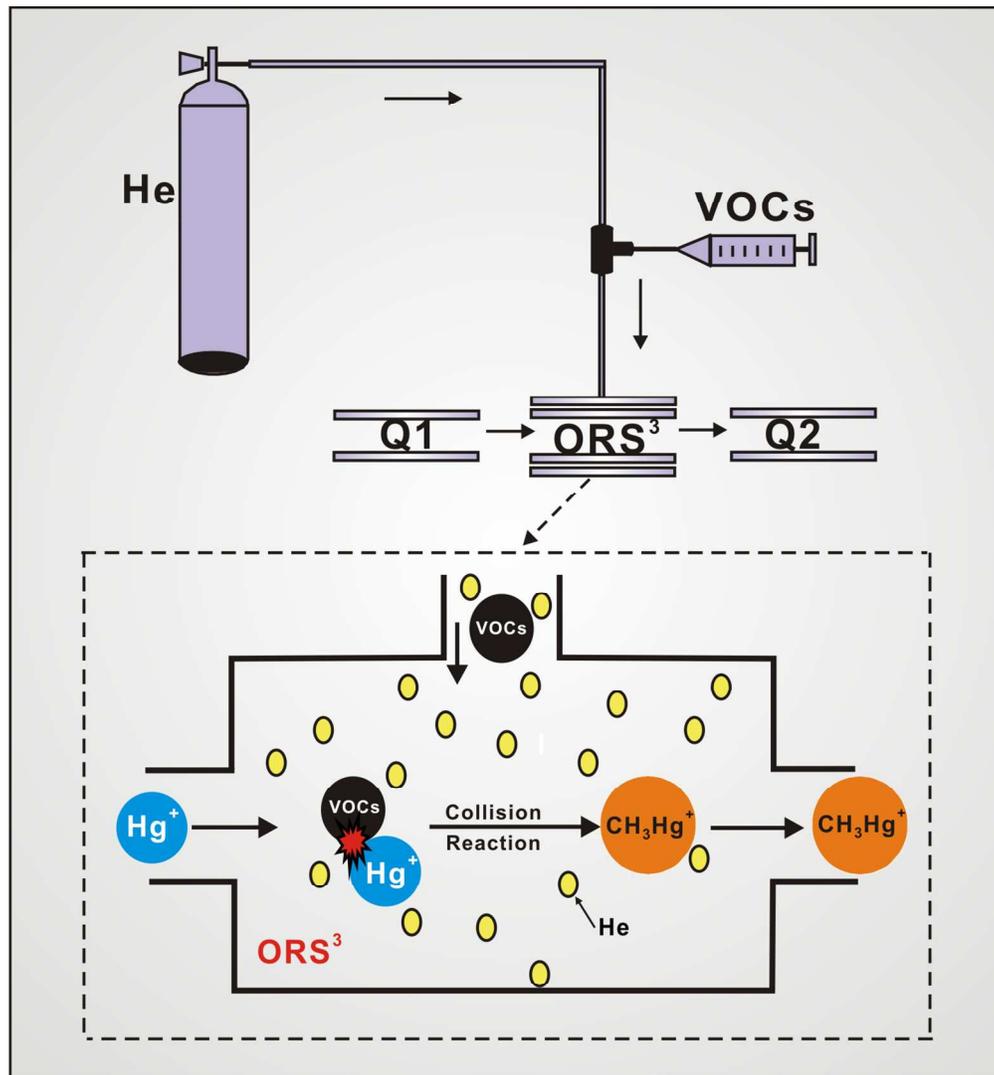


Fig.1 The schematic representation of ICP-MS/MS operation in the methylation of gaseous  $\text{Hg}^+$  ion using  $\text{VOCs} / \text{He}$  as reaction gas.  
119x128mm (300 x 300 DPI)

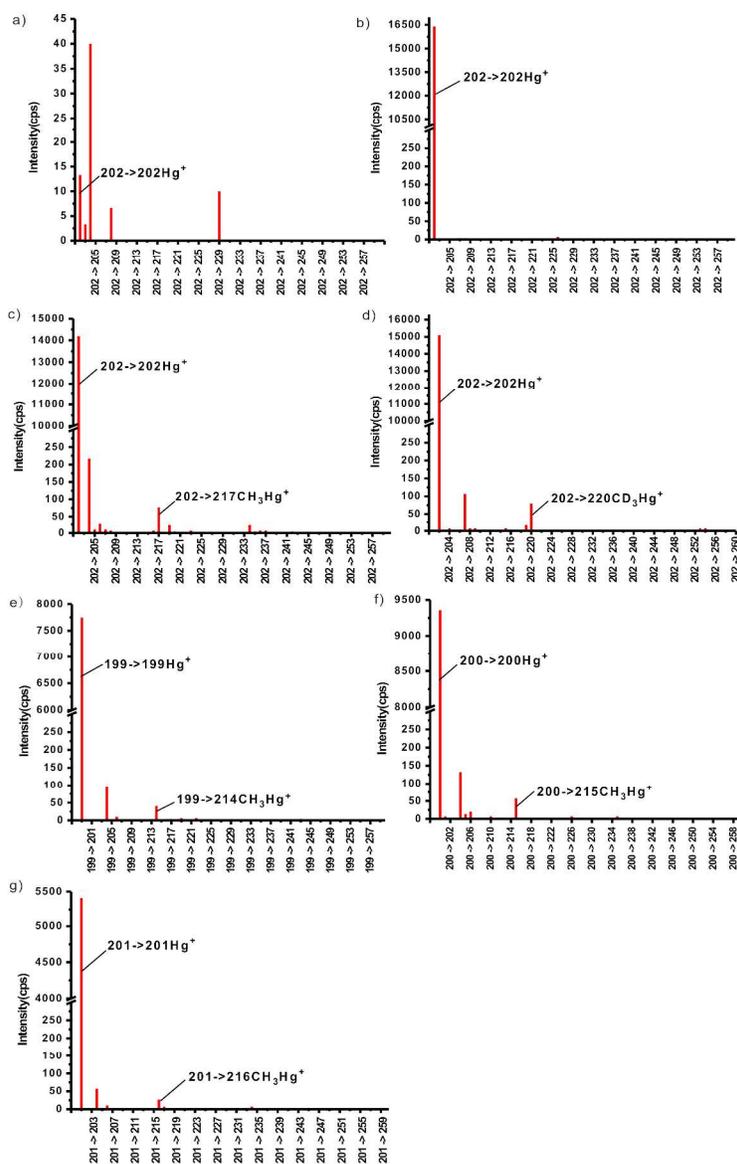


Fig.2 The products scan results of methylation of the gaseous  $\text{Hg}^+$  ions. a) The products scan mass spectrum of  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$  only without  $^{202}\text{Hg}^+$  ions; b) The products scan mass spectrum of  $^{202}\text{Hg}^+$  ions only without  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$ ; c) The products scan mass spectrum of  $^{202}\text{Hg}^+$  ions reacted with  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$ ; d) The products scan mass spectrum of  $^{202}\text{Hg}^+$  ions reacted with  $\text{CD}_3\text{I}$ ; e) The products scan mass spectrum of  $^{199}\text{Hg}^+$  ions reacted with  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$ ; f) The products scan mass spectrum of  $^{200}\text{Hg}^+$  ions reacted with  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$ ; g) The products scan mass spectrum of  $^{201}\text{Hg}^+$  ions reacted with  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$ . (Experiment conditions:  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  concentration,  $10 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ ;  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}/\text{CD}_3\text{I}$  flow rate,  $5 \mu\text{L min}^{-1}$ ; He flow rate,  $0.05 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ )  
 $301 \times 457 \text{ mm}$  ( $200 \times 200 \text{ DPI}$ )

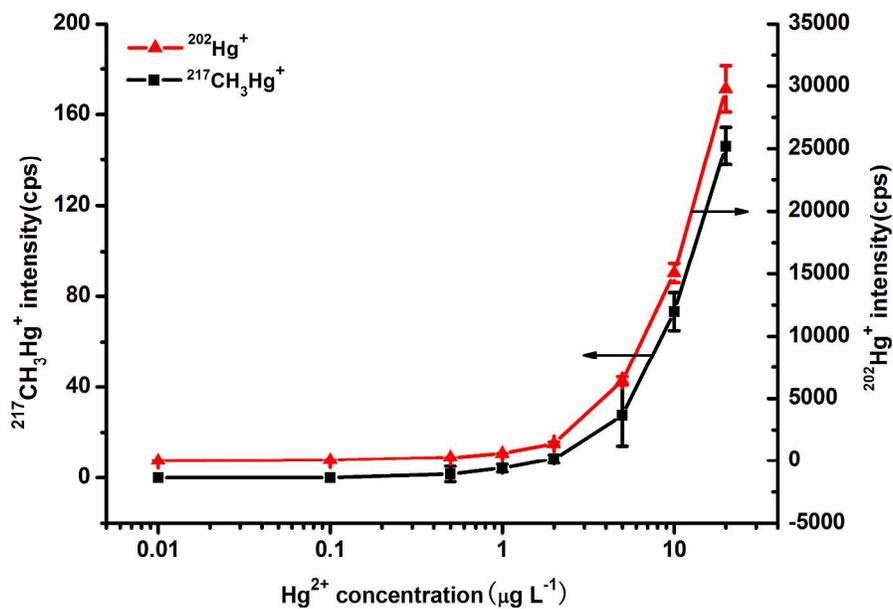


Fig.3 The effect of  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  concentration settings on the species of  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$  and  $^{202}\text{Hg}^+$ . All the tests were conducted in triplicate, and the error bars indicate the s.d. of three repeated measurements.

(Experiment conditions:  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$  flow rate,  $5 \mu\text{L min}^{-1}$ ; He flow rate,  $0.05 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ )  
297x209mm (300 x 300 DPI)

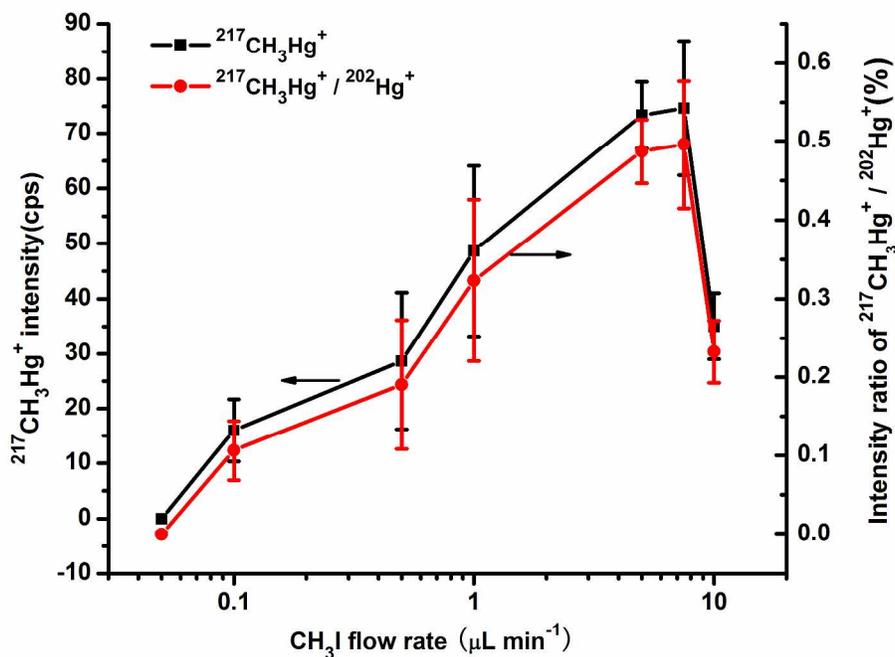


Fig.4 The effect of CH<sub>3</sub>I flow rate settings on the species of <sup>217</sup>CH<sub>3</sub>Hg<sup>+</sup> and the ratios of <sup>217</sup>CH<sub>3</sub>Hg<sup>+</sup> / <sup>202</sup>Hg<sup>+</sup>. All the tests were conducted in triplicate, and the error bars indicate the s.d. of three repeated measurements. (Experiment conditions: Hg<sup>2+</sup> concentration, 10 μg L<sup>-1</sup>; He flow rate, 0.05 mL min<sup>-1</sup>)  
279x215mm (300 x 300 DPI)

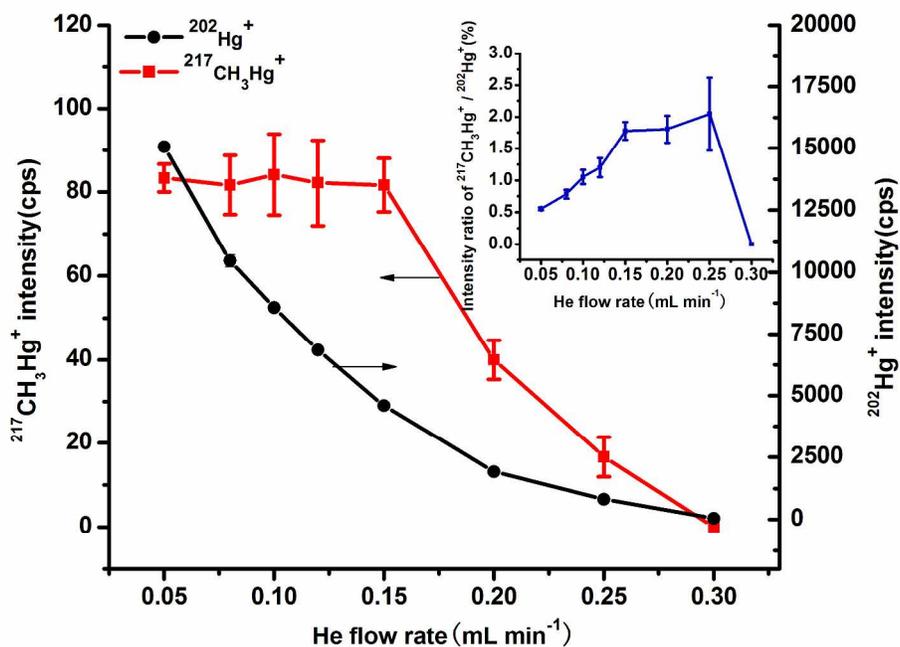
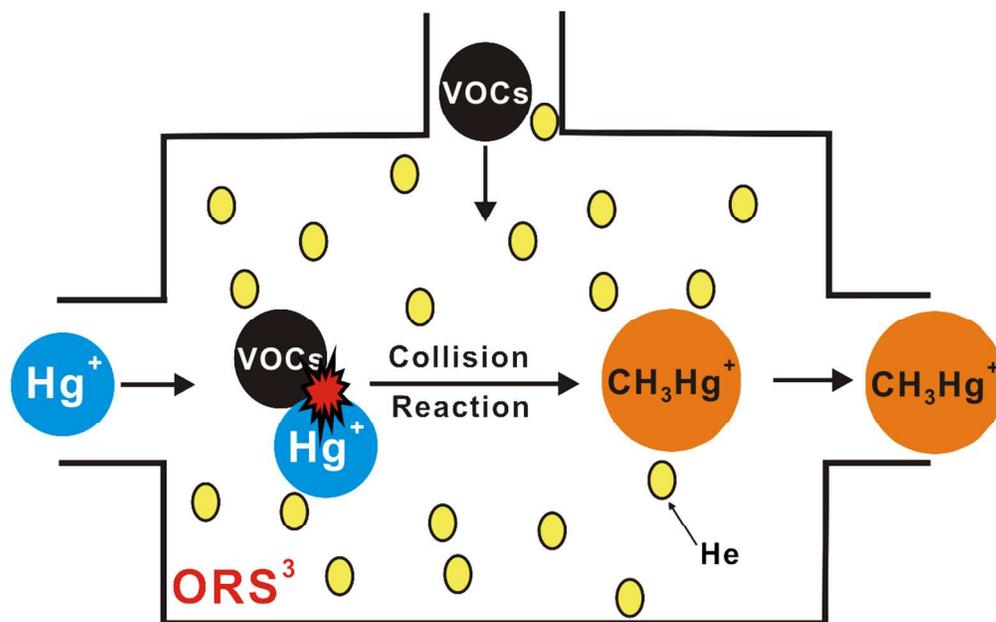


Fig.5 The effect of He flow rate settings on the species of  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+$  and  $^{202}\text{Hg}^+$  and the ratios of  $^{217}\text{CH}_3\text{Hg}^+ / ^{202}\text{Hg}^+$  (inset). All the tests were conducted in triplicate, and the error bars indicate the s.d. of three repeated measurements. (Experiment conditions:  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  concentration,  $10 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ ;  $\text{CH}_3\text{I}$  flow rate,  $5 \mu\text{L min}^{-1}$ )  
279x215mm (300 x 300 DPI)



In this work, ICP-MS/MS was chosen as a tool for the first time to study abiotic methylation of inorganic mercury reacting with VOCs in gas environment.  
108x67mm (300 x 300 DPI)