

Transcriptional activities of methanogens and methanotrophs vary with methane emission flux in rice soils under chronic nutrients constraints of phosphorus and potassium

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Abstract Nutrient status in soil is crucial for the growth and development of plants which
15 indirectly/directly affect the ecophysiological functions of resident soil microorganisms. Soil methanogens and methanotrophs can be affected by soil nutrient availabilities and plant growth, which in turn modulate methane (CH₄) emissions. Here, we assessed whether deficits in soil available phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) modulated the activities of methanogens, methanotrophs in a long

term (20 y) experimental system undergoing limitation in either one or both nutrients. Results showed
20 that a large amount of CH₄ emitted from paddy soil at rice tillering stage (flooding) while CH₄ flux was
minimum at ripening stage (drying). Compared to NPK treatment, the soils without P input significantly
reduced methane flux rates, whereas without K input did not. Under P limitation, methanotroph
transcript copy number significantly increased in tandem with a decrease in methanogen transcript
abundance, suggesting that P-deficient induced changes in soil physiochemical properties in tandem
25 with rice plant growth might constrain the activity of methanogens, whereas the methanotrophs might
be adaptive to this soil environment. In contrast, lower transcript abundance of both methanogen and
methanotrophs were observed in K-deficient soils. Assessments of community structures based upon
transcript indicated that soils deficits in P induced greater shifts in the active methanotrophic
community than K-deficient soils while similar community structures of active methanogens were
30 observed in both treatments. These results suggested that the population dynamics of methanogens and
methanotrophs could vary along with the changes in plant growth states and soil properties induced by
nutrient deficiency.

Keywords: Methane; Methanogen; Methanotroph; Paddy field

35 **1. Introduction**

Methane is the second most abundant greenhouse gas, next only to CO₂, in the atmosphere and

contributes approximately 20-30% of the global warming effect (IPCC, 2007). The atmospheric concentration of CH₄ has increased from a pre-industrial value of 0.715 ppm to 1.824 ppm in 2013 (IPCC, 2007; WMO, 2010), with anthropogenic activities accounting for 60% of the global budget of annual CH₄ emission (Insum and Wett, 2008). One significant global source of methane is rice paddy cultivation, covering a worldwide area of 155 million hectares and contributing 10% of the annual anthropogenic CH₄ emissions (Nazaries et al., 2013).

The net methane flux is determined by the balance between the activities of methanogens and methanotrophs (Le Mer and Roger, 2001). The biochemistry and molecular biology of both methanogens and methanotrophs has been extensively reviewed (Thauer et al., 2008; Trotsenko and Murrell, 2008). In addition to 16S rRNA gene based assays, functional genes (*mcrA* - encoding the alpha subunit of methyl co-enzyme reductase and the *pmoA* gene, encoding the alpha subunit of membrane bound particulate methane monooxygenase) have been successfully used as genetic markers to target both methanogens and aerobic bacterial methanotrophs (MOB), respectively in the environment (Steinberg and Regan, 2008; McDonald et al., 2008).

In previous DNA-based analyses, it was reported that changes in the population size of methanogens and methanotrophs were closely related to the variations in CH₄ production and oxidation potential in paddy soils (Dubey and Singh, 2000; Bao et al., 2014; Mohanty et al., 2014), lake sediments and wetland soils (Liu et al., 2014). However, studies have also indicated that the *mcrA* and *pmoA* gene

55 copy numbers were not significantly correlated with the activities of CH₄ production and oxidation, despite the fact that they responded to environmental disturbance (Ahn et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2014; Zheng et al., 2013). Other investigators have suggested that assessment of methanogen community composition, based on *mcrA* gene diversity, remained highly stable in response to environmental changes, showing no significant correlation with the rate of CH₄ production in various soil ecosystems
60 (Ma et al., 2012; Xu et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2014).

It is reasonable to assume that gene abundance analyses alone may not be adequate to link the methanogenic and/or methanotrophic potential of communities with the methane flux (Zheng et al., 2013; Ma et al., 2012; Yuan et al., 2011). However, the transcriptional analysis (mRNA) of *mcrA* and *pmoA* genes can provide information on the ‘active’ communities of methanogens and methanotrophs
65 (Ma et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2014; Freitag and Prosser, 2009; Freitag et al., 2010; Angel et al., 2011). Ma et al. (2012) reported that the abundance of *mcrA* transcripts showed a greater correlation with CH₄ production rates compared to the *mcrA* gene copies. Similarly, Ahn et al. (2014) also suggested that the transcript abundance of *mcrA* and *pmoA* genes could correlate with the CH₄ emission pattern whilst the gene abundance remained relatively stable in rice paddy soil. Interestingly, a study on peat soils
70 indicated that the abundance of *mcrA* or *pmoA* transcripts alone was not correlated with CH₄ flux, instead, the transcript/gene ratios of both *mcrA* and *pmoA* genes actually exhibited a linear correlation with CH₄ emission (Freitag et al., 2010).

The nutrient availabilities of nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) severely influence soil fertility and crop production (Ogden et al., 2002; Pujos and Morard, 1997). Although previous
75 studies have focussed on the effect of N on methane flux, in particular on methanotrophic activity and diversity (Bodelier et al., 2000), little is known on the effects of both P and K on both methanogens and methanotrophs (extensively reviewed in (Veraart et al., 2015)). Specifically, the P and K deficient agricultural land is about 51% and 12% of the total cultivation area in China, respectively. Previous
80 studies indicated that CH₄ emissions in P and K deficient plots are significantly lower than balanced inorganic fertilization plots (Yang et al., 2010; Shang et al., 2011). The long-term paddy rice fertilization field experiment utilized in this study was established in 1990, the rice plants in the plots without P input showed severe P deficiency symptoms and loss of about 55% of yield, and the plants in the plots without K input exhibited clear K deficient symptoms and lost about 20% of yield (Zhao et al.,
2011, Shang et al., 2011). However, it is unknown that how the functional microorganisms such as
85 methanogens and methanotrophs respond to the soil P and K exhausting environments.

In this study, we hypothesised that the depleting soil available P and K obviously restricted rice plant growth, and simultaneously, it may also affect the community compositions and functions of methanogens and methanotrophs. Therefore, the long-term paddy rice fertilization field experiment was employed, and the soil and gas samples were collected twice at rice tillering and ripening stage. We
90 subsequently used this multi-level approach to resolve the impact of phosphorus and potassium upon

the community composition and abundance of both resident (DNA based) and active (mRNA-based) methanogens and methanotrophs and its subsequent influence upon overall methane flux.

2. Materials and Methods

95 2.1. Experimental site

The experimental site is located within the Taoyuan Agro-ecosystem Research Station of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (28°55' N, 111°26' E), Hunan province, China. The area is characterized by a subtropical monsoon climate with an annual average air temperature of 16.5°C and a mean annual precipitation of 1448 mm. Soil samples were collected from a long-term paddy rice field fertilization experiment established in 1990 (Yang et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2010). The paddy soil was derived from 100 quaternary red clay and the cropping regime was a double rice cropping system. The experiment contained ten treatments with three replicates, organised by randomized blocking design, with each plot of 33 m². The four treatments selected for this study were as follows: NPK (amended with nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium fertilizers), NK (-P, amended with nitrogen and potassium fertilizers), NP (-105 K, amended with nitrogen and phosphorus fertilizers) and N (-PK, only amended with nitrogen fertilizer). The annual fertilizers input were urea, superphosphate, and potassium chloride at 182.3 kg N ha⁻¹ year⁻¹, 39.3 kg P ha⁻¹ year⁻¹, 197.2 kg K ha⁻¹ year⁻¹, respectively. For the late rice-cropping season when we sampling, urea was applied with three splits, 40% as basal fertilizer, 50% as tillering fertilizer

and 10% as panicle fertilizer. The P and K fertilizers were applied as basal fertilizers before rice
110 transplanting. The basal fertilizers were well incorporated into the soil by plowing to 10-20 cm depth 2
days before rice planting, and the top-dressing was surface broadcasted. Consistent with the water
management in local late rice-cropping system, flooding was initiated after early rice harvest before late
rice transplanting, and maintained until 10 days before rice harvesting. During this period, a 7 days
drainage episode was implemented at late tillering stage.

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2.3. Methane emission measurement and soil sampling

In situ methane fluxes from the experimental field plots were sampled using static chambers
(Shang et al., 2011) at rice tillering (flooding) and ripening stages (drying) during the late rice-cropping
season. The sampling chamber was made of PVC with a size of 60×70×90 cm, which was equipped
120 with one circulating fan inside to ensure sufficient gas mixing and wrapped with a layer of sponge to
minimize air temperature changes inside the chamber during the period of sampling. After rice
transplant, a PVC frame was fixed into a random site in each plot. The top edge of the frame had a
groove for filling with water to seal the rim of the chamber. Each frame enclosed 6 rice plants and the
height aboveground of the frame is only 5 cm to avoid affecting the growth of rice plants. Gas samples
125 were taken from the chamber headspace with a 30 mL syringe and stored in pre-evacuated vials
(Labcolimited high Wycombe UK). At each sampling stage, CH₄ fluxes were measured in triplicate

plots for all treatments once a day for 3 days. Confirmation of a similar variation trend of CH₄ fluxes among treatments was observed during these 3 days, we only presented the data from the third day when soil samples were collected in this study.

130 In order to further explain the dynamic changes of methane flux in the field, fresh soil samples were collected from the plots immediately after in situ CH₄ flux sampling. Five soil columns (0–20 cm depth and 5 cm diameter) were randomly taken from each plot and homogenised. The samples were divided into two aliquots, one immediately frozen in liquid nitrogen and stored at -80 °C for nucleic acid extraction and the remainder were used to analyse soil properties and conduct incubation
135 experiment to determine methane emission rates under controlled environment. The incubation was carried out as follows: after 24 h pre-incubation at 30 °C, equal amounts of fresh soil samples from each treatment (three replicates) were homogenised and 30 g soil (dry weight) was placed into a 250 mL plastic box that can be sealed. For tillering stage samples, soil water content was adjusted to field flooding condition by maintaining 2 cm free surface water. For the ripening stage samples, water
140 content in the soils was adjusted to the same level (50% moisture content, w/w) according to the highest water content of the fresh soil samples. Afterwards, the plastic boxes were sealed and incubated at 30 °C. Headspace gas sampling was conducted at 0 and 60 min, respectively, using a 5 mL syringe and stored in pre-evacuated vials (Labcolimited high Wycombe UK). The sampled CH₄ was analysed using a gas chromatograph equipped with a FID detector (Agilent 7890A, USA).

2.2. Measurement of plant biomass and soil properties

Immediately after gas and soil sampling, six randomly chosen rice plants were harvested. After washing off adhering soil from roots, the plant samples were oven dried to constant weight at 60 °C and aboveground and underground biomasses were estimated separately. Data are standardized to 1 m² plots.

150 Soil organic carbon (SOC) was determined by K₂Cr₂O₇ oxidation (Kalembas and Jenkinson, 1973). Total nitrogen (TN) was measured with Automatic Flow Injection after digestion in H₂SO₄. After fusion in NaOH, total phosphorus (TP) and potassium (TK) were measured by Inductively Coupled Plasma Spectrometry (Agilen, USA). After extraction with NH₄OAc, available K was determined by Atomic Absorption Spectroscopy (Seal, Germany). Available P (AP) was measured using UV-Vis
155 Spectrophotometer (PerkinElmer, USA) following extraction with 0.5 M NaHCO₃. Soil pH was determined at a soil to water ratio of 1: 2.5 (Bao, 2000).

2.4. Soil microbial DNA and mRNA extractions

Soil microbial DNA was extracted according to Chen et al (2010) with slight modifications. Briefly,
160 after the addition of lysing solution, MP FastPrep-24 (MP Biomedicals, USA) was used instead of a vortex followed by a 15 min water bath treatment at 68 °C. DNA concentration and quality were measured using a NanoDrop NA-1000 spectrophotometer (Thermo Scientific, Wilmington, DE, USA).

Extraction of total RNA from soils was performed according to the method described by Mettel et al. (2010). The extracted nucleic acid was rendered DNA free by DNase (Promega, USA) digestion according to the manufacturer's instructions. To remove humic acids, the total RNA was reversibly bound to Q-Sepharose and followed by stepwise elution using 1.5 M NaCl, precipitated with isopropanol and resuspended in TE buffer (pH 8.0). In order to remove the 5S rRNA and remaining salts, an RNeasy MinElute Kit (Qiagen, Germany) was used to further purify the total RNA and mRNA associated only with prokaryotes was captured using, the mRNA-ONLY prokaryotic mRNA isolation kit (Epicentre Biotechnologies, United States). Finally, the enriched 700 ng mRNA was reverse-transcribed to cDNA using the Fermentas K1622 RevertAid™ First Strand cDNA Synthesis Kit (Fermentas, USA) and the resulting cDNA was stored at -80°C.

2.5. Composition and abundance of soil methane-cycling communities

For T-RFLP fingerprinting, primers *mals/mcrA-rev* (Steinberg and Regan, 2008) and A189F/Mb661R (Holmes et al., 1995) were used for PCR amplification of the *mcrA* and *pmoA* gene, respectively. The PCR reaction solution (50 µL) consisted of 60 ng of DNA template, 0.3 µM of each primer and 25 µL 2 × Power Taq Master Mix (TIANGEN, China). Reaction conditions for the *mcrA* gene included an initial denaturation step at 95 °C for 3 min, followed by five cycles of denaturation at 95 °C for 30 s, annealing at 48 °C for 45 s, and extension at 72 °C for 30 s, with a ramp rate of 0.1 °C s⁻¹

from the annealing to the extension temperature. These initial five cycles were followed with 30 cycles of denaturation at 95 °C for 30 s, annealing at 55 °C for 45 s, and extension at 72 °C for 30 s, followed by a final extension step at 72 °C for 10 min. The PCR conditions for *pmoA* gene amplification was as follows: after an initial denaturation step at 95 °C for 5 min, followed by 5 cycles of denaturation at 95 °C for 25 s, annealing at 65 °C for 30 s, extension at 72 °C for 30 s. These initial five cycles were followed with 30 cycles of denaturation at 95 °C for 25 s, annealing at 55 °C for 30 s, and extension at 72 °C for 30 s, followed by a final extension step at 72 °C for 10 min.

T-RFLP analysis was performed at Sangni Corporation (Shanghai, China) using an ABI Prism 3100 Genetic Analyzer. T-RFLP profiles for *mcrA* and *pmoA* genes were generated with the endonucleases *HaeIII* (Fermentas, USA) and *HhaI* (Fermentas, USA), respectively. Data analysis of the resultant T-RFLP profiles was performed using PeakScan (version 1.0, Applied Biosystems, Inc.). Fragments with a signal above 1% of the sum of all peak heights were included and peak positions that differed in size by ≤ 2 bp in an individual profile were binned and considered as one fragment. Minimum T-RF size for inclusion within the cluster analysis was set at 50 bp or larger.

Local databases of *mcrA* and *pmoA* gene sequences were constructed using over 2,000 downloaded from Functional Gene Pipeline/Repository (FGPR, <http://fungene.cme.msu.edu/>) and National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>). *In silico* digestion was performed on these sequences using restriction endonuclease sequences and the T-RFs were assigned to

specific methanogenic and MOB lineages, which was subsequently used to predict and verify the
200 assignment of individual T-RFs in this study.

For real-time quantitative PCR, *mcrA* and *pmoA* qPCR were performed using the mals/*mcrA*-rev
(Steinberg and Regan, 2008) and A189F/Mb661R (Kolb et al., 2003) primer pairs, respectively.
Real-time PCR assays were performed in a volume of 10 μ L containing 5 μ L 2 \times SYBR Premix Ex Taq
TM (Takara, Japan), 150 nmol L⁻¹ forward and reverse primers and 5 ng of template DNA. Thermal
205 cycling conditions for the two genes were also the same as described for the T-RFLP analysis. The
standard curves for the *mcrA* and *pmoA* genes were created using a 10-fold dilution series of plasmids
containing the target gene of interest derived by PCR and cloning from soil.

For determination of absolute quantities of *mcrA* and *pmoA* transcripts, the quantitative PCR was
performed using 10 ng of cDNA template. The standard was prepared from *in vitro* transcription of
210 *mcrA* and *pmoA* clones derived from soil using the Riboprobe *in vitro* Transcription System (Promega)
according to the manufacturer's instructions. The *in vitro* transcript was purified by phenol-chloroform
extraction and quantified using a RiboGreen RNA quantification kit (Invitrogen). The resultant
transcripts were reverse transcribed as described above and a dilution series (10 fold) of cDNA was
used as the standard.

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2.6. Statistical analysis

Soil properties such as pH, soil organic carbon and total nitrogen together with gene abundance between the treatments were compared by ANOVA analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS 13, SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). Significance among means was identified using least significant differences. Pearson correlation analysis between CH₄ flux, soil properties, plant biomass and population size of resident and active methanogens and methanotrophs was also performed using SPSS. Redundancy analysis (RDA) was used to characterize the relationship between soil properties, plant biomass and the community structures of methanogens and methanotrophs using CANOCO statistical package for Windows 4.5 (Biometris, Wageningen, Netherlands). A Mantel test based on 499 random permutations was used to examine the significant correlations between the differences in soil properties plant biomass and microbial communities.

3. Results

3.1. Influence of P and K deficiencies on soil properties and plant biomass

Compared to the NPK treatment, -P and -PK treatments induced significant decreases in soil organic carbon (SOC), total phosphorus (TP) and available P (AP) content, whereas -K only caused significant decline in available potassium (AK) content (Table 1). Significant lower plant biomass were also observed in -P, -K and -PK plots compared to NPK treatment, suggesting that deficit in soil P and K availability had restricted the growth of rice plant (Fig. 1). Especially, at the rice tillering stage, the -P

235 treatment revealed a reduction of 41% and 28% ($P < 0.01$) in aboveground and belowground plant biomass, respectively.

3.2. Influence of P and K deficits on CH₄ flux

The measurements from the field plots and soil incubation showed that large amount of CH₄ emission was detected at tillering stage while it was at very low level at ripening stage (Fig. 1). The methane emission rates at tillering stage exhibited that the NPK treatment possessed the highest rate while the lowest appeared in the -P treatment which was significantly different from NPK ($P < 0.05$). The CH₄ flux in -K treatment were not significantly different from NPK ($P > 0.05$). Meanwhile, the -PK treatment showed significantly higher CH₄ flux than -P ($P < 0.05$) but less than NPK treatment.

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3.3. Shifts of methanogenic populations and transcripts under exhausting soil available P and K circumstance

When assessing the abundance of the *mcrA* gene, based upon both DNA- and mRNA-based analyses, we observed significantly higher gene copy numbers at the tillering stage when compared to the ripening stage across all the treatments (Fig. 2a). At the tillering stage, both -P and -K did not significantly modulate the abundance of *mcrA* gene copy numbers when compared to the NPK treatment. However, at the transcription level the treatments of -P, -K and -PK revealed significant

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decreases in *mcrA* transcript abundance in comparison with NPK ($P < 0.05$, Fig. 2b). Although no significant difference in *mcrA* transcript abundance was observed between -K and -P treatments ($P >$
255 0.05), the -PK treatment exhibited lower *mcrA* transcript abundance when compared to both -K and -P treatments (Fig. 2b). Similar to the the lower methane emissions observed at the ripening stage, all the treatments revealed lower *mcrA* transcript copy numbers under both -P and -K treatments, suggesting, as above, that the effect of nutrient limitation on the gene expression was independent of the strength of methane flux or rice cultivation stage (Fig. 2b).

260 The T-RFLP patterns of resident methanogenic community structures at the rice tillering stage were relatively stable in response to both -P and -K deficits (Fig. 3a, Fig. 4a). However, both -P and -K treatments induced shifts in the active community composition of methanogens when assessing community structure at mRNA level (Fig. 3a, Fig. 4a). These two treatments severely limited the expression of *mcrA* from less abundant members of methanogens represented by T-RFs 118, 208, 277
265 and 292 bp, but stimulated the activities of other methanogens represented by T-RFs 95 and 202 bp (Fig. 3a). The active methanogen community composition of -PK was roughly similar with that in -P and -K plots, besides that, the further shifts also happened in this treatment, such as the methanogens represented by T-RF 216 bp, corresponding to uncultivated archaeal methanogens, was relatively less abundant in -PK when compared to -P and -K treatments. At ripening stage, both DNA- and
270 mRNA-based analyses revealed similar community compositions as that at the tillering stage, and -P

and –K exhibited similar effects on methanogen community compositions (Fig. 3a, Supplementary Fig. 1a).

3.4. Shifts of methanotrophic populations and transcripts under depleting soil available P and K circumstance

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For the resident (DNA) MOB abundance, no significant differences were detected between treatments at the tillering stage. Similarly, at the ripening stage, except for the –P treatment, all the treatments revealed no significant differences between observed MOB abundance ($P > 0.05$, Fig. 2c). However, the abundance of the active (mRNA) MOB of the treatments without applying P and K showed a different picture (Fig. 2d). At the tillering stage, the –P treatment showed a significant increase (~85%) in *pmoA* transcript abundance, whereas –K led to a significant reduction (~75%) in *pmoA* transcript when compared to the NPK treatment (Fig. 2d). The *pmoA* transcripts in –PK treatment only accounted for 24% of the NPK treatment and was the lowest among all the treatments. At ripening stage, a different trend was observed with potassium deficits resulting in a significant increase in *pmoA* transcript abundance compared to NPK, –P and –PK treatments.

The MOB community compositions, based on both DNA and mRNA analyses, revealed differential responses under depleting soil available P and K conditions (Fig. 3b). At the tillering stage, both –P and –PK treatments displayed similar T-RFLP patterns but different from the MOB community

compositions in -K plots, especially at the mRNA level (Fig. 4b). -P and -PK treatments resulted in
290 community shifts within the active MOB, particularly T-RF 150 bp, predicted to represent the type I
methanotroph *Methylococcus/Methylocaldum*. Transcript abundances of this methanotrophs increased
10 folds, whilst transcripts representing likely members of the genus *Methylococcus* (T-RF 108 bp)
significantly reduced in -P and -PK treatment compared to NPK ($P < 0.05$). Meanwhile, -P and -PK
treatments induced a decline in the relative abundance of an unknown type II methanotroph genus or
295 *Methylosinus/Methylocystis* (T-RF 81 bp). For other taxa, T-RF 143 bp was observed in -P and -PK
treatments. The treatment without K input resulted in a substantial reduction of the relative abundance
of T-RF 128 bp (corresponding to several genera, including type I and type II methanotrophs) in
resident MOB community (Fig. 3b).

At the ripening stage, -P also induced a significant increase in the relative abundance of T-RF 249
300 bp within the resident MOB community and a significant reduction of T-RFs 70 bp and 108 bp in the
active methanotrophs. Remarkably, -K not only caused significant increase in the relative abundance of
T-RF 81 bp in the resident MOB community but also increased the relative abundance of the T-RF 70
bp in the active MOB populations (Fig. 3b). In addition, -PK showed similar T-RFLP pattern to -K
(Supplementary Fig. 1b).

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3.5. Correlation between methanogenic, methanotrophic populations, soil properties and CH₄ flux

Correlation analysis indicated that the CH₄ fluxes from field and soil incubation were significantly correlated to the transcript ratio of *mcrA/pmoA* ($P < 0.05$ and $P < 0.01$, respectively, Table 2) at the tillering stage. In addition, CH₄ flux from soil incubation was also significantly correlated with the contents of both total and available phosphorus (TP and AP, $P < 0.01$), SOC ($P < 0.05$) and plant biomass ($P < 0.05$). Redundancy analysis (RDA) indicated that P-deficient induced changes in soil physiochemical properties, such as SOC, TP, AP contents in tandem with plant biomass, were important factors driving community structure shifts of active (mRNA based) methanogens and methanotrophs (Fig. 5).

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4. Discussion

Phosphorus and potassium availability have been known to influence methane emissions from peat (Aerts and Toet, 1997) and paddy soils (Yang et al., 2010; Shang et al., 2011; Han et al., 2002). In this study, since the treatments of -P, -K and -PK had been continuously grown rice for 20 years without applying P, K and PK fertilizers correspondingly, the soil Olsen-P and available K concentrations have reached stable minimum levels due to the exhausting effect of plants (Shang et al., 2011). The rice plants showed severe P and K deficiency symptoms in the -P and -K plots, respectively, and the yields reduced significantly in the sampling year (Zhao et al., 2011; Shang et al., 2011). We observed that the soils without P input also induced significant reduction in CH₄ emission, whereas -K treatment did not

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325 show clear influence on net methane flux when compared to NPK plots. Since methane emission is the consequence of the activities of both methanogenic and methanotrophic populations, whether these two functional groups were also inhibited just like the rice plants under such poor soil P and K nutritional status is unknown. Although the soil available P and K were at depleting levels after 20 years experiment, the question is why these two element deficits led to different effects on CH₄ emission.

330 Our results indicated no significant correlation between CH₄ flux and the abundance of methanogens and methanotrophs population sizes (based on DNA), similarly, it was reported that the abundance of the *pmoA* gene was not correlated to soil methane oxidation rates in paddy fields (Zheng et al 2013). These phenomena suggested that the population sizes of both methanogens and methanotrophs would be relatively stable in relation to the chemical fertilizations. The differences of
335 CH₄ fluxes caused by the treatments would be strongly linked to the behaviours of their active communities.

The mRNA-based assessments indicated that the abundances of both active methanogens and methanotrophs, represented by transcript abundance of *mcrA* and *pmoA*, were more significantly influenced by the fertilization regimes compared to DNA-based approaches at rice tillering stage when
340 high CH₄ emission was observed, and the CH₄ flux was closely related with the transcript ratio of *mcrA/pmoA* ($r^2=0.682$; $P < 0.05$). These clearly expressed that the active methanogenic and methotrophic communities rather than the whole populations were more sensitively responded to the

soil nutrient status. Although other studies also reported that the community structures based on DNA analysis could respond to soil environmental changes and they could reflect the existing state of functional groups (Ahn et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2014; Zheng et al., 2013), the analysis based on gene transcripts are increasingly reported to provide more useful information in understanding the *in situ* activities of functional microbial communities than the DNA analysis, as gene transcripts are indicative for the active groups against a large resident microbial population (Nicolaisen et al., 2008; Nicol et al., 2008; Freitag et al., 2010).

It was determined that although -P and -K treatments resulted in similar reductions in *mcrA* transcript abundance with similar transcript composition at the tillering stage, they induced different consequences for *pmoA*-containing methanotrophic communities at the transcript level. P deficits caused a significant increase in *pmoA* transcript abundance and also influenced the active methanotrophic community structure. On the contrary, K deficits induced significant reduction in *pmoA* transcript abundance but did not affect the community compositions. The distinct responses of active methanogens and methanotrophs to the P and K limitations are likely to be linked to the difference in their adaptation and response strategies. Phosphorus is an essential life element that is a crucial component of nucleotides and energetic material, such as ATP (Rausch and Bucher, 2002). Phosphorus deficiency can affect both plant and microorganisms, but the critical levels might differ. Due to the diverse species of each functional community and their differential adaptabilities to low level of soil P

content (Chauhan et al., 2012), the species within the functional group might possess varied strategies. In the present study, the T-RF representing the genus *Methylococcus/Methylocaldum* was markedly enriched within the -P treatment (Fig. 3b). Previous studies have reported that *Methylococcus* and *Methylocaldum* sp. were dominant members of MOB communities in low P oligotrophic soil (Chauhan et al., 2012). Although we do not know the real mechanisms about the enrichment of *Methylococcus/Methylocaldum* under such a poor soil P nutritional status, it could be speculated that the possible adaptations of these MOB groups to a P deficient environment might be attributed to one or more adaptive strategies. First, the possession of high-affinity P transporters, capable of producing P-liberating enzymes, as has been documented previously (Veraart et al., 2015; Sebastian and Ammerman, 2009). Second, P use minimisation through low P containing membranes using non-phosphorus lipids (Van Mooy et al., 2009) or smaller genomes and lower RNA content, which can minimize their P-requirements may explain their ability to thrive in low P environments (Sturner and Elser, 2002). In contrast, potassium plays important roles in the activities of enzymes and cell osmotic pressure (Page and Cear, 2006), lacking K may influence the activities of the cells and the expression of functional gens. Thus, as a consequence, the copy numbers of *pmoA* transcripts were sharply decreased under K deficits condition but the compositions were not clearly impacted.

In addition, we focused on the analysis of the possible contributions of methanogens and methanotrophs on methane emission in relation to the soil P and K status, but in fact the plant biomass

was also affected. Although we observed that CH₄ emission was significantly related to plant biomass,
380 CH₄ emissions did not always rely on the plant biomass. For instance, the crop yield was significantly
different but the CH₄ emission was similar between NPK and -PK treatments. Similar result was also
detected by Shang et al. (2011). So, the mitigation of CH₄ emission under very low soil P content might
be influenced by both poor P nutrition of methanogens and methanotrophs and low plant biomass.

Besides, soil water management has been widely known to play an important role in regulating
385 CH₄ emission (Cai et al., 1997; Nishimura et al., 2004; Towprayoon et al., 2005). We observed that the
CH₄ flux were much lower at rice ripening stage when soil was drying than that at tillering stage when
soil was under flooding. These phenomena were also reported by previous studies that showing
midseason drainage and the disappearance of the water layer induced significant decline in methane
emission flux, which might associated with the reduction in methane production and increase in the
390 oxidation of CH₄ under drying soil environment (Nishimura et al., 2004; Towprayoon et al., 2005).

It should be noted that previous studies have documented that soils derived from different parent
materials may possess different initial microbial community structure (Ulrich and Becker, 2006; Sheng
et al., 2015). Agricultural practices such as crop planting, fertilization and irrigation can modify the
initial microbial community structures to some extent based on the initial microbial communities (Fierer
395 et al., 2003). Therefore, different soils may have different methanogenic and MOB community
composition structures, their shift patterns in different soils responded to low P availability may vary

among different soil types. The variations of the methanogenic and MOB communities in responding to the depleting P and K levels in the paddy soil derived from quaternary red clay may be transferrable to other soils in tendency, but the varying species might be obviously different.

400

5. Conclusions

P-deficient soils showed significantly lower CH₄ flux. This might be attributed to the restriction of methanogens and the stimulation of methanotrophs that could have adapted to changes in soil physiochemical properties in association with rice plant growth under chronic nutrient constraints. In contrast, K-deficient did not affect the CH₄ flux, which might be caused by the reductions of both methanogenic and methanotrophic activities. Comparatively, more variations within community composition of the active methanotrophs were observed in P-deficient soils than that in K-deficient soils, whereas both P- and K-deficient soils shared similar active methanogenic community structures. We have observed these effects in our quaternary red soils, but to what extent it can be generalized remains unclear, considering the remarkable soil heterogeneity.

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Acknowledgements

These efforts were supported by the National Research Foundation of China (grant numbers 41330856, 41501277) and the Chinese Academy of Sciences Strategic Leading Science and Technology

415 Projects (grant number XDB15020200). We also acknowledge funding from the Dept. of Premier and
Cabinet and the University of Western Australia under the Western Australian Fellowships Program to
ASW and the University of Western Australia to DK within the CAS-UWA Joint Laboratory on Soil
Systems Biology.

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Table 1 The basic characteristics of the examined paddy soil under different fertilization treatments at rice tillering stage and rice ripening stage.

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Treatment ^b	Soil properties ^a						
	SOC (g kg ⁻¹)	TN (N g kg ⁻¹)	TP (P g kg ⁻¹)	TK (K g kg ⁻¹)	AP (P mg kg ⁻¹)	AK (K mg kg ⁻¹)	pH (1:2.5 H ₂ O)
NPK	20.53±1.01a ^c	1.91±0.09ab	0.69±0.05a	13.69±0.10a	12.23±1.51b	135.40±33.98a	5.15±0.15a
-K	20.51±0.36a	2.10±0.16a	0.66±0.06a	13.77±0.46a	14.38±1.56a	63.40±5.38b	5.16±0.15a
-P	18.60±0.06b	1.86±0.03b	0.42±0.06b	14.02±0.31a	4.45±1.03c	138.83±35.93a	5.27±0.23a
-PK	17.94±0.11b	1.96±0.06ab	0.43±0.06b	13.76±0.11a	4.13±0.37c	59.28±3.61b	5.19±0.20a

^a Soil properties: *SOC*, total carbon, *TN*, total nitrogen, *TK*, total potassium, *TP*, total phosphorus, *AP*, available phosphorus and *AK*, available potassium.

^bTreatments: *NPK*, balance chemical fertilization; *-K*, potassium deficient; *-P*, phosphorus deficient; *-PK*, phosphorus and potassium deficient.

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^c Significant differences ($P < 0.05$) between treatments are shown with letters a, b, or c; mean ± SEM, n=3 for each treatment.

Table 2 Correlation between CH₄ flux and methanogenic, methanotrophic populations and soil properties.

	Sampling stage	<i>mcrA/pmoA</i>	<i>mcrA/pmoA</i>	SOC	TN	TP	AP	Plant biomass	
		(gene)	(transcripts)					aboveground	belowground
CH ₄ flux	Tillering	0.167	0.682	0.480	0.134	0.548	0.328	0.548	0.328
(in situ)	Ripening	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
CH ₄ flux	Tillering	0.559	0.833**	0.620*	0.576*	0.739**	0.794**	0.739**	0.794**
(in lab)	Ripening	0.738**	0.441	0.723**	0.479	0.876**	0.845**	0.876**	0.845**

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

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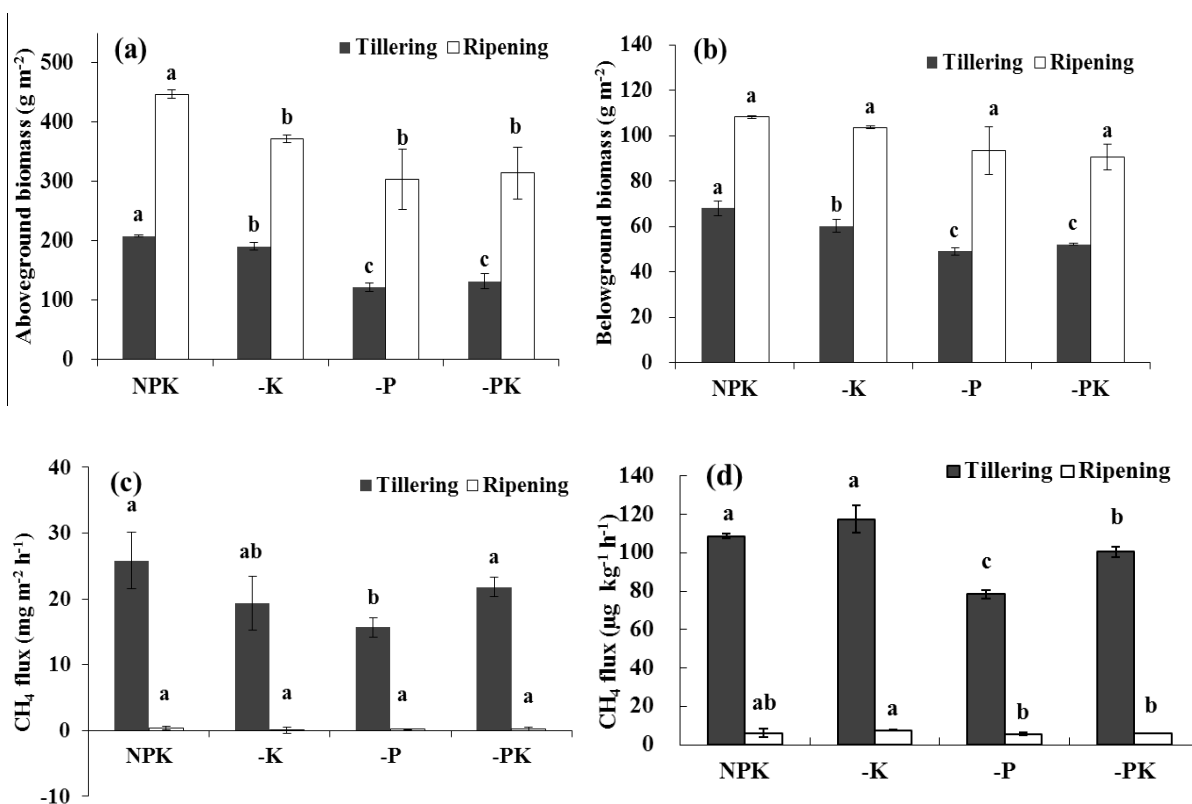


Fig. 1 Aboveground (a) and belowground (b) plant biomass and methane flux from field plots (c) and soil incubation (d) at rice tillering stage and rice ripening stage. *NPK*, balance chemical fertilization; *-K*, potassium deficient; *-P*, phosphorus deficient; *-PK*, phosphorus and potassium deficient. Significant differences ($P < 0.05$) between the treatments are shown with letters a, b, or c; mean \pm SEM, $n=3$ for each treatment. Statistical analysis for soils from tillering stage and ripening stage were conducted separately.

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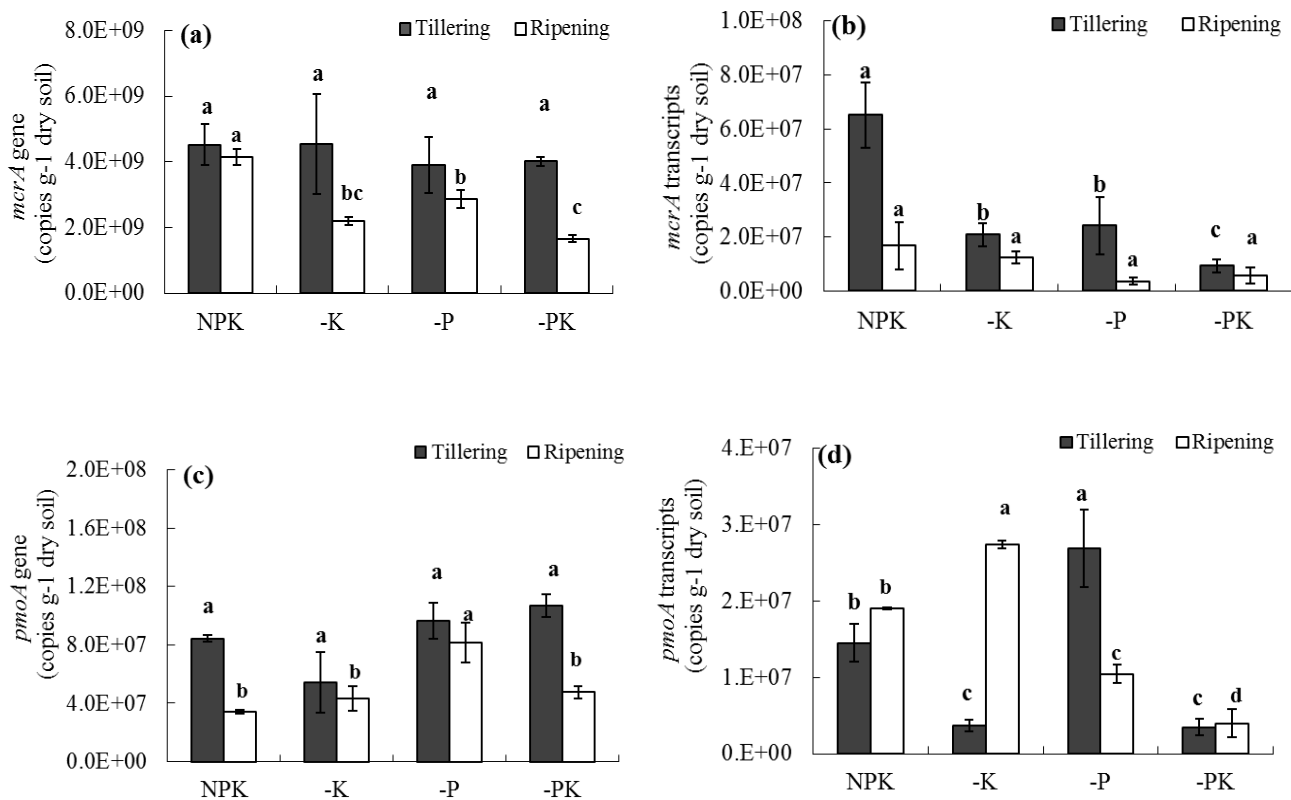
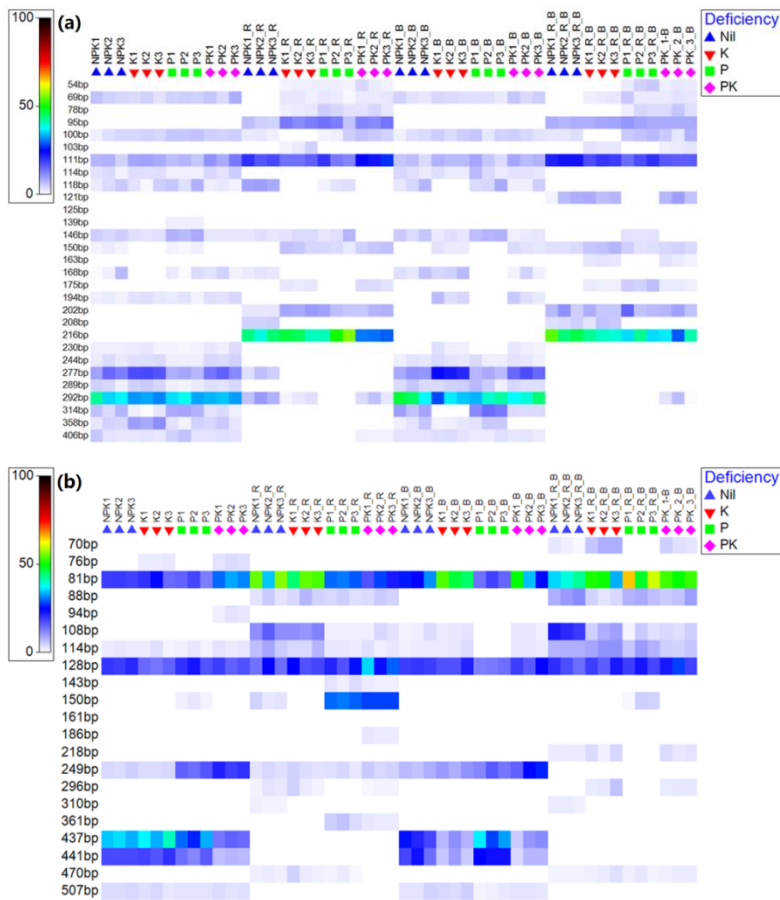


Fig. 2 Copy numbers of *mcrA* gene (a) and gene transcripts (b) and *pmoA* gene (c) and gene transcripts (d) in relation to nutrient P and K deficient condition. **NPK**, balance chemical fertilization; **-K**, potassium deficient; **-P**, phosphorus deficient; **-PK**, phosphorus and potassium deficient.

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Significant differences ($P < 0.05$) between the soils are shown using letters a, b, or c. Statistical analysis between soils from tillering and ripening stage was performed separately. Soils with the same letter at each depth are not significantly different at the $P < 0.05$ level.



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Fig. 3 Heatmap of *mcrA*-(a) and *pmoA*-based (b) T-RFLP profiles showing average relative abundances of *mcrA* T-RFs with endonuclease *HaeIII* and *pmoA* T-RFs with endonuclease *HhaI* in soils. The relative abundance of T-RFs is given as a percentage of the total peak height. Fragment sizes within the graph indicate the sizes (bp) of the experimental T-RFs by T-RFLP. Letters “R” after the treatments indicate samples from mRNA-derived profile, and letters “B” indicate the samples from ripening stage. *NPK*, balance chemical fertilization; *K*, potassium deficient; *P*, phosphorus deficient; *PK*, phosphorus and potassium deficient.

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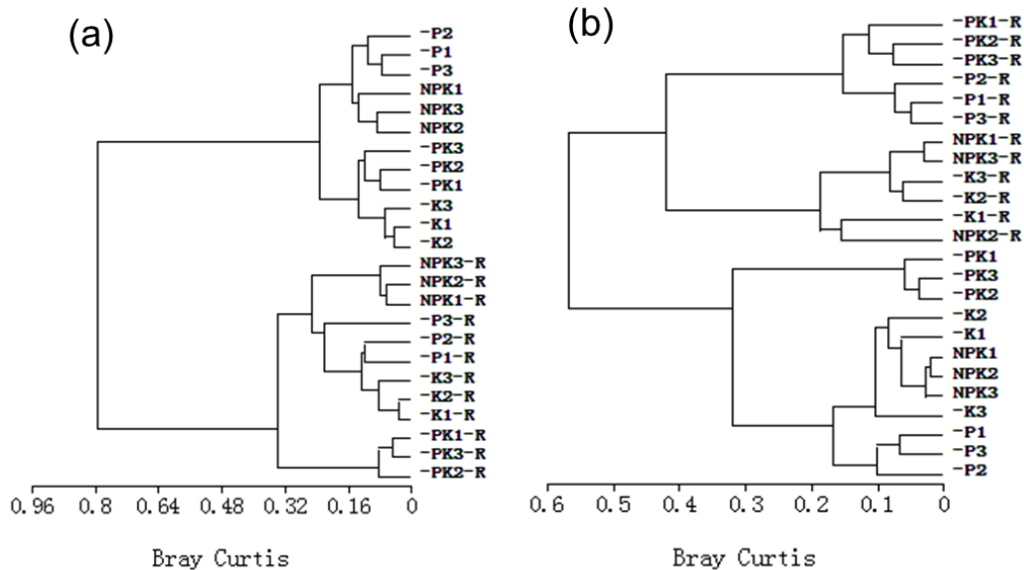
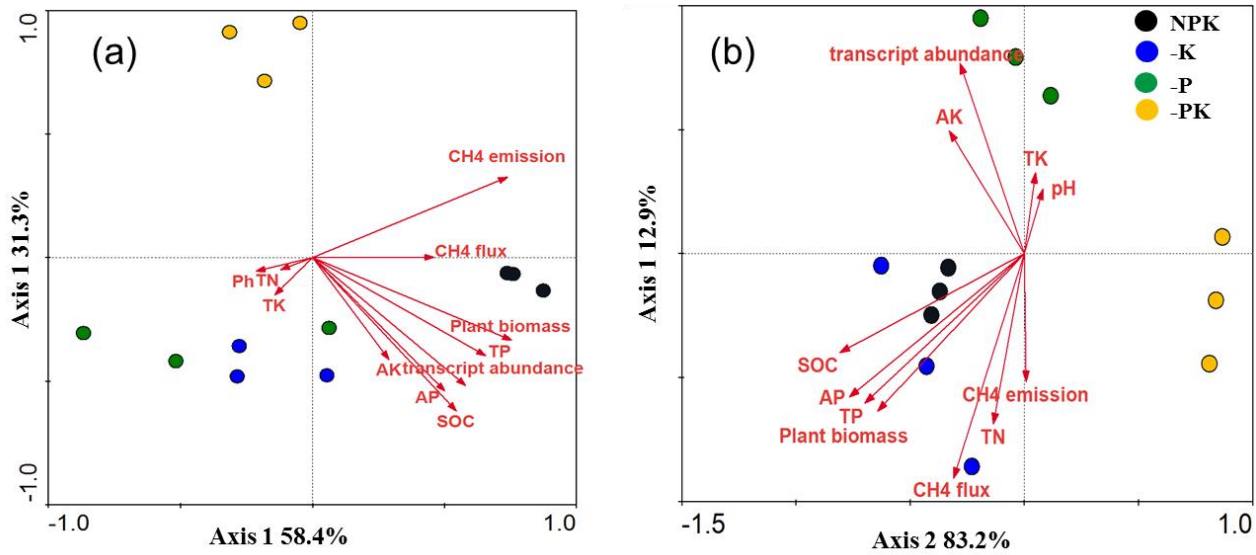


Fig. 4 Cluster analysis of *mcrA*-(a) and *pmoA*-based (b) T-RFLP profiles from rice tillering stage.

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Letters “R” after the treatments indicate samples from mRNA-derived profile. *NPK*, balance chemical fertilization; *-K*, potassium deficient; *-P*, phosphorus deficient; *-PK*, phosphorus and potassium deficient.



595 Fig. 5 Redundancy analysis indicating relationships between soil properties, plant biomass and
community structures of *mcrA* (a) and *pmoA* (b) gene transcripts from rice tillering stage. **NPK**,
balance chemical fertilization; **-K**, potassium deficient; **-P**, phosphorus deficient; **-PK**, phosphorus
and potassium deficient. **CH₄ emission**, methane flux from field plots; **CH₄ flux**, methane flux
from soil incubation.

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