

1 Review of “A numerical analysis of biogeochemical controls with physical modulation on hypoxia during summer in
2 the Pearl River Estuary” by Wang et al. (Revised).

3 The manuscript has been substantially revised and edited based on the previous review comments, and is now clearer
4 and more easily read. The description of the physical modulation method, which was developed for this study, is much
5 improved. Further, the authors have added new model validation results in comparison to field observations from the
6 Pearl River estuary and added comparisons of modeled metabolism processes with values reported in the literature.
7 These results support and strengthen the overall conclusions of the paper. I commend the authors for this thorough
8 revision. Some specific comments follow.

9

10 **Response:**

11 *We wish to thank the referee for the positive comments on our manuscript and we will make revisions according to
12 these comments. Detailed responses to all comments are given below. (Responses are shown in Italic Font).*

13

14 **Specific comments:**

15 P1, line 24: Standard convention is to omit the space before a % sign. Please correct throughout.

16 **Response:** *Okay, we have omitted the space before the % sign throughout the revised manuscript.*

17

18 P2, lines 21-23: For the sentence beginning “Shen et al. (2013) ...” it is not clear to me how this sentence contributes
19 to the paragraph. Please clarify.

20 **Response:** *Here we intended to use the study by Shen et al. (2013) as an example to demonstrate that elucidating the
21 relative contributions of physical and biogeochemical processes on hypoxia is an important question. In the revised
22 manuscript, we deleted this sentence to make this section clearer and more easily read.*

23

24 P4, line 15: Specify the Mellor-Yamada turbulent closure model that was used. I think it is MY 2.5 in ECOMSED

25 **Response:** *Yes, it should be the Mellor and Yamada’s level 2.5 turbulent closure model. We have corrected it in the
26 revised manuscript.*

27

28 P5, line 8: Insert “suspended” before “sediments” and insert “which” before “significantly”

29 **Response:** *We have revised the sentence as suggested.*

30

31 P15, line 18: Change “conductive” to “conducive”

32 **Response:** *As suggested, we have changed the word ‘conductive’ to ‘conducive’*

33

34 P16, lines 24-25: This sentence is redundant of the first paragraph in section 4.4 and could be omitted.

35 **Response:** *Okay, we have deleted this sentence as suggested.*

36

37 P19, line 18: M.C. Murrell is included twice as an author in this reference

1 ***Response:*** *Thanks! We have modified the reference in the revised manuscript.*

2

3 P23, line 15: Citation should be Murrell and Lehrter (2011)

4 ***Response:*** *We modified this citation in the revised manuscript.*

5

6 P32, Figure 10 c,d: Frequency is misspelled

7 ***Response:*** *We have corrected this word in Fig. 10 c, d*

8

9 P36, Figure 15 a,b: Frequency is misspelled

10 ***Response:*** *We have corrected this word in Fig. 10 c, d*

11

12

A numerical analysis of biogeochemical controls with physical modulation on hypoxia during summer in the Pearl River estuary

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Abstract. A three-dimensional (3-D) physical-biogeochemical coupled model was applied to explore the mechanisms controlling the dissolved oxygen (DO) dynamics and bottom hypoxia during summer in the Pearl River estuary (PRE). By using the numerical oxygen tracers, we proposed a new method (namely the physical modulation method) to quantify the contributions of boundary conditions and each source and sink process occurring in local and adjacent waters to the DO conditions. A mass balance analysis of DO based on the physical modulation method indicated that the DO conditions at the bottom layer were mainly controlled by the source and sink processes, among which the sediment oxygen demand (SOD) at the water-sediment interface and the re-aeration at the air-sea interface were the two primary processes determining the spatial extent and duration of bottom hypoxia in the PRE. The SOD could cause a significant decrease in the bottom DO concentrations (averaged over July-August 2006) by over 4 mg L⁻¹ on the shelf off the Modaomen sub-estuary, leading to the formation of a high frequency zone of hypoxia (HFZ). However, the hypoxia that occurred in the HFZ was intermittent and distributed in a small area due to the combined effects of re-aeration and photosynthesis, which behaved as sources for DO and offset a portion of the DO consumed by SOD. The bottom DO concentrations to the west of the lower Lingdingyang bay (i.e. the western shoal near the Qi'ao Island) were also largely affected by high SOD, but there was no hypoxia occurring there because of the influence of re-aeration. Specifically, re-aeration could lead to an increase in the bottom DO concentrations by ~4.8 mg L⁻¹ to the west of the lower Lingdingyang bay. The re-aeration led to a strong vertical DO gradient between the surface and the lower layers. As a result, the majority (~89%) of DO supplemented by re-aeration was transported to the lower layers through vertical diffusion and ~28% reached the bottom eventually. Additional numerical experiments showed that turning off re-aeration could lead to an expansion of the hypoxic area from 237 km² to 2,203 km² and result in persistent hypoxia (hypoxic frequency >80%) to the west of the lower Lingdingyang bay. Compared to re-aeration and SOD, photosynthesis and water column respiration had relatively small impacts on the DO conditions; turning off these two processes increased the hypoxic area to 591 km². In summary, our study explicitly elucidated the interactive impacts of physical and biogeochemical processes on the DO dynamics in the PRE, which is critical to understanding hypoxia in this shallow and river-dominated estuarine system.

1 1. Introduction

2 The formation and maintenance of hypoxia are related to physical and biogeochemical processes. Physical processes can
3 affect dissolved oxygen (DO) conditions by changing the horizontal and vertical DO transport fluxes. For example, hypoxia
4 in the Changjiang estuary is related to the inflow of the Taiwan Warm Current which brings low-oxygen waters to the estuary
5 and facilitates stratification, inhibiting vertical diffusion, and thus isolating the bottom waters from the oxygenated surface
6 waters (Wang, 2009; Wang et al., 2012). Other studies have also suggested that stratification was the major cause of hypoxia
7 in many areas (Ni et al., 2014; Du and Shen, 2015; Yu et al., 2015a). Biogeochemical processes can have a significant impact
8 on DO as well by affecting its internal production and consumption. For example, phytoplankton growth can be stimulated
9 by excessive nutrient loading producing abundant DO by photosynthesis in the water column. In addition, phytoplankton
10 utilize DO for respiration during their growth and generate detrital organic matter after death that can deposit on the
11 sediment resulting in sediment oxygen demand (SOD). The statistical linkage between nutrient loadings and the spatial
12 extent of hypoxia was well documented for the Chesapeake bay (Hagy et al., 2004) and the northern Gulf of Mexico (Justic
13 et al., 2003). In some coastal areas, the terrestrial inputs of particulate organic matter are important to the formation of
14 hypoxia. Zhang and Li (2010) suggested that terrestrial particulate organic carbon played a significant role in generating high
15 SOD, which is the main cause of hypoxia in the Pearl River estuary. Furthermore, physical and biogeochemical processes are
16 closely coupled and highly interacted with each other in regulating the DO dynamics. Physical processes can affect the DO
17 concentrations by altering the distribution of nutrients and phytoplankton and their relevant biogeochemical processes that
18 can affect the DO fluxes by producing or consuming DO along with the physical transport. One important question on
19 hypoxia is to elucidate the relative contributions of physical and biogeochemical processes. A mass balance analysis on DO
20 is a commonly used method, widely applied to many hypoxic areas including the Chesapeake bay and the northern Gulf of
21 Mexico to address this question (Scully, 2010; Montes et al., 2014; Li et al., 2015; Yu et al., 2015b). ~~Shen et al. (2013)~~
22 ~~introduced a conceptual model by using two different time scales for physical and biogeochemical processes to quantify their~~
23 ~~contributions to the DO dynamics.~~

24 The Pearl River is the second largest river in China with an annual discharge rate of $10,524 \text{ m}^3 \text{ s}^{-1}$, 80% of which is
25 transported during the wet season (Ou et al., 2009; Zhang and Li, 2010). The Pearl River network (Fig. 1) includes Beijiang
26 (North River), Xijiang (West River), Dongjiang (East River), Liuxi River, and Tan River, covering a drainage area of 4.5×10^5
27 km^2 . Freshwater from the river network is emptied into the Northern South China Sea (NSCS) through eight outlets, Humen,
28 Jiaomen, Hongqili, Hengmen, Modaomen, Jitimen, Hutiaomen, and Yamen. The Pearl River estuary (PRE; Fig. 1) is located
29 on NSCS and adjacent to the river network. The PRE consists of four sub-estuaries, including the Lingdingyang bay,
30 Modaomen, Jitimen, and Huangmaohai sub-estuaries, among which the Lingdingyang bay is the largest one with an area of
31 almost $2,000 \text{ km}^2$. The PRE is a complex estuarine system characterized by a shallow bank to the west of the estuary with a
32 depth of less than 5 m and two deep channels with depths larger than 10 m and widths of 1 km. In summer, physical

1 processes in the PRE are influenced by abundant river discharge and southwesterly prevailing winds. Complicated
2 hydrodynamics and topography significantly affect the spatial and temporal distributions of nutrients, phytoplankton, and
3 DO. Seasonal hypoxia has been reported in the PRE from several large-scale field observations since the 1970s (Yin et al.,
4 2004). Several modelling studies have also been conducted to investigate hypoxia in the PRE (Weibing et al., 2001b, a; Luo
5 et al., 2008). Unlike the northern Gulf of Mexico, hypoxia in the PRE is intermittent and confined to a small scale (Rabouille
6 et al., 2008), although nitrogen loadings in the PRE are close to those in the Mississippi River (Hu and Li, 2009). Previous
7 studies suggested that high SOD dominated the DO depletion at the bottom waters and was responsible for the occurrence of
8 bottom hypoxia in the PRE (Yin et al., 2004; Zhang and Li, 2010). However, spatial distributions of SOD and hypoxia were
9 inconsistent and there was a location shift between the hypoxic zone and high SOD areas (Zhang and Li, 2010). No further
10 discussion has been provided for this problem in those studies. According to our study (see details in the following sections),
11 this location shift is ascribed to the modulation of the effects of the source and sink processes on DO due to physical
12 transport. Specifically, in addition to the local source and sink processes, DO concentrations in local waters can also be
13 influenced by the source and sink processes occurring in adjacent waters, which produce or consume DO in adjacent waters
14 and then affect the DO fluxes transported from adjacent to local waters. This process demonstrates the spatial connection of
15 each source and sink process occurring in different locations and is of great importance to the DO dynamics in a shallow
16 river-dominated system, as in the PRE. In the traditional mass balance analysis of DO, the contribution of the adjacent
17 source and sink processes is included in the DO transport fluxes but its impact on hypoxia is not explicitly revealed.

18 The main objectives of this study are 1) to investigate the characteristics of hypoxia in the PRE, including the spatial
19 distribution, intensity, and duration, and 2) to propose a new method (physical modulation method) to depict the modulation
20 of the effects of the source and sink processes on DO due to physical transport and explore the mechanisms controlling the
21 DO balance as well as the hypoxia in the PRE. The manuscript is organized as follows. In section 2, we describe the physical
22 and water quality models used in this study as well as the theory and methodology of the proposed physical modulation
23 method. In section 3, we present the validation of our models and the physical modulation method. Section 4 provides the
24 results and discussion. Section 5 presents the main conclusions.

25 **2. Methods**

26 **2.1 Physical model**

27 In order to properly account for the interactive impacts of riverine, estuarine, and shelf-sea processes on hydrodynamics, we
28 use a one-dimensional (1-D) and a three-dimensional (3-D) coupled physical model (Hu and Li, 2009; Hu et al., 2011) that
29 integrate the Pearl River network, the Pearl River estuary (PRE), and adjacent coastal waters into an overall modelling
30 system. Specifically, the 1-D river network model is dynamically coupled with the 3-D coastal model for the PRE using an
31 explicit coupling approach. The eight river outlets (Fig. 1a) serve as the coupling interface between the 1-D and the 3-D

1 model domains. These two models run in parallel and their model quantities are exchanged across the coupling interface
2 during runtime. At each time step, the 3-D model utilizes the simulated discharge obtained from the 1-D model as the river
3 boundary forcing and the 3-D model sends simulated water levels to the 1-D model as the downstream boundary forcing for
4 the next time step. A detailed description of the methodology and implementation of the coupled model can be found in Hu
5 and Li (2009).

6 The 1-D model uses a Preissmann implicit scheme and an iterative approach to solve the Saint Venant equations of mass
7 and momentum conservation. A salinity transport module is also incorporated in the model. For details on the 1-D model and
8 its governing equations, see Hu and Li (2009). The 1-D model simulates 299 major branches of the river network with 1,726
9 computational cross-sections and 189 nodes (Fig. 1b). For the upstream boundaries, the real-time river discharge or water
10 levels with zero salinity are specified at Shizui, Gaoyao, Shijiao, Laoyagang, and Boluo (see Fig. 1a for their locations). The
11 initial conditions of water level and salinity are set to zero. The time step is 5 s for the 1-D hydrodynamic model.

12 The 3-D model used in this study is the Estuaries and Coastal Ocean Model with Sediment Module (ECOMSED;
13 HydroQual (2002), extensively used in estuaries. The model solves the Navier-Stokes equations with hydrostatic and
14 Boussinesq approximations. A Smagorinsky-type formula is applied to parameterize horizontal mixing and the Mellor and
15 Yamada's level 2.5 turbulent closure model is applied to calculate vertical viscosity and diffusivity (Mellor and Yamada,
16 1982). Details on the ECOMSED and its governing equations can be found in HydroQual (2002). The 3-D model has
17 183×186 horizontal grids with resolutions ranging from 400-500 m inside the estuary to 3-4 km near the open boundary (Fig.
18 1b). Vertically, there are 16 sigma levels with refined resolutions at the surface and bottom layers. At the open boundaries,
19 tide forcing is prescribed using water levels derived from the Oregon State University Tidal Data Inversion Software (OTIS),
20 with the uniform salinity and temperature boundary conditions based on the observed data from Wanshan Island (Hu and Li,
21 2009). Atmospheric forcing is interpolated into our model grid using wind, air pressure, and net solar radiation obtained from
22 the ERA-interim (the Interim ECMWF Re-Analysis, <http://www.ecmwf.int/en/research/climate-reanalysis/era-interim>). The
23 spatial resolution of the ERA-interim data is 0.125°×0.125° and the temporal resolution is 6 h. The initial conditions of the
24 water level and salinity are set to zero. The time steps are 5 s and 30 s for the external mode and internal mode in the
25 ECOMSED, respectively.

26 The 1-D and 3-D coupled physical model was first implemented in November and December 2005 to reach steady state
27 and then continuously run from January 1, 2006 to December 31, 2006. The results of the runs for July and August 2006
28 were used for the analysis of summer hypoxia in the PRE.

29 **2.2 Water quality model**

30 The water quality model used in this study is the Row-Column Aesop (RCA) developed by HydroQual (2004). In the water
31 column, RCA simulates five interactive systems including the carbon cycle, nitrogen cycle, phosphorus cycle, silicon cycle,

1 and DO balance (Fig. 2a). In addition, a sediment flux module is incorporated into RCA to simulate the depositional flux of
 2 particulate organic matter (including particulate organic nitrogen, particulate organic phosphorus, and particulate organic
 3 carbon), diagenesis processes in the sediment converting particulate organic matter to dissolved matters, and the
 4 transportation of dissolved matters from the sediment to the overlying water (Fig. 2b). Interactions between the water
 5 column and the sediment can be simulated internally by RCA. At each time step, the water quality module passes the
 6 calculated depositional fluxes of particulate organic matters to the sediment flux module, which in return sends the simulated
 7 SOD and nutrient fluxes to the water quality module as its bottom boundary conditions.

8 In the summer, the **suspended** sediments concentrations are high in the PRE, **which** significantly limit the growth of
 9 phytoplankton by reducing the light penetration through the water column. The shading effects of suspended sediments are
 10 considered in RCA as follows (Di Toro, 1978):

$$11 \quad K_e = 0.052N + 0.174D + 0.031P \quad (1)$$

12 where K_e represents the light extinction coefficient (1 m^{-1} ; Table 1); N represents the sediment concentrations (mg L^{-1}); D
 13 represents the concentrations of particulate organic matters (mg L^{-1}); P represents the concentrations of Chlorophyll- α (μg
 14 L^{-1}). The sediment concentrations are simulated by a sediment transport module incorporated into ECOMSED (HydroQual,
 15 2002;Hu and Li, 2009).

16 The equation for each water quality variable is given as:

$$17 \quad \frac{\partial C}{\partial t} = \frac{\partial}{\partial x} \left(E_x \frac{\partial C}{\partial x} \right) + \frac{\partial}{\partial y} \left(E_y \frac{\partial C}{\partial y} \right) + \frac{\partial}{\partial z} \left(E_z \frac{\partial C}{\partial z} \right) - u \frac{\partial C}{\partial x} - v \frac{\partial C}{\partial y} - w \frac{\partial C}{\partial z} + S - W \quad (2)$$

18 where C represents the concentrations of each water quality variable; x , y , and z represent the two horizontal coordinates and
 19 the vertical coordinate; u , v , and w represent the corresponding velocity components in the x , y , and z coordinates,
 20 respectively; E_x , E_y , and E_z represent the dispersion coefficients; S represents the sources and sinks for water quality
 21 variables; W represents the external inputs of nutrients and oxygen-demanding materials which originate from municipal and
 22 industrial discharges, river discharges, and atmospheric deposition.

23 The source processes for DO include re-aeration at the air-sea interface and photosynthesis, while the sink processes for
 24 DO include nitrification of ammonia, oxidation of dissolved organic matter and dissolved sulfide, respiration by
 25 phytoplankton, and SOD at the water-sediment interface. Here, we combine nitrification, oxidation, and respiration into a
 26 single process called the water column respiration (WCR) to represent the total DO depletion in the water column. The
 27 equation describing the kinetic processes of DO is given as:

$$\begin{aligned}
& S_{DO} = k_a \theta_a^{T-20} (DO_{sat} - DO) + \alpha_{OC} \cdot \alpha_{NH_4} \cdot G_P \cdot P_C + (\alpha_{NO_{23}C}) \cdot (1 - \alpha_{NH_4}) \cdot G_P \cdot P_C \\
& - 2 \cdot \alpha_{ON} \cdot k_{14,15} \theta_{14,15}^{T-20} \cdot NH_4 \cdot \frac{DO}{K_{nitri} + DO} \\
& - \alpha_{OC} \cdot \left[k_{20,0} \theta_{20,0}^{T-20} \cdot RDOC + k_{21,0} \theta_{21,0}^{T-20} \cdot LDOC \cdot \frac{LDOC}{K_{LDOC} + LDOC} + k_{22,0} \theta_{22,0}^{T-20} \cdot ReDOC \cdot \frac{ReDOC}{K_{LDOC} + ReDOC} \right. \\
& \quad \left. + k_{23,0} \theta_{23,0}^{T-20} \cdot ExDOC \cdot \frac{ExDOC}{K_{LDOC} + ExDOC} \right] \cdot \frac{P_C}{K_{Pc} + P_C} \cdot \frac{DO}{K_{DO} + DO} \\
& - \alpha_{OC} \cdot k_{PR}(T) \cdot P_C \\
& - k(DO_{sed} - DO) \\
& - k_{O_2^*} \theta_{O_2^*}^{T-20} \cdot O_2^* \cdot \frac{P_C}{K_{Pc} + P_C} \cdot \frac{DO}{K_{DO_{O_2^*}} + DO}
\end{aligned} \tag{3}$$

where k_a represents the surface mass transfer coefficient ($m \text{ day}^{-1}$) for re-aeration; θ_a , $\theta_{14,15}$, $\theta_{20,0}$, $\theta_{21,0}$, $\theta_{22,0}$, $\theta_{23,0}$, $\theta_{O_2^*}$ represent the temperature coefficients; DO_{sat} represents the saturation concentration of DO ($mg \text{ O L}^{-1}$); α_{OC} represents the oxygen to carbon ratio; α_{NH_4} represents the preference for ammonium uptake by phytoplankton; G_P represents the specific phytoplankton growth rate (day^{-1}); P_C represents the phytoplankton biomass ($mg \text{ C L}^{-1}$); $\alpha_{NO_{23}C}$ represents the oxygen to carbon ratio for nitrate uptake; α_{ON} represents the oxygen to nitrogen ratio; $k_{14,15}$ represents the nitrification rate at $20 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ (day^{-1}); K_{nitri} , K_{DO} , and $K_{DO_{O_2^*}}$ represent the half saturation constants for oxygen limitation ($mg \text{ O L}^{-1}$); $k_{20,0}$, $k_{21,0}$, $k_{22,0}$, and $k_{23,0}$ represent the oxidation rates for refractory dissolved organic carbon (RDOC), labile dissolved organic carbon (LDOC), reactive dissolved organic carbon (ReDOC), and algal exudate dissolved organic carbon (ExDOC) at $20 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ (day^{-1}); K_{LDOC} represents the Michaelis constant for LDOC ($mg \text{ C L}^{-1}$); K_{Pc} represents the half saturation constant for phytoplankton limitation ($mg \text{ C L}^{-1}$); $k_{PR}(T)$ represents the temperature corrected algal respiration rate (day^{-1}); k represents the transfer coefficient between the sediment and the overlying water; DO_{sed} represents the concentration of DO in the sediment ($mg \text{ O L}^{-1}$); $k_{O_2^*}$ represents the oxidation rate of dissolved sulfide.

The simulation period for the water quality model is identical to those for the physical model with a time step of 30 s. The initial conditions for water quality variables were derived from a 61 d spin up simulation, which was repeated three times in order to reach steady state. The river boundaries are prescribed based on the monthly observations (including DO, NH_4 , NO_2+NO_3 , and PO_4) in 2006 collected by the State Oceanic Administration and reported in Liu et al. (2015). The open boundaries are specified using historical monthly observations obtained from the State Oceanic Administration and reported in Zhang and Li (2010). The nutrient loadings were provided by the Shenzhen Environmental Protection Monitoring Centre, the Environment Council of Macau Special Administrative Region, and the Environment Protection Department of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. The primary parameters in the water quality model are set based on HydroQual (2004)

1 and previous modelling studies conducted in the PRE (Table 2).

2 2.3 The physical modulation method

3 A new method (physical modulation method) was introduced in this study to explicitly depict the modulation of the effects of
4 source and sink processes on DO due to physical transport. This method assumes that DO concentrations can be divided into
5 two separate parts (Eq. (4)), including the simulated DO concentrations merely driven by boundary conditions (DO_{BC}) and
6 the ones merely driven by internal source and sink processes (DO_S).

$$7 \quad DO = DO_{BC} + DO_S \quad (4)$$

10 where DO_{BC} and DO_S represent the changes in DO concentrations due to the effects of boundary conditions and the source
11 and sink processes, respectively. Governing equations for DO , DO_{BC} , and DO_S are given as:

$$12 \quad \frac{\partial DO}{\partial t} + ADV(DO) - DIFF(DO) = S \quad (5)$$

$$13 \quad \frac{\partial DO_{BC}}{\partial t} + ADV(DO_{BC}) - DIFF(DO_{BC}) = 0 \quad (6)$$

$$14 \quad \frac{\partial DO_S}{\partial t} + ADV(DO_S) - DIFF(DO_S) = S \quad (7)$$

15 where ADV represents the process of advection ($u \frac{\partial}{\partial x} + v \frac{\partial}{\partial y} + w \frac{\partial}{\partial z}$); $DIFF$ represents the process of diffusion ($\frac{\partial}{\partial x} \left(E_x \frac{\partial}{\partial x} \right) +$

16 $\frac{\partial}{\partial y} \left(E_y \frac{\partial}{\partial y} \right) + \frac{\partial}{\partial z} \left(E_z \frac{\partial}{\partial z} \right)$); S represents the source and sink terms including the re-aeration, photosynthesis, WCR, and SOD

17 (Eq. (3)). The DO_S can be further divided into four different terms:

$$18 \quad DO_S = DO_{Rea} + DO_{Phot} + DO_{WCR} + DO_{SOD} \quad (8)$$

21 where DO_{Rea} , DO_{Phot} , DO_{WCR} , and DO_{SOD} represent the changes in DO concentrations due to the effects of re-aeration,
22 photosynthesis, WCR, and SOD, respectively (Table 1). These four variables can be simulated using Eq. (7) except that S
23 refers to their corresponding source and sink terms. The positive values of DO_{Rea} and DO_{Phot} indicate that re-aeration and
24 photosynthesis are the sources of DO and thus lead to an increase in DO concentrations; on the other hand, negative values
25 of DO_{WCR} and DO_{SOD} indicate that the WCR and SOD are the sinks of DO and thus cause a decrease in DO
26 concentrations. By combining Eqs. (4)-(7), the changes in DO can be divided into three parts:

27

$$\begin{aligned}
& \Delta DO = \Delta DO_{BC} + \Delta DO_S \\
& = \underbrace{\Delta t \times [-ADV(DO_{BC}) + DIFF(DO_{BC})]}_{CBC} + \underbrace{\Delta t \times [-ADV(DO_S) + DIFF(DO_S)]}_{CAS} + \underbrace{\Delta t \times S}_{CLS}
\end{aligned} \tag{9}$$

where $\Delta t \times [-ADV(DO_{BC}) + DIFF(DO_{BC})]$ represents the contributions of boundary conditions (*CBC*); $\Delta t \times S$ represents the contributions of local source and sink processes (*CLS*), which directly affect the DO concentrations in local waters; $\Delta t \times [-ADV(DO_S) + DIFF(DO_S)]$ represents the contributions of adjacent source and sink processes (*CAS*), which affect the advective and diffusive DO fluxes by altering the DO concentrations in adjacent waters. The last term presents the modulation of the effects of the source and sink processes on DO due to physical transport and denotes the interactive impacts of physical and biogeochemical processes occurring in different locations. The traditional mass balance analysis of DO is not able to distinguish *CBC* and *CAS* as they are combined into the overall DO transport flux. However, with the application of the physical modulation method proposed here, these two terms can be separated from one another so that their respective contributions on the DO dynamics can be accurately quantified.

Additional numerical oxygen tracers were implemented in RCA to simulate five new variables associated with the physical modulation method, namely DO_{BC} , DO_{Rea} , DO_{Phot} , DO_{WCR} , and DO_{SOD} . The simulation of DO_{BC} is forced by the same initial and boundary conditions with the DO simulation. For the simulations of DO_{Rea} , DO_{Phot} , DO_{WCR} , and DO_{SOD} , the initial and boundary conditions are all set to zero. Each source and sink term associated with DO is calculated at each time step using Eq. (3). The validation of the physical modulation method is presented in Section 3.

3. Model validation

3.1 Validations of physical and water quality models

Datasets used for model validation include hourly water levels at eight tidal stations and cruise observations conducted during July and August 2006 (see Fig. 3a for the locations of the survey stations). The tidal stations are located at Jiaomen, Hengmen, Modaomen, Jitimen, Hutiaomen, Yamen, Zhuhai, and Wanshan Islands. Cruise observations include the profiles of salinity, temperature, and DO. The Taylor diagram in Fig. 3b gives a general statistical evaluation of our physical and water quality models. Green isolines provide a measure of model performance, denoted by the centred root-mean-square difference (RMSD) normalized by observed values. The distances between the reference point of observations (red pentagram) and the points for simulated variables are proportional to the normalized RMSD. The angular coordinate shows the magnitude of the correlation with the observations and the radial coordinate represents the standard deviations of the simulated values normalized by the observed values. A perfect match between the model and the observations would have a correlation coefficient of 1, a normalized RMSD of 0, and a normalized standard deviation of 1.

There is a good agreement between the simulated and observed water levels at the eight tidal stations (Fig. 4), with the

1 normalized RMSD <0.30 of the standard deviation of observations, correlation coefficients >0.95 , and the normalized
2 standard deviations close to 1 at all stations (Fig. 3b). In general, our model successfully reproduced the realistic variations
3 of tidal ranges and the spring-neap tidal cycles. Comparisons of the simulated salinity and temperature with the observations
4 are shown in Figs. 5 and 6, respectively. The simulated results follow the observed spatial distributions closely. Both the
5 model results and the observations indicate that during the summer, the PRE is mainly occupied by freshwater originated
6 from the Pearl River network, with a significant westward spreading of the river plume along the coast, while the shelf is
7 mostly filled with saline water. The normalized RMSDs for salinity and temperature were relatively small (<0.60 of the
8 standard deviation of observations) and the correlation coefficients were high (>0.90) (Fig. 3b).

9 The comparison between the simulated and observed DO concentrations at the bottom layer is shown in Fig. 7. The
10 observations were collected in four different monitoring cruises, each of which lasted for 3-4 d. The simulated DO
11 concentrations averaged over the same period were adopted for comparison purposes. Our model generally reproduced the
12 observed DO distributions and captured the observed hypoxia on the shelf off the Modaomen sub-estuary (Fig. 7c). This
13 hypoxic zone has also been reported by previous observational (Cai et al., 2013) and modelling studies (Zhang and Li, 2010).
14 The DO concentrations are relatively low in the upper Lingdingyang bay due to the inflow of low-oxygen water from the
15 river outlets but they increase gradually along the estuary to 5 mg L^{-1} in the lower Lingdingyang bay. The simulated results
16 generally follow the observed patterns. However, the model underestimates the variations in DO concentrations, with a
17 normalized standard deviation of ~ 0.63 because the model fails to reproduce the super saturation of DO observed at the
18 surface. The correlation coefficient for DO is relatively high (>0.60) and the normalized RMSD is less than 0.80 of the
19 standard deviation of observations (Fig. 3b). To further gain an insight into the differences between the simulation results and
20 the observations, we analyse the frequency distribution of their biases normalized by the standard deviation of observations
21 (Figs. 3c and d). Overall, 85% of the normalized biases are within ± 1 and the model underestimates the DO concentrations
22 by 0.34 of the standard deviation of observations.

23 In order to further evaluate the model performance in terms of depicting the important kinetic processes controlling the
24 DO dynamics, we compared the simulated re-aeration, SOD, and respiration rates with historical estimated values obtained
25 from previous studies (Table 3). The respiration rate was estimated by subtracting the nitrification rate from WCR (He et al.,
26 2014). The simulated values were comparable to the historical estimations (Table 3). The observed re-aeration rates exhibit
27 strong spatial variability with the maximum values occurring near river outlets and decreasing sharply to negative values in
28 the mouth of the estuary, while the maximum values of SOD occur in the middle of the estuary. Our model reasonably
29 reproduced the observed patterns of the re-aeration and SOD. We also conducted the model-data comparisons for
30 chlorophyll-*a*, particulate organic carbon (POC), and primary productivity as they are important variables associated with the
31 respiration rate and SOD; as shown in Table 3, the simulated values were in agreement with the observations.

32 The comparisons show that our models are robust to the spatial and temporal variability of hydrodynamic parameters

1 and DO as well as relevant important biogeochemical parameters. The spatial extent of hypoxia near the Modaomen
2 sub-estuary from our simulation is consistent with the previous studies as mentioned above. Nevertheless, the model-data
3 comparison for hypoxia presented here is limited due to data insufficiency at the current stage. We suggest strengthening the
4 direct observations on hypoxia and those related to the important kinetic processes affecting DO in future studies to provide
5 a more comprehensive evaluation of the model performance.

6 **3.2 Validation of the physical modulation method**

7 Theoretically, there should be no differences in terms associated with DO dynamics between the physical modulation method
8 and RCA if the methodology and implementation of the physical modulation method are right. Therefore, the comparisons of
9 the July-August-averaged DO distributions simulated by these two methods are shown in Fig. 8 to assess the accuracy of the
10 physical modulation method. Overall, DO distributions simulated by the physical modulation method were in good
11 agreement with those simulated by RCA. At the surface layer, the physical modulation method slightly overestimated RCA
12 simulations in the Lingdingyang bay and its adjacent areas, yet underestimated RCA simulations on the shelf (Fig. 8a). This
13 is also true for the middle layer (Fig. 8b). At the bottom layer, the physical modulation method simulated DO concentrations
14 slightly higher within the model domain (Fig. 8c). Additional numerical tests suggested that the differences in DO
15 concentrations between the two methods were caused by the nonlinear numerical methods used in the water quality model.
16 These nonlinear numerical methods are applied to restrain the errors brought by discretizing the linear partial differential
17 equations.

18 Frequency distributions of the biases between the physical modulation method and RCA are computed over the whole
19 model domain and for different bias bins between -1.0 and 1.0 mg L⁻¹ (Fig. 9a). The layers where the bias varies between
20 -0.1 and 0.3 mg L⁻¹ occupy about 97% of the total volume in our model domain. Therefore, the DO concentration simulated
21 by the physical modulation method is close to the DO concentration derived from RCA, whereas it is slightly overestimated
22 by the physical modulation method. A linear regression of the spatially-averaged DO concentration (averaged over the area
23 represented by the red box in Fig. 8) further suggested that the physical modulation method reproduced the comparable
24 temporal patterns of DO concentrations, which agreed well with the temporal pattern obtained from RCA with the regression
25 coefficient of $R^2 > 0.99$ and the regression slope of ~1:1 (Fig. 9b). Therefore, the acceptable differences in DO concentrations
26 between these two methods indicated the feasibility of the physical modulation method.

27 Comparisons of the horizontal advective DO fluxes, vertical advective DO fluxes, and vertical diffusive DO fluxes were
28 also conducted (Fig. 9 c-e). Horizontal diffusive DO fluxes were much smaller than the other terms and hence omitted. The
29 agreement between the DO fluxes calculated by the physical modulation method and RCA indicates that the physical
30 modulation method is also practical for use in the diagnostic analysis of the DO balance (Figs. 9c-e). For a better assessment
31 of the physical modulation method, some additional techniques (e.g. oxygen isotopes and artificial tracers) can be applied so

1 that the distributions of each DO part (e.g. DO_{BC} , DO_{Rea} , DO_{Phot} , DO_{WCR} , and DO_{SOD}) can be validated directly.

2 **4. Results and discussion**

3 **4.1 Characteristics of DO distribution during summer in the PRE**

4 The simulated distributions for July-August-averaged DO concentration at the surface and bottom layers are shown in Figs.
5 10a,b. Compared with the bottom layer, DO concentrations at the surface layer were higher in most of areas except in the
6 upper estuary (Fig. 10a) that receives a large number of low-oxygen water discharged from the river outlets. At the bottom
7 layer, the lowest DO concentration was approximately 2 mg L^{-1} between the Jitimen and Modaomen sub-estuaries (Fig. 10b).
8 There is a slender zone with relatively lower DO concentrations located on the shelf off the Modaomen sub-estuary,
9 extending from the Gaolan Island to the Hengqin Island. The simulated July-August-averaged DO concentration remained
10 above 3 mg L^{-1} defined as the threshold of hypoxia (Luo et al., 2008). In order to identify whether the hypoxia has occurred,
11 we estimated the hypoxic frequency in each model grid as follows:

$$12 \quad P_h = \frac{N_h}{N_T} * 100\% \quad (10)$$

13 where N_h is the number of hours when hypoxia occurs; and N_T is the total number of hours in July and August (i.e., 1,488).
14 The hypoxic frequency in Fig. 10d shows that there is a high frequency zone (HFZ) near the Modaomen sub-estuary. This
15 HFZ zone is encompassed by 10% isoline of hypoxic frequency and resembles the low DO-concentration zone. In the HFZ,
16 the hypoxic frequency varies from 10% to over 50% with the spatial average of 35%, which means that there are, on average,
17 22 days during July and August with hypoxia. Furthermore, when the severe hypoxia was defined as $DO < 2 \text{ mg L}^{-1}$ (Rabalais
18 et al., 2010), the highest hypoxic frequency in the HFZ decreased to approximately 40% and the average hypoxic frequency
19 was 16% (Fig. 10c).

20 The vertical patterns of the DO concentrations along the two transects are shown in Figs. 10e,f. These two transects
21 represent the central areas of the HFZ and their locations are shown in Figs. 10a-d. Transect A starts from the inner
22 Modaomen sub-estuary and extends southward, while transect B starts from the Gaolan Island and ends near the Hengqin
23 Island. The parallel distribution of DO concentrations to the bottom topography can be observed in both transects during July
24 and August (Figs. 10e,f). In transect A, surface DO concentrations range from 6 to 7 mg L^{-1} and the lowest bottom DO
25 concentration is almost 4 mg L^{-1} (Fig. 10e). The relatively low-DO water is confined to a thin layer above the sediment. In
26 the south end of transect A, where the depth is as much as 25 m, 7 mg L^{-1} isoline of DO concentration can penetrate into
27 depths greater than 15 m. The same is true for transect B (Fig. 10f), where the surface DO concentration is above 6 mg L^{-1}
28 and the bottom DO concentration is almost 4 mg L^{-1} .

29 Compared with the Chesapeake Bay (Hagy et al., 2004) and the northern Gulf of Mexico (Scavia et al., 2003; Rabouille
30 et al., 2008), hypoxia in the PRE was much less severe with higher DO concentrations, a lower hypoxic frequency, and a

1 smaller hypoxic extent. Here, we estimate the hypoxic area and hypoxic volume as follows:

$$2 \quad \text{hypoxic area} = \sum P_h * \Delta s \quad (11)$$

$$3 \quad \text{hypoxic volume} = \sum P_h * \Delta v \quad (12)$$

4 where P_h is the hypoxic frequency calculated using Eq. (10); Δs and Δv are the area and volume of each model grid cell,
5 respectively. Hypoxic area and hypoxic volume are the expected values which consider the temporal variability of hypoxia.
6 If hypoxia is defined as $DO < 3 \text{ mg L}^{-1}$, the expected hypoxic area and volume are 237 km^2 and 0.13 km^3 , respectively, much
7 smaller than those in the northern Gulf of Mexico ($13,500 \text{ km}^2$; Rabalais et al. (2007)) and the Chesapeake Bay (8 km^3 ;
8 Rabalais et al. (2010)).

9 **4.2 DO balance**

10 In order to investigate the processes that control the DO conditions, a diagnostic analysis of DO balance was conducted for
11 the PRE (Fig. 11) and the HFZ (Fig. 12). All of the diagnostic terms are combined at each desired grid cell and given for the
12 upper layer, middle layer, and bottom layer. According to the survey data of the Pearl River Estuary Pollution Project (Chen
13 et al., 2004), the pycnocline in the PRE is located at depths ranging from 1.5 to 3 m. We, therefore, define the upper layer as
14 the top 20% of the 10-m average depth in the PRE. The bottom layer is limited to 20% of the depth above the sediment
15 where the DO concentration is relatively lower as demonstrated in Figs. 10e,f. We also estimated the contribution of each
16 source and sink process as well as the boundary conditions to vertical advective DO fluxes (Fig. 11b and Fig. 12b), vertical
17 diffusive DO fluxes (Fig. 11c and Fig. 12c), and horizontal advective DO fluxes (Fig. 11d and Fig. 12d). Horizontal diffusive
18 DO fluxes are much smaller than the other terms and hence are omitted. The contributions of the boundary conditions (*CBC*
19 in Eq. (9)), adjacent source and sink processes (*CAS* in Eq. (9)), and local source and sink processes (*CLS* in Eq. (9)) to the
20 DO balance for the PRE and the HFZ are shown in Fig. 11e and Fig. 12e, respectively.

21 **4.2.1 PRE**

22 At the upper layer of the PRE, there is a DO influx of $9,051 \text{ tonnes day}^{-1}$ induced by re-aeration, which causes an increase in
23 July-August averaged DO concentrations by $0.55 \text{ mg L}^{-1} \text{ day}^{-1}$ (Fig. 11a). This reoxygenation will enhance the DO vertical
24 gradient and supplement the DO at the middle and bottom layers by vertical diffusion. According to Fig. 11c, 89% (0.48 mg
25 $\text{L}^{-1} \text{ day}^{-1}$) of oxygen entering the upper layer via re-aeration will be transported to the middle layer by vertical diffusion and
26 eventually 28% ($0.15 \text{ mg L}^{-1} \text{ day}^{-1}$) will reach the bottom layer (Fig. 11c). Figure 11c also shows that re-aeration is a major
27 contributor (accounts for 99%) to vertical diffusive DO fluxes. Another important source of DO is photosynthesis. As shown
28 in Fig. 11c, the vertical diffusive flux of DO_{Phot} (changes in DO concentrations due to the effects of photosynthesis; Table 1)
29 is much smaller than that of DO_{Rea} (changes in DO concentrations due to the effects of re-aeration). This indicates that the

1 DO gradient driven by photosynthesis is much smaller than that driven by re-aeration since the diffusion coefficients are the
2 same. The surface DO_{Phot} rarely reaches the middle and bottom layers through vertical diffusion (Fig. 11c), but can be
3 transported by horizontal and vertical advection (Figs. 11b,d). Approximately $0.56 \text{ mg L}^{-1} \text{ day}^{-1}$ of DO_{Phot} is transported off
4 the upper layer of the PRE while at the same time vertical advection brings about $0.35 \text{ mg L}^{-1} \text{ day}^{-1}$ of DO_{Phot} from the
5 middle layer, 2 and 1.2 times the photosynthesis rate at the upper layer, respectively. The DO_{BC} (changes in DO
6 concentrations due to the effects of the boundary conditions) and DO_{WCR} (changes in DO concentrations due to the effects of
7 WCR) are also transported mainly by horizontal and vertical advection (Figs. 11b,d). Moreover, SOD can exert significant
8 negative effects on DO concentrations in the upper layer (Fig. 11b) by decreasing DO concentrations and thereby preventing
9 the upward vertical advective DO fluxes from reaching the upper layer. In general, *CAS* and *CLS* are the most important
10 factors controlling the DO balance (Fig. 11e). Although the boundary conditions can affect DO concentrations at the upper
11 layer, the negative horizontal advective DO_{BC} fluxes are close to positive vertical advective DO_{BC} fluxes; therefore, these
12 two processes compensate each other (Fig. 11e).

13 At the middle layer, horizontal and vertical advectations are the main processes controlling the DO dynamics (Fig. 11a).
14 As the DO content transported from the middle layer to the upper layer exceeds the content transported to the middle layer
15 from the bottom layer, the overall performance of vertical advection leads to a decrease in DO concentrations. In addition,
16 both the horizontal and vertical advection are dominated by the contribution of boundary conditions (Figs. 11b,d), indicating
17 that the DO balance at the middle layer is mainly controlled by *CBC* (Fig. 11e).

18 As light becomes weak at the bottom layer, the growth of phytoplankton is limited along the shallow coastal areas. As a
19 result, photosynthesis and WCR play trivial roles in affecting the DO balance; thus, SOD becomes a major sink for DO at the
20 bottom layer. This is in contrast to the situation in the Chesapeake Bay (Li et al., 2015). The discrepancies in the dominant
21 role of SOD responsible for the total DO depletion at the bottom layer result from the differences in geometry. The
22 Chesapeake Bay has a relatively deep channel where SOD ranges from 0.86 to $3.2 \text{ g m}^{-2} \text{ day}^{-1}$ and accounts for 16% of total
23 DO depletion at the bottom layer (Boynton and Kemp, 1985). However, the PRE is characterized by the shallow banks with
24 depths $<5 \text{ m}$ where SOD ranges from 0.49 to $3.5 \text{ g m}^{-2} \text{ day}^{-1}$. Therefore, SOD dominates the total DO depletion at the bottom
25 layer with a consumption rate of $0.53 \text{ mg L}^{-1} \text{ day}^{-1}$ (Fig. 11a). Furthermore, this deoxygenation results in a strong vertical DO
26 gradient between the middle and bottom layers and thereby facilitates the downward vertical diffusion. Figure 11c shows that
27 SOD is a major cause of vertical diffusion between the middle and bottom layers followed by re-aeration, which contribute
28 79% and 25% of vertical diffusive DO fluxes, respectively. Therefore, re-aeration can also have significant effects on DO
29 concentrations at the bottom layer. Vertical advection is a major mechanism by which SOD can affect the middle layer and
30 especially the upper layer, while vertical diffusion is a mechanism by which SOD can only affect a thin layer above the
31 sediment (Figs. 11b, c). Figure 11a shows that the horizontal advective DO_{BC} fluxes are close to vertical advective DO_{BC}
32 fluxes and these two processes compensate each other. As a result, the DO balance at the bottom layer is mainly controlled

1 by *CAS* and *CLS* (Fig. 11e).

2 **4.2.2 HFZ**

3 Compared with the upper layer in the PRE, the vertical advective DO fluxes in the HFZ are almost 5.5-fold larger because
4 of its shallower depth and larger vertical velocity. As a result, vertical advection becomes the most important process
5 controlling the DO balance at the upper layer (Fig. 12a). Besides vertical advection, re-aeration is another important source
6 for DO. In the HFZ, re-aeration brings about $1.24 \text{ mg L}^{-1} \text{ day}^{-1}$ oxygen to the upper layer (Fig. 12a), 64% of which is
7 transported to the middle layer via vertical diffusion (Fig. 12c).

8 At the middle layer, the DO is mainly balanced by horizontal and vertical advection (Fig. 12a), both of which are
9 mainly contributed by boundary conditions (Fig. 12b, d).

10 At the bottom layer, SOD dominates the DO depletion rate (Fig. 12a) and leads to a significant vertical DO gradient
11 between the middle and bottom layers, which results in 88% of vertical diffusive DO fluxes (Fig. 12c). In addition, SOD can
12 affect DO concentrations at the upper layer through vertical advection (Fig. 12b). Unlike the bottom layer of the PRE,
13 boundary conditions play a more important role in the DO balance at the bottom layer of the HFZ through horizontal and
14 vertical advection. According to Figs. 12b,d, horizontal advection brings DO_{BC} to the bottom layer of the HFZ, while vertical
15 advection transports DO_{BC} upward to the middle layer. However, these two processes compensate each other and the DO
16 balance at the bottom layer is mainly controlled by *CAS* and *CLS* (Fig. 12e). Therefore, the processes controlling the DO
17 balance at the bottom layer of the HFZ and the PRE are basically similar, suggesting the need for further discussion on the
18 mechanisms of hypoxia in the PRE.

19 **4.3 Why hypoxia occurs in the HFZ?**

20 Zhang and Li (2010) showed that the distribution of hypoxia in the PRE was related to SOD because of the dominant roles of
21 SOD in the bottom DO depletion rates. However, as shown in Fig. 13a, the HFZ is not located where high SOD is and there
22 is a location shift between the hypoxic zone and the high SOD areas (Zhang and Li, 2010). One possible reason for this shift
23 is the lack of the full consideration of all source and sink processes. Therefore, we will primarily examine the distribution of
24 the gross DO depletion rate at the bottom layer (Fig. 13b).

25 In fact, it is hard to estimate the gross DO depletion rate since we cannot confirm the thickness affected by SOD. In the
26 Chesapeake Bay (Hong and Shen, 2013; Shen et al., 2013) and northern Gulf of Mexico (Yu et al., 2015b), SOD is
27 characterized by the thickness of the bottom layer to evaluate the contributions to the DO depletion rate, assuming that the
28 bottom water mixes evenly below the pycnocline. In the PRE, the depth of pycnocline significantly varies in time and space,
29 which makes it hard to estimate. As mentioned above, the shallow depth and large vertical velocities make it possible for
30 SOD to affect the surface layer significantly. Therefore, the gross DO depletion rate was alternatively estimated by summing

1 the WCR, photosynthesis, and SOD which was divided by depth. The negative values represent DO consumption while the
2 positive values represent DO production. As shown in Fig. 13b, the distribution of hypoxia and the gross DO depletion rate
3 are also inconsistent. Specifically, the gross DO depletion rate ranges from 0.6 to more than 1.0 mg L⁻¹ day⁻¹ in the middle of
4 the Lingdingyang bay but no hypoxia occurs. In contrast, the gross DO depletion rates are much lower at the bottom layer of
5 the HFZ because the effects of adjacent source and sink processes should be included in the discussion on hypoxia.

6 Figure 13c shows the agreement in the distribution between DO_S (changes in DO concentrations due to the effects of the
7 source and sink processes; Table 1) and hypoxia with the lowest DO_S areas resembling the HFZ. According to the physical
8 modulation method, DO_S is only controlled by the combination of CAS and CLS . Therefore, hypoxia in the HFZ is caused
9 by the largest negative effect of all source and sink processes occurring not only in local waters but also in adjacent waters,
10 consistent with the diagnostic analysis that the DO balance at the bottom layer is mainly controlled by CAS and CLS . Based
11 on this result, we will continue to investigate why the source and sink processes exert the largest negative effect on the HFZ.

12 The spatial distribution of DO_{SOD} (changes in DO concentrations due to the effects of SOD), DO_{WCR} , DO_{Rea} , and
13 DO_{Phot} are shown in Fig. 14. Because of the similar distributions and magnitudes of DO_{WCR} and DO_{Phot} , the distribution of
14 hypoxia is mainly controlled by re-aeration and SOD. At the bottom layer, a low DO_{SOD} zone is observed along the west
15 coast extending from the west of the lower Lingdingyang bay to the HFZ where the July-August averaged DO_{SOD}
16 concentration ranges from -4 to -5 mg L⁻¹ (Fig. 14a). Therefore, the July-August averaged DO concentration can be
17 decreased by 4 to 5 mg L⁻¹ due to the effects of SOD, causing the west of lower Lingdingyang bay and HFZ potentially
18 hypoxic. The reasons of no hypoxia occurring to the west of the lower Lingdingyang bay is related to re-aeration. Figure 14c
19 shows that at the bottom layer, re-aeration has distinct positive effects to the west of the lower Lingdingyang bay, which
20 offsets the high negative effects of SOD there. As a result, only the HFZ is **conductive** to hypoxia. Additional numerical
21 experiments suggest that turning off re-aeration will lead to a significant expansion of the hypoxic area by more than 9 times
22 to 2,203 km² and result in a shift of the hypoxic centre to the west of the lower Lingdingyang Bay (Fig. 15b, d). Compared to
23 re-aeration and SOD, photosynthesis and WCR had relatively small impacts on DO conditions; turning off these two
24 processes increased the hypoxic area to 591 km² (Fig. 15a, c). One interesting question remains unclear: Why does
25 re-aeration have the largest positive effects to the west of the lower Lingdingyang Bay. In order to investigate this question,
26 the DO_{Rea} balance analysis is conducted for this area (the western shoal near Qi'ao Island and encompassed by a DO_{Rea}
27 isoline of 4 mg L⁻¹; as shown in Fig. 14c) (Fig. 14 e-g). As shown in Fig. 14e, there is a high oxygen influx driven by
28 re-aeration in the upper layer (blue arrow in Fig. 14e), among which the vast majority (76%) is transported to the middle
29 layer (red arrow in Fig. 14e) and eventually 21% reach the bottom layer (red arrow in Fig. 14g) through vertical diffusion. In
30 addition, due to the high re-aeration rate on the surface of the upper Lingdingyang Bay, the horizontal advection brings about
31 0.31 mg L⁻¹ day⁻¹ DO originating from the upstream re-aeration (green arrow in Fig. 14g). Since the supplement brought by
32 vertical diffusion and horizontal advection exceed the loss caused by vertical advection, there remains a considerable amount

1 of oxygen originating from surface re-aeration. In the HFZ, the re-aeration rate is 0.39 times lower; therefore, the vertical
2 diffusive DO_{Rea} flux to the bottom layer is only one-fourth with the value to the west of Lingdingyang Bay estuary. Finally,
3 no hypoxia occurs in the upper Lingdingyang Bay because it is adjacent to the river network and influenced by river
4 discharges largely. As a result, the quick water exchange here brings low-DO fresh water out of the upper Lingdingyang Bay
5 quickly, making it difficult for hypoxia to occur. This can be demonstrated by the high gross DO depletion rates and low DO_S
6 concentration levels at the bottom layer of the upper Lingdingyang Bay (Fig. 13b, c).

7 **4.4 Why the hypoxia in the PRE is not severe?**

8 Unlike persistent and extensive hypoxia in the Chesapeake Bay (Hagy et al., 2004) and northern Gulf of Mexico (Rabouille
9 et al., 2008), hypoxia in the PRE is intermittent and confined to small areas. Previous studies suggested that it is because the
10 short residence time (3-5 d) in the PRE prevents the organic matter from completing their biogeochemical cycle (Yin et al.,
11 2004; Rabouille et al., 2008). Moreover, the phosphorus limitation and high turbidity also inhibit the complete utilization of
12 nutrients and growth of phytoplankton in the PRE (Yin et al., 2004).

13 However, according to Zhang and Li (2010), hypoxia in the PRE is mainly controlled by SOD which is mainly
14 determined by terrestrial particulate organic matter. In addition, we also compared the gross depletion rate in the PRE with
15 that in the northern Gulf of Mexico and Chesapeake Bay (Table 4). In the northern Gulf of Mexico, SOD ranges from 0.06 to
16 $0.70 \text{ g m}^{-2} \text{ day}^{-1}$ during the summer of 2003-2006 and the net water column respiration (estimated by multiplying the WCR
17 and photosynthesis by the depth below the pycnocline) ranges from 0.57 to $3.60 \text{ g m}^{-2} \text{ day}^{-1}$ below the pycnocline. Given the
18 depth below the pycnocline is 8.8 to 22.8 m, the gross depletion rate ranges from 0.11 to $0.55 \text{ mg L}^{-1} \text{ day}^{-1}$, with the areal
19 extent of hypoxia averaged $13,500 \text{ km}^2$. In the summer in the Chesapeake Bay, the gross depletion rate ranges from 0.16 to
20 $0.96 \text{ mg L}^{-1} \text{ day}^{-1}$ in the main stem of the bay and the persistent hypoxia extends for 8 km^3 . In the HFZ, the model results
21 (Fig. 13b) show that the gross depletion ranges from less than 0.2 to more than $1.0 \text{ mg L}^{-1} \text{ day}^{-1}$ with the hypoxic area and
22 hypoxic volume of 237 km^2 and 0.13 km^3 , respectively. These comparisons show that the gross DO depletion rates are
23 comparable to or even higher while hypoxia is less severe in the PRE compared to the Chesapeake Bay and the northern
24 Gulf of Mexico. Therefore, there should be a different mechanism rather than phosphorous limitation or high concentrations
25 of sediments controlling the hypoxia in the Pearl River estuary.

26 ~~Hypoxia in the PRE is not severe because of limited hypoxic area, relatively high DO concentrations, and the~~
27 ~~intermittency of hypoxia.~~ As mentioned earlier, hypoxia is confined within the HFZ due to the effects of SOD and
28 re-aeration. When we focus on hypoxia in the HFZ, relatively high DO concentrations are caused by the mild effects of
29 source and sink processes on DO. According to Fig. 14c, the July-August averaged DO_S concentration ranges from -2 to -3
30 mg L^{-1} at the bottom layer of HFZ, which indicates that July-August averaged DO concentration varies from 3 to 4 mg L^{-1}
31 given the July-August averaged DO_{BC} concentration is approximately 6 mg L^{-1} . Based on this result, we will continue to

1 study the reasons for such low DO_s concentrations at the bottom layer of the HFZ.

2 Figure 17 reveals that DO_{SOD} ranges from -4 to -5 $mg\ L^{-1}$ at the bottom layer of the HFZ, with the spatially averaged
3 value of -4.31 $mg\ L^{-1}$. This result indicates that the average DO concentrations at the bottom layer of HFZ will be as low as
4 1.76 $mg\ L^{-1}$, assuming that other source and sink processes are neglected. This result implies that SOD alone is large enough
5 to form severe hypoxia in HFZ. However, photosynthesis production rates exceed the WCR consumption rate and eventually
6 increase the average DO concentrations significantly by 0.94 $mg\ L^{-1}$ at the bottom layer of HFZ (Fig. 16). Numerical
7 experiments showed that turning off photosynthesis and WCR decreased DO concentrations to below 3 $mg\ L^{-1}$ and increased
8 the hypoxic frequency to more than 60% in HFZ (Figs. 15c,d). In addition to photosynthesis, re-aeration is another important
9 source of DO, which can cause an increase in average DO concentrations by 0.88 $mg\ L^{-1}$ at the bottom layer of the HFZ (Fig.
10 16). As shown in Fig. 15, turning off re-aeration can also decrease the DO concentrations and increase the hypoxic frequency
11 at the bottom layer of the HFZ. Moreover, the hypoxic frequency averaged over the bottom layer of the HFZ was increased
12 to about 59%; thus, hypoxia would occur for over a month during July and August in the HFZ. Therefore, there are two
13 reasons for hypoxia not being severe in the PRE. First, the hypoxic area is limited due to the effects of SOD and re-aeration.
14 Second, the intermittent hypoxia in the HFZ is caused by re-aeration and photosynthesis which offset a portion of DO
15 consumed by SOD.

16 5. Summary and conclusions

17 We used a physical-biogeochemical coupled model incorporated with the physical modulation method to investigate the DO
18 dynamics and hypoxia during summer in the PRE. Model validations using the available *in situ* data and historical
19 observations showed that our model could reasonably reproduce the observed patterns of hydrodynamic parameters and DO
20 concentrations as well as the key processes controlling hypoxia (i.e. re-aeration and SOD). In addition, the physical
21 modulation method was able to predict the simulated concentrations and mass budgets of DO from the RCA model and
22 therefore, could be used to quantify the relative impacts of boundary conditions and source and sink processes occurring in
23 local and adjacent waters on the DO conditions.

24 The model results showed a high frequency zone (HFZ) of hypoxia on the shelf off the Modaomen sub-estuary,
25 consistent with the previous studies. Hypoxia in the HFZ was confined to a thin layer above the sediment and was not severe
26 because of its intermittency in time and limited spatial extent ascribed to the contributions of re-aeration and photosynthesis.
27 Based on the diagnostic analysis using the physical modulation method, the DO balance at the bottom layer was largely
28 affected by local and adjacent source and sink processes. Re-aeration and SOD were the two principle kinetic processes
29 controlling the spatial distribution and duration of bottom hypoxia in the PRE. SOD could exert significant negative effects
30 on the bottom DO concentrations in the HFZ and to the west of the lower Lingdingyang Bay, making these two areas prone
31 to hypoxia. On the other hand, re-aeration along with physical transport could supply a considerable amount of DO to the

1 bottom layer and largely offset the oxygen consumed by SOD. Consequently, no hypoxia occurred to the west of the lower
2 Lingdingyang Bay, while hypoxia in the HFZ was intermittent and confined to a smaller area compared to those in the
3 Chesapeake Bay and the northern Gulf of Mexico. Furthermore, our numerical experiments suggested that turning off
4 re-aeration could produce a larger, more persistent hypoxic area in the PRE.

5 Finally, the physical modulation method proposed in this study could be useful for further investigation of other water
6 quality issues in the PRE and could also be applied to other shallow and river-dominated estuaries.

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Table 1. List of state variables in the water quality model (RCA) and the physical modulation method

Variables	Descriptions (unit)
<i>Ke</i>	light extinction coefficient (m^{-1})
<i>N</i>	sediment concentration ($mg\ L^{-1}$)
<i>D</i>	concentration of POM ($mg\ L^{-1}$)
<i>P</i>	concentration of Chlorophyll- α ($\mu g\ L^{-1}$)
<i>DO</i>	dissolved oxygen ($mg\ O\ L^{-1}$)
<i>DO_{sat}</i>	saturation concentration of dissolved oxygen ($mg\ O\ L^{-1}$)
<i>DO_{sed}</i>	concentration of dissolved oxygen in the sediment ($mg\ O\ L^{-1}$)
<i>O₂[*]</i>	dissolved oxygen equivalents ($mg\ O\ L^{-1}$)
<i>P_c</i>	phytoplankton biomass ($mg\ C\ L^{-1}$)
LDOC	labile dissolved organic carbon ($mg\ C\ L^{-1}$)
RDOC	refractory dissolved organic carbon ($mg\ C\ L^{-1}$)
ReDOC	reactive dissolved organic carbon ($mg\ C\ L^{-1}$)
ExDOC	algal exudate dissolved organic carbon ($mg\ C\ L^{-1}$)
<i>DO_{BC}</i>	changes in DO concentrations due to the effects of boundary conditions ($mg\ O\ L^{-1}$)
<i>DO_S</i>	changes in DO concentrations due to the effects of source and sink terms ($mg\ O\ L^{-1}$)
<i>DO_{Rea}</i>	changes in DO concentrations due to the effects of air-sea re-aeration ($mg\ O\ L^{-1}$)
<i>DO_{Phot}</i>	changes in DO concentrations due to the effects of photosynthesis ($mg\ O\ L^{-1}$)
<i>DO_{WCR}</i>	changes in DO concentrations due to the effects of WCR ($mg\ O\ L^{-1}$)
<i>DO_{SOD}</i>	changes in DO concentrations due to the effects of SOD ($mg\ O\ L^{-1}$)

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Table 2. Parameters for the water quality model (RCA)

Parameters	Range	Value	Units
Maximum specific growth rate of phytoplankton	1.7-3.0 ^a	2.0 ^c	day ⁻¹
Respiration rate	0.1-0.3 ^a	0.1 ^c	day ⁻¹
RDON mineralization rate	0.008-0.01 ^a	0.009 ^c	day ⁻¹
LDON mineralization rate	0.085-0.1 ^a	0.09 ^c	day ⁻¹
RPON hydrolysis rate	0.007-0.01 ^a	0.008 ^c	day ⁻¹
LPON hydrolysis rate	0.05-0.07 ^a	0.06 ^c	day ⁻¹
RDOP mineralization rate	0.01-0.02 ^a	0.01 ^c	day ⁻¹
LDOP mineralization rate	0.1-0.2 ^a	0.1 ^c	day ⁻¹
RPOP hydrolysis rate	0.007-0.1 ^a	0.008 ^c	day ⁻¹
LPOP hydrolysis rate	0.085-0.1 ^a	0.09 ^c	day ⁻¹
RDOC mineralization rate	0.007-0.01 ^a	0.009 ^c	day ⁻¹
LDOC mineralization rate	0.1-0.15 ^a	0.1 ^c	day ⁻¹
RPOC hydrolysis rate	0.007-0.01 ^a	0.01 ^c	day ⁻¹
LPOC hydrolysis rate	0.07-0.1 ^a	0.08 ^c	day ⁻¹
RPON, LPON, RPOP, LPOP, RPOC, LPOC settling rates	0.5-1.0 ^a	0.5 ^c	m day ⁻¹
Nitrification rate	0.05-0.1 ^a	0.08 ^c	day ⁻¹
Denitrification rate	0.05-0.4 ^a	0.09 ^c	day ⁻¹
G1 POM diagenesis rate	0.035 ^b	0.035 ^b	day ⁻¹
G2 POM diagenesis rate	0.0018 ^b	0.0018 ^b	day ⁻¹
G3 POM diagenesis rate	0-1.0E-6 ^b	1.0E-7 ^c	day ⁻¹
Nitrification rate in the sediment	0.1313 ^b	0.1313 ^b	m day ⁻¹
Denitrification rate in the aerobic layer	0.2-1.25 ^b	1.25 ^c	m day ⁻¹
Denitrification rate in the anaerobic layer	0.25 ^b	0.25 ^b	m day ⁻¹

^a HydroQual (2004)

^b Di Toro (2001)

^c Zhang and Li (2010)

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Table 3 Comparisons between the simulated and historically estimated values during summer at the Lingdingyang bay: re-aeration rate (Rea); sediment oxygen demand (SOD); respiration rate (Resp); chlorophyll-*a* (Chl-*a*) concentrations; primary productivity (PP); particulate organic carbon (POC) concentrations. Note that positive values represent DO production rates, while negative values represent DO consumption rates.

	Simulated	Historically estimated	Time period
Rea (g m ⁻² day ⁻¹)	-0.09 ~ 9.59	-0.68 ~ 6.8 ^a	Aug. 2005; Aug. 2008
SOD (g m ⁻² day ⁻¹)	-1.01 ~ -3.53	-0.72 ~ -3.89 ^b	Jul. 1999
Resp (mg L ⁻¹ day ⁻¹)	0.00 ~ -0.27	-0.11 ~ -0.37 ^a	Aug. 2008
Chl- <i>a</i> (µg L ⁻¹)	1.92±1.96	1.64 ^c	Jun. 2012
PP (mg m ⁻² day ⁻¹)	310.8±427.5	302.9 ^c	Jun. 2012
POC (mg L ⁻¹)	<0.5-3.01	0.40~>2.50 ^d	Nov. 2013, Feb. 2014, May 2014, and Aug. 2014

^a He et al. (2014)

^b Chen et al. (2004)

^c Ye et al. (2015)

^d Guo et al. (2015)

Table 4 A summary of the sediment oxygen demand (SOD), net water column respiration rate (NWCR, estimated by multiplying WCR and photosynthesis by the depth below the pycnocline), and gross depletion rate (GD) below the pycnocline reported for the northern Gulf of Mexico and the Chesapeake Bay. Note that negative values represent DO consumption rates. The thickness of the bottom layer below the pycnocline and the hypoxic estimations for these two regions are also included.

	Time period	SOD	NWCR	GD	Depth of the bottom layer (m)	Hypoxic area or volume
		(g m ⁻² day ⁻¹)	(g m ⁻² day ⁻¹)	(mg L ⁻¹ day ⁻¹)		
Northern Gulf of Mexico	Jun. 2003 ^a	-0.06 ~ -0.70	-0.57 ~ -2.39	-0.11 ~ -0.24	15.0 ~ 22.5	13,500 km ² ^b
	Jun. 2006 ^a	-0.06 ~ -0.58	-2.69 ~ -3.50	-0.24 ~ -0.33	18.8 ~ 21.4	
	Aug. 2007 ^a	-0.06 ~ -0.53	-1.06 ~ -2.23	-0.23 ~ -0.55	8.8 ~ 22.8	
Chesapeake Bay	Aug. ^c	-1.5 ~ -3.2	-1.7 ~ -16.0	-0.16 ~ -0.96	20	8 km ³ ^d

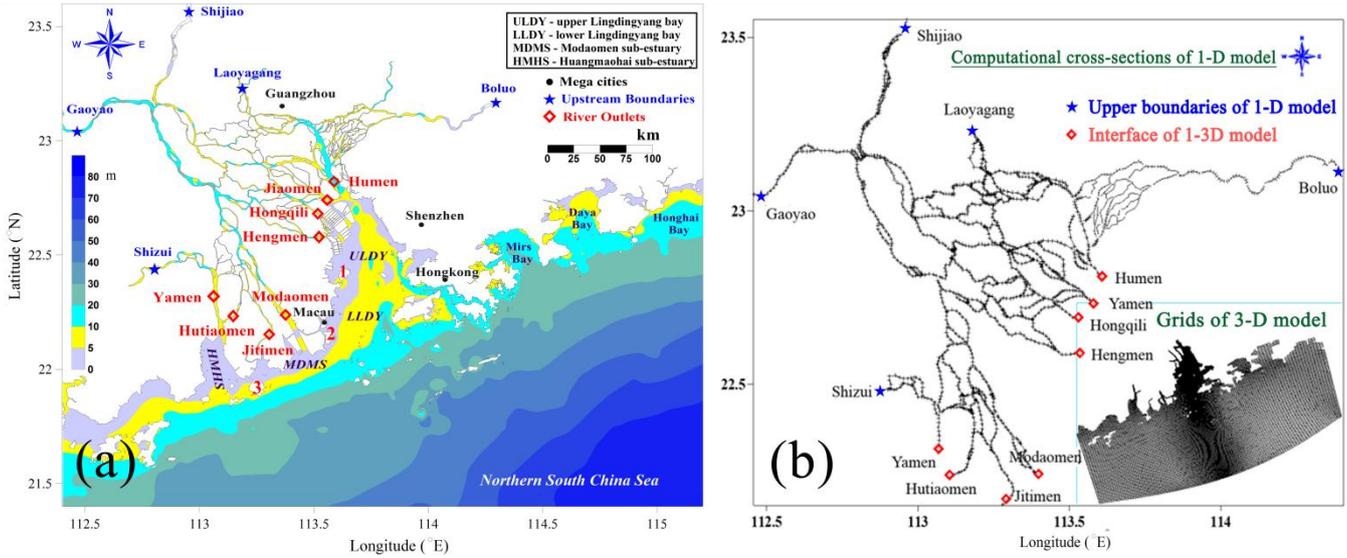
^a Murrell and Lehrter (2011)

^b Rabalais et al. (2007)

^c Hong and Shen (2013)

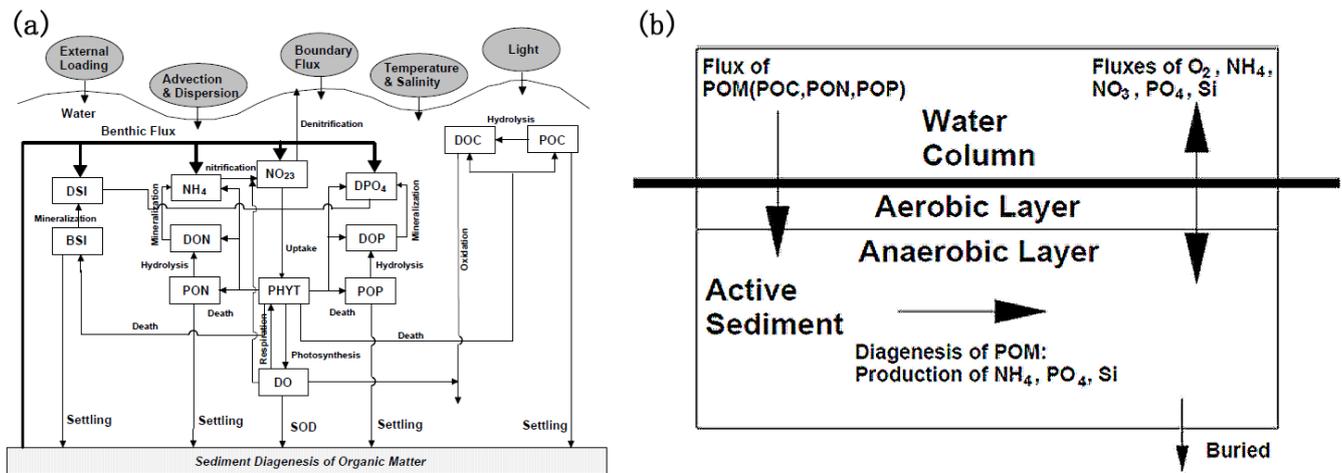
^d Rabalais et al. (2010)

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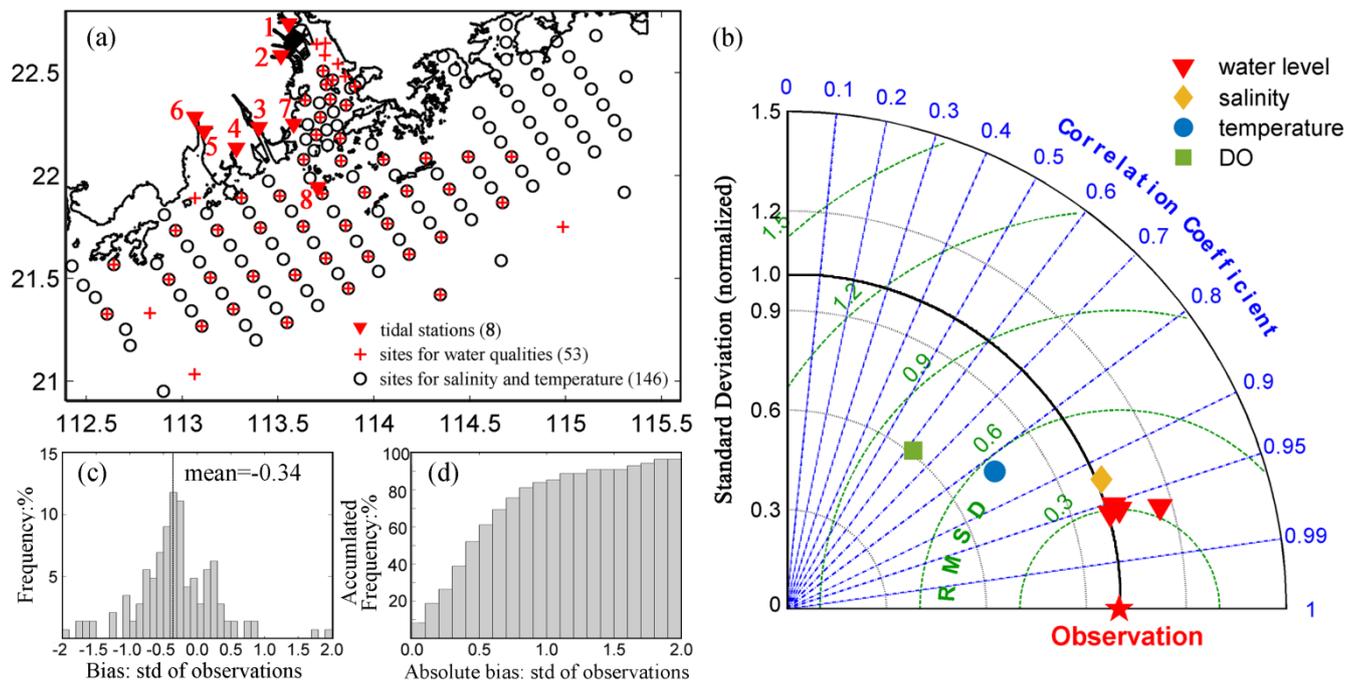
3 Fig. 1 Maps showing (a) the Pearl River Delta with the Pearl River network and the Pearl River estuary (PRE), and (b)
 4 computational cross-sections for 1-D model and model grids for 3-D model. The red numbers in Fig. 1a represent
 5 islands which are not marked on the map: 1-Qi'ao island; 2-Hengqin Island; 3-Gaolan Island.
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9 Fig. 2 A conceptual framework for (a) RCA model and (b) sediment flux model (revised from (Di Toro, 2001)):
 10 dissolved oxygen (DO); phytoplankton (PHYT); particulate organic carbon (POC); dissolved organic carbon (DOC);
 11 ammonia nitrogen (NH_4); nitrite and nitrate nitrogen ($\text{NO}_{2/3}$); particulate organic nitrogen (PON); dissolved organic
 12 nitrogen (DON); dissolved inorganic phosphorus (DPO_4); particulate organic phosphorus (POP); dissolved organic

1 phosphorus (DOP); dissolved silica (DSi); biogenic silica (BSi); sediment oxygen demand (SOD).

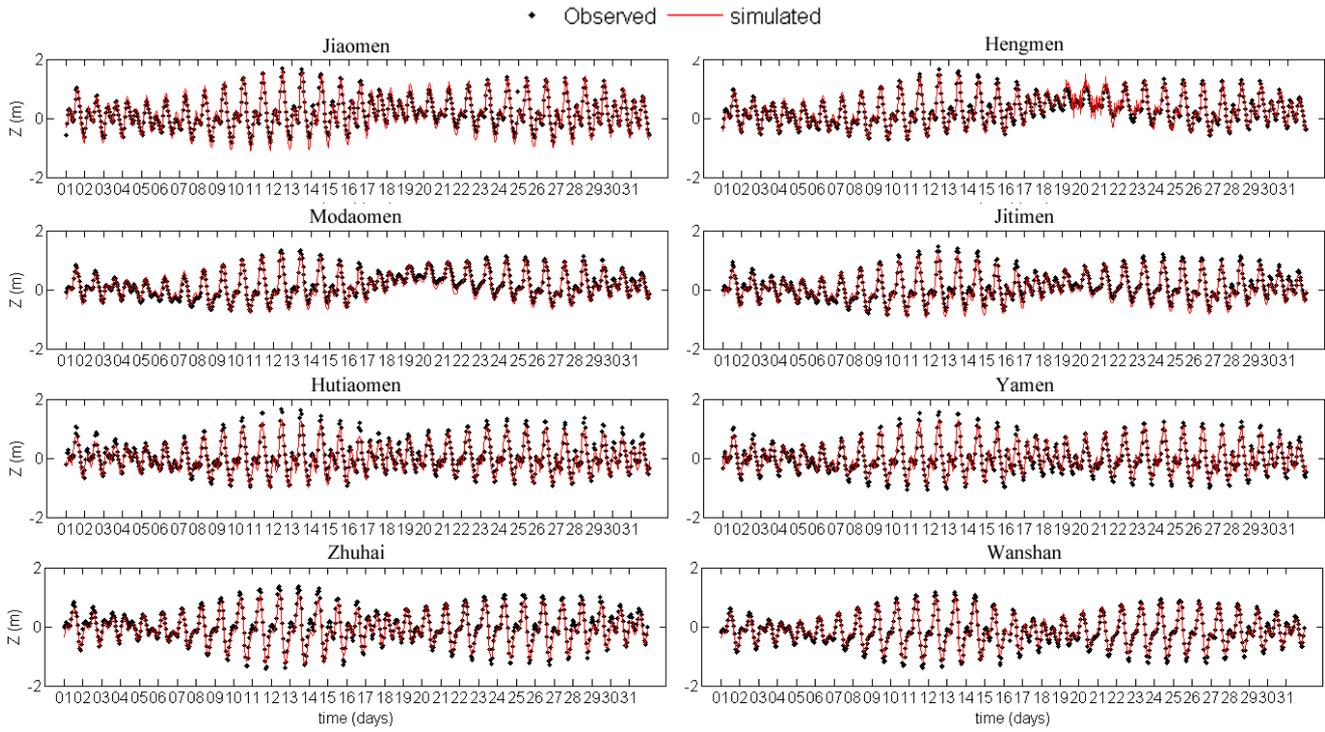


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3 Fig. 3 (a) Survey stations of water levels (red triangles), salinity and temperature (black circles), and water quality
4 variables (red crosses) during July and August 2006. (b) Normalized Taylor diagram illustrating the model skills of
5 simulating the water levels (red triangles), salinity (orange diamonds), temperature (blue circles), and DO (green
6 squares). (c) Frequency and (d) accumulated frequency distribution as a function of the biases and absolute values of
7 the biases normalized by the standard deviation of observations between the simulated and the observed DO
8 concentrations. Note that positive values represent model's overestimations on the DO concentrations, while negative
9 values represent underestimations. 1-Jiaomen; 2-Hengmen; 3-Modaomen; 4-Jitimen; 5-Hutiaomen; 6-Yamen;
10 7-Zhuhai; 8-Wanshan Island.

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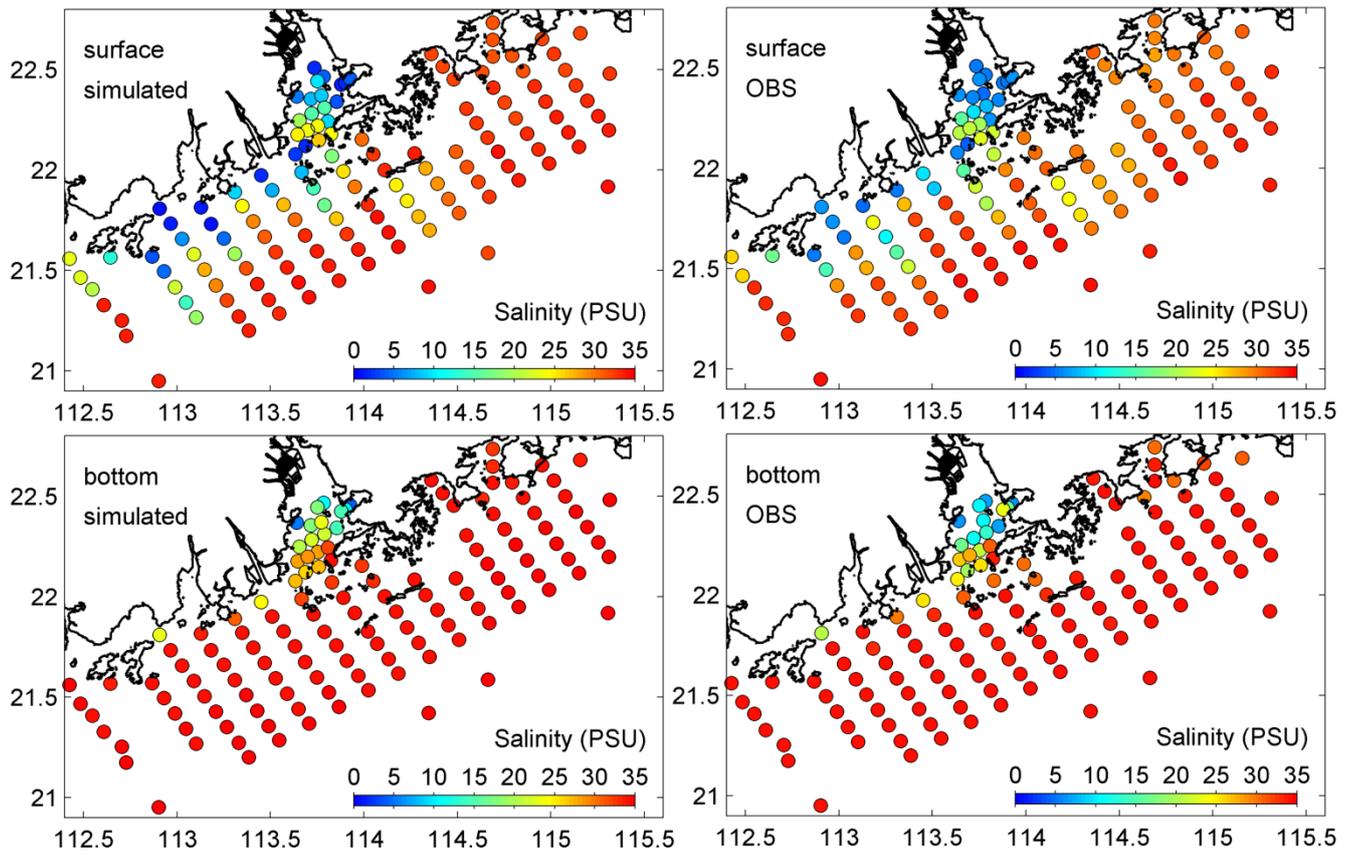
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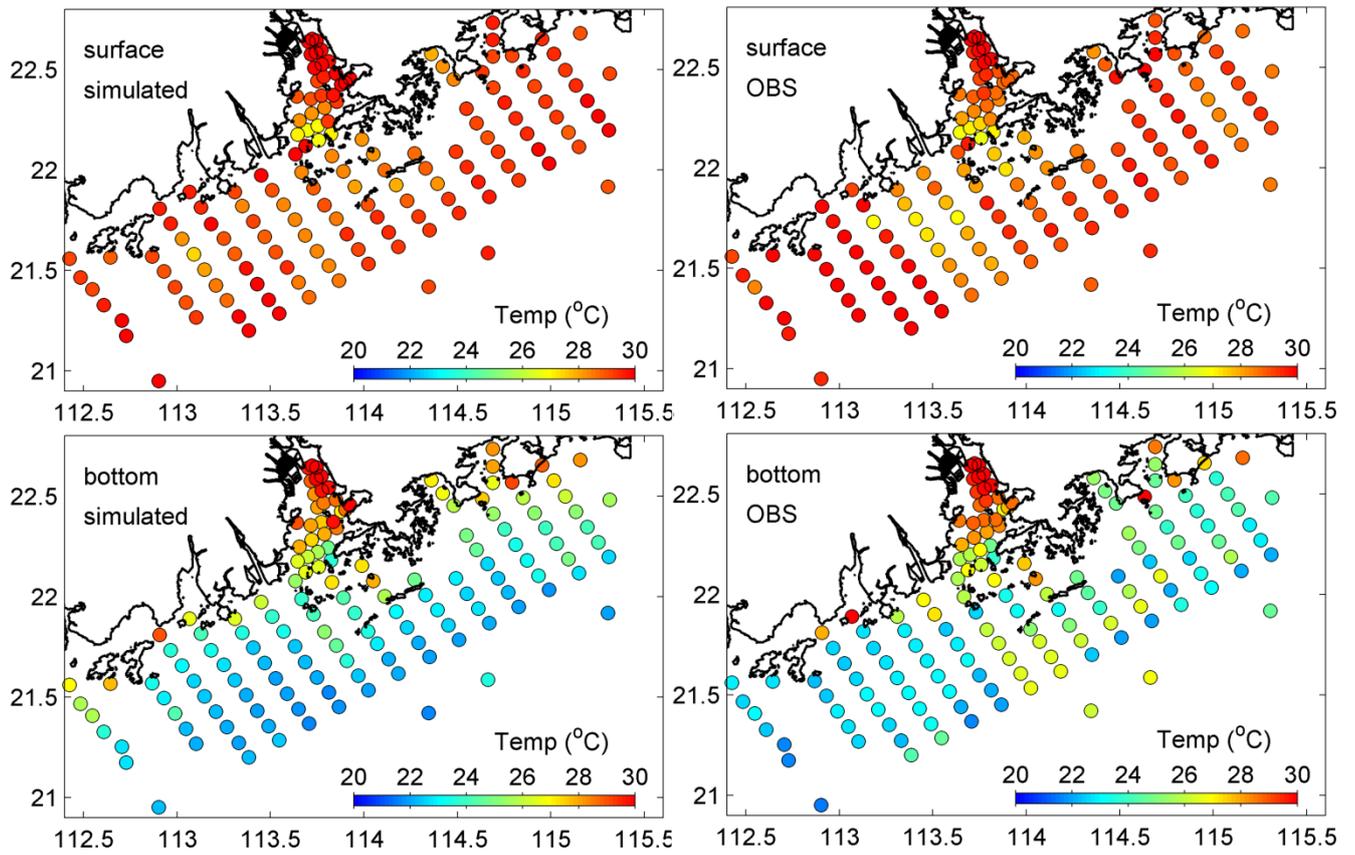
2 Fig. 4 Comparisons of the simulated (red lines) and the observed (black dots) water levels at eight tidal stations during
 3 July 2006. Locations for the tidal stations are shown in Fig. 3a.

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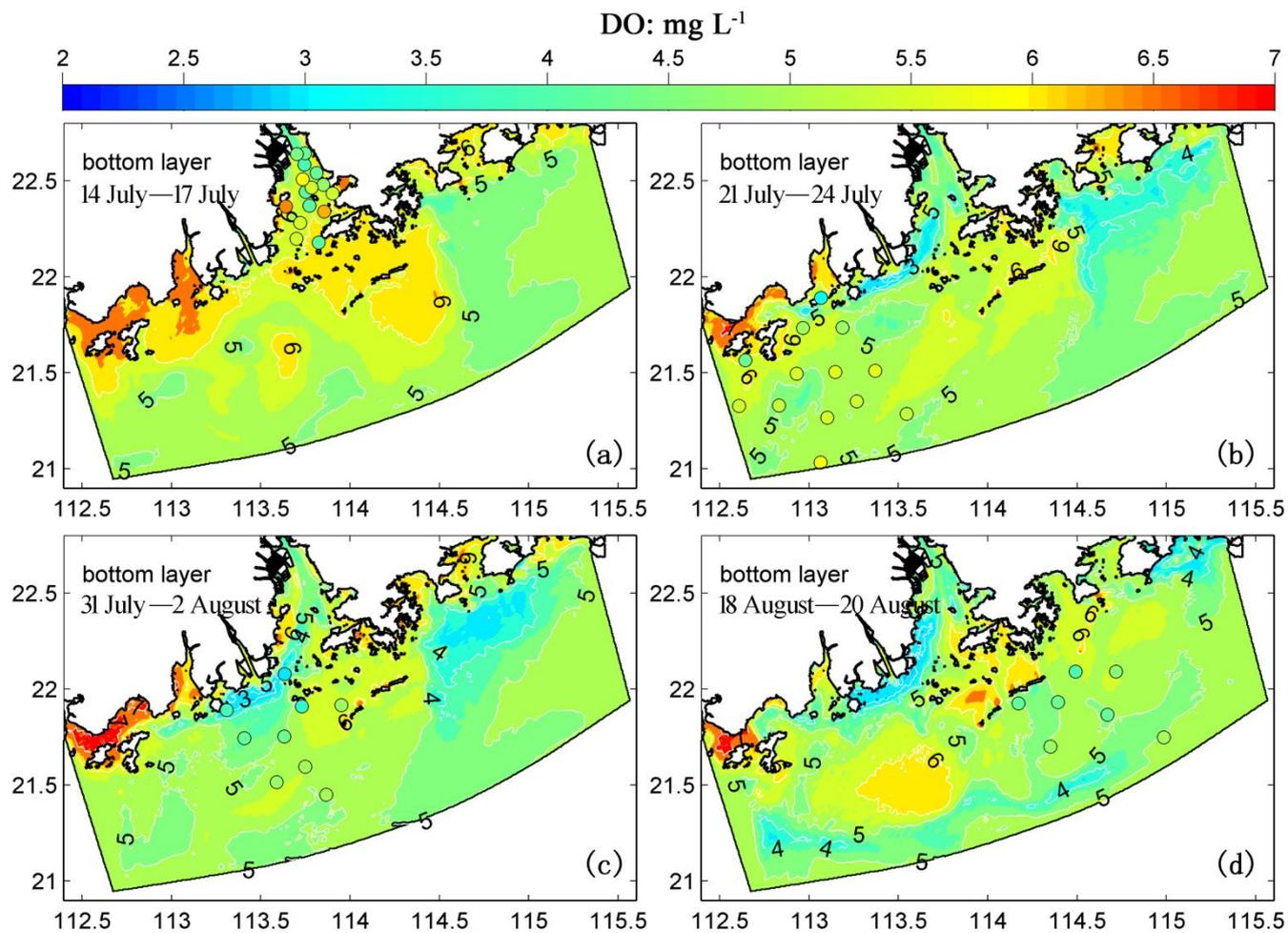
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Fig. 5 Comparisons of the simulated (left panels) and the observed (right panels) salinity at the surface layer (upper panels) and the bottom layer (lower panels) during July and August 2006.



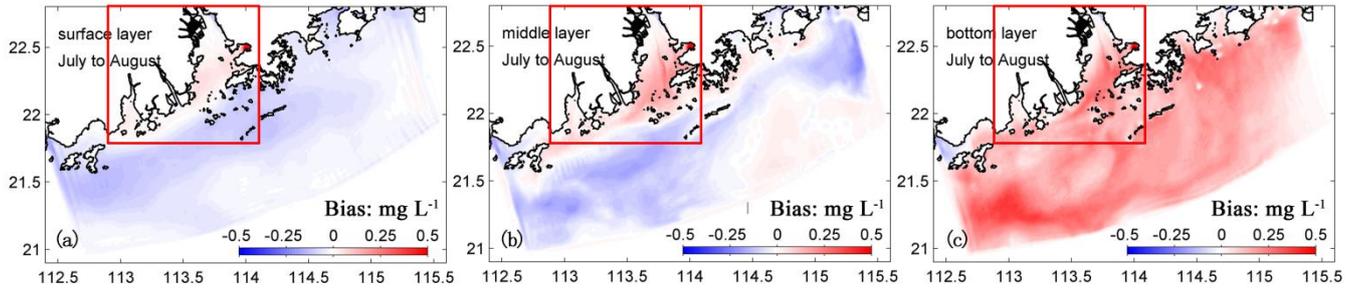
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Fig. 6 Comparisons of the simulated (left panels) and the observed (right panels) temperature at the surface layer (upper panels) and the bottom layer (lower panels) during July and August 2006.



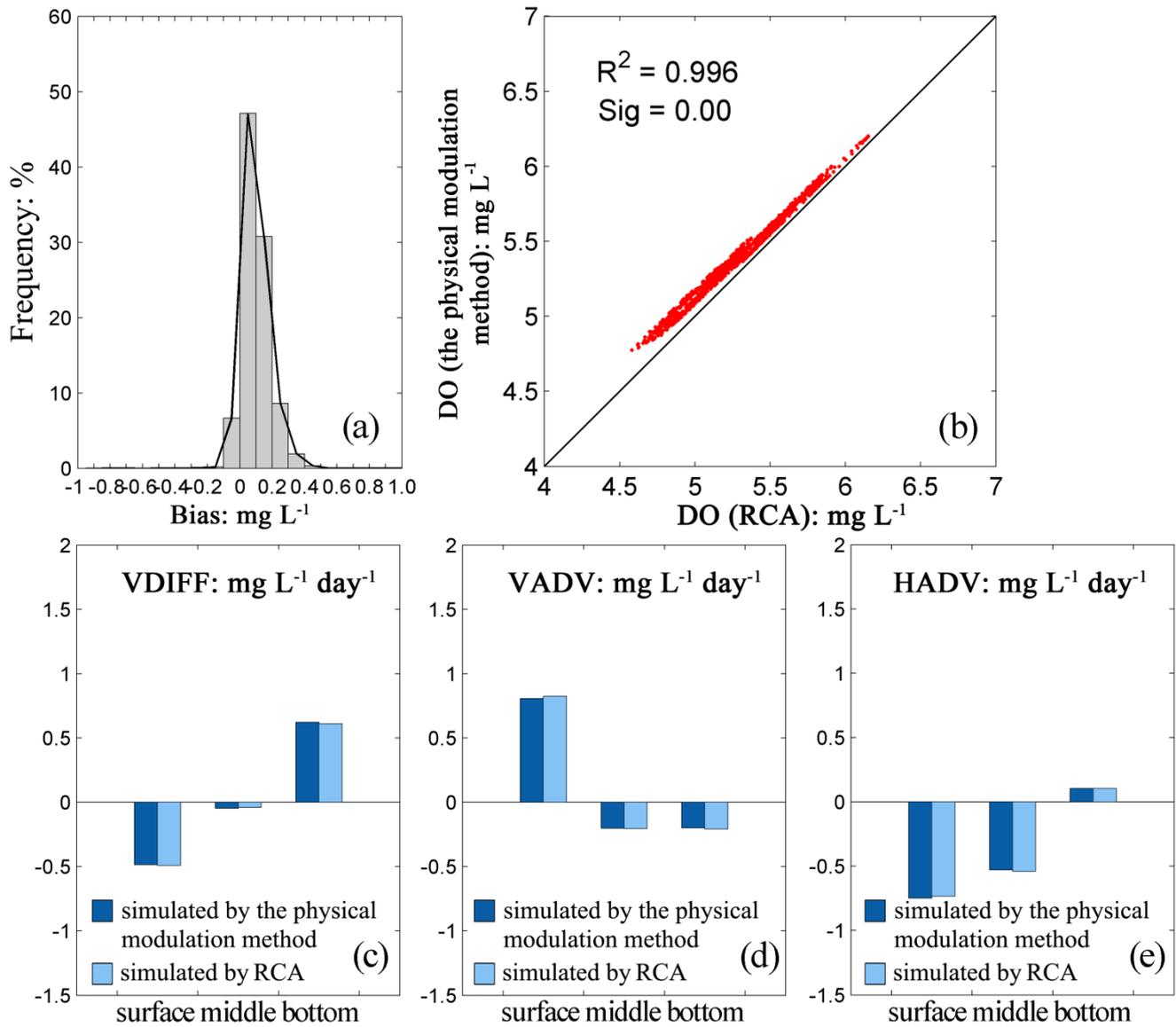
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2 Fig. 7 Comparisons of the simulated (colored map) and the observed (colored dots) DO concentrations at the bottom
3 layer during July and August 2006.

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2 Fig. 8 Spatial distributions of the biases of the simulated DO concentrations (averaged over July-August 2006)
 3 between the physical modulation method and the water quality model (RCA). Note that positive values (red) indicate
 4 that the physical modulation method overestimates the DO concentrations simulated by RCA, while negative values
 5 indicate underestimations. The red box represents the main part of the Pearl River estuary (PRE), which is the area of
 6 interest in this study.



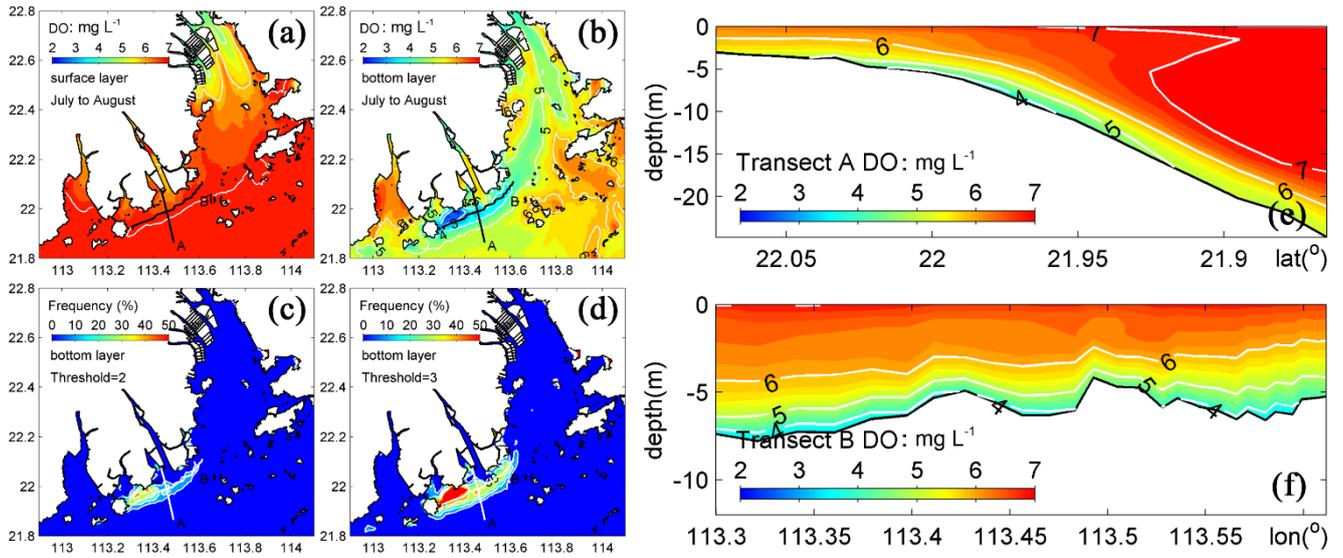
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2 Fig. 9 Comparisons for the physical modulation method and RCA: (a) frequency distribution as a function of the biases
 3 of the simulated DO concentrations; (b) the DO concentrations in the main PRE (denoted by the red box in Fig. 8); (c)
 4 the vertical DO diffusive fluxes; (d) the vertical advective DO fluxes; (e) horizontal advective DO fluxes.

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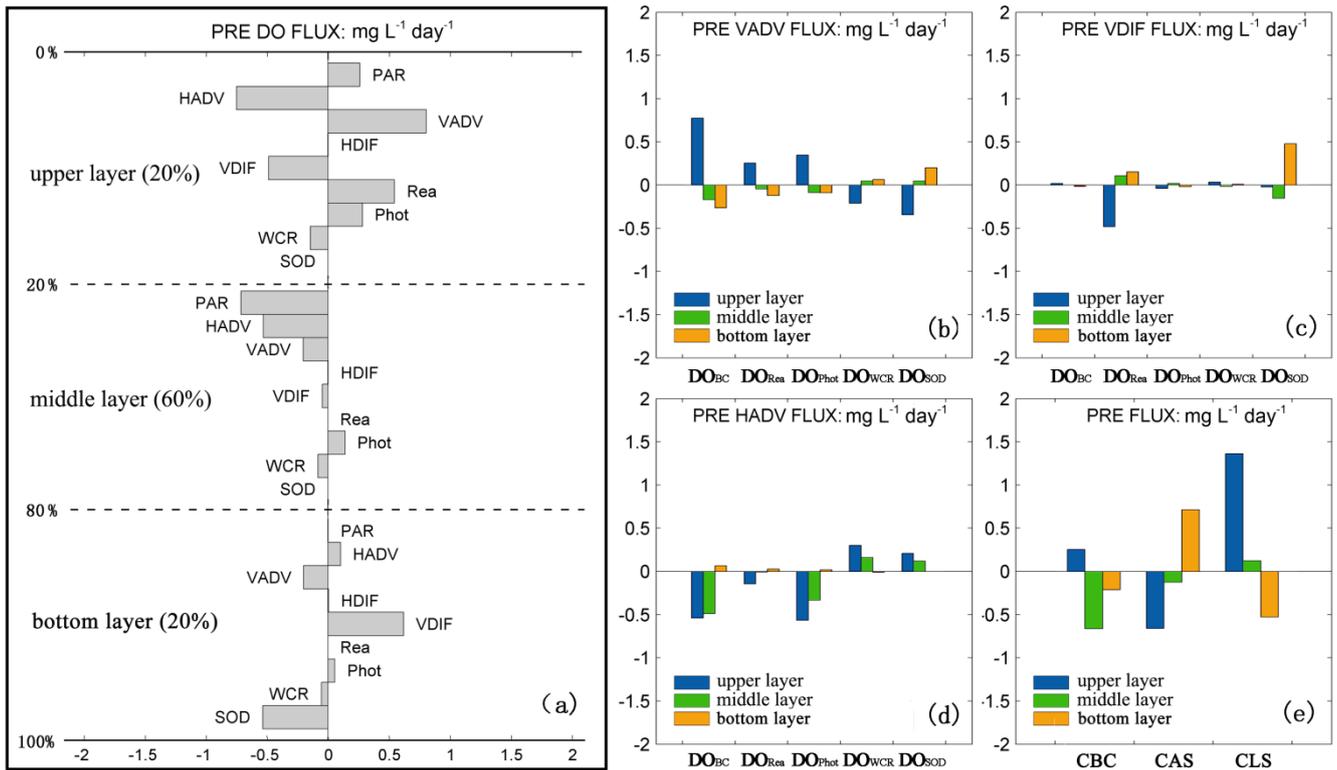
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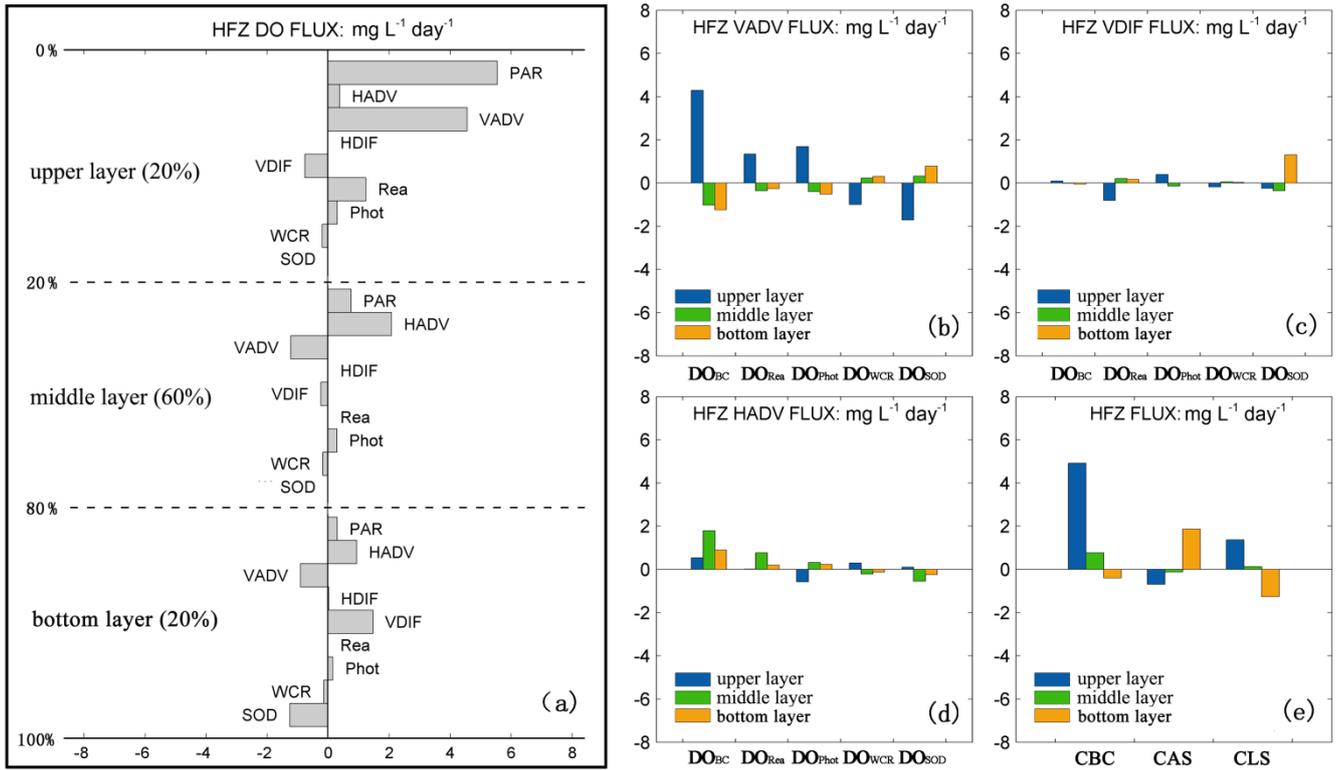
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Fig. 10 Spatial distributions of the monthly averaged DO concentrations at (a) the surface layer and (b) the bottom layer in the PRE. Spatial distributions of hypoxic frequency during July and August using DO thresholds of (c) 2 mg L⁻¹ and (d) 3 mg L⁻¹ for hypoxia. Vertical distributions of the DO concentrations along two transects (see their locations in Fig. 10 a-d).



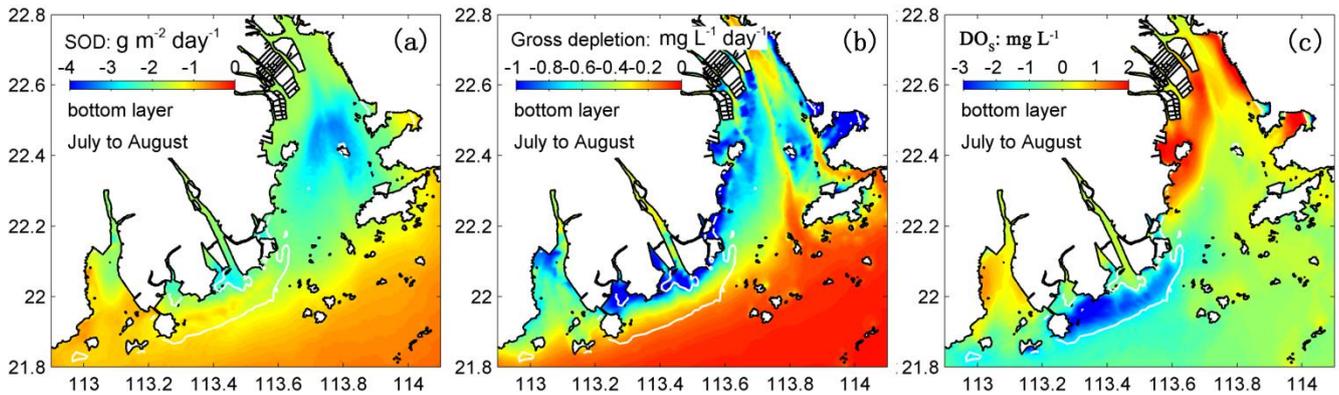
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2 Fig. 11 (a) The simulated DO mass balance (averaged over July-August 2006) for the PRE. All the diagnostic terms are
3 given for the upper layer above the 20% of depth, for the middle layer, and the bottom layer which covers 20% of
4 depth over the sediment. Contributions of each source and sink process as well as boundary conditions to (b) the
5 vertical advective DO fluxes, (c) the vertical diffusive DO fluxes, and (d) the horizontal advective DO fluxes. (e)
6 Contributions of boundary conditions (CBC), adjacent source and sink terms (CAS), and local source and sink terms
7 (CLS) to the DO balance. Abbreviation PAR represents localized partial derivatives of DO; SOD and DO_{SOD}
8 represent the sediment oxygen demand and the changes of DO concentrations due to the effects of sediment oxygen
9 demand, respectively; WCR and DO_{WCR} represent the water column respiration and the changes of DO
10 concentrations due to the effects of water column respiration, respectively; Phot and DO_{Phot} represent the
11 photosynthesis and the changes of DO concentrations due to the effects of photosynthesis, respectively; Rea and
12 DO_{Rea} represent the re-aeration and the changes of DO concentrations due to the effects of re-aeration, respectively;
13 DO_{BC} represents the changes of DO concentrations due to the effects of boundary conditions; VADV represents the
14 vertical advection of DO; HADV represents the horizontal advection of DO; VDIFF represents the vertical diffusion of
15 DO; and HDIFF represents the horizontal diffusion of DO.

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2 Fig. 12 Same as Fig.11 except for the HFZ.

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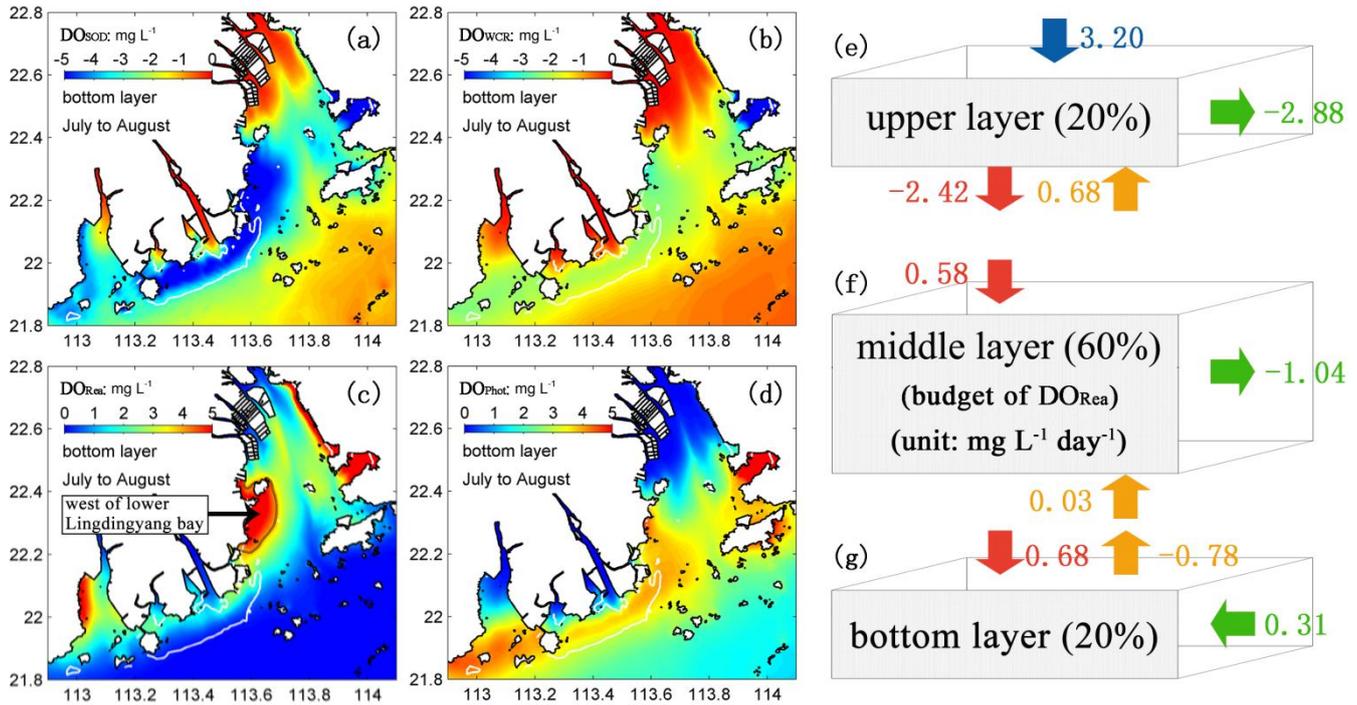
5 Fig. 13 Spatial distributions of the monthly averaged (a) SOD, (b) gross depletion rates of DO, and (c) the
6 concentrations of DO_s at the bottom layer. Note that the HFZ is also shown here (denoted by the area encompassed by
7 white lines).

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3 Fig. 14 Spatial distributions of the monthly averaged (a) DO_{SOD} , (b) DO_{WCR} , (c) DO_{Rea} , and (d) DO_{Phot} at the
 4 bottom layer. Note that the HFZ is also shown here (denoted by the area encompassed by white lines). The DO_{Rea}
 5 balance analysis for (e) the upper layer, (f) the middle layer, and (g) the bottom layer to the west of the lower
 6 Lingdingyang bay (the western shoal near the Qi'ao Island and encompassed by a DO_{Rea} isoline of 4 mg L⁻¹; as shown
 7 in Fig. 14c). Blue arrows represent the re-aeration rates; red arrows represent the vertical diffusive fluxes of DO_{Rea} ;
 8 orange arrows represent the vertical advective fluxes of DO_{Rea} ; green arrows represent the horizontal advective fluxes
 9 of DO_{Rea} . Note that positive values indicate sources of DO, while negative values indicate sinks of DO (unit: mg L⁻¹
 10 day⁻¹).

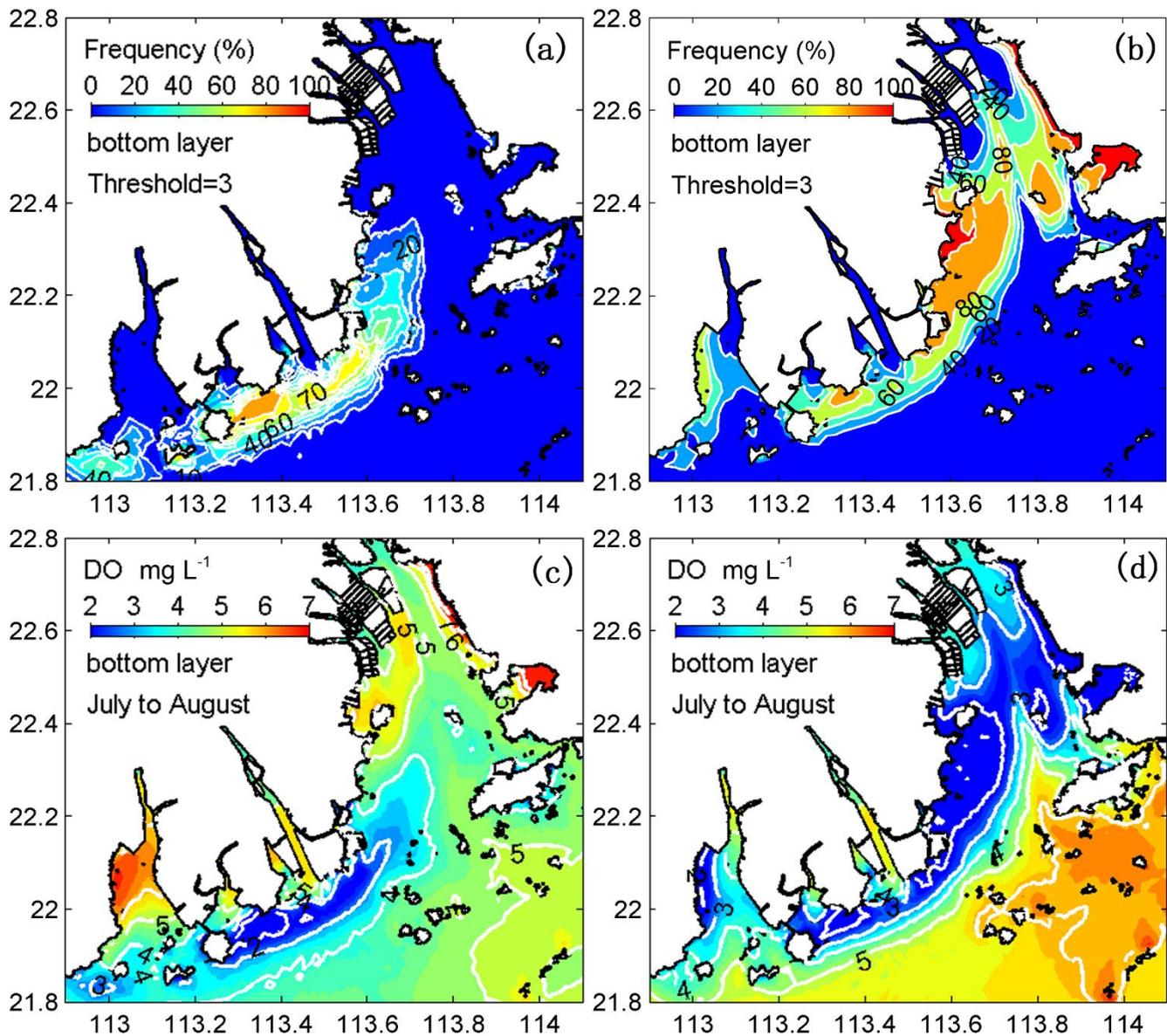
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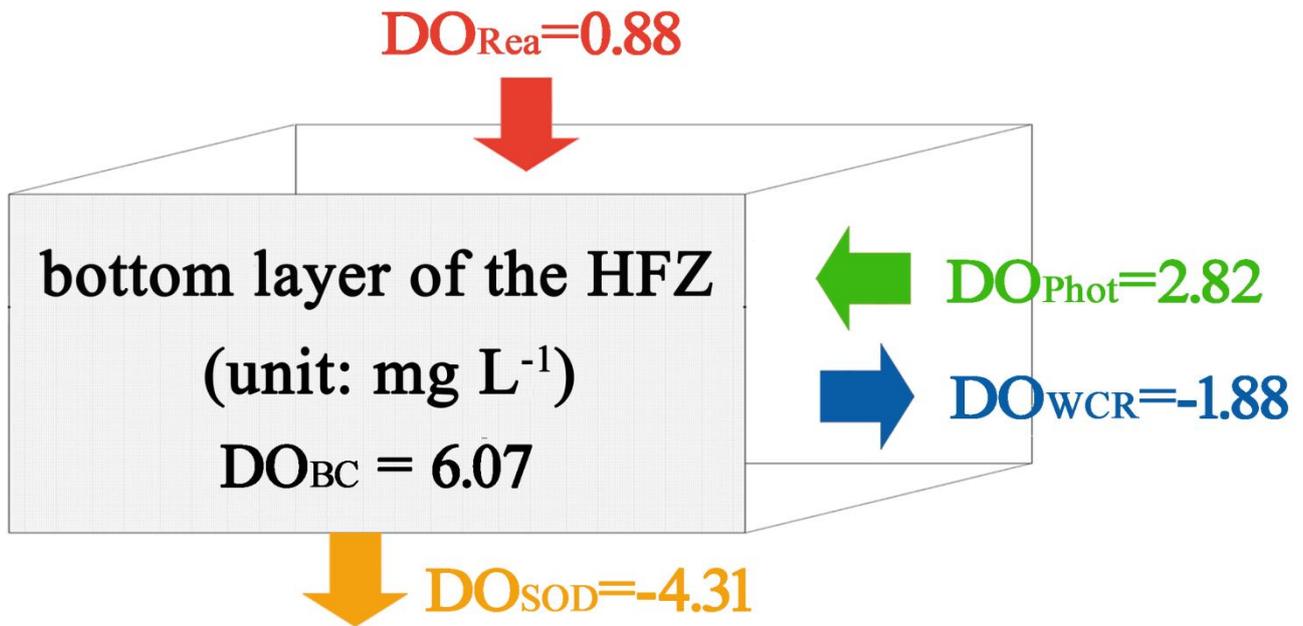
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Fig. 15 Spatial distributions of hypoxic frequency (using a DO threshold of 3 mg L⁻¹ for hypoxia) and the monthly averaged DO concentrations at the bottom layer for the numerical experiments by turning off (a, c) photosynthesis and water column respiration and (b, d) the re-aeration, respectively.



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 2 Fig. 16 The simulated mass balance for the bottom DO in the HFZ. Note that positive values indicate positive effects
 3 on the DO concentrations, while negative values indicate negative effects (unit: $mg L^{-1}$).