Unravelling Biosynthesis and Biodegradation Potentials of Microbial Dark Matters in Hypersaline Lakes

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Highlights

- Over 3,000 MAGs obtained from hypersaline lakes that enriching genomic resources.
- Identified 8,000+ potential biosynthetic gene clusters in uncultured microbes.
- Uncovered biodegradation potential in several microbial dark matter lineages.
- Key insights for biotechnology, environmental management applications.
- Versatile and resilient microorganisms in extreme environments.

Abstract

Biosynthesis and biodegradation of microorganisms critically underpin the development of biotechnology, new drugs and therapies, and environmental remediation. However, the vast majority of uncultured microbial species along with their metabolic capacities in extreme environments remain obscured. To unravel the metabolic potential of these microbial dark matters (MDMs), we investigated four deep-inland hypersaline lakes with largely diversified environmental parameters in Xinjiang,

China. Metagenomic binning obtained 3,030 metagenome-assembled genomes (MAGs) spanning 82 phyla, of which 2,363 MAGs could not be assigned to a known genus. MDM MAGs were abundantly observed with distinct taxa among lakes, possibly linked to the diversification of physiochemical conditions. Analysis of biosynthetic potentials identified 9,635 biosynthesis gene clusters (BGCs), in which 8,966 BGCs considered novel. We found that some MDM phyla consistently comprised enriched BGCs, which were considered to play essential roles in biotechnological applications. In addition, biodegradation potentials such as dehalogenation, anaerobic ammonium oxidation (Anammox), polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon (PAH), and plastics degradation were found in new microbial clades from hypersaline lakes. These findings substantially expanded the genetic repository of biosynthesis and biodegradation potentials, which can further assist the development of new and innovative applications in biotechnology.

Graphical abstract

Keywords

Biosynthesis; Biodegradation; Hypersaline Lakes; Metagenome-assembled Genomes; Microbial Dark Matters

1. Introduction

Microorganisms are vital in the global ecosystems that underpin life on Earth, as they play essential roles contributing to biogeochemical cycling, supporting food webs, and maintaining the fitness of plants and animals (Bahramet al. 2018; Falkowskiet al. 2008; Loucaet al. 2016; Senderet al. 2016). Particularly, the microbial metabolic capabilities such as decomposing pollutants and producing secondary metabolites like natural products have fostered the development of biosynthesis and biodegradation, thereby propelling biotechnological processes and addressing environmental challenges (Barabadiet al. 2019; Chemler and Koffas 2008; Wanget al. 2014; Zhanget al. 2022). Nonetheless, a vast majority of the microbial species are unculturable, leading to the inefficient exploration of metabolic capacities across diverse environments.

To address this issue, a series of state-of-art sequencing technologies along with bioinformatic tools, such as metagenomic sequencing and binning, have revolutionised our ability to investigate and decode the metabolic pathways of uncultured microorganisms. Employing such approaches, we can unveil previously uncharacterised microorganisms within underexplored environment, considerably expanding our recognition of the specific microbial roles and functions in biosynthesis and biodegradation. This knowledge could be instrumental in harnessing more efficient and sustainable methods for producing natural products or devising more effective pathways for contaminant degradation (Zallotet al. 2021). However, current progress in the application of microbial resources for biosynthesis is still hindered by the efficiency of the enzymes for large-scale production, sustainability of methodologies, and the financial demands of culturing (Saravananet al. 2021; Wuet al. 2014). On the other hand, environmental variability, complexity of microbial communities, and the high costs of pre-treatment are main issues that obstructed the efficiency of biodegradation (Azubuikeet al. 2016; Taghaviet al. 2021). Furthermore, our understanding of the underlying microbial mechanisms of biosynthesis and biodegradation, including novel enzymes and metabolic pathways involved in these processes, are still largely unknown. Therefore, to enhance our understanding of these mechanisms and facilitate more efficient and effective biosynthesis and biodegradation processes, it is imperative to investigate uncultured microbial species and their metabolic capacities in extreme environments. Such exploration can deepen the knowledge of novel enzymes and metabolic pathways, leading to more sustainable and environmentally friendly solutions across a wide range of applications.

Hypersaline lakes are typical examples of extreme environment, which usually characterised by high salinity (≥ 35 g/L), elevated aridity and evaporation, poor in nutrients such as organic carbon, and some with high alkalinity (Sorokinet al. 2014; Vavourakiset al. 2018; Ventosaet al. 2015). These habitats accommodate distinct extremophilic microbial communities that have evolved to adapt the conditions inhospitable to other living organisms (Rothschild and Mancinelli 2001; Shu and Huang 2022). Deep

inland hypersaline lakes usually exhibit distinct environmental parameters from lake to lake due to the influences of climate, geology, and human activities. Consequently, a wide range of microbial communities residing in these hypersaline habitats remain unexplored, presenting potential resources for biotechnological applications (Krienitz and Kotut 2010; Mesbah and Wiegel 2012; Rojaset al. 2018; Schultz and Rosado 2020). Genome-resolved analyses indicates that these deep inland hypersaline lakes harbour a large number of uncultured microorganisms, namely microbial dark matter (MDM) such as DPANN archaea and CPR bacteria (Vavourakiset al. 2018; Xieet al. 2022; Zhaoet al. 2020). These findings substantially broadened our recognition of MDM from an evolutionary perspective. However, these pioneering studies merely scratched the surface of hypersaline lake microbiomes, restricted by the scope of study areas and limitations in bioinformatic analysis techniques. Therefore, to comprehensively uncover the microbial niches within hypersaline lake microbiomes and further reveal metabolic capacities in these extreme ecosystems, more in-depth and expansive investigations on hypersaline lake microbial genomes should be envisaged.

In this study, we examined four saline lakes in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China, each with distinct salinity (1.5 g/L to 237 g/L) and altitude (-153 m to 1,585 m). Previous study observed that salinity significantly influences the microbial assemblages of saline lake microbiota (Jiet al. 2019), but the roles that lake planktonic and sediment microbial communities devote to biosynthesis and biodegradation resolved from metagenomes remain uncertain. Given such a diverse range of geographic and environmental parameters, we assembled over 3,000 Metagenome-Assembled Genomes (MAGs) from these four lakes, aiming to unearth new microbial lineages and decode the metabolic characteristics of hypersaline lake prokaryotes.

2. Methods

2.1. Sampling and measurement of physiochemical parameters

Hypersaline lake samples were collected in July 2018 from Aiding Lake (ADH), Barkol Lake (BLK), Dabancheng Lake (DBC) and Qijiaojing Lake (QJJ) (Fig. S1), Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China. The detailed sampling and geographic information were recorded in Table S1. For water samples from each lake (n = 4), a total amount of 5 L of lake water from the upper 50 cm surface was randomly collected into a 5 L sterile container. Lake water was firstly filtered through a filter paper (Whatman, GE Healthcare, NY, USA) to remove large particles before filtering through 0.22 μm PES (Polyethersulfone) membranes (Millipore, Billerica, MA, USA) to enrich planktonic microorganisms. For sediment samples from each lake, about 50 grams of sediment samples (n = 4) were randomly collected at 0-10 cm depth at the bottom of lake into sterile 50 ml falcon tubes. Membranes and

sediment samples were immediately placed on dry ice before brought to laboratory transferred to a -80 °C freezer until further DNA extraction was performed.

The salinity and pH of lake water were measured *in situ* using a Hydrolab DS5 multiparameter water quality meter (Hach Company, Loveland, CO, USA). Total organic carbon (TOC) was analyzed with a TOC/TN-VCPH analyzer (Shimadzu, Tokyo, Japan). The concentrations of lithium (Li^+), sodium (Na^+), ammonium (NH_4^+), potassium (K^+), magnesium (Mg^{2+}), calcium (Ca^{2+}), chloridion (Cl^-) and sulfate (SO_4^{2-}) were determined using an inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (Agilent Technologies Inc., Bellevue, WA, USA).

2.2. DNA extraction and metagenomic sequencing

Total DNA was extracted from frozen filtered membrane or sediment samples using the DNeasy PowerSoil Pro Kit (Qiagen, Hilden, Germany), following the manufacturer's instructions. Extracted DNA was quality checked by NanoDrop 2000 (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, Massachusetts, US) and quantity checked by Qubit Fluorometer (Thermo Fisher Scientific, USA). Next generation metagenomic sequencing was performed at Novogene (Tianjin, China) on an Illumina NovaSeq 6000 platform using the PE150 strategy.

2.3. Assembly, binning and phylogenetic analyses

Raw paired-end reads were initially filtered using fastp with default parameters (Chenet al. 2018). Clean reads were individually and co-assembled using SPAdes (v3.15.2) (Bankevichet al. 2012) under "--meta" mode into contigs specifying k-mer sizes of 21, 33, 55, 77 and finally reserved contigs > 1,000 bps. Metagenomic binning was applied to both single sample assembly and co-assembly by using BASALT (v1.0) under default mode (Yuet al. 2021). The completeness and contamination of bins were assessed using CheckM v1.0.2 with "lineage_wf" workflow and default parameters (Parkset al. 2015), with only medium and high qualitied bins that meet the MIMAG standard (completeness ≥ 50, contamination ≤ 10) (Bowerset al. 2017) kept as metagenomic-assembled genomes (MAGs) for further analysis.

Phylogenetic analysis of bacteria and archaea MAGs were performed based on a multiple sequence alignment of 120 bacterial- and 122 archaeal-specific single-copy marker proteins (Chaumeilet al. 2020), respectively. A concatenated alignment of these marker proteins was created using HMMER v3.1.b2 with default parameters (Eddy 2011). Bacterial and archaeal hylogenetic trees were inferred using IQ-TREE under the best fitted models with 1,000 bootstrap replications (Minhet al. 2020), before being visualized and annotated in iTOL v6 (Letunic and Bork 2021).

2.4. Identification of non-coding RNA genes and functional annotation

Non-coding RNA genes including transfer RNA genes and ribosomal RNA genes were identified to evaluate the integrity of MAGs. Briefly, tRNA genes were predicted using tRNAscan-SE (v2.0.9) (Chan et al. 2021), while rRNA genes including 5S rRNA, 16S rRNA, and 23S rRNA were predicted using Barrnap (v0.9, https://github.com/tseemann/barrnap). For genetic analysis, Opening Reading Frames (ORFs) of assembled contigs were predicted using Prodigal (v2.6.3) with default parameters (Hyatt et al. 2010). Predicted ORFs were dereplicated with CD-HIT (v4.6) at 90% identity (Li and Godzik 2006). Dereplicated ORFs were annotated against Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and Genomes (KEGG) database (version 58) and NCBI-NR database (version 20220806), respectively with Diamond (v2.0.11.149) (Buchfink et al. 2015) using "more-sensitive" mode and e-value at 1e-10. In addition, dereplicated ORFs were further annotated against Pfam (v34.0) and TIGRFAM (v15.0) databases using InterProScan (v5.54-87.0) (Jones et al. 2014). To estimate the relative abundance of each genes, dereplicated fasta sequences of ORFs were mapped against raw sequence reads by Bowtie2 (v2.4.2) (Langdon 2015). Then, the depth of aligned reads were calculated using SAMtools (v1.7) (Li et al. 2009) and summarised with a perl script 'calc.coverage.in.bam.depth.pl' from a previous study (Albertsen et al. 2013). Finally, coverage-normalised KOs were clustered into modules and pathways using a python script "pathway_pipeline.py" in PICRUSt2 (Douglas et al. 2020). For genome-centric analysis, each MAG was predicted using Prodigal with default parameters and being annotated against KEGG database using the same parameter described above.

2.5. Annotation of Biosynthetic Gene Clusters (BGCs)

Genome sequences were used as input using antiSMASH (v.6.1.1) (Blin et al. 2021) to identify BGCs from saline lake MAGs. The gbk-formatted output of each MAG was further processed using BiG-SCAPE (v1.1.2) (Navarro-Muñoz et al. 2020) against MIBiG database (Kautsar et al. 2020) to cluster Gene Cluster Families (GCFs) at 0.2, 0.3, 0.4, 0.5, 0.6, 0.7, and 0.8 distance threshold, respectively. To determine the novelty of BGCs, we followed the criteria described in Paoli *et al.* (Paoli et al. 2022), that any BGCs with cosine distance larger than 0.2 to a known BGC in the MIBiG database were considered novel.

2.6. Detection of Biodegradation potentials

To identify MAGs with potential biodegradation functions including dechlorinating, nitrogen removal, and degradation of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), dereplicated MAG ORFs were further annotated against two homebrew databases: EDB-DHG and EDB-Ncyc for dechlorinating and nitrogen removal, and the Darhd Database for PAH degradation (Li et al. 2022), as well as the PlasticDB for plastics degradation (Gambarini et al. 2022), respectively, using Diamond with the same parameter described above, finally reserve matched sequences at identity ≥ 50%. As the Darhd

database only contained nucleotide sequences, we pre-treated all sequences by translating into amino acids with Prodigal to keep the consistency with other databases. Annotated sequences were further checked by comparing results with KEGG, NCBI-NR, and InterProScan, respectively, to avoid false annotation. EDB-DHG and EDB-Ncyc Databases are available for download in FigShare (https://figshare.com/ndownloader/articles/23504874/versions/1).

2.7. Statistical analysis and data visualization

Data organization and formatting were conducted using the R packages "tibble", "dplyr", "tidyr", and "stringr". Statistical analysis was conducted using the R packages "vegan", "stats", and "FSA". Data visualization was performed using the R packages "ggplot2" and "cowplot".

3. Results

3.1. Large proportion of metagenome-assembled genomes from hypersaline lakes were considered novel

Metagenomic sequencing generated ~1.2 Tb DNA sequence data from 30 samples taken from four hypersaline lakes. The metagenomic assembly generated 26 Gb of contig data with sequence length > 1,000 bp. After metagenomic binning, we recovered 3,030 non-redundant bins that meet the MIMAG stand (Completeness $\geq$ 50%, Purity $\geq$ 90%, mean Completeness = 79.8% $\pm$ 14.8%, mean Purity = 97.8% $\pm$ 2.0%) (Bowerset al. 2017). These bins were considered as metagenomic-assembled genomes (MAGs) for the following analyses (Fig. 1A). There were 76.9%, 51.5%, and 44.6% of the MAGs contained 5S, 16S, and 23S rRNA genes, respectively, while 23.7% possessed all three types of rRNA genes (Fig. 1B). In terms of tRNA genes, 75% of the MAGs contained more than 13 types of tRNA genes (Fig. 1C). There were 97.1%, 78.0% and 56.7% of MAGs affiliated with unclassified or close to a tentatively assigned species, genera, and families, respectively, suggesting that a high proportion of the genomes discovered in the hypersaline lakes were unknown or candidates for future identification (Fig. 1D). SDetails of the sequencing data size, contig summary, number of genomes, and specifics of the MAGs were supplied in Table S1.

3.2. Distinct genetic composition and functional potential among lakes

Distinct genetic compositions were identified among the lakes and sample types. Overall, the planktonic genetic richness in Chao1 index of ADH and DBC were significantly higher than that of QJJ, while the genetic richness and evenness in Shannon index of DBC was significantly higher than that of QJJ (P < 0.05). However, no significant difference was found between lakes in sedimentary samples (Fig. 2A). Genetic compositions of lake planktonic and sedimentary communities were significantly different (P < 0.05, Fig. S2), which were mainly driven by salinity including Li^+, Na^+,

SO_4^{2-}, Ca^{2+}, Mg^{2+}, and K^+ in planktonic communities, and TOC, SO_4^{2-}, and Na^+ in sedimentary

communities (Fig. 2B). Functional capacity profiles suggested that microbial genetic potentials varied

distinctly among sample types and lakes, particularly in aspects such as nitrogen and sulfur

metabolisms, carbon fixation, methanogenesis, and multidrug resistance, among others (Fig. 3C).

Specific analysis within pathways showed that in carbon fixation, Dicarboxylate−hydroxybutyrate

cycle was mainly enriched in QJJ planktons, while rTCA cycle, Hydroxypropionate−hydroxybutylate

cycle, and 3−Hydroxypropionate bi−cycle were enriched in QJJ sediments. On the other hand, BLK

sediment communities mainly performed Reductive pentose phosphate cycle (CBB cycle) and

Wood−Ljungdahl pathway for carbon fixation. For methane metabolism, BLK was found to be

enriched in Methanogenisis in sediments, while DBC and QJJ were found to be enriched in methane

oxidation in sediments. F420 biosynthesis were found to be abundant in QJJ plankton, possibly due to

the high relative abundance of archaea communities. Nitrogen cycle related modules including

nitrogen fixation, nitrification, and denitrification were mainly found enriched in QJJ sediments, while

dissimilatory nitrate reduction and assimilatory nitrate reduction module were found enriched in DBC

and QJJ plankton, respectively. For sulfur metabolism, thiosulfate oxidation was found to be abundant

in DBC plankton, while dissimilatory sulfate reduction was found enriched in BLK sediments (Fig.

2D). These findings suggest that distinct metabolic pathways were found among these four lakes.

3.3.   Microbial dark matters were highly diverse in the hypersaline lakes

Of the 3,030 non-redundant MAGs, 2,685 were classified as bacteria spanning 70 phyla, with 18 of

them (25.7%) considered as MDM phyla. The remaining 345 MAGs were identified as archaea,

spanning 12 phyla, including 8 MDM phyla. While a vast majority of the MAGs were assigned to non-

MDM phyla (96.6% in plankton and 92.5% in sediment in relative abundance), those minorities which

classified as MDM demonstrated higher diversity that comprised 16.7% and 30.1% of total MAGs in

numbers in the plankton and sediments, respectively (Fig. 2A). This observation suggested that MDMs

could exhibit considerable diversity in hypersaline environments. Lineages of common phyla were

ubiquitously found across most samples, but distinct distributions of MDM phyla (except

Patescibacteria) were only identified in specific lakes or sample types (Fig. 2B). These MDM phyla

were predominantly located in samples with high microbial diversity (*i.e.,* ADH and BLK sediment,

Fig. 2B & C), but low relative abundance (< 0.5%) among recovered MAGs, indicating that a

considerable number of unknown microorganisms inhabitant in these environments were yet to be

discovered.

3.4.   Biosynthetic Potentials of saline lake MDMs

In the 3,030 hypersaline lake MAGs, we identified 9,635 biosynthetic gene clusters (BGCs), including

1,170 BGCs clustered into known gene cluster families (GCFs) as per the MiBIG database. A total of

8,966 BGCs (93% of overall BGCs) that including 501 clustered BGCs with cosine distance ≥ 0.2, as

well as 8,465 unclustered BGCs, were considered novel (Fig. 4A). Notably, a number of bacterial

MDM phyla were enriched in BGCs (BGCs per MAG > 5), including *OLB16*, *Moduliflexota*, *KSB1*,

Fibrobacterota, and *B130-G9*. This enrichment was only observed in *Planctomycetota*, *Myxococcota*,

and *Acidobacteriota* among the non-MDM phyla (Fig. 4B), suggesting that bacterial MDMs in these

saline lakes may possess abundant biosynthetic potentials. Fewer BGCs were found in archaeal MAGs

(BGCs per MAG < 2), possibly due to the insufficient data collected in the database.

To further explore biosynthetic potentials of MDM MAGs, bacterial and archaeal phylogenetic trees

were constructed, selecting MAGs with Completeness ≥ 70% or BGCs ≥ 5. There were 16 bacterial

and 2 archaeal phyla that contained MAG(s) with BGCs ≥ 5, suggesting potential biosynthetic

enrichment in these phyla. Bacterial and archaeal phyla with small genome sizes (*i.e., Patescibacteria*

and *Nanoarchaeota*) generally lacked BGCs, except one MAG from *Nanoarchaeota* which was

considered an outlier. Some phyla with only a single MAG obtained from saline lake metagenomes,

such as *B130-G9*, *Moduliflexota*, *UBP6*, etc. (labelled individually on the tree, Figure 4B), were not

further discussed in this study as their biosynthetic pattern and consistency cannot be validated due to

insufficient data. However, other MDM phyla consistently demonstrated enrichment with specific

BGC Classes. For example, phylum *Armatimonadota* primarily consisted of RiPPs, Terpene and Other

BGC classes, while phylum OLB16 was enriched in NRPS, RiPPs, and Terpene. Most of the MAGs

in phylum *Bdellovibrionota* had BGCs in Terpene, RiPPs, and Other BGC classes, whereas KSB1

MAGs featured NRPS, PKS-NRPS hybrid, and Terpene classes (Figure 4C). These observations

suggest that MAGs within these phyla may have similar biosynthetic potentials. Two *Asgardarchaeota*

MAGs were found to be enriched with BGCs, although this pattern was not consistent across the entire

phyla, necessitating more genomes analysis for further exploration.

3.5.   Biodegradation potentials of saline lake MDMs

To dissect the biodegradation potentials of hypersaline lake microorganisms, we analysed genes

involved in the nitrogen cycle, dehalogenation, plastics degradation, and PAHs degradation within

MDM MAGs. A number of bacterial MDM phyla were found to be rich in nitrogen metabolism genes,

such as *GCA-001730085*, *Hydrogenedentota*, *OLB16*, *Fibrobacterota*, *Krumholzibacteriota*, *FEN-*

1099, *RBG-13-61-14*, and *Zixibacteria* (Figure 5A), suggesting that these MDMs may play a crucial

role in the nitrogen cycle in hypersaline lakes. Interestingly, although MAGs belong to typical

anaerobic ammonium oxidizing bacteria (AnAOB), *i.e.,* families *Scalinduaceae* and *Brocadiaceae* in

the order *Brocadiales*, class *Brocadiae*, were not found in this study, anaerobic ammonium oxidation

(Anammox)-related genes (*i.e.,* gen *hzs* and *hdh*) were found in several MDM phyla in addition to the

known AnAOB groups, such as GCA-001730085, *Hydrogenedentota*, *Calditrichota*, *KSB1*, *FEN-*

1099, and *SAR324* (Figure 5A). While fewer nitrogen cycle related genes were found in archaea than bacteria, we found that Asgard archaea universally contain *nirBD* and *norBC* genes, suggesting that they might be functionally involved in the nitrogen cycle in hypersaline lakes (Figure 5B). In terms of the dehalogenation genes *rdh*, we found a number of MDM lineages with *rdh* genes in the hypersaline lake MAGs, such as bacterial phyla *Eisenbacteria*, *Krumholzibacteriota*, *Zixibacteria*, *KSB1*, and *Marinisomatota* (Figure 5A). In archaeal taxa, *rdh* gene were found in phyla *Thorarchaeota*, *Lokiarchaeota*, and *Hadarchaeota* (Figure 5B). These findings suggested that these MDMs may have dehalogenation capacity in hypersaline lakes.

To explore plastic degradation and PAHs potentials of saline lake MAGs, dereplicated ORFs were annotated against the PlasticDB and Darhd databases. Results showed that MDM MAGs with plastic degradation capabilities distributed in most of the phyla, including for previously known as non-biodegradable plastics, such as polyethylene (PE), polyethylene terephthalate (PET), polyamide (Nylon), polystyrene (PS), and polyurethane (PU), were found in phyla *GCA-001730085*, *Hydrogenedentota*, *Krumholzibacteriota*, *Fibrobacterota*, *Marinisomatota*, *KSB1*, *Moduliflexota*, *FEN-1099*, *SAR324*, *RBG-13-61-14*, and *Lokiarchaeota* (Figure 5A & B). For PAHs degradation potentials, genes such as aromatic ring-hydroxylating dioxygenase, phenylpropionate dioxygenase, and benzoate dioxygenase were found across MDM MAGs, spanning phyla *Sumerlaeota*, *Krumholzibacteriota*, *Calditrichota*, and *Lokiarchaeota* (Figure 5A & B), suggesting that many MDMs may also have the potential to degrade microbially degradable plastics and PAHs.

4.   Discussion

Uncharacterised microorganisms possess a vast repository of undiscovered enzymes and metabolic pathways that hold the potential for applications in various fields including biotechnology, medicine, agriculture, and environmental remediation (Atanasov et al. 2021; Bhushan et al. 2019; Chen et al. 2021; Rinke et al. 2013; Waschulin et al. 2022; Xu et al. 2022). By identifying and characterising both known or novel enzymes and pathways in MDMs, we can uncover new technologies for the production of compounds and natural products, as well as innovative strategies for biodegradation of pollutants and toxic wastes. In this study, we investigated four hypersaline lakes with distinct biochemical characteristics and successfully uncovered over 3,000 MAGs with biosynthesis and biodegradation potentials. Although a metatranscriptomic analysis was not included in this study to confirm biosynthetic activity, our metagenomic analyses revealed nearly 10,000 potential BGCs, including ~80% of which were considered novel. Notably, our findings concerning MDM phyla that are enriched in BGCs aligned with a previous studies that included metatranscriptomic analysis from marine environments (Geller-McGrath et al. 2023; Paoli et al. 2022), such as *Omnitrophota*, *KSB1*, *OLB16*, and

FEN-1099, etc., further validated our findings in biosynthetic analysis. On the other hand, biodegradation capabilities such as nitrogen removals (especially Anammox), dehalogenation, plastics degradation, and PAHs degradation, are areas of intense interest for environmental remediation efforts (Heet al. 2021; Liuet al. 2023a; Liuet al. 2020; Qiaoet al. 2023; Zhanget al. 2019; Zrimecet al. 2021). The presence of biodegradation genes in MDMs observed in this study offered new potentials for the degradation of pollutants, plastics, and toxic compounds. Overall, these findings improved our understanding of the metabolic potentials of novel microbial species in developing biosynthetic and biodegradation capabilities, which can contribute to a broad range of applications including biofuels, medicine, agricultural and industrial applications, as well as environmental remediation efforts. Moreover, the recovery of MAGs provided valuable genomic resources that enables insights into microbial evolution, potentially expanding our understanding of the Tree of Life (Huget al. 2016).

Extreme environments are typically inhospitable to a large proportion of known microorganisms (Lee and Park 2018; Rothschild and Mancinelli 2001). However, such environments offer a group of specialised extremophiles that have evolved unique strategies to maintain their stability and functionality under such extreme conditions (Malavasiet al. 2020; Wanget al. 2022; Yinet al. 2019). Recent studies have uncovered dozens of thousands of MAGs from various extreme environments, including deserts, oil fields, hydrothermal vents, cold seeps, hypersaline lakes, and glaciers, etc. (Andersonet al. 2017; Donget al. 2022; Ezeet al. 2020; Finstadet al. 2017; Liuet al. 2019; Liuet al. 2022; Vavourakiset al. 2018). These findings vastly improved our recognition of uncultured microorganisms, including their genetic and functional potentials in these extreme environments. Microorganisms in hypersaline lakes are known as halotolerant or halophilic live forms, with distinct physiological and biochemical features that enable them to adapt such extreme environments (Liuet al. 2023b; Muet al. 2020). Interestingly, while hypersaline lakes were previously known to be nutrient-poor, recent studies revealed that some of them are nutrient-rich, particularly in the lake sediment (Konget al. 2020; Yueet al. 2019; Zhaoet al. 2022), which aligns with the results of this study. The remarkable adaptations and compatibilities of these organisms to high salinity environment, along with specialised functions including osmoregulation, "salt-in" strategy, membrane formation, and halophilic enzymes, etc. (Gunde-Cimermanet al. 2018; Oren 2002; 2020; Rodriguez-Valera 2020; Salma and andMehnaz Samina 2020), offer exceptional opportunities for biotechnological applications. These applications range from non-sterile bioproduction and bioremediation of high salinity wastes, to salt production and desalination. Collectively, mining and utilising microbial resources from hypersaline lakes can significantly advance our understanding of the metabolic potentials of extremophiles. This knowledge can be harnessed for applications in biotechnological industries and environmental management practices, broadening the spectrum of practical applications and contributing to sustainable development and environmental preservation.

Despite the promising potential of exploiting uncultured hypersaline microorganisms (namely MDMs) for various applications, limitations of exploiting these MDMs cannot be overlooked. One key challenge is that MDMs often contain many genes or enzymes undocumented in the current databases. This can affect the accuracy of predictions, annotations, or classification in the genomic analyses (Dröge and McHardy 2012; Lobbet al. 2020; Rinkeet al. 2013). While advancements in state-of-art sequencing technologies and bioinformatic tools, such as long-read sequencing (Jainet al. 2016; Wanget al. 2015), single-cell sequencing (Nawy 2014), deep refinement (Yuet al. 2021), and machine learning (Hoarfrostet al. 2022) approaches, have assisted to mitigate these discrepancies, each of these technologies has its own limitations. These still hampers the robust *de novo* assembly of low abundant MDM MAGs from the microbial communities. Moreover, since successfully culturing of a microorganism is still considered as the "gold standard" approach of the microbial characterisation, it is still challenging to replicate the extreme conditions such as hypersaline environments under laboratory conditions, making it difficult to culture MDMs. Even if the culturing approaches can be managed, validating their functional and metabolic properties to confirm biosynthesis and biodegradation potentials remains a major challenge. Cutting-edge technologies and in-depth analysis tools, such as multi-omics approaches (Gutlebenet al. 2018), Raman spectroscopy methods (Cuiet al. 2022), and high-throughput single-cell sequencing technologies (Zhenget al. 2022) may assist the isolation and culturing of uncharacterised microorganisms. However, most of these techniques have been sophisticatedly applied to human gut microbiome studies, thus such application to extreme environmental samples remains challenging, both in terms of laboratory experiments and *in silico* analyses.

Indeed, further exploration of MDMs from hypersaline lakes and other extreme environments is complex, with numerous technical challenges to be addressed. One of the key conundrums lies in the increase of resolution for low coverage of microbial genomes, which is difficult to recover via binning. The successful enrichment of these MDMs is also hindered by intricate nutrient requirements, complex microbial interactions, and slow growth rates associated with these extremophiles (Dedysh 2011; Imachiet al. 2020; Lewiset al. 2021). Possible solutions might be conceived such as 1) utilisation of advanced sequencing technologies such as Hi-C, Pore-C, and HiFi sequencing (Bickhartet al. 2022; Deshpandeet al. 2022; Wengeret al. 2019), which could potentially yield higher-quality and more complete genomic assemblies from metagenomic datasets, offering a more detailed and accurate view of the landscape of MDM genomes; 2) development of new bioinformatic tools to enhance the accuracy and resolution of recovered genomes from metagenomic datasets. This could be achieved through the application of machine learning algorithms or the improvement of existing bioinformatic tools; 3) upgraded laboratory techniques for culture enrichment (*e.g.,* machine learning based high-throughput microbial culturomics) (Huanget al. 2023) or "counterselection" strategy on extreme

389 environmental metagenomes. Nevertheless, successful development and application of these
390 approaches could significantly advance our discovery of MDMs and their associated biotechnological
391 potentials. It could also unfold possibilities for exploration of life in most extreme environments on
392 Earth, including abyssal, hadal, deep subsurface, and even beyond, into extraterrestrial environments.

5.   Conclusions

Our study implemented genome-centric analyses on over 3,000 MAGs recovered from four
hypersaline lakes with distinct different environmental parameters in Xinjiang, China, offered valuable
resources of genomic data and contributions to our understanding of microbial life in extreme
environments, particularly hypersaline lakes. We found over 8,000 potential BGCs and uncovered
several MDM phyla that may be enriched in biosynthetic capacities, which could substantially support
future research in biotechnological applications. In addition, the discovery of biodegradation genes
within certain MDM lineages also suggests promising prospects for environmental remediation
strategies. In summary, this study expands our knowledge of microbial diversity and function in
extreme environments, paving the path to the future discovery of uncultured microorganisms. This
research not only deepens our understanding of the Tree of Life but also opens doors to a multitude of
potential applications in biotechnology and environmental remediation.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

408 ZQ and KY designed the experiment; XQ and YK collected the samples; RM and ZQ processed the
409 samples; ZQ, YZ, and QZ analysed the data; ZQ wrote the manuscript; ZQ, YK and TZ revised the
410 manuscript; and all co-authors reviewed and agreed the manuscript for publication.

Declaration of competing interests

412 The authors have no competing interests.

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Availability of data and materials

Consent for publication

425 The authors have all reviewed and agreed the manuscript for publication.

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Fig. 1. Summary of MAGs obtained from hypersaline lakes. A) A breakdown of completeness and

purity of recovered MAGs. Red: medium-quality MAGs, Green: high-quality MAGs, and Blue: Near-

complete (NC) MAGs. B) The proportion of 5S, 16S, 23S, and all three types of rRNA genes predicted

in MAGs. C) Summary of genes encoding standard tRNAs predicted in MAGs. D) Proportion of

MAGs that affiliated to a classified, candidate, or unknown taxon at different levels.

Fig. 2. Microbial composition and genetic characteristics of four saline lakes. A) Alpha indices of

predicted genes from planktonic and sedimentary communities in different lakes. B) RDA analysis of

predicted genes from planktonic and sedimentary communities in different lakes. C) Relative

abundance of genes involved in key pathways including carbon fixation, fatty acid metabolism,

methane metabolism, nitrogen metabolism, photosynthesis, and sulfur metabolism. D) Z-score

normalized relative abundance of modules in carbon fixation, methane metabolism, nitrogen

metabolism, and sulfur metabolism.

Fig. 3. Phylogenetic analysis of MDM MAGs. Unrooted maximum likelihood trees of archaeal and bacterial MAGs were constructed with 122 and 120 concatenated marker genes in IQ-TREE using Q.pfam+R10 and LG+F+R10 models, respectively. A) MDM proportion of planktonic and sedimentary communities in terms of relative abundance and number of MAGs. Red: MDMs; Grey: non-MDMs. B) Microbial structure of planktonic and sedimentary communities in different lakes in terms of relative abundance and number of MAGs classified at phylum level. C) Phylogenetic tree of bacterial and archaeal MAGs. MDM lineages (bacterial) or phyla (archaeal) highlighted in pink, and MDM MAG(s) present in the corresponding lineages/phyla were indicated with shapes (ADH: square, BLK: circle, DBC: triangle, QJJ: diamond, solid symbol: sediment, hallowed symbol: plankton).

Fig. 4. Analysis of biosynthetic potentials of hypersaline lake MAGs. A) A summary of predicted BGCs. In the pie chart on top, blue indicates that predicted BGCs were clustered to known BGCs in the MiBIG database with cosine distance ≤ 0.2; red indicates that predicted BGCs clustered to known BGCs but with cosine distance > 0.2, which was considered novel; grey indicates that BGCs were not clustered to a known BGC in the MiBIG database. The pie chart at bottom summarised the number of BGCs annotated to a BGC class. B) Normalised number of BGCs per MAG in each phylum. C) Phylogenetic trees of archaeal and bacterial MAGs with completeness ≥ 70, or number of BGCs ≥ 5. Midpoint-rooted maximum likelihood trees of archaeal and bacterial MAGs were constructed with 122 and 120 concatenated marker genes in IQ-TREE using Q.pfam+R10 and LG+F+R10 models, respectively. Black branches indicate bacterial MAGs, while purple branches indicate archaeal MAGs.

Fig. 5. Phylogenetic analysis of biodegradative potentials in A) bacterial and B) archaeal MDM MAGs. Maximum likelihood trees of bacterial and archaeal MAGs were constructed with 120 and 122 concatenated marker genes in IQ-TREE using LG+F+R10 and Q.pfam+R10 models, respectively. The bacterial and archaeal trees were rooted with phylum *GCA-001730085* and *Thorarchaeota*, respectively. Key biodegradative genes were annotated in orange (nitrogen metabolism), teal (dehalogenation), light blue (plastics degradation), and purple (PAHs degradation).

Fig. S1. Location of Aiding Lake (ADH), Barkol Lake (BLK), Dabancheng Lake (DBC), and

Qijiaojing Lake (QJJ).

Fig. S2. NMDS plot of genetic diversities analysed in Bray-Curtis dissimilarities. Different colours

indicate different lakes, including red (ADH), cyan (BLK), green (DBC), and purple (QJJ), while

different shapes indicate different lake compartments, including sediment (solid circle) and plankton

(hollowed circle).