

**Viral metagenome reveals microbial hosts and the associated antibiotic resistome
on microplastics**

Ruilong Li^{1,2†}, Xin-Li An^{1†}, Yijin Wang², Zhugen Yang⁴, Jian-Qiang Su¹, Jonathan
Cooper⁵, Yong-Guan Zhu^{1,3*}

¹Key Lab of Urban Environment and Health, Institute of Urban Environment, Chinese
Academy of Sciences, Xiamen 361021, China

²College of Light Industry and Food Engineering, Guangxi University, Nanning
530004, China

³State Key Lab of Urban and Regional Ecology, Research Center for Eco-
Environmental Sciences, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100085, China

⁴School of Water, Energy and Environment, Cranfield University, Cranfield, MK43
0AL, United Kingdom

⁵The School of Engineering, The University of Glasgow, G12 8LT, United Kingdom

[†] These authors contributed equally to this work.

*Correspondence should be addressed to: ygzhu@rcees.ac.cn (Yong-Guan Zhu).

Abstract

Microplastics provide a unique niche for viruses, promoting viral interactions with hosts and accelerating the rapid “horizontal” spread of antibiotic resistance genes (ARGs). Currently, however, there is a lack of knowledge concerning the main drivers for viral distribution on microplastics and on the resulting patterns of viral biogeographic distributions, and the spread of the associated ARGs. Here, we performed metagenomic and virus enrichment-based viromic sequencings on both polyethylene (PE) and polypropylene (PP) microplastics along a river. Experimental results show that *Proteobacteria*, *Firmicutes*, *Actinobacteria* and *Cyanobacteria* were the potential hosts of viruses on microplastics, but only approximately 4.1% of viral variations were associated with bacterial community. Notably, two shared ARGs and six metal resistance genes were identified in both viral and their host bacterial genomes, indicating the occurrence of horizontal gene transfer (HGT) between viruses and bacteria. Furthermore, microplastics introduce more distinctive elements to viral ecology, fostering viral diversification and virus-host linkage while refraining from an escalated level of HGT of ARGs, in contrast to natural matrixes. Our study provide comprehensive profiles of viral communities, virus-related ARGs and their driving factors on microplastics, highlighting how these anthropogenic niches providing unique interfaces that comprise highly defined viral ecological features in the environment.

Keywords: Microplastics, Antibiotic resistance genes, Virus, Horizontal gene transfer, Host bacterial genomes

Introduction

Persistent and cyclic microplastics pollution has been considered as a hallmark of the anthropocene¹. This increasing stream of human-made polymers are becoming an emerging environmental and human health crisis, posing toxic effects by releasing leachates and even threatening human health via directly entering biological tissues and cells or trophic transfer²⁻⁴. Research efforts have unraveled microplastics provide a novel niche for microbial colonization and biofilm growth, owing to their high hydrophobicity, large surface/volume ratios, persistence and recalcitrance^{5, 6}. The diverse microbial community of heterotrophs, autotrophs, predators, and symbionts that colonize microplastics has become known as the “plastisphere”⁷. Evidences that microplastics surfaces selectively enrich pathogens into areas inaccessible to natural substrates suggest that MP pollution could provide new refuges for pathogens and have ramifications on disease transmission and treatment^{8, 9}.

Viruses are ubiquitous and abundant members of Earth’s microbiomes, impacting host evolution, metabolism, and Earth’s biogeochemical cycles. However, most studies of plastisphere have overlooked viruses while largely focusing on bacteria and fungi. A few studies on virions on microplastics have shown that viruses can hitchhike on microplastics and prolong their infectivity by adhering to the microplastics surface, which have not investigated viral communities and their bacterial hosts¹⁰⁻¹². Our recent study that applied bulk metagenomic sequencing provided evidence that viruses are ubiquitous on microplastics surfaces in a freshwater environment¹³. Antimicrobial resistance bacteria are a compelling health issue since they make antibiotic treatments obsolete, even causing the death. Although studies have characterized the resistome in the plastisphere^{8, 13, 14} and analyzed the presence of antimicrobial resistance genes (ARGs) in the viral fractions from various environmental compartments, microplastics associated viruses-host interactions have not yet been reported^{15, 16}. It has been argued

that the abundance of phage-borne ARGs has been overestimated due to the rare occurrence of phage-mediated ARG transduction and the contamination with nonviral DNA (free bacterial DNA or outer membrane vesicles)^{15, 17}. However, recent advances in viral particle enrichment and bioinformatic tools for viromes have enabled the recovery of a vast richness of viral populations and accurate prediction of the association between viruses and their potential bacterial hosts in the plastisphere.

Microplastics have been posited to act as a new substrate within aquatic environments, with MP-associated bacterial communities found to be distinct from those in naturally occurring substrates¹⁸. The synthetic polymers show extensively higher microbial community richness and evenness than the surrounding natural substrates (i.e. water, sediment, wood, cobblestone, rock, and leaf) (Ogonowski et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2020; Zadjelovic et al., 2023). Evidences of niche partitioning between different polymer types have observed that microplastics harbour communities discrete from other polymer types (i.e. cellulose and glass beads)¹⁹. The physicochemical properties, surrounding nutrients, and pH can affect the abundance, diversity, and activity of biofilm microbial communities on these substrates²⁰⁻²². Additionally, viruses as mobile genetic elements may alter the adaptive evolution of their hosts, and promote nutrient cycling and microbial diversity via killing their host^{23, 24}. Bacterial populations may act as biotic factors that regulate the viral ecology via host-virus interactions^{25, 26}. Under the substantial pressure imposed by myriad abiotic and biotic variables, viromes and their associated ARGs on plastisphere are expected to exhibit significant divergence from the surrounding substrates. To test this hypothesis, our study extracted microbial DNA and viral DNA from the surfaces of microplastics (polyethylene and polypropylene), stone, wood and sand. Metagenomic sequencing and viral particle enrichment-based viromic sequencing were applied to explore the unique

viral community on microplastics, their associated ARGs, and the factors driving changes in the plastisphere. The data would provide a benchmark for assessing the potential of horizontal gene transfer and environmental risks of viral communities in the plastisphere.

Main text

Diversity of Bacterial Communities on Microplastics

A total of 28,732 bacterial species were obtained in microplastic samples at the watershed scale using metagenomic sequencing. *Proteobacteria*, *Acidobacteria*, *Actinobacteria*, and *Chlorobacteria* were the dominant phyla in both PP and PE, accounting for 52.60% of the total bacterial community (Fig. S2a). No significant difference in both the species richness (ACE, Chao1 and Richness index) and evenness (Shannon, Simpson and Pielou indexes) was found with sampling sites (from site1 to site 5) or microplastic types ($P > 0.05$, Fig. S2c and S6b). The core bacterial community was also evaluated across all samples. A set of 25,883 bacterial species were found in all sampling sites, and the core species accounted for 78.4 % of the total bacterial species detected. As shown in the Venn diagram, there were 12,284 bacterial species shared in all the samples except the sample PE_5 with lowest species richness (Fig. S3). A majority of bacterial species (28599) were shared between microplastic types, and there were 49 and 84 species were only in PE and PP, respectively (Fig. S2d).

Approximately 0.32% of bacterial species were identified to be potential pathogens. A total of 91 species of potential pathogenic bacteria were detected, which belonged to 11 phyla (Fig. S13a). No significant difference was detected with sampling sites or plastic types (Fig. S13b and S13c). On these microplastics, *Burkholderia cepacia* (13.29%), *Klebsiella pneumoniae* (10.21%) and *Clostridium sp* (7.59%) were

the dominant detected pathogens.

A significant distance-decay effect was also observed in the similarity of microbial community composition between any two sampling sites ($R^2 = 0.842$, $P < 0.001$) (Fig. S2b). NMDS analysis showed that no geographical cluster of bacterial communities was observed among the samples, and the distribution of bacterial community in the PE samples was significantly different from the one in the PP microplastics ($P < 0.05$) (Fig. S2e).

Diversity of Viral Communities on Microplastics

A total of 226,853 contig fragments were obtained, of which the contig length less than 1000 kb accounted for 89% of total contigs (Fig. S4a and Table S2). 17,180, 38,029 and 17,4331 assembled contigs were assigned to viral genus, family and order level, respectively (Fig. S4b-d). *Myoviridae* and *Siphoviridae* were the dominant viral communities at the family level, accounting for 58.8% of the total viral abundance in all samples (Fig. 1a). No significant difference in the richness and evenness of viral community was found with microplastic types ($P > 0.05$, Fig. 1c and S6a). Assembled viral contigs were classified into 501 viral genera, and 364 viral genera shared among these two kinds of microplastics (Fig. 1d), in which *Asteriusvirus* (25.46%), *Prasinovirus* (4.60%), *Klosneuvirus* (4.22%), *Peduvirus* (3.86%), *Mimivirus* (3.70%), *Punavirus* (3.34%), *Chlorovirus* (3.11%) and *Salacisavirus* (3.03%) were the dominant genera (Fig. S8).

A significant distance-decay effect was also observed in the viral communities between any two sampling sites (Fig. 1b). NMDS analysis based on Bray-Curtis distance revealed the distinct dissimilarity of viral communities between PE and PP microplastics ($P < 0.05$) (Fig. 1e).

Bacterial and Viral Resistance Genes on Microplastics

The functional genes of both bacterial and viral sequences were annotated on the microplastics at the watershed scale, based on blasting against the UniProtKB, KEGG, BacMet and SARG databases (Fig. S9a and S9d). Most of the viral genes (approximately 58.75% of predicted ORFs) were annotated as “unclassified and poorly characterized” using KEGG database, while other genes (15.38% of ORFs) were mainly belonging to protein families of genetic information processing, protein families of signaling and cellular processes and nucleotide metabolism and unclassified genetic information processing at KEGG level 2. Moreover, 11.91% of predicted viral ORFs were successfully annotated against the UniProtKB database. The genes encoding technical terms, molecular function and biological process accounted for 10.33%, 8.48% and 7.51% of the total viral ORFs, respectively.

For bacterial functional genes, a majority of unigenes (59.52%) were unclassified and poorly characterized, and some other unigenes were associated with metabolic pathways (11.88%), biosynthesis of secondary metabolites (5.43%), microbial metabolism in diverse environments (3.72%) and biosynthesis of amino acids (2.18%). No distinct distribution patterns of bacterial or viral functional genes were observed with the microplastic types ($P > 0.05$) (Fig. S9b), whilst the similarity of the distribution of the bacterial functional genes was significantly decreased with the increasing geographical distance ($P < 0.05$) (Fig. S9c and S9f).

A total of 779 viral ORFs were found to carry 72 metal resistance genes (MRGs), of which 31 metal resistance types were shared in all samples. 21 metal resistance types were shared in both microplastic types and 14 metal resistance types were shared in 5 sampling sites. The five most dominant shared metal resistance types conferred

resistance to Cu (15.11%), Zn (13.98%), As (10.70%), Fe (9.98%), W and Mo (6.77%) (Fig. 2a). For bacterial community, sixty-eight metal resistance types consisting of 391 MRGs (41393 bacterial unigenes) were detected in bacterial metagenomes. MRGs in bacterial metagenomes mainly encoded resistance to Cu (15.11%), Zn (13.98%), As (10.70%) and Fe (9.98%) (Fig. 2b). Sixty-five metal resistance types were shared in both plastic types whilst 57 MRG resistance types were shared among the sampling sites. It is notable that bacterial metagenomes exhibited 39 unique metal resistance types, whereas no unique metal resistance type was detected in virome.

Fifty-seven ARG subtypes (667 viral contigs) conferring resistance to 13 antibiotic classes were detected based on virome data, and there were 34 ARG subtypes shared in both PE and PP microplastics and 19 ARG subtypes shared in 5 sampling sites. Among these ARGs, trimethoprim (33.19%), tetracycline (21.55%), and MLS (19.62%) resistant genes were the most abundant ARGs. All common resistance mechanisms were detected, including antibiotic efflux (39.98%), antibiotic target replacement (33.19%) and antibiotic target protection (17.88%). Regarding bacterial metagenome, 210 ARG subtypes (11,443 bacterial unigenes) were detected to encode resistance to 20 antibiotic types. Among these bacterial ARG subtypes, 166 ARGs (encoding resistance to 19 drug classes) were shared in both PE and PP microplastics and 104 ARGs (coding resistance to 17 drug types) were shared in 5 sampling sites. ARGs encoding resistance to multidrug (33.73%), macrolide-lincosamide-streptogramin (MLS) (23.82%), and tetracycline (13.64%) were the most abundant. All common resistance mechanisms were observed and antibiotic efflux (77.27%)-related ARGs accounted for the highest proportion of the detected ARGs. No significant variation for viral ARGs and MRGs composition was observed along geographical distance gradient (ANOVA, $P > 0.05$), while bacterial ARGs and MRGs distribution exhibited distinct differences with the

increasing distances (Fig. S9). In the metagenome, a total of 22,992 unigenes were associated with MGEs, including transposon (73.55%), recombinase (19.80 %), and integron (6.65%). There was no significant difference in MGE abundance between different sampling sites and microplastic types (ANOVA, $P > 0.05$).

Drivers of Viral Community and Resistance Genes Distribution

The abundance (Pearson's, right triangle) and compositions (Mantel test, left link) of virus species, ARGs, and MRGs were not significantly correlated with almost all non-biological environmental and biological factors (bacterial community species and functional genes) ($P > 0.05$) (Fig. 3a). A majority of variations in viral ARG (92.2%) and MRG (98.0%) compositions were unable to be explained by abiotic factors (metal concentration, antibiotic concentration, geographical distance, salinity, and etc.) and biotic factors (bacterial community and MGEs), Fig. 3b and 3c. Only 7.7% of variation in viral taxonomic composition was explained by physicochemical properties (3.2%) and bacterial community (4.1%), while approximately 92.3% of viral variation can be unexplainable (Fig. 3d).

For the bacterial community, the abundance and composition of bacterial species, ARGs and MRGs were significantly correlated with most environmental factors (e.g. metal concentration, antibiotic concentration, geographical distance, salinity, dissolved oxygen, chemical oxygen demand, biological oxygen demand, flow rate, ammonium nitrogen, total phosphorus, total nitrogen, dissolved organic carbon, pH, and urbanization factors, $P < 0.05$, Fig. 3a). Abiotic factors and viral community (19.3%) commonly explained 21.1% of variations in bacterial community, while 78.9% of variations were not explained (Fig. 3e). MGEs could explain 60.6% of the variations of bacterial ARG composition and 8.8% of the variations of bacterial MRG composition,

respectively, Fig. 3f and 3g.

Interaction between Viral Community and Host Bacteria

Viral and Bacterial Species

Based upon the approaches of tRNA matches, clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats (CRISPR) spacer linkages and direct nucleotide alignment by using blastn, a total of 1,491 host-virus pairs were linked in the samples, and the number of associations in PP (1,001 pairs) were almost two times as much as the one in PE (490 pairs) (Supplementary Data 2). Only 4.94% viral contigs (mostly assigned to 28 viral families) of the total contigs were associated with these predicted host-virus pairs, and 594 viral associated scaffolds could only be annotated at the kingdom level (Fig. 4a). Most of the predicted host populations associated with the host-virus pairs were assigned to five phyla, including *Proteobacteria* (761), *Actinobacteria* (79), *Firmicutes* (34), *Cyanobacteria* (17), and *Bacteroidetes* (6), Fig. 4a.

Pearson analysis showed that two shared and diverse host bacterial phyla (*Proteobacteria* and *Actinobacteria*) showed significant correlations with the abundances of viral contigs, $P < 0.01$, Fig. 4b. Furthermore, the virus-host abundance ratios were calculated to assess how virus-host dynamics varied across different hosts and virus-host abundance ratios (typically > 1) were observed among different hosts, and the highest average values were observed in *Proteobacteria* and *Actinobacteria* (Fig. 4b). The abundances of the host phyla were significantly correlated with the total abundance of viruses infecting the same host lineage on microplastics ($R^2 = 0.991$, $P < 0.001$), Fig. 4c.

Shared resistance genes

Virus-host pairs prediction analysis showed that six MRGs including *pfr* (Fe, Cu,

Mn), *copF* (Cu), *arsB* (As), *zraR/hydH* (Zn), *pitA* (Zn, Te) and *modC* (W, Mo) and two ARGs (*bla_{OXA}-9* encoding β -lactamase) and *dfrA1* encoding resistance to trimethoprim) were detected in both the viruses and their host bacteria. Relative abundances of shared ARGs and MRGs in the virus-host pairs were calculated by mapping viral clean reads to the resistance gene-associated contigs. These shared resistance genes (MRGs and ARGs) were mainly carried by the class *Caudovirales*, *Imitervirales* and unclassified viral class (Fig. 4d). The potential bacterial hosts of the shared MRGs were frequently associated with *Pseudomonadaceae*, *Flavobacteriaceae*, *Mycobacteriaceae* and *Comamonadaceae*. The two shared ARGs *bla_{OXA}-9* and *dfrA1* had the bacterial hosts related to *Comamonadaceae*.

Comparisons plastisphere and natural particles

Taxonomic composition

By employing metagenomic sequencings on 11 natural particles (3 for stone, 4 for wood, and 4 for sand) from corresponding sampling sites, 10761 viral contigs were obtained, respectively. After taxonomically identified by referencing IMG/VR database by using VPF-Class, 6177 of these vOTUs were assigned to family level, respectively.

Viral community taxonomic composition has significant divergence between samples from distinct compartments (Fig. 5). Myoviridae, Siphoviridae, and Mimiviridae dominated the plastisphere viral communities at family level in microplastics, whereas the viral communities in natural particles were dominated by *Myoviridae*, *Siphoviridae*, and *Podoviridae*. Additionally, regarding viral community alpha diversity (Fig. 5c, d, f, and g), samples collected from natural particles showed much higher viral richness and evenness compared to microplastics from the Beilun River, where the wood has the highest viral richness and evenness.

Resistance genomes and host prediction

Viral open reading frames (ORFs) were assigned to functional genes by referencing eggNOG database. Compared with the uniform viral functional profiles in natural particles, there were less abundant and less diverse viral functional genes in plastisphere, especially for PE (Fig. 5 b and Fig. S14). Either functional gene or ARG profiles exhibited a significant clustering pattern according to the type of material types among distinct samples (Fig. 5 e and h).

To assess the viruses-associated microbiological risks, we identified the viral ARGs by referencing SARG database. As a result, we respectively identified 9356 MRGs (conferring resistance to 58 types of metals) and 455 MRGs (conferring resistance to 25 types of metals) (Fig. S15 and Fig. S16). It was found that microplastics had much lower abundance and diversity of MRGs, but wood posed the highest viral metal resistance associated risks, followed by sand, stone, PE, and PP. Moreover, 525 ARG subtypes (12831 ARGs) and 163 ARG subtypes (3379 ARGs) were found from both natural particles and microplastics samples, which dominantly conferred resistance to 26 types of antibiotics (Fig. S17 and Fig. S16). Notably, significant higher abundances of ARGs were found in sand, whereas the ARG abundances of other samples followed the order: Wood > PP > PE > Stone (Fig. S17a). The type of particles may also determine the prevalent ARG types (Fig. S17a). That is, rifamycin, MLS, multidrug, and tetracycline were the dominant ARG types from natural particles, where aminocoumain and tetracycline dominated the ARG types of microplastics. This phenomenon is associated with the distribution of resistance mechanism, where efflux pump, antibiotic target protection, and regulator dominated natural particles resistance mechanism. However, the mutation, antibiotic target protection, and antibiotic target

alteration relies on the resistance mechanism of the microplastics samples (Fig. S17b).

By comparing the nucleotide similarity of CRISPR-spacers and tRNA in both viromes and metagenomic assembled genomes (MAGs), we predicted the potential linkage between the viral contigs and their hosts' MAGs. Consequently, the hosts of 1589, 870, 515, 285, and 612 viral contigs were successfully predicted for stone, wood, sand, PE and PP, respectively (Fig. S19). Significantly diverse virus-host pairs were found in natural particles rather than plastisphere.

Furthermore, we delineated the occurrence of horizontal gene transfer (HGT) between viruses and their hosts by identifying the coexistence of specific ARGs in both viral contigs and their predicted host scaffolds, which were observed in both microplastics and sediments. HGTs of MRGs occurred more prevalently in samples from Beilun River, with 5 MRGs found in PE and 1 MRG in PP, than in sand samples (only 1 MRG found in wood). Neither MRG performed HGT in other natural samples nor horizontally transferred MRG were shared among samples (Fig. S20a). HGTs of ARGs occurred more prevalently in sediments (6 ARGs in sand) than in microplastics (6 ARGs in stone, 2 ARGs in wood, 2 ARGs in PP, and no ARG in PE). It is worth noting that the HGT of an ARG (i.e. rsmA conferring resistance to diaminopyrimidine) was observed in three kinds of natural particles, whereas no shared HGTs of specific ARG was obtained between microplastics and other natural particles (Fig. S20b).

Virus in microplastics collected from river watershed

Microplastics provide a distinct human-made niche for colonization, proliferation and genetic exchange of viruses and their bacterial hosts. These microbial hitchhiker niches, such as pathogens or ARGs, hosted by microplastics, can spread to other environments either by water flow or water columns in the river. In this study, the

microplastics were collected from the Bei-Lun River watershed throughout the geographically Karstic areas. Our data showed that microplastics in the river can host a diversity of bacterial and viral communities using the combination of metagenome and virus-enriched virome sequencing. Recent studies have demonstrated that the viral contigs deriving from metagenome sequencing alone are far less than those from the viromes, which is not sufficient to reveal the viral taxonomic and functional diversity in the complex environments, especially for the rare taxa^{13, 27}. Compared to merely 42174 viral reads and 11 ARGs in viromes priorly identified from total plastisphere metagenomes without viral purification, the combined approach used in this study can override the metagenome sequencing since metagenome sequencing depth from microplastics might limit the interpretation of the viral biodiversity¹³. Moreover, viral enrichment is challenging the possibility of identifying the viral contigs. Our present study showed that viral enrichment-based virome sequencing was able to capture more viral species and functional genes. Therefore, the combination of metagenome and virome sequencing data can provide a comprehensive profile of the diversity of viral communities, host-viral associations and the potential HGT of ARGs on microplastics.

No significant difference in the Alpha diversity of microbial or viral communities was observed in the different sampling sites and different types of microplastics. This was possibly attributed to biofilms on microplastics, providing a stable shelter for microbial and viral colonization. Both microbial and viral communities showed no distinct cluster with sampling sites, while the community structure of PE and PP was significantly different. The selective adsorption of microorganisms onto microplastics possibly explained the distribution heterogeneity of microbial and viral communities on microplastics with different materials. PE has a larger specific surface area than PP, which is favorable for bacterial adhesion. The alanine, aspartate and glutamate

metabolism-related genes are enriched in the viral metagenome of PP, further indicating that PP microplastics might be feasible to microbial and viral proliferation and metabolism on PP. The biogeographic pattern that community similarity decreases with increasing geographical distance has been observed in both microbial and viral communities. One possible reason was that the interaction between viruses and their bacterial hosts might contribute to the elimination and replacement of species in reassembling processes of microbial populations.

Microbial community composition showed that *Proteobacteria*, *Acidobacteria*, *Actinobacteria*, and *Chlorobacteria* were found to be the dominant bacterial phyla on PP and PE microplastics from the Bei-Lun River. The observation was consistent with previous studies in rivers, lakes, soils, oceans, wastewater treatment plants, polar regions, and deep-sea environments^{28, 29}. Some potential pathogens including *Burkholderia cepacia*, *Klebsiella pneumoniae* and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* were also detected on microplastics, indicating that these pathogens could infect humans and animals by hitching a ride on microplastics to other environments. For viral community, *Myoviridae* and *Siphoviridae* were found to be predominant viral families on microplastics, which were also reported to be abundant in agricultural soils, marine and river³⁰⁻³². Additionally, MDA is known to introduce biases associated with sequence composition³³, which might partially explain the high abundance of the typical dsDNA virus *Myoviridae* on the microplastics.

Previous studies have demonstrated that the microplastics act as hotspots of ARGs^{8, 34}. Our findings provides new knowledge and understanding of ARGs and MRGs of plastisphere based on the metagenome and virome data and its role in the spread of AMR through HGT. Our study found that only 667 viral contigs carried ARGs, accounting a small proportion of total contigs, which was consistent with the previous

376 studies. Trimethoprim, tetracycline, MLS resistance genes were frequently detected in
377 the viral contigs. Previous studies observed the trimethoprim, chloramphenicol and
378 MLS resistance genes frequently in soils, the polymyxin resistance proteins mostly in
379 rivers, and beta-lactamase in swine gut^{16,35}. One possible explanation was that the ARG
380 distribution associated with the viruses linked to their surrounding environments.

381 Bacterial ARGs on microplastics were observed to mainly encode resistance to
382 multidrug, MLS, and tetracycline, which was different from our previous high through
383 qPCR research. The data mainly were attributed to the difference in the used approach
384 for detecting ARGs on microplastics. In this study, some MRGs were also detected in
385 viral and bacterial sequences on plastisphere. Al and Fe resistance genes accounted for
386 a large proportion of MRGs of virome, while bacterial MRGs were mainly associated
387 with the resistance to Cu, Zn and As^{36, 37}. These auxiliary metabolic genes might be
388 favorable for the hosts' adaptation to stressed environments via compensating for host
389 bacterial metabolism outputs.

390 Abiotic factors and viral community contributed to the distribution of bacterial
391 community on microplastics, indicating the potential Interactions between bacterial and
392 phage communities in natural environments. The large proportion of unexplained
393 variance needs to be further investigated in the future study. MGEs including
394 transposon, recombinase and integron were frequently detected in the bacterial contigs,
395 and MGEs and this was partially associated with bacterial ARGs and MRGs
396 distributions. This was expectable that horizontal transfer of ARGs and MRGs was
397 frequently mediated by MGEs. Bacterial community exerted marginal effect on viral
398 community. Environmental factors, including pH, salinity and nutrient concentration,
399 have been confirmed as the dominant factors governing the viral community and their
400 carried resistance genes on microplastics, which was consistent with the finding in

marine sediment, agricultural soils and even mine drainage sediments^{28, 29}. Previous metagenomics data have also demonstrated that anthropogenic activity indicators, geographic distance and microplastics types are the major drivers of bacterial abundance and diversity of resistance genes in water and soil/sediment^{34, 38, 39}. However, this study found that no significant association was observed between virial ARG, MRG, taxonomic composition and individual environmental factors. One possible explanation was that the limited exchange of organic and inorganic matter between water and polymer might exerted little impact on the structure and compositions of viral community of plastisphere. Furthermore, non-polar microenvironment of microplastics might reduce the colonization of bacteria, and thus exacerbated their dependences of phages.

Proteobacteria, *Actinobacteria*, *Firmicutes*, and *Cyanobacteria* were the domain potential host phyla of microplastic viruses based on metagenomic binning data. The abundance of almost all viruses exhibited similar variations to that of their hosts. Previous studies also observed that *Proteobacteria*, *Actinobacteria*, *Firmicutes*, and *Cyanobacteria* were the domain potential host phyla of plastisphere, ocean, soil viruses. *Terapinvirus*, *Omegavirus*, *Cafeteria* and *Prasinovirus* were the most frequently detected with the potential hosts. *Terapinvirus*, a genus of dsDNA virus in the class Caudoviricetes, has been reported to be bacterial and archaeal viruses³⁹. *Omegavirus* were potential wide-host viruses, which were identified with the potential hosts from *Proteobacteria* and *Firmicutes*. A previous study has found that *Mycobacteria*, human pathogens, are their natural hosts. *Cafeteria* was a giant virus with a remarkable complement of genes infects marine zooplankton⁴⁵, and that both *Proteobacteria*, *Actinobacteria* were its potential hosts. It has also been shown that *Prasinovirus* can infect the algae in the freshwater environment, and our study further demonstrates that

freshwater is its preferring niche²⁷.

Comparisons of plastisphere and natural particles

Some interesting phenomena were observed in the comparisons of microplastics and other natural particles, which would shed light on the dynamics of host microbial-viral migration. Various viruses were identified in each plastisphere derived from the Beilun River, but their richness and diversity were significantly lower than those identified in natural particles. This has been supported by the following evidence. Firstly, previously reported as numerous as bacteria in various biotopes^{40,41}, viruses and the assemblages they compose more diversified in natural particles, which could be influenced by the distinct nutrient availability in different habitats. Further in support of this, capable of governing viral hosts' life strategies, viral auxiliary metabolic genes (AMGs) exhibited significantly higher abundances in natural particles compartments compared to plastispheres. Secondly, unlike bulk soils with ample resources, plastispheres always have uncontrollable and harsh environmental conditions comprising the variable interior volumes and shapes of microplastics, the persistent and substantial properties of microplastics against decomposition, as well as a vast range of toxic leachates⁴². These unfavorable conditions, together with the properties of surface materials, can drive taxonomic variations and functional shifts in the viral and their hosts' microbiomes⁴³. It is worth noting that, in order to be adapted to the harsher conditions, viruses in microplastics are prone to have a broader host range, which have been supported by ecological evidence that environmental filtering can limit the diversity of viruses but improve their hosts' range⁴⁴.

Additionally, in contrast to the previous reports considering that plastispheres often exhibit higher HGTs of ARGs than natural matrixes merely according to the

abundant and diverse MGEs found in plastispheres^{45, 46}, sediments exhibited more prevalent virus-mediated HGTs of ARGs than plastispheres in this study directly supported by genetic evidence. This phenomenon could be ascribed to the generally higher accumulation of antibiotics in natural water and sediments than in microplastics, fitting quite well to the hypothesis “cost of antibiotic resistance”^{47, 48}. microplastics is hence capable of providing a favorable niche for viral diversification and virus-mediated HGT of ARGs. As we know plastisphere bacteria typically significantly response to environmental variables, instand the relatively enclosed circumstance of plastisphere enables the robustness and uniqueness of viral communities, viral ARGs, and virus-host linkages, as the more highly linked virus-host relationship unraveled in microplastics compared to natural particles.

The results improve our understanding of the potential host of viruses and the virus-host relationships in microplastics, although a majority of bacterial hosts could not be identified at the low taxonomic levels (e.g., at the genus level). The shared resistance genes were observed in both bacterial and viral contigs, indicating that viral particles might exert a potential role in the HGT of resistance genomes. The data may be attributed to the microplastics biofilm providing favorable micro-environment for the genetic exchange between bacterial and viral genome due to infection.

Our findings also provide a comprehensive profile of the viral community patterns, ARGs and MRGs, virus-host interactions and driving factors based metagenomic and viromic sequencing. More importantly, some unique features of viral diversity and shared resistance genomes with their host bacteria through HGT were detected in microplastics along the river, in comparisons to natural particles (sand, wood and stone). Four resistance genes are shared by virus and their hosts on microplastics, and the abundances are closely related to their geographical location. Moreover, dynamics of

viral populations and function are subjected to their hosts and have no close relationships with other environmental and anthropogenic factors, which is significantly different from other matrixes.

Methods

Sample Collection

Incubations of 30 days in situ of two types of microplastics, namely PE and PP were performed on March 2021 in the Beilun River (21° 32'- 22° 45'N, 107° 32'- 108° 03'E), Guangxi Province, China (Fig. S1 and Table S1)²². As an exorheic river of the Guangxi typical karst area, five sites along Beilun River were established for recovery of the immersed microplastics according to urbanization and physicochemical properties with Site 1 as the rural region, Site 2 and Site 3 as the peri-urban regions and Site 4 and Site 5 as being characteristic of urban regions.

On each site, 2.0g microplastic (PE and PP) and natural particles (stone, wood and sand) were cultured in river water, respectively. Detailed information is listed as follows. The characteristics of PE and PP microplastics were white fragment, where the size of PE was 0.90 ± 0.10 mm, and the size PP was 1.11 ± 0.15 mm, which were purchased from Aladdin Chemical Company (Shanghai, China). The microplastics were disinfected using 70% ethanol for 30 min and then rinsed exhaustively with sterile water. All of the natural particles are collected from the same zones in the upstream of Beilun River, and immediately sterilized using high pressure steam sterilization pot to overcome the implication of the original bacterial and viral communities. And, only the extracted DNA concentration far less than 0.1 ng/μL and no band showed on the agarose gel can be considered as the qualified samples.

The incubation time was established based upon a previous study reporting the

successful biofilm formation on plastics within 30 days⁴⁹. Particles were subsequently placed at each site and persistently immersed in the water using techniques described in our previous study⁵⁰. After the incubation, microplastics, natural particles and 10 L of water samples were collected at each site. All these samples were stored in sterile glass containers and kept on ice at 4°C for transport, and finally stored at -20°C before embarking the experiments.

Measurement of Physicochemical Properties

Large particles and potential herbivores were filtered using 10.0 and 3.0 µm filters (Merck Millipore Ltd., Ireland), respectively. An inductively coupled plasma optical-emission spectrometry (ICP-OES, Leeman, Prodigy) was used to determine the concentrations of metals (i.e., Fe, As, Al, Te, Cu, Zn, Cr, Mn, Ni, Mo, V, W, Cs, Sn, Pb, Ag, Co, Mg, Hg, Cd, Se, Ga, Na, K, Ca, Ba). A number of additional physicochemical properties were collected, described in our previous studies, including particle size, elemental composition, specific surface area, hydrophobicity, and zeta potential of microplastics and the pH, DOC, TN, TP, NH₃-N, flow rates, BOD, COD and DO of the local environment. The concentrations of diaminopyrimidines, tetracycline, sulfonamides, fluoroquinolones, macrolides of the river water samples, and the levels of urbanization (medical level, population size and domestic sewage discharge) were also determined¹³.

Metagenomic Sequencing and Data Analysis

DNA was extracted from microplastic and natural particles using a FastDNA Spin kit (MP Bio) according to the manufacturer's instructions. The extracted DNA samples were sent to Guangdong MAGIGENE Co., Ltd. (Guangzhou, China) for high-

throughput sequencing. Nine libraries with 400 bps insert size were constructed, and paired-end (PE, $2 \times 150\text{bp}$) sequencing was then performed on the HiSeq X platform (Illumina, San Diego, CA, USA). Approximately 550 million clean reads were obtained after quality screening by Cutadapt (v1.2.1)⁵¹ and assembled by k-mer~ parameter settings (k-mer = 27, 127) of Megahit (v1.2.6) (<https://hku-bal.github.io/megabox/>)⁵². Prediction of open reading frames (ORFs) was performed using MetaGeneAnnotator⁵³, and then removal of redundant genes was performed using CD-HIT (v 4.8.1)⁵⁴ based on 90% sequence similarity and 90% coverage. High-quality reads were aligned to the non-redundant gene catalogs to calculate gene abundance with 95% identity using SOAPaligner (<http://soap.genomics.org.cn/> version 2.21)⁵⁵. Bacterial reads were initially retrieved from by using Kraken2, and subsequent to this, assembled into bacterial genomes. The metagenomic binning was conducted by using MetaWrap2, with parameters set at 50% completeness and 10% contamination. This comprehensive approach aimed to efficiently recover bacterial genomic information, ensuring a robust analysis of the dataset. Bacterial taxonomic annotation was performed by BLASTn against NCBI-NT database (Nucleotide collection, <ftp://ftp.ncbi.nih.gov/blast/db/>, v2016-6-19, E-value $\leq 10^{-5}$) using the lowest common ancestor (LCA) algorithm in MEGAN 5⁵⁶.

Viral DNA Extraction and Sequencing

The detachment of microbes from microplastics and natural particles was performed using methods according to Yang et al.⁴⁹ by vigorous vortex for 5 min in 5 mL PBS supplemented with 0.5% (v/v) Tween 20 (Aladdin). Microbial biomass was collected and microplastics were then eluted with sterile water. After centrifugation and washing with sterile water, the extraction of viral DNA was performed according to the

method described by Trubl et al.⁵⁷ and Adriaenssens et al.⁵⁸ with the following modifications. In brief, the buffer containing microbes detached from microplastics were homogenized and then filtered through a 0.25 mm filter membrane (Biosharp, USA). The filtrate was mixed with 1% potassium citrate buffer by weight (10 g L⁻¹ C₆H₅K₃O₇, 1.92 g L⁻¹ Na₂HPO₄·12H₂O and 0.24 g L⁻¹ KH₂PO₄; pH = 7) (Sigma-Aldrich, USA). The mixture was first incubated at 4°C for 15 min, and then sonicated (100 W, 47 kHz) on ice for 3 min with manual shaking for 30 secs per minute. After the first centrifugation (4602 xg for 10 min) (Eppendorf, Centrifuge 5420), the supernatant was transferred to a second tube and re-centrifuged again at 5478 xg for 15 min. The resultant supernatants were sequentially filtered through 0.45 and 0.22 µm filters (Anpel Hydrophilic PTFE Syringe Filters, China) to remove the remaining non-viral-like particles.

Extracts were enriched using tangential flow filtration technique (TFF, Sartorius Vivaflow50 30,000 MWCO PES, USA). The concentrated samples were precipitated with PEG-8000 (10% w/v) (Solarbio, P8260) and incubated overnight at 4 °C. Viral particles in precipitation were centrifuged by cesium chloride density gradient (1.7, 1.5, and 1.35 g/mL layers) and particles in 1.35-1.5 g mL⁻¹ layers were collected. Subsequently, the purity and morphology of virus samples were examined by 1% uranyl acetate staining (FEI Tecnai G2 Spirit Bio TWIN, USA) under a transmission electron microscopy (TEM). Enriched viral particles were treated with DNase I [TaKaRa Recombinant DNase I (RNase-free) 2270A] and RNase A (Takara Ribonuclease A 2158) to remove non-encapsulated DNA and RNA fragments, respectively. The presence of bacterial DNA was evaluated by PCR of 16S rRNA gene. The solution was then subjected to viral DNA extraction using a Takara MiniBEST Viral RNA/DNA Extraction Kit Ver.5.0 and the concentration of viral DNA was determined using a Qubit

3.0 fluorometer (Invitrogen, Waltham, Massachusetts).

Multiple displacement amplification (MDA) was performed for the extracted viral DNA to meet metagenomic sequencing requirements. It should be noted that this approach may introduce unavoidable but small sequencing biases. Nine amplification products were sent for metagenomic sequencing using the HiSeq 4000 platform (Illumina, San Diego, CA, USA) and each 400bp insert size fragment library yielded 150bp paired end reads.

Virus Identification

After quality control with Trimmomatic⁵⁹, a total of ~550 million clean reads (~55 million per sample) were used for the assembly of viral sequences to resolve potential virus clusters on microplastics using Megahit (v1.1.2) with parameters of -presets meta-large-min-contig-len 300. Totally, 4,997,260 and 5,578,389 contigs were recovered from PE and PP samples, respectively. Potential viral contigs were initially predicted through the “Prodigal” package in CheckV⁵⁶, and were further processed by the virus hidden Markov models (vHMMs) pipeline to identify microbial and viral genes using three different filtering criteria, namely: (i) the score of gene identification must be greater than 1.2; (ii) if the sequence contained 10 genes, the host sequence was determined to contain at least 2 microbial genes while the viral sequence was determined to contain at least 2 viral genes, and; (iii) as host sequences, at least 30% of the genes should be annotated as microbial genes. The potential viral contigs with high confidence identified by VirSorter2 (v 1.0.5) were involved. Consequently, 226,853 unique contigs were assigned to viruses and 648 contigs were assigned to proviruses. The host sequences in proviral contigs were cut out before taxonomic annotation.

Taxonomic annotations of viral contigs were assigned to putative virus dominant

(224986 contigs), phylum (174333 contigs), class (174331 contigs), order (174331 contigs), family (38029 contigs), genus (17810 contigs) and unassigned (1867 contigs) using VPF-Class⁵⁷ combined with CheckV. Clean reads were mapping to the resultant contigs using BWA (v0.7.17, mem -k 30) and the reads with the coverage < 80% were filtered. RPKM value (reads per kilo base per million mapped reads) for each contig was calculated to evaluate the viral abundance.

Host Prediction

The Quant_bin module of MetaWRAP (v1.3.2) was used to estimate the abundance of the constructed bacterial genome with default parameters⁶⁰. Briefly, a per-sample assembly read (with clean reads) was generated using Salmon (v0.13.1)⁶¹, which provides a table of relative abundance (genome copies per million reads (ppm)) for each scaffold in different samples. The abundance of contained bacterial alleles was summed and normalized to the total mapped reads across samples (genome copies/ppm reads) for each genomic bin. In this study, three computational strategies based upon nucleotide sequence similarity were used for host prediction,⁶² namely:

(i) CRISPR spacer bar matching. CRISPR spacer sequences from the bacterial genome were predicted using a CRISPR recognition tool⁶³. Detected spacer sequences were queried against the viral genome using the BLASTn-short function with the parameter of at least 95% identity over the entire spacer length, allowing only 1-2 SNPs at the 50 end of the sequence;

(ii) tRNA matching⁵⁷. The "-t" option of ARAGORN⁶⁴ was applied to recover tRNAs from bacterial genomes and viral genomes, respectively. The recovered tRNAs were compared by BLASTn⁶⁵ and only exact

matches (100% length and 100% sequence identity) were considered as putative bacteria-virus pairs;

(iii) Nucleotide sequence homology between the bacterial genome and viral genome. The viral genome was queried against the bacterial genome using BLASTn⁶⁵. Only alignments ≥ 1000 bp in length with more than 70% coverage of the best hits indicated a bacteria-virus pair.

Functional gene annotation

Protein-coding sequences were predicted using PROKKA⁶⁶ and annotated by BLASTp against the Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and Genomes (KEGG) database, the unsupervised orthology group (eggNOG v5.0.0), the SARG database (<http://smile.hku.hk/SARGs/>), the BacMet database (<http://bacmet.biomedicine.gu.se/>) and the MGE database (<https://bench.cs.vt.edu/ftp/data/databases/>), with parameters of alignment = 1, threshold = 1e-10, and identity > 40%. Additionally, viral ORFs were annotated by BLASTp against the UniProtKB/Swiss-Prot (ViralZone, reviewed protein, <https://viralzone.expasy.org/>) with parameters of threshold = 1e-3. The annotation with the lowest E value in each database was then selected as the best hit for that protein. Pathogenic bacteria were screened against a pathogen catalogue (Supplementary Data 1).

Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis and visualization of the data in this study was performed using R (v 4.1.1) (<https://www.r-project.org/>). Alpha and beta diversity analyses were performed using the vegan and ggplot2 packages in R. The degree of explanation (R -value) and significance (p -value) between samples were calculated based on Adonis

analysis (PERMANOVA). Adonis $R^2 = 0.99$ indicates that 99% of the between-sample variation is explained, and a $p < 0.05$ value indicates high statistical significance. Stress values < 0.05 for NMDS based upon Bray-Curtis distances indicate good agreement between NMDS analyses, suggesting the consistence between the distances between samples in a reduced two-dimensional space and the actual multivariate distances between samples. LEfSe analysis was performed using the online Galaxy platform (<https://huttenhower.sph.harvard.edu/galaxy/>). The definition of shared taxa or genes was classified as three conditions, i.e., shared in all samples; shared in PP and PE microplastics; shared in all five sampling sites, combining findings from both PP and PE at the same sampling site.

Data availability

The raw sequencing reads of bacterial and viral communities have been deposited into the NCBI Sequence Read Archive (SRA) under the accession number PRJNA1104113 and PRJNA1104403 (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sra>). The other data generated in this study are provided in the main text or Supplementary Information.

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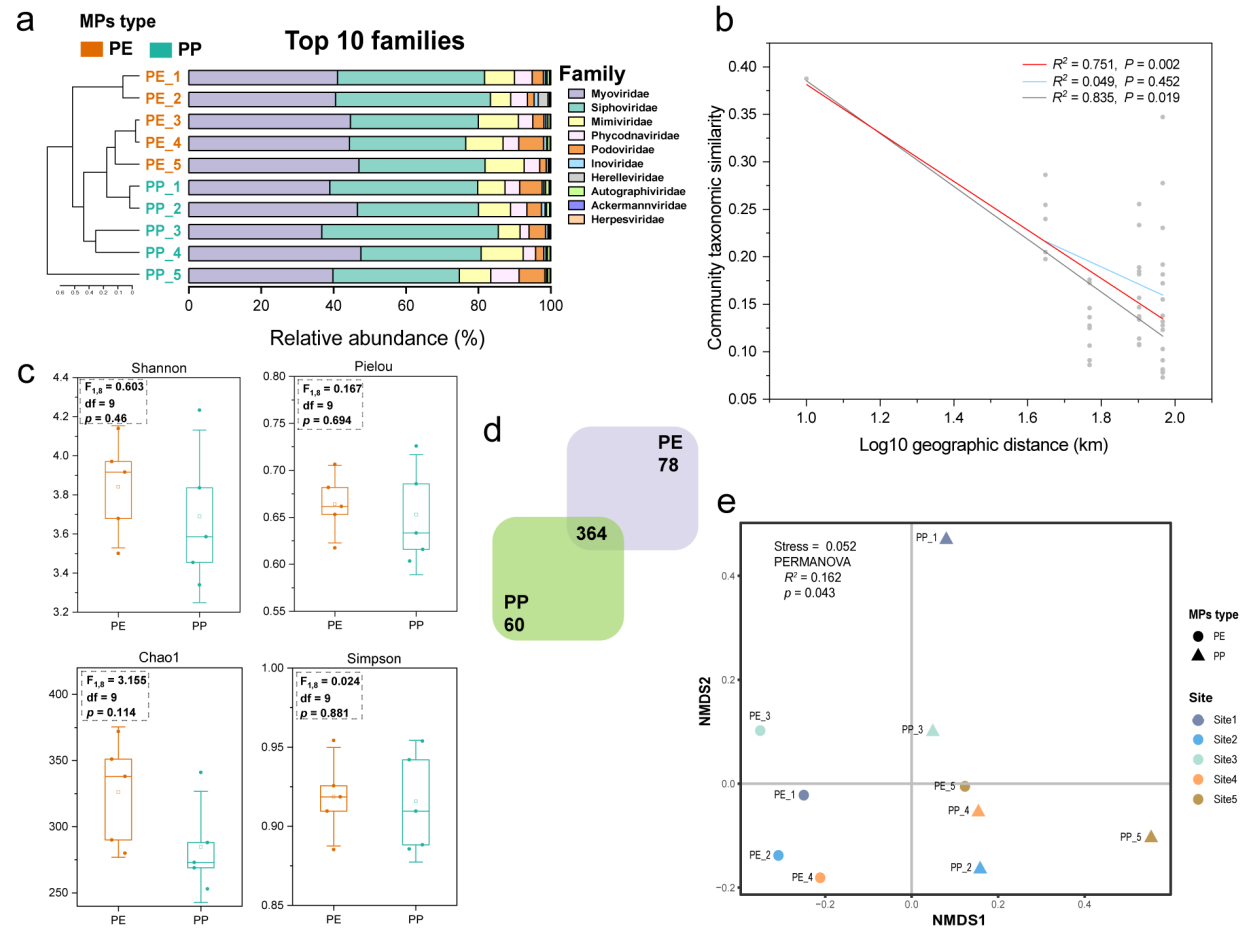
Author Contributions Statement

Ruilong Li designed the experiments and contributed to data analysis and the writing

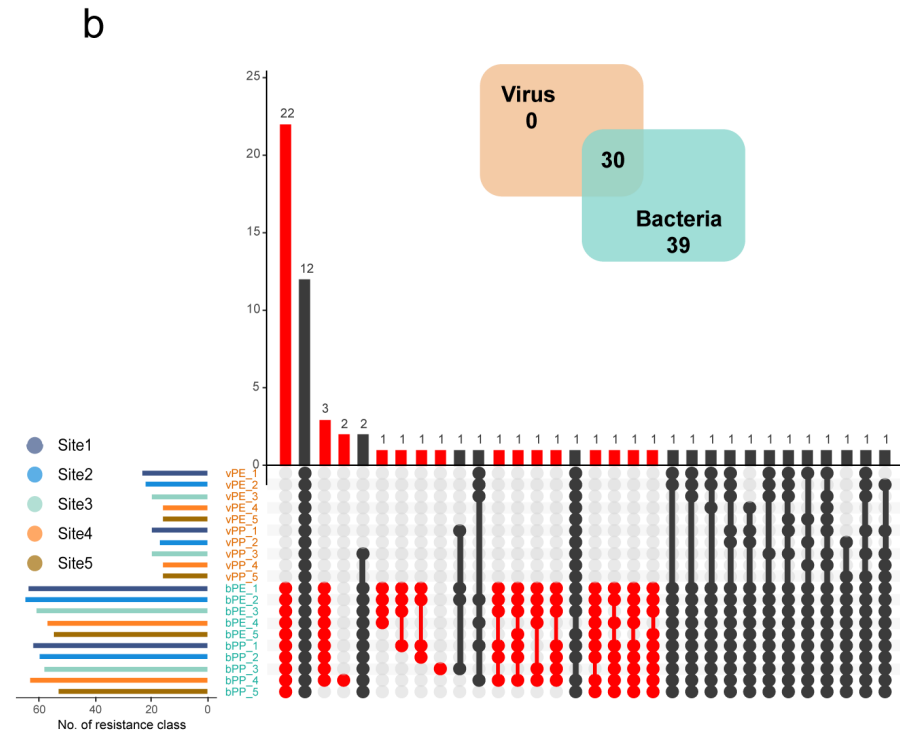
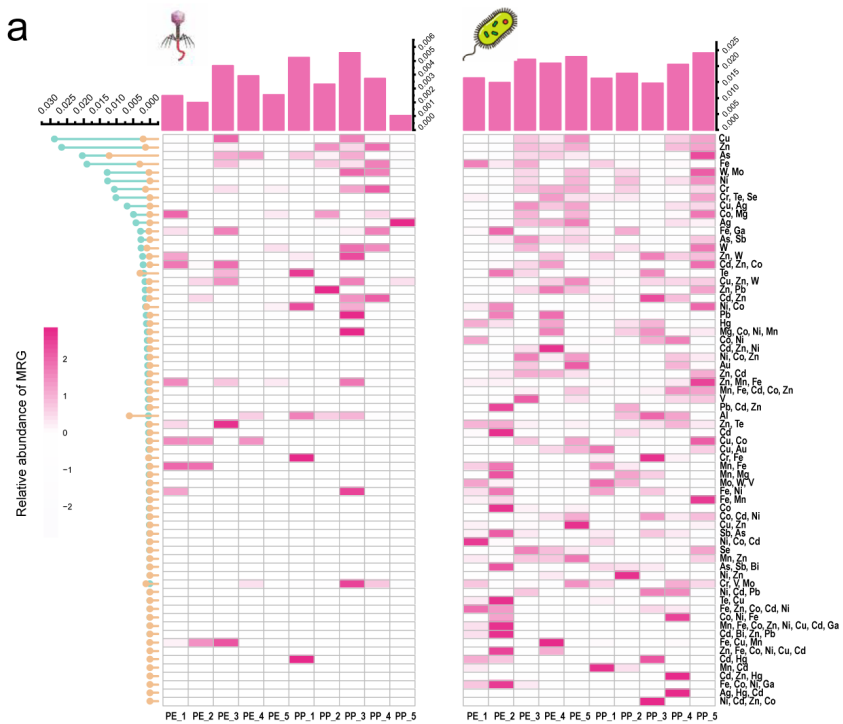
of the paper. Xinli An performed viral DNA extraction, sequencing and identification and the writing of the paper. Yijin Wang contributed to the creation of the final figures and the writing of the paper. Zhugen Yang contributed to the writing of the paper and discussion of results. Jian-Qiang Su contributed to the writing of the paper. Jonathan Cooper contributed to the discussion of results. Yong-Guan Zhu conceived the idea of the study and contributed to the writing of the paper. All authors contributed to the review and editing of the paper.

Competing Interests Statement

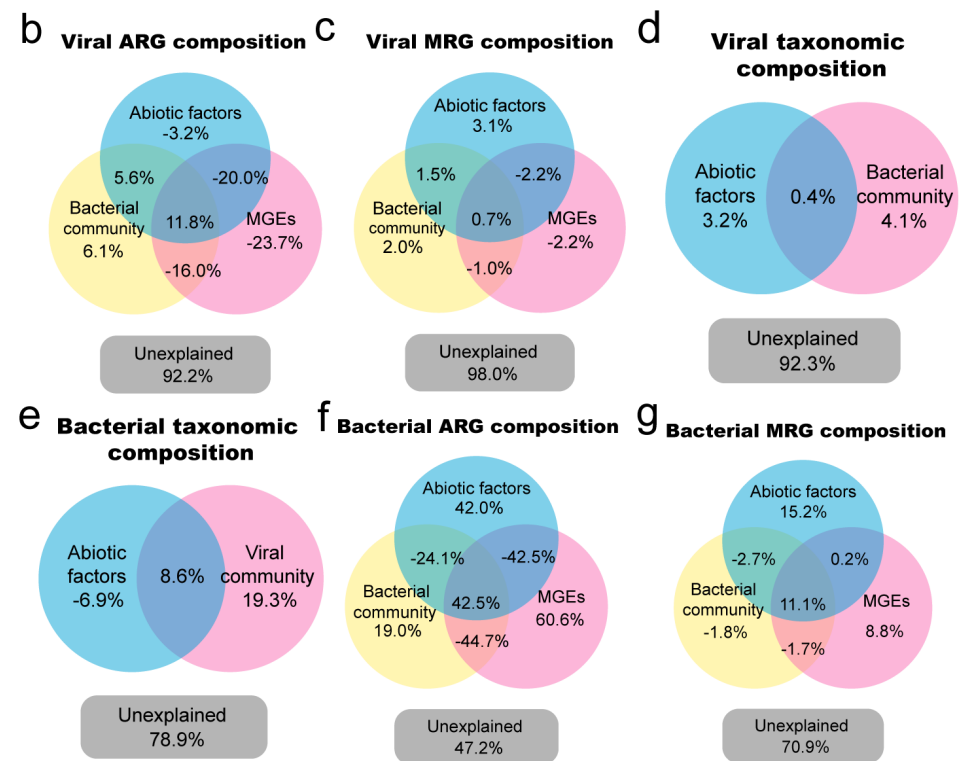
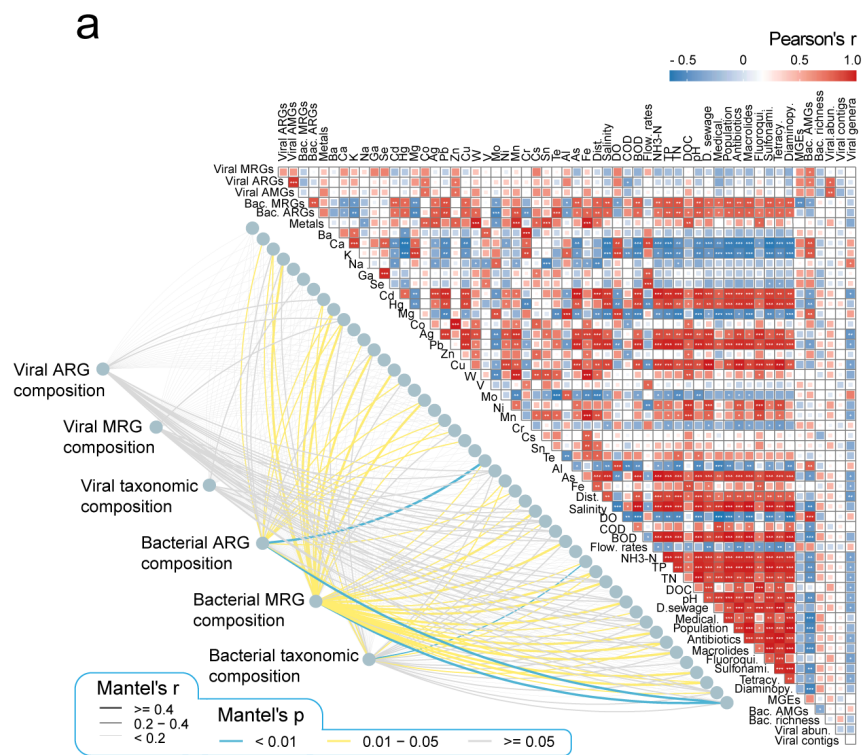
The authors declare no competing interests.



687 **Fig. 1. Diversity and composition of viral communities.** **a** Relative abundance of the top 10 abundant virus families in the two microplastic
688 samples. The left Y-axis shows the UPGMA clustering based on Bray-Curtis distance. **b** Distance-decay relationships (DDRs) based on Bray-
689 Curtis similarity (1 - dissimilarity) of viral taxonomic community compositions. **c** Differences in alpha diversity between PE and PP. (ANOVA,
690 $n=5$, Shannon: $F_{1,8}=0.603$; $df=9$; $p=0.460$, Pielou: $F_{1,8}=0.167$; $df=9$; $p=0.694$, Chao1: $F_{1,8}=3.155$; $df=9$; $p=0.114$, Simpson: $F_{1,8}=0.024$; $df=9$;
691 $p=0.881$). Data are presented as mean values $\pm$ SEM (Shannon for PE and PP: 3.84 ± 0.11 and 3.69 ± 0.16 , Pielou for PE and PP: 0.66 ± 0.01 and
692 0.65 ± 0.02 , Chao1 for PE and PP: 326.20 ± 17.74 and 284.80 ± 15.11 , Simpson for PE and PP: 0.92 ± 0.01 and 0.92 ± 0.01). **d** Shared and unique virus
693 genera between PE and PP. **e** Distribution patterns of virus communities visualized using NMDS analysis based on Bray-Curtis distance.

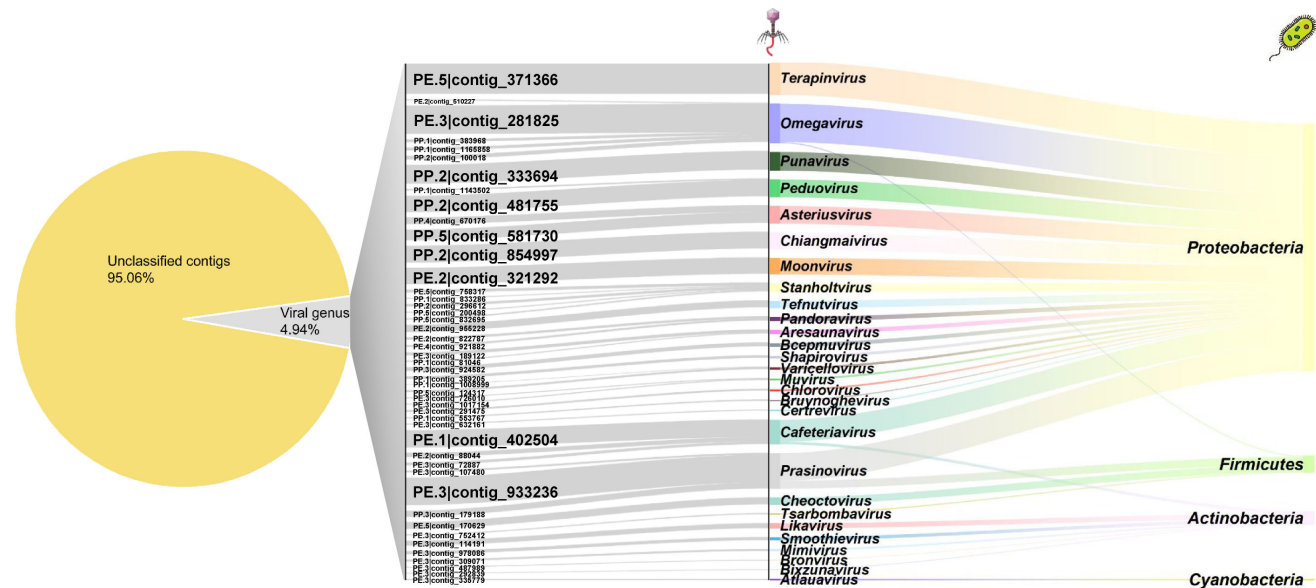


695 **Fig. 2. Relative abundance (RPKM) of bacterial and viral-encoded resistance genes.** **a** Heat map shows the relative abundance of the various
696 metal resistance genes (MRGs) annotated. Bar chart above shows the relative abundance of MRGs in each sample. **b** Interference plots show
697 MRGs in 20 classified groups (i.e. for bacterial and viral communities on PE, PP collected in 5 sampling sites). The bars in the bottom left corner
698 show the number of resistance genes detected in the 20 groups. The upper bar indicates the intersection of resistance genes from different samples.
699 The circles in the bottom graph matrix indicate the sets of groups with intersection. The Venn diagram in the top right corner shows the number of
700 shared MRGs between the bacterial and viral communities.

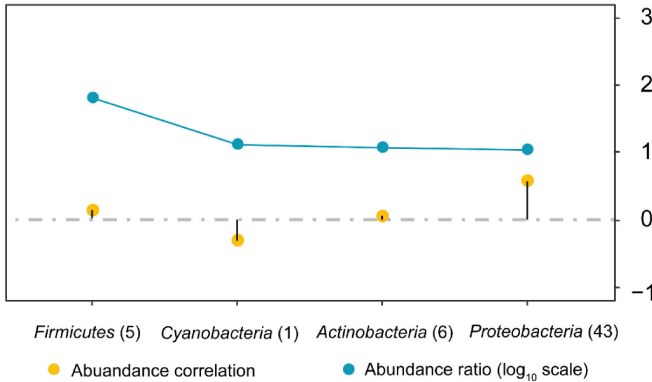


702 **Fig. 3. MRG and taxonomic dynamics of bacterial and viral communities.** **a** Pairwise comparisons of the biotic and abiotic variables. The
703 color gradient in the heatmap denotes Pearson's correlation coefficients. Edge width corresponds to the Mantel's r statistic for the corresponding
704 distance correlations, and edge color denotes the statistical significance. **b, c, d, e** Partial redundancy analysis differentiating the effects of abiotic
705 factors, bacterial community and MGEs on ARG structures in bacterial and viral communities and the effects of abiotic factors, bacterial
706 community and viral community on taxonomic structures in bacterial and viral communities.

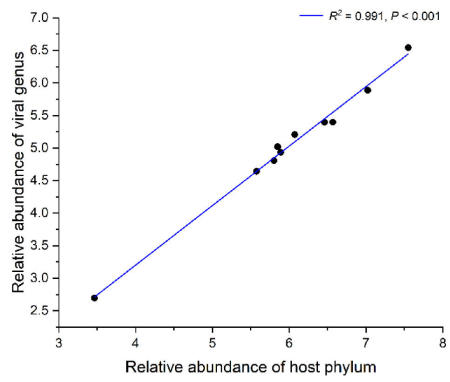
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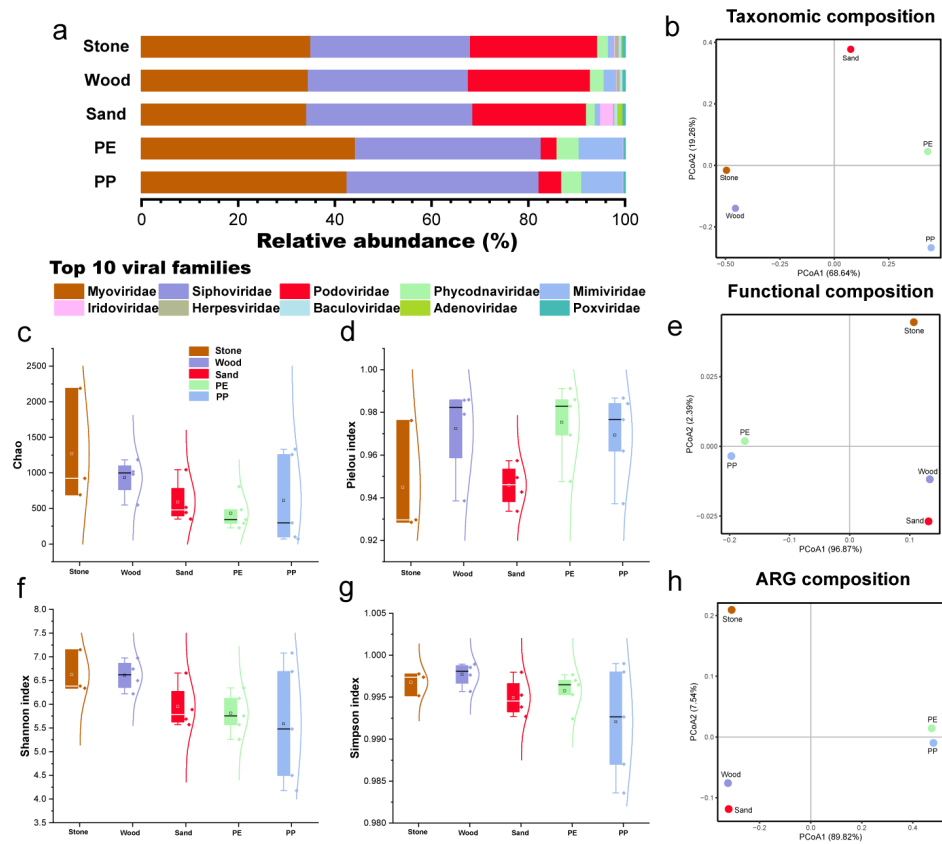
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c



708 **Fig. 4. Viral-host interaction structure.** **a** Matched virus-host association. Association of specialized (one bacterial host and one virus), generic
709 (one bacterial host and multiple viruses) and multivalent (multiple bacterial hosts and one virus) virus-host associations based on viral contig
710 information. **b** Virus-host abundance (RPKM) correlations and abundance ratios. Solid circles indicate positive correlations while hollow circles
711 indicate negative correlations. **c** The linear regression analysis between total relative abundance (RPKM) of viral genus and total relative abundance
712 (RPKM) of predicted host phyla.



714 **Fig. 5. Comparisons of viral community** composition (a), richness (c), and evenness (d, f, g) in natural particles and microplastics as well as the
715 dissimilarities of viral taxonomic and functional composition. (ANOVA, Shannon: $F_{1,19}=4.515$; $df=20$; $p=0.047$, Pielou: $F_{1,19}=3.611$; $df=20$;
716 $p=0.073$, Chao1: $F_{1,19}=3.171$; $df=9$; $p=0.091$, Simpson: $F_{1,19}=2.327$; $df=20$; $p=0.144$). Data are presented as mean values $\pm$ SEM (Shannon for
717 nature particles and MPs: 6.37 ± 0.15 and 5.70 ± 0.29 , Pielou for nature particles and MPs: 0.96 ± 0.01 and 0.97 ± 0.01 , Chao1 for nature particles and
718 MPs: 898.27 ± 153.95 and 520.00 ± 111.71 , Simpson for nature particles and MPs: 1.00 ± 0.00 and 0.99 ± 0.00). Principal Coordinate Analysis (PCoA)
719 analysis based on bray-curtis distance for (b) viral taxonomic composition, (e) viral functional composition based on eggNOG database, and (h)
720 viral ARG composition based on SARG databas

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