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Shelf humic substances as carriers for basin-scale iron transport in the North Pacific

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Iron is one of the key elements controlling phytoplankton growth in large areas of the global ocean. Aeolian dust has traditionally been considered the major external source of iron in the North Pacific. Recent studies have indicated that sedimentary iron from the shelf region of the Sea of Okhotsk has a strong impact on the iron distribution in the North Pacific, while the mechanism supporting its long-distance transport remains poorly understood. Here, we report that refractory shelf humic substances, which complex and carry dissolved iron, are transported conservatively at least 4000 km from the shallow sediments of the Sea of Okhotsk to the subtropical North Pacific with the circulation of intermediate water. This result indicates that shelf humic substances are probably one of the key factors shaping the distribution of dissolved iron in the ocean interior.

Iron (Fe) is one of the essential elements for marine life and has low solubility in oxic seawater^{1,2}; therefore, external inputs of Fe influence ocean primary productivity^{3,4}. Aeolian dust, shelf sediments, and hydrothermal vents are major external sources of dissolved Fe (Fe_d), and the mechanisms that make Fe soluble and contribute to long-distance transport are vital to connecting external sources with primary productivity in remote ocean areas^{3,5}. Although aeolian dust has traditionally been considered the major external source of Fe to the ocean^{6,7}, shelf sediments have been noted to be much more important than aeolian dust or hydrothermal vents in terms of the percentage of the Fe_d inventory in the ocean and its role in fueling the biological carbon pump⁵. The chemical species of Fe_d contributing to long-distance transport from sediments are thus critical information to understand not only marine Fe cycle but also global carbon cycle.

Organic ligands increase the capacity of Fe to dissolve in seawater by complexing with Fe and possibly contribute to long-distance transport through protecting Fe_d from being scavenged^{1–4}. Siderophores, saccharides, and humic substances have been considered probable Fe-binding organic ligands in marine environments^{4,8,9}. Among these substances, refractory humic substances are probably the most important Fe_d carriers in the subsurface ocean because siderophores and saccharides are microbiologically labile^{10,11}. Humic substances, which are complex and heterogeneous mixtures of organic molecules that form during the decay and transformation of biogenic remains, are highly functionalized and are generally characterized by their color due to their ultraviolet-visible (UV-Vis) absorbance¹². As a consequence of their absorbance characteristics, humic substances exhibit fluorescence properties commonly referred to as humic-like fluorescent dissolved organic matter (FDOM_H)^{13,14}. It is well established that FDOM_H is universally distributed over the Earth's surface, namely, from streams to deep oceans^{15,16}. Fe-binding ligands^{4,17} and FDOM_H ^{18–20} have been reported to be released during the microbial degradation of sinking particles, and a linear relationship was found between FDOM_H and Fe(III) solubility (dissolution capacity of Fe) in subsurface waters^{21–24}; thus, FDOM_H is very likely a major Fe-binding organic ligand in the dark ocean. A global ocean Fe biogeochemical model also successfully applied autochthonous FDOM_H as the main organic ligand to reproduce the Fe_d distribution in the ocean²⁵. However, oceanographic linkage between Fe_d and FDOM_H has not been explored with the basin-scale.

Here, we present the distribution of Fe_d together with FDOM_H along a section in the western North Pacific (Fig. 1a) where basin-scale transport of sedimentary Fe_d from the shelf region of the Sea of Okhotsk has been reported^{26,27}. We hypothesize that sedimentary Fe_d complexed with FDOM_H is stable and contributes to long-distance transport with the circulation of intermediate water. Therefore, we separate the allochthonous (shelf-derived) fraction of FDOM_H from the autochthonous fraction, which was determined by the relationship

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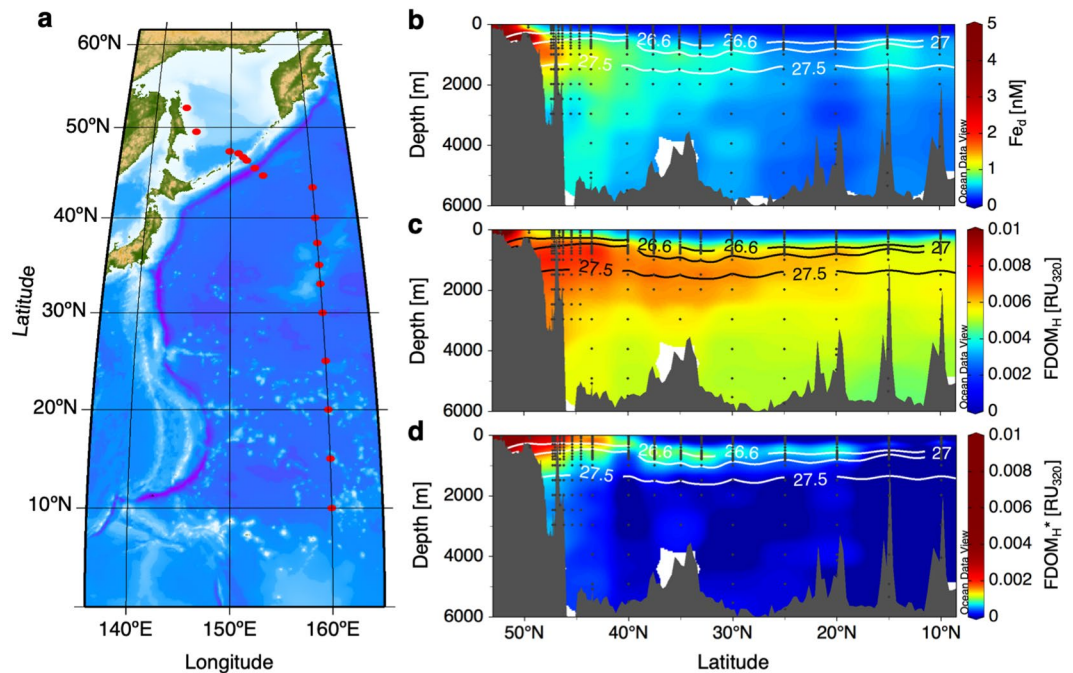


Figure 1. Basin-scale distributions from the shelf of the Sea of Okhotsk to the subtropical North Pacific. (a) Station locations. (b) Fe_d (nM). (c) FDOM_H (RU_{320}). (d) FDOM_H^* (RU_{320}). Solid lines in (b–d) represent the $26.6\sigma_\theta$, $27.0\sigma_\theta$, and $27.5\sigma_\theta$ contours, and 26.6 – $27.0\sigma_\theta$ and 27.0 – $27.5\sigma_\theta$ correspond to upper and lower intermediate water, respectively.

with apparent oxygen utilization (AOU)^{18–20}, and identify the relative contribution of allochthonous FDOM_H as a carrier of Fe_d in the intermediate water of the western North Pacific.

Results

Transport of allochthonous FDOM_H by intermediate water. Analogous to previous studies^{26,27}, this study found the highest concentrations of Fe_d evident in the shelf region of the Sea of Okhotsk, and high concentrations of Fe_d were measured in intermediate to deep waters around the Bussol' Strait due to strong diapycnal tidal mixing (Fig. 1b). The diapycnal tidal mixing at the deep sill of the Bussol' Strait (2200 m) is known to be important to determine the physical and chemical properties of the intermediate water^{28–30}. The levels of Fe_d in the North Pacific Intermediate Water (NPIW; 26.6 – $27.5\sigma_\theta$)³¹, which is characterized by a salinity minimum in subtropical regions (Supplementary Fig. 1a), were higher than those in the upper/deeper water masses. It has been suggested that the Fe_d derived from shelf sediments in the Sea of Okhotsk is transported to the basin region by the Okhotsk Sea Intermediate Water (OSIW; 26.6 – $27.0\sigma_\theta$)³² and then spreads through the circulation of intermediate water, including the NPIW, in the North Pacific^{26,27}.

The lowest level of FDOM_H was observed in surface waters, which was likely due to the photobleaching of FDOM_H ^{33–35}, except in the shelf region of the Sea of Okhotsk (Fig. 1c). The levels along the transect generally increased with depth in the mesopelagic layer (200–1000 m) and then slightly decreased with depth in the deep layer (>1000 m). The distribution pattern of FDOM_H was almost identical to that of AOU (Supplementary Fig. 1b), as previously reported^{18–20,36,37}.

Interestingly, however, the FDOM_H -AOU relationships in the mesopelagic layer and the deep layer were different (Fig. 2a). The FDOM_H levels in the mesopelagic layer were higher than those in the deep layer, thus showing deviations from the linear regression line obtained for the deep layer. Similar but smaller deviations in mesopelagic FDOM_H from the deep linear regression line have also been observed in the central North Pacific¹⁸. Because AOU represents the amount of oxygen consumed by respiration after the subduction of a water mass, the deep linear regression line has been attributed to the *in situ* FDOM_H produced by microbes during the oxidation of organic matter^{18–20}. Thus, the autochthonous fraction of FDOM_H in the mesopelagic layer corresponds to the linear portion of the regression between AOU and FDOM_H (determined for the deep layer); then, the contribution of allochthonous FDOM_H , which is defined here as FDOM_H^* , can be estimated quantitatively (see Methods).

The distribution pattern of FDOM_H^* was distinctly different from that of FDOM_H (Fig. 1c,d). The highest level was observed in the shelf region of the Sea of Okhotsk. The levels of FDOM_H^* in the OSIW and the upper intermediate water (26.6 – $27.0\sigma_\theta$)³¹ were higher than those in the upper/deeper water masses from the Sea of Okhotsk to the south as far as 20°N in the subtropical North Pacific gyre, corresponding to the southernmost region of the NPIW distribution³¹. FDOM_H^* accounted for $37 \pm 7\%$ ($n = 4$) and $12 \pm 4\%$ ($n = 9$) of the bulk FDOM_H in the OSIW and the upper NPIW at 20 – 30°N , respectively (Supplementary Fig. 2). A negative linear relationship was evident between FDOM_H^* and salinity in the intermediate water (adjusted $R^2 = 0.78$, Fig. 2b), even though FDOM_H was not linearly related to salinity in the intermediate water (adjusted $R^2 = 0.003$). Because

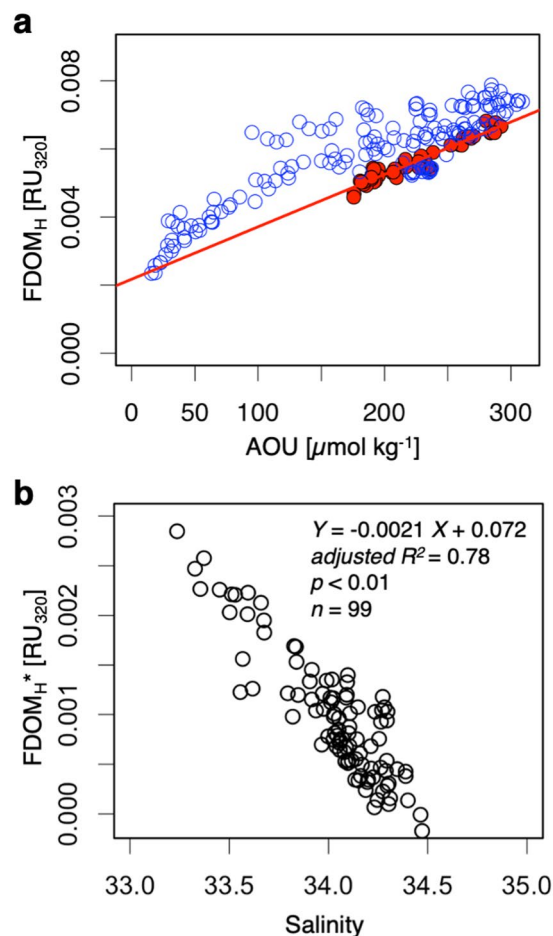


Figure 2. Allochthonous FDOM_H (FDOM_H^*) in the intermediate water. (a) Relationship between AOU and FDOM_H in the deep layer (>1000 m) of the 160°E transect (red circles) and in the mesopelagic layer (200–1000 m) from the basin of the Sea of Okhotsk to the subtropical North Pacific (blue circles). The red line represents the linear regression of the deep layer. (b) Relationship between salinity and FDOM_H^* in the intermediate water. The samples in the water masses with a density range of $26.6\text{--}27.5\sigma_\theta$ and depths of greater than 200 m from the basin of the Sea of Okhotsk to the subtropical North Pacific (20°N) are plotted.

the OSIW, which is influenced by the dense shelf water that forms in the coastal polynya through sea-ice formation involving the interaction with sediments³², greatly contributes to the formation of the upper intermediate water³¹, its negative relationship with salinity indicates that FDOM_H^* from the shelf sediments of the Sea of Okhotsk is conservatively transported across the North Pacific through the formation and circulation of the intermediate water. The residence time of the OSIW in the Sea of Okhotsk was estimated to be 1.4–7 years^{38,39}. The apparent ages of intermediate water, including the NPIW, from the western subarctic to the subtropical North Pacific gyre were suggested to be ~25 years⁴⁰. Such timescales of the circulation of the intermediate water indicate that FDOM_H^* is not removed nor transformed in the dark ocean for at least several decades.

Role of FDOM_H in the chemical speciation of Fe_d . The Fe(III) solubility has been found to be controlled by organic complexation^{1,2}; thus, Fe(III) solubility is not simply related to FDOM_H level in surface waters where siderophores and saccharides in addition to FDOM_H are possibly key organic ligands of Fe_d ^{21,23,41,42}. However, it has been reported that the FDOM_H level is linearly related to the Fe(III) solubility throughout the water column, except in the surface water^{21–23}. The linear relationship did not differ between the deep layer and the mesopelagic layer in the Sea of Okhotsk and the western subarctic Pacific²¹, where autochthonous FDOM_H is dominant and where FDOM_H^* co-occurs with autochthonous FDOM_H . Such a relationship indicates that Fe(III) solubility represented by the FDOM_H level is the same between allochthonous and autochthonous fractions in the region. Therefore, we can estimate the Fe(III) solubility of bulk FDOM_H , as well as FDOM_H^* , based on a linear relationship between Fe(III) solubility and FDOM_H level (see Methods).

The Fe(III) solubility of FDOM_H^* (Fe(III) solubility*) was lower than the corresponding Fe_d concentration in the upper intermediate water and the lower intermediate water ($27.0\text{--}27.5\sigma_\theta$) (Fig. 3a). The majority of the flux of Fe_d from sediments to the water column has been considered to be dominated by organic- Fe(III) complexes^{43,44}. Thus, the relationship (Fig. 3a) indicates that a specific fraction of Fe_d from shelf sediments occurs as Fe_d complexed with FDOM_H^* and is transported across the North Pacific with the conservative spread of FDOM_H^* . This

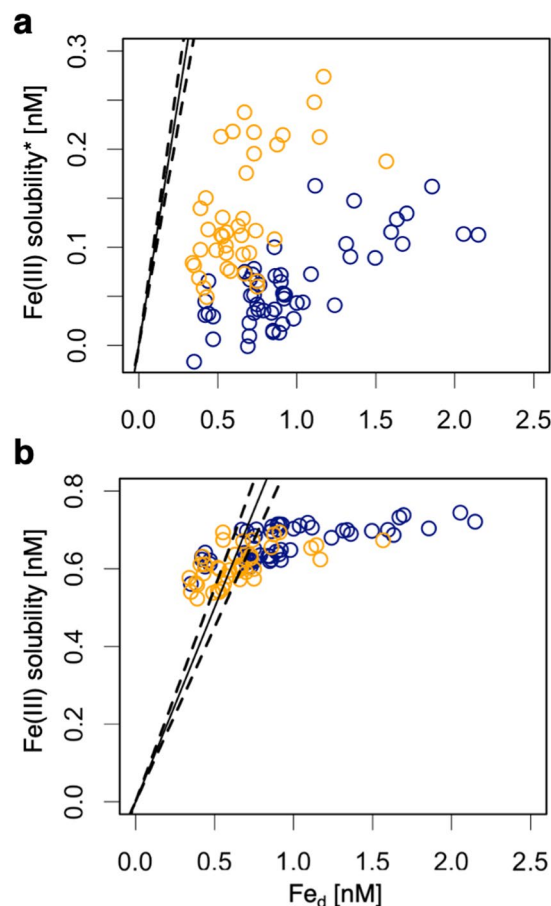


Figure 3. Relationships between Fe_d concentration and Fe(III) solubility. **(a)** Fe_d concentration versus Fe(III) solubility* estimated from FDOM_H^* . **(b)** Fe_d concentration versus Fe(III) solubility estimated from FDOM_H . The samples in the upper intermediate water ($26.6\text{--}27.0\sigma_\theta$, orange circles) and lower intermediate water ($27.0\text{--}27.5\sigma_\theta$, blue circles) from the basin of the Sea of Okhotsk to the subtropical North Pacific (20°N) are plotted. Solid lines and dotted lines indicate the 1:1 line of Fe_d concentration versus its solubility and standard deviation of the 1:1 line, respectively.

mechanism is effective for the long-distance transport of Fe_d , particularly in the mesopelagic and deep layers where FDOM_H is not degraded by sunlight.

The other fractions of Fe_d , namely, excess Fe_d compared with corresponding Fe(III) solubility* (Fig. 3a), are not complexed with FDOM_H^* . The Fe_d concentration also exceeded the Fe(III) solubility of bulk FDOM_H , particularly in the OSIW, as well as in the lower intermediate water in the Sea of Okhotsk and the western subarctic Pacific gyre ($\sim 40^\circ\text{N}$) (Figs. 1b and 3b), suggesting that some fractions of Fe_d are complexed with neither FDOM_H^* nor autochthonous FDOM_H . Similar to our observations, excess Fe_d concentrations compared with its bulk solubility have been reported in the mesopelagic and deep layers of the western subarctic Pacific gyre²³. The Fe(III) solubility was obtained by measuring Fe in the soluble fraction ($<0.025\mu\text{m}$)^{21–23}. Because the molecular weight of FDOM_H is reported to be less than 1.8 kDa³⁴, quite smaller than $0.025\mu\text{m}$, soluble Fe can form complexes with humic substances, as indicated by FDOM_H . These pieces of evidence indicate that excess Fe_d compared with the solubility derived from bulk FDOM_H can occur as colloidal Fe ($0.025\text{--}0.22\mu\text{m}$), which is not complexed with FDOM_H . Although the size fractionation was not determined in this study, the substantial occurrence of colloidal Fe has been observed in the intermediate water of the western subarctic Pacific⁴⁵, which is the same water mass observed in this study.

Discussion

FDOM_H^* , namely, allochthonous FDOM_H , is most likely supplied from sediments as stable complexes with Fe_d since major forms of sediment-derived Fe_d are organic complexes^{43,44}. Assuming that the other Fe_d preferentially forms complexes with autochthonous FDOM_H in the intermediate and deep waters, the spatial distribution of Fe_d concentrations (Fig. 1b) can be separated into three groups (Fig. 4 and Supplementary Fig. 3). High concentrations of allochthonous $\text{FDOM}_H\text{-Fe}$ complexes and colloidal Fe occur in the shelf region of the Sea of Okhotsk and spread to the western North Pacific through circulation of intermediate water, including the NPIW. The allochthonous $\text{FDOM}_H\text{-Fe}$ complexes and colloidal Fe are mainly distributed in the upper and lower intermediate waters, respectively, implying that the allochthonous $\text{FDOM}_H\text{-Fe}$ complexes can make more important contributions to primary production in remote areas due to intrusion into the upper layer. Interestingly, a shift in

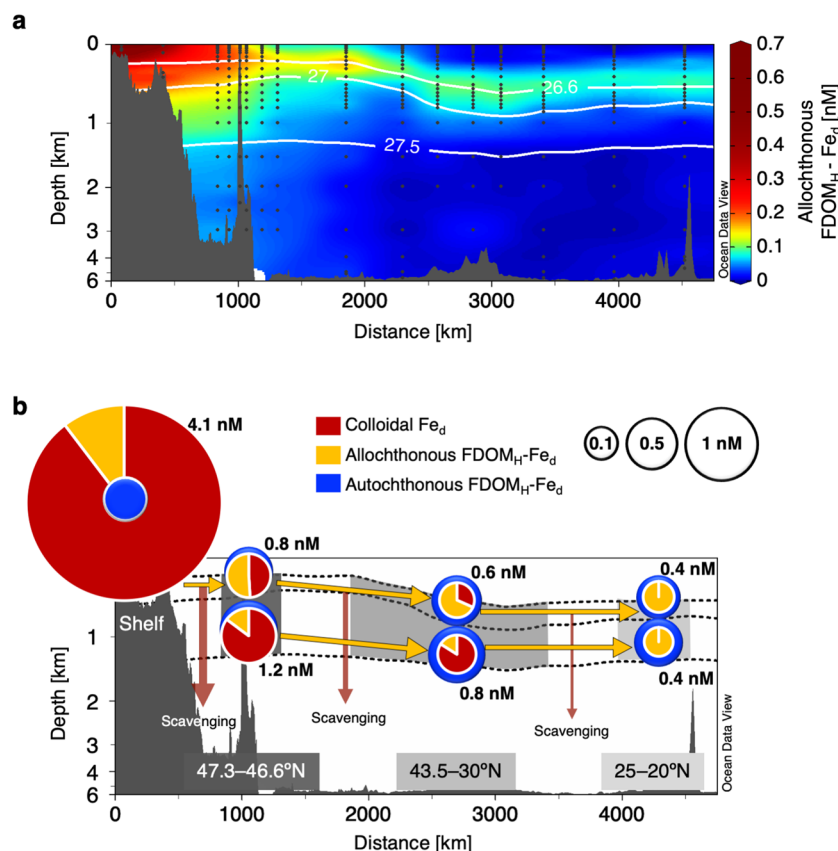


Figure 4. Basin-scale transport of sedimentary Fe_d by the complexation with allochthonous FDOM_H. (a) Distribution of allochthonous FDOM_H-Fe complexes from the northernmost station on the shelf of the Sea of Okhotsk to the subtropical North Pacific (20°N). (b) Illustration of the chemical forms of Fe_d during transport by the circulation of upper and lower intermediate waters. The values of 0–2 km are stretched out on the y-axes. The solid white lines in (a) and dotted black lines in (b) represent the 26.6σ_θ, 27.0σ_θ, and 27.5σ_θ contours, and 26.6–27.0σ_θ and 27.0–27.5σ_θ correspond to upper and lower intermediate water, respectively. Pie diagrams in (b) show the average relative contributions of allochthonous FDOM_H-Fe complexes and colloidal Fe. Concentric circles represent average concentrations of allochthonous FDOM_H-Fe complexes + colloidal Fe (warm colors) and autochthonous FDOM_H-Fe complexes (cold colors). Note that the two circles for upper and lower intermediate waters located at 47.3–46.6°N are illustrated non-concentrically because the concentrations of the two fractions are almost the same. The concentrations described near the circles represent the average Fe_d concentrations.

dominant groups of sedimentary Fe_d from colloidal Fe to allochthonous FDOM_H-Fe complexes involving a dramatic decrease in Fe_d concentration was evident during transport by the OSIW in the Sea of Okhotsk. The relative contribution of allochthonous FDOM_H-Fe complexes was $10 \pm 5\%$ in the OSIW on the shelf of the Sea of Okhotsk and changed to $51 \pm 15\%$ in the upper intermediate water around the Bussol' Strait. This result is consistent with the results of a previous study that estimated that 76% of sedimentary Fe_d is scavenged during transport from the shelf to the basin region in the Sea of Okhotsk⁴⁶. The major groups of Fe_d continuously shifted and reached 100% allochthonous FDOM_H-Fe complexes at 25–20°N along with circulation of upper intermediate water, including the NPIW, indicating that the conservative behavior of allochthonous FDOM_H contributes to long-distance transport of sedimentary Fe_d over more than 4000 km to the subtropical North Pacific.

Relatively high concentrations of colloidal Fe and autochthonous FDOM_H-Fe complexes were observed in and below the lower intermediate water in the subarctic gyre (Supplementary Fig. 3). Such high concentrations may be explained by scavenged sedimentary Fe_d occurring as a result of reversible Fe exchange processes, including stabilization by organic ligands in the dissolved phase, aggregation and disaggregation of nanoparticles, and sinking of aggregated nanoparticles^{47,48}. The colloidal Fe was greater than allochthonous FDOM_H-Fe in the lower intermediate water from the source region to 30°N (~3500 km of transport distance) but was completely replaced with allochthonous FDOM_H-Fe complexes in the lower NPIW at 25–20°N. These results suggest that reversible Fe exchange processes are effective for long-distance transport of sedimentary Fe_d, similar to hydrothermal vent systems⁴⁷, but they are not as effective as complexation with allochthonous FDOM_H. Although dissolved organic matter (DOM) complexation with soluble Fe_d has not yet been understood for hydrothermal plumes⁴⁷, this study clarifies that the conservative behavior of allochthonous FDOM_H can contribute to the long-distance transport of sedimentary Fe_d in the subsurface ocean.

The transport mechanism of sedimentary Fe_d reported in this study can be applied to the western Arctic Ocean, where high levels of Fe_d and FDOM_H are evident in dense shelf water^{49,50}. It has been documented that hypoxic shallow sediments are an important source of Fe_d and labile particulate Fe through the supply of Fe(II) from the sediments, oxidation to Fe(III) , and chelation of Fe(III) with organic ligands or formation of inorganic Fe(III) to labile particles⁴³. It has also been reported that FDOM_H is produced in marine sediments even under anoxic conditions⁵¹. Therefore, it can be concluded that FDOM_H are primary organic ligands contributing to the long-distance transport of sedimentary Fe for the whole ocean, although stable transport is limited to the dark ocean where photodegradation of FDOM_H is inhibited. An application of the method used in this study to other intermediate water systems will clarify the generality regarding with the relationship between Fe(III) solubility and FDOM_H as well as the role of FDOM_H as a carrier of sedimentary Fe.

Apart from macronutrients, the chemical framework of the Fe cycle in the ocean has not been well established because Fe has extremely low solubility in modern seawater. The chemical properties of Fe control input from external sources and its residence time, which shape the Fe distribution in the ocean. Although organic ligands have been considered a major factor increasing Fe solubility, the exact role of organic complexation in the Fe cycle, and in fact the very nature of the ligands that stabilize soluble Fe, have been incompletely characterized. This study clearly indicates that FDOM_H is a factor that controls the residence time of Fe_d , at least sedimentary Fe_d . Although aeolian dust has traditionally been considered a major source of Fe for phytoplankton growth in the western North Pacific, the episodic inputs of aeolian dust may not be sufficient to sustain primary productivity in the region⁵². The stable transport of sedimentary Fe_d complexed with allochthonous FDOM_H by intermediate water possibly influence primary productivity in a wide area of the western North Pacific. Thus, FDOM_H can be a crucial factor controlling the Fe cycle in the ocean.

Allochthonous and autochthonous FDOM_H , as ligands of Fe_d , are able to be determined by salinity and AOU in the western North Pacific (Fig. 2). A global ocean Fe biogeochemical model successfully parameterized autochthonous FDOM_H as the main ligand²⁵. A parameterization of allochthonous and autochthonous FDOM_H in the biogeochemical models may result in the accurate reproduction of the modern ocean Fe cycle and consequently ocean ecosystems and carbon cycling, which will have implications for the appropriate estimation of how climate change will affect ocean productivity^{3,4}.

Methods

Oceanographic observations. Observations in the western North Pacific were conducted along the 160°E transect in July 2012 as part of the R/V *Hakuho Maru* cruise (KH-12-3). Observations from the basin of the Sea of Okhotsk to the western subarctic Pacific gyre through the Bussol' Strait and the shelf region of the Sea of Okhotsk were conducted in June 2014 by the R/V *Professor Multanovskiy* and in August 2006 by the R/V *Professor Khromov*, respectively. Salinity and temperature were measured using a conductivity-temperature-depth (CTD) sensor, and dissolved oxygen (DO) concentrations were measured using an oxygen sensor connected to a CTD. The DO concentrations were also measured on board by the Winkler titration method, and the DO concentrations measured by the sensor were calibrated using the concentrations determined by the Winkler method. The oxygen solubility was calculated using the function of Weiss (1970)⁵³, and apparent oxygen utilization (AOU) was then calculated as the difference between the solubility and the measured DO concentration. Seawater from the surface to bottom layers (16–29 depths) was collected with acid-cleaned Teflon-coated 10- or 12-L Niskin-X bottles that were mounted on the CTD with a carousel multi-sampling system during the R/V *Hakuho Maru* and R/V *Professor Multanovskiy* cruises. The sampling method used for seawater from the two stations (C3 and B5) located in the shelf region of the Sea of Okhotsk during the R/V *Professor Khromov* cruise has been described elsewhere⁴⁶.

Dissolved iron. Concentrations of dissolved iron (Fe_d) in the shelf region of the Sea of Okhotsk measured during the R/V *Professor Khromov* cruise were derived from previously reported data⁴⁶. To collect a subsample from the Niskin-X sampler during the R/V *Hakuho Maru* (KH-12-3) cruise, the sampler was transported in a clean air bubble (filled with air that had been passed through a high-efficiency particulate air filter) and a 0.2- μm Acropak filter (Pall Corporation) was connected to the Niskin-X spigot; the filtrate was then collected in acid-cleaned 125-mL low density polyethylene (LDPE) bottles (Nalgene Co., Ltd). To collect a subsample from the Niskin-X sampler during the R/V *Professor Multanovskiy* cruise, the sampler was placed in a clean tent and a 0.22- μm Millipak filter (Millipore Corporation) was connected to the Niskin-X spigot; the filtrate was then collected in acid-cleaned 125-mL LDPE bottles (Nalgene Co., Ltd). We confirmed that there were no significant differences between the Fe_d concentrations measured using the Acropak filter and the Millipak filter.

The filtrate ($<0.22\ \mu\text{m}$) was adjusted to $\text{pH} < 2$ by the addition of ultrapure HCl (TamaPure AA-10, final HCl concentration of the sample was 0.024 M) and then allowed to remain for one to three months at room temperature in the onboard clean room. Each sample was then adjusted to $\text{pH} 3.2$ just before its measurements by the addition of ammonium solution and a formic acid (10 M)–ammonium (2.4 M) buffer. Fe_d , defined as the leachable Fe in the filtrate at $\text{pH} < 2$, was then analyzed in the onshore laboratory using a flow injection analysis (FIA) chemiluminescence detection system⁵⁴. All sample treatments were performed under laminar flow in the onboard or onshore clean air laboratory.

The Fe_d measurements and reference seawater analyses in this study were quality controlled using SAFe (Sampling and Analysis of Iron) cruise⁵⁵ reference standard seawater (obtained from the University of California Santa Cruz for an inter-comparison study). We measured a SAFe reference sample during every sample measurement run of the FIA instrument performed in the onboard and onshore laboratories. The consensus values for Fe(III) in the SAFe reference standard seawater are $0.093 \pm 0.008\ \text{nM}$ (S) and $0.933 \pm 0.023\ \text{nM}$ (D2) (May 2013, www.geotraces.org), and we obtained values of $0.098 \pm 0.010\ \text{nM}$ ($n = 12$) (S) and $0.976 \pm 0.101\ \text{nM}$ ($n = 10$) (D2) using our method. This good agreement demonstrates that our data quality was high and that our data are comparable with the global GEOTRACES dataset. The detection limit (three times the standard deviation of the Fe(III))

concentration of purified seawater (0.036 nM) that had been passed through an 8-quinolinol resin column three times to remove Fe) was 0.020 nM.

Humic-like fluorescent dissolved organic matter. To determine the level of humic-like fluorescent dissolved organic matter (FDOM_H) in the samples obtained during the R/V *Hakuho Maru* and R/V *Professor Murtanovskiy* cruises, the seawater samples from the Niskin-X sampler were poured directly into pre-combusted, triple-rinsed glass vials with Teflon-lined caps. The glass vials were thoroughly washed with Milli-Q water for their next use on board the ship. Just after sampling, the seawater was allowed to stand until reaching room temperature without undergoing any filtration procedure, and fluorescence measurements were performed with a spectrofluorometer (RF-1500, Shimadzu) with a 1-cm quartz cell. The fluorescence intensity of the FDOM_H was determined at excitation and emission wavelengths of 320 nm and 420 nm, respectively, according to Yamashita *et al.*³⁷. It was reported that the observed differences in FDOM_H levels with and without filtration using GF/F glass fiber filters were negligible for the open ocean samples³⁷.

Seawater samples collected at two stations located in the shelf region of the Sea of Okhotsk during the R/V *Professor Khromov* cruise were filtered with a 0.22-μm Millipak filter (Millipore Corporation) connected to the Niskin-X spigot and poured into acid-cleaned fluorinated high-density polyethylene (HDPE) bottles (Nalgene Co., Ltd). The filtrate was stored frozen in the dark until analysis. The frozen samples were thawed and allowed to stand until reaching room temperature; fluorescence measurements were then conducted as described above.

After the analysis, the fluorescence intensities were corrected to the area under the water Raman peak of Milli-Q water (excitation = 320 nm), which was analyzed daily with freshly prepared Milli-Q water and calibrated to Raman Units (RU₃₂₀)⁵⁶. Because the instrument-specific response⁵⁷ of the spectrofluorometer (RF-1500, Shimadzu) was not corrected commercially, the instrument-specific response was corrected with the comparison of FDOM_H fluorescence intensity in RU₃₂₀ obtained by an instrument-specific response-corrected spectrofluorometer (FluoroMax-4, Horiba)⁵⁸. The conversion factor from RU₃₂₀ to commonly used Raman Units (RU; fluorescence intensity corrected by peak area of Raman scatter at 350 nm)^{56,58} was 1.87.

Allochthonous humic-like fluorescent dissolved organic matter. A general linear relationship between FDOM_H and AOU in intermediate and deep layers, which is indicative of the *in situ* production of FDOM_H during the microbial degradation of organic matter, has been observed throughout the open ocean^{18–20,36,37}. In this study, the linear relationship between FDOM_H and AOU was also evident in the deep layer (>1000 m) along the 160°E transect (FDOM_H = $1.54 \times 10^{-5} \times \text{AOU} + 2.17 \times 10^{-3}$, $n = 46$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.93$, $p < 0.01$). However, many samples in the mesopelagic layer (200–1000 m) did not follow the linear relationship observed in the deep layer but exhibited deviations from this linear relationship at high levels of FDOM_H (Fig. 2a). This deviation from the linear relationship signifies the lack of involvement of the *in situ* process and corresponds to allochthonous FDOM_H¹⁸. Thus, in this study, allochthonous FDOM_H is defined as FDOM_H^{*} and is estimated using FDOM_H, AOU, and the linear regression equation observed in the deep layer as follows:

$$\text{FDOM}_{\text{H}}^* = \text{FDOM}_{\text{H}} - (1.54 \times 10^{-5} \times \text{AOU} + 2.17 \times 10^{-3}) \quad (1)$$

Iron solubility. It has been reported that Fe(III) solubility is linearly related to the FDOM_H fluorescence intensity in intermediate and deep waters but not in surface waters^{21,23,41,42}. Such differences in these relationships are likely due to the occurrence of organic ligands (e.g., siderophores and saccharides) other than FDOM_H in surface waters. Thus, using a previously published dataset²¹, the linear regression between Fe(III) solubility and FDOM_H fluorescence intensity in quinine sulfate units (QSU) was determined for the deep waters (>1000 m) of the western subarctic Pacific gyre and the basin of the Sea of Okhotsk collected in 2000 during the R/V *Mirai* cruise (MR00) (Supplementary Fig. 4). Because the instrument-specific response of the spectrofluorometer used in the previous study²¹ was not corrected, the regression equation in Supplementary Fig. 4 could not be directly applied to this study.

Therefore, to determine the calibration factor between the two fluorescence units, namely, the previously reported QSU²¹ and the RU₃₂₀ used in this study, we compared the FDOM_H fluorescence in QSU and RU₃₂₀ using samples in the deep layer. For this comparison, two stations located in the western subarctic Pacific gyre and in the basin of the Sea of Okhotsk were selected from each cruise (Supplementary Fig. 5a). Although the observations in this study (MU14) were conducted 14 years after those of the previous study (MR00), the vertical profiles of AOU in the deep layer were almost identical between the two observations (Supplementary Fig. 5b,c). Additionally, the linear relationship between the AOU values in the deep layer of the two cruises is evident, with a slope of almost one (Supplementary Fig. 5d), indicating that the water mass was observed to have the same biogeochemical characteristics in both cruises, thus allowing one to make a calibration factor between RU₃₂₀ and QSU using the relationship between the FDOM_H values of the deep layer observed in both cruises (Supplementary Fig. 6).

The conversion factor from FDOM_H with units of RU₃₂₀ to Fe(III) solubility with units of nM was achieved using the slope ($\pm$ a standard deviation) of two relationships, namely, FDOM_H [RU₃₂₀] versus FDOM_H [QSU] (Supplementary Fig. 6) and FDOM_H [QSU] versus Fe(III) solubility [nM] (Supplementary Fig. 4), as follows:

$$\text{Fe(III)solubility[nM]} = 200(\pm 11) \times 0.481(\pm 0.041) \times \text{FDOM}_{\text{H}}[\text{RU}_{320}] \quad (2)$$

The estimated value (96.2 ± 9.7) was applied as the conversion factor from FDOM_H [RU₃₂₀] to Fe(III) solubility [nM] in this study. The bulk Fe(III) solubility and allochthonous Fe(III) solubility (Fe(III) solubility^{*}) were estimated using the conversion factor with the fluorescence intensity of bulk FDOM_H and FDOM_H^{*}, respectively.

Ocean data view parameters. Ocean Data View (ODV; <http://odv.awi.de/>)⁵⁹ was used to produce the basin-scale distributions of each parameter in Figs. 1 and 4 and Supplementary Figs. 1–3. Although high levels of Fe_d , FDOM_H , and FDOM_H^* were observed in the shelf region of the Sea of Okhotsk (9.1 nM, 0.020 RU_{320} , and 0.018 RU_{320} , respectively), the highest ends of the color scales were set to 5 nM for the Fe_d concentration (Fig. 1b) and to 0.01 RU_{320} for FDOM_H (Fig. 1c) and FDOM_H^* (Fig. 1d) for better visualization. The lowest end of the color scale was set to 0 for FDOM_H^* (Fig. 1d) even though negative values were evident, particularly in surface waters. While high concentrations of colloidal Fe and allochthonous FDOM_H -Fe complexes were also observed in the shelf region of the Sea of Okhotsk (up to 8.4 nM and 1.8 nM, respectively), as shown in Fig. 4 and Supplementary Fig. 3; the highest end of the color scale was set to 0.7 nM for both species in the figures.

Data availability

The datasets presented in the current study are available from the corresponding authors upon reasonable request.

Received: 26 November 2019; Accepted: 21 February 2020;

Published online: 11 March 2020

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the captains, crews and scientists onboard the R/V *Hakuho Maru*, R/V *Professor Moltanovskiy*, and R/V *Professor Khromov* for their help with observations and sample collection, as well as Dr. Y. Volkov, director of the Far Eastern Regional Hydrometeorological Research Institute, for cooperation with the Japanese-Russian joint research programme. We are also grateful for the comments from Drs. R. Jaffé and K. Misumi, which improved the manuscript. This work was supported by KAKENHI (Grant Numbers JP15H05820 and JP18H04910 “OMIX”, 24121003 “NEOPS”, JP16H02930, JP17H00775, JP19H04249) and the Grant for Joint Research Program of the Institute of Low Temperature Science, Hokkaido University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the design of the research. Y.Y. and J.N. performed fluorescence and iron analyses, respectively. Y.Y. analysed the results and prepared the manuscript with inputs from J.N., H.Ob., and H.Og.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Additional information

Supplementary information is available for this paper at <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-61375-7>.

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