

Triple-energy computed tomography in the megavoltage-range with an inverse Compton scattering light source

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Abstract

Gamma-ray spectral computed tomography (CT) plays a crucial role in the discrimination of heavy metal materials, as it provides detailed information on atomic composition, including electron density ρ_e and effective atomic number Z_{eff} . However, the reconstruction accuracy of ρ_e and Z_{eff} in conventional gamma-ray dual-energy CT is constrained by the use of bremsstrahlung spectra and the omission of the photoelectric effect term in the decomposition of the linear attenuation coefficient. To improve the reconstruction accuracy of ρ_e and Z_{eff} , a triple-energy CT method based on an inverse Compton scattering (ICS) gamma-ray source was proposed in this paper, and its validity was demonstrated via Monte Carlo simulations. By utilizing the quasi-monochromatic and continuously energy-tunable gamma-rays generated by an ICS light source, the contributions of the photoelectric effect, Compton scattering, and pair production to the linear attenuation coefficient of an imaging material can all be accurately accounted for, which enables the decomposition of the linear attenuation coefficient of an unknown material using three basis materials. Compared to gamma-ray dual-energy CT, the gamma-ray triple-energy CT developed in this study significantly enhances the reconstruction accuracy of ρ_e and Z_{eff} . A phantom study revealed that the gamma-ray triple-energy CT enables the retrieval of ρ_e and Z_{eff} with reconstruction accuracies exceeding 1% and 3.5%, respectively.

Full Text

Preamble

Triple-energy computed tomography in the megavoltage-range with an inverse Compton scattering light source

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Gamma-ray spectral computed tomography (CT) plays a crucial role in the discrimination of heavy metal materials, as it provides detailed information on atomic composition, including electron density and effective atomic number Z_{eff} . However, the reconstruction accuracy of ρ and Z_{eff} in conventional gamma-ray dual-energy CT is constrained by the use of bremsstrahlung spectra and the omission of the photoelectric effect term in the decomposition of the linear attenuation coefficient. To improve the reconstruction accuracy of ρ and Z_{eff} , a triple-energy CT method based on an inverse Compton scattering (ICS) gamma-ray source was proposed in this paper, and its validity was demonstrated via Monte Carlo simulations. By utilizing the quasi-monochromatic and continuously energy-tunable gamma-rays generated by an ICS light source, the contributions of the photoelectric effect, Compton scattering, and pair production to the linear attenuation coefficient of an imaging material can all be accurately accounted for, which enables the decomposition of the linear attenuation coefficient of an unknown material using three basis materials. Compared to gamma-ray dual-energy CT, the gamma-ray triple-energy CT developed in this study significantly enhances the reconstruction accuracy of ρ and Z_{eff} . A phantom study revealed that the gamma-ray triple-energy CT enables the retrieval of ρ and Z_{eff} with reconstruction accuracies exceeding 1% and 3.5%, respectively.

Keywords: Gamma-ray spectral computed tomography, Electron density, Effective atomic number, Inverse Compton scattering light source, Monte Carlo simulation

Introduction

Owing to their strong penetration capability, gamma-rays with photon energies above 100 keV play a crucial role in medical, industrial, and security imaging applications. Gamma-rays are typically generated through two primary methods: the decay of radioactive isotopes (e.g., ⁶⁰Co, ¹³⁷Cs, ^{99m}Tc, ¹³¹I, ¹⁸F, etc.) and the bremsstrahlung radiation produced by high-energy electrons. The former method can generate a monochromatic gamma-ray spectrum, but the spatial

distribution of the gamma-rays is isotropic. As a result, it is primarily utilized as an emission source in nuclear medicine imaging, including single photon emission computed tomography (SPECT) [?, ?] and positron emission tomography (PET) [3-5]. The latter method generates gamma-rays with specific directionality, making it widely applicable in conventional transmission imaging. However, the gamma-ray spectrum produced by this approach is highly broad, with photon energies spanning from zero up to the maximum energy of the incident electrons. When using the broad bremsstrahlung spectrum for imaging, different materials can exhibit identical attenuation characteristics [?, ?], making them indistinguishable.

Since the gamma-ray attenuation of a material is energy-dependent, spectral radiography holds significant potential for enhancing material discrimination capabilities. As a result, dual-energy radiography has been widely adopted in practical applications. The primary limitation of dual-energy radiography is its difficulty in distinguishing between materials when they are stacked together. Although methods such as the virtual peeling technique [?] and dynamic material discrimination algorithm [?] have been developed to address material overlap issues, their performance is significantly compromised by nonuniform or coarse-textured backgrounds.

To completely resolve the material overlap problem, computed tomography (CT) technique must be adopted, as it can generate cross-sectional attenuation images of an object by capturing radiographs from multiple angles around the object. When dual-energy CT is employed, the atomic composition information of an imaging object—including electron density and effective atomic number Z_{eff} —can be obtained in addition to the linear attenuation coefficient, significantly enhancing the capability for material discrimination. Furthermore, the information on Z_{eff} can also enhance the accuracy of dose calculation [10-12] and range estimation [13-17] in proton and heavy-ion therapy.

In dual-energy CT, the two energy spectra can be generated either at the source level (e.g., via dual-source configurations [?, ?] or fast kVp/MVp switching [20-22]) or at the detector level (e.g., employing a sandwich detector design [?, ?]). In each scenario, the energy spectra are inherently broad. The application of such broad spectra leads to beam hardening artifacts in CT reconstruction [?, ?], which severely impacts the quantitative analysis of the results. Additionally, a conventional bremsstrahlung-based gamma-ray source can produce at most two energy spectra. As a result, the contribution of the photoelectric effect to the linear attenuation coefficient of an imaging material is often neglected in gamma-ray dual-energy CT [?, ?], resulting in substantial errors, particularly for high-Z materials. For instance, the photoelectric effect contributes more than 20% to the total attenuation of lead (Pb) at a gamma-ray energy of 1 MeV, as shown in Fig. 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]. Although photon-counting detectors enable multi-energy CT in the low-energy range (10-100 keV) [28-30], this technique is difficult to extend to the high-energy region (100 keV to several MeV). Consequently, gamma-ray multi-energy CT

has not been achieved.

As an alternative, an inverse Compton scattering (ICS) light source, based on the collision between a relativistic electron beam and a laser, can generate quasi-monochromatic and continuously energy-tunable gamma-rays with high brightness [32–35], which makes it an ideal light source for gamma-ray spectral CT imaging. The gamma-rays generated by an ICS light source can span an energy range from tens of keV to several MeV, fulfilling the requirements for biomedical imaging and material nondestructive testing. In the X-ray energy region (below 100 keV), the ICS light source has proven to be a vital tool for spectral imaging, such as K-edge subtraction (KES) [36–38] and dual-energy CT [?]. However, in the gamma-ray energy region (100 keV to several MeV), spectral imaging based on an ICS light source remains largely unexplored.

In this paper, we propose a gamma-ray spectral CT method based on an ICS light source. By employing triple-energy CT scanning instead of the conventional dual-energy approach, the electron density and effective atomic number Z_{eff} of an imaging object can be reconstructed with significantly higher accuracy. The feasibility and validity of this gamma-ray spectral CT method were demonstrated through Monte Carlo simulations.

Methods

A. Physical model of gamma-ray triple-energy CT

Gamma-ray attenuation in an imaging material is governed by four interaction mechanisms: Rayleigh (coherent) scattering, the photoelectric effect, Compton (incoherent) scattering, and pair production. However, the contribution of coherent scattering is typically negligible compared to the other mechanisms, as illustrated in Fig. 1. Therefore, in practical applications, only the latter three effects—the photoelectric effect, Compton scattering, and pair production—are usually considered. The interaction cross sections of the photoelectric effect, Compton (incoherent) scattering, and pair production are all energy-dependent. For the photoelectric effect, the energy-dependence $f_{PE}(E)$ is empirically approximated as $1/E^3$ in the absence of electron-shell discontinuities, with the constant typically set to 3 or lower as the gamma-ray energy increases [?]. For Compton scattering, the energy-dependence $f_{CS}(E)$, assuming unbound electrons at rest, is described by the well-known Klein-Nishina formula, neglecting the incoherent scattering function and Doppler broadening. For pair production, the energy-dependence $f_{PP}(E)$ is highly complex and is often simplified using a crude model (e.g., $E - 1.02$ [?]). The energy-dependencies $f_{PE}(E)$, $f_{CS}(E)$, and $f_{PP}(E)$ can serve as basis functions for the energy-dependent decomposition of the linear attenuation coefficient $\mu(E)$ of an imaging object, expressed as:

$$\mu(E) = a_{PE}f_{PE}(E) + a_{CS}f_{CS}(E) + a_{PP}f_{PP}(E),$$

where the decomposition coefficients a_{PE} , a_{CS} , and a_{PP} are directly related to the

material properties,

$$\begin{aligned} a_{PE} &= K_1^n \rho \\ a_{CS} &= K_2 \rho \\ a_{PP} &= K_3 Z \rho \end{aligned}$$

where ρ , Z , and A represent the mass density, atomic number, and atomic weight, respectively, K_1 , K_2 , and K_3 are constants typically determined through calibration using materials of interest with known properties in practical applications, and n is approximately 3 for high- Z materials and 3.8 for low- Z materials [?].

To determine the three decomposition coefficients a_{PE} , a_{CS} , and a_{PP} , CT scans at three photon energies are required. However, conventional dual-energy CT can provide at most two energy spectra. In practice, only two of these coefficients are calculated by neglecting either pair production in the keV energy region or the photoelectric effect in the MeV energy region. In the keV energy region, pair production cannot occur because the photon energy is below the threshold of 1.022 MeV, making its omission straightforward. However, in the MeV energy region, the neglecting of the photoelectric effect introduces significant errors, particularly for high- Z materials, as demonstrated in Fig. 1. Therefore, triple-energy CT is essential for the accurate reconstruction of these decomposition coefficients.

Alternatively, the energy-dependent linear attenuation coefficient $\mu(E)$ of an imaging object can be decomposed using three basis materials (BM_1 , BM_2 , and BM_3) instead of the aforementioned basis functions, as follows:

$$\mu(E) = c_1 \mu_{BM,1}(E) + c_2 \mu_{BM,2}(E) + c_3 \mu_{BM,3}(E),$$

where $\mu_{BM,i}(E)$ ($i = 1, 2, \text{ or } 3$) represents the linear attenuation coefficient of the i th basis material, whose values are known at different gamma-ray energies, and c_i ($i = 1, 2, \text{ or } 3$) denotes the decomposition coefficient, which is related to the decomposition coefficients a_{PE} , a_{CS} , and a_{PP} ($i = 1, 2, \text{ or } 3$) of the i th material as follows:

$$\begin{pmatrix} a_{PE} \\ a_{CS} \\ a_{PP} \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} a_{PE,1} & a_{PE,2} & a_{PE,3} \\ a_{CS,1} & a_{CS,2} & a_{CS,3} \\ a_{PP,1} & a_{PP,2} & a_{PP,3} \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} c_1 \\ c_2 \\ c_3 \end{pmatrix}$$

with the coefficient matrix

$$\begin{pmatrix} a_{PE,1} & a_{PE,2} & a_{PE,3} \\ a_{CS,1} & a_{CS,2} & a_{CS,3} \\ a_{PP,1} & a_{PP,2} & a_{PP,3} \end{pmatrix}$$

This three-basis-material decomposition of $\mu(E)$ generalizes the two-basis-material approach employed in conventional dual-energy CT [?], which is limited to calculating two decomposition coefficients using two energy spectra.

When three gamma-ray spectra are utilized for the CT scan, projections of the linear attenuation coefficient at high, middle, and low gamma-ray energies can be obtained:

$$\begin{aligned} P_H &= -\ln \int S(E) \exp\left(-\int \mu(\mathbf{r}, E) ds\right) dE \\ P_M &= -\ln \int S(E) \exp\left(-\int \mu(\mathbf{r}, E) ds\right) dE \\ P_L &= -\ln \int S(E) \exp\left(-\int \mu(\mathbf{r}, E) ds\right) dE \end{aligned}$$

where P_H , P_M , and P_L represent the measured projections at high-energy (Spec_H), middle-energy (Spec_M), and low-energy (Spec_L) spectra, respectively, \mathbf{r} is an arbitrary position vector in Euclidean space, and $S(E)$ denotes the intensity-normalized energy spectrum, satisfying $\int S(E) dE = 1$. For an ICS light source, the energy distribution is angular-dependent [?, ?]. To reduce the energy spectrum to its intrinsic form, a large source-to-sample distance—typically on the order of several tens of meters—must be employed. The intrinsic energy spectrum, which depends solely on the electron and laser beam parameters rather than the collecting angle, can be approximated by a Gaussian distribution, with a typically narrow bandwidth (e.g., an rms value of a few percent). When an ICS light source is utilized for triple-energy CT, the normalized energy spectrum $S(E)$ in Eq. (6), compared to the energy dependence of $\mu(E)$ in the gamma-ray energy region, can be approximated as a Dirac function $\delta(E)$. Thus, Eq. (6) can be simplified as follows:

$$P_H = \int \mu(\mathbf{r}, E_H) ds, \quad P_M = \int \mu(\mathbf{r}, E_M) ds, \quad P_L = \int \mu(\mathbf{r}, E_L) ds,$$

where E_H , E_M , and E_L represent the peak energies of the high-, middle-, and low-energy spectra, respectively. Using Eq. (7), the linear attenuation coefficients $\mu(E_H)$, $\mu(E_M)$, and $\mu(E_L)$ of the imaging object can be reconstructed. The reconstruction method employed in this study is the Algebraic Reconstruction Technique with Total Variation (ART-TV) iterative algorithm. Thus, the decomposition coefficients c_1 , c_2 , and c_3 can be determined by solving the following linear equation system:

$$\begin{pmatrix} \mu(E_H) \\ \mu(E_M) \\ \mu(E_L) \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} \mu_{BM,1}(E_H) & \mu_{BM,2}(E_H) & \mu_{BM,3}(E_H) \\ \mu_{BM,1}(E_M) & \mu_{BM,2}(E_M) & \mu_{BM,3}(E_M) \\ \mu_{BM,1}(E_L) & \mu_{BM,2}(E_L) & \mu_{BM,3}(E_L) \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} c_1 \\ c_2 \\ c_3 \end{pmatrix}$$

This method for determining c ($i = 1, 2,$ and 3) is known as the post-processing method. Additionally, these decomposition coefficients can be calculated in another way. By substituting Eq. (3) into Eq. (7), a different linear equation system can be established:

$$P_H = \int c_1(\mathbf{r})ds, \quad P_M = \int c_2(\mathbf{r})ds, \quad P_L = \int c_3(\mathbf{r})ds,$$

denoting the projections of c_1 , c_2 , and c_3 , respectively. By solving Eq. (10), the projections C_1 , C_2 , and C_3 can be obtained. Using these projections, the decomposition coefficients c_1 , c_2 , and c_3 can also be reconstructed through the ART-TV iterative algorithm. This method for determining c ($i = 1, 2,$ and 3) is known as the pre-processing method.

B. Electron density and effective atomic number retrieval

Combining Eqs. (1) and (2), the linear attenuation coefficient of an imaging object can be written in the following form:

$$\mu(E) = K_{1Z_{eff}^n} \rho_e f_{PE}(E) + K_2 \rho_e f_{CS}(E) + K_{3Z_{eff}} \rho_e f_{PP}(E),$$

where the effective atomic number Z_{eff} , rather than the atomic number Z , is used to account for any material, particularly composite materials, and ρ_e represents the electron density, defined as $\rho_e = Z/A$ with N denoting the Avogadro' s constant. Through the simultaneous solution of Eqs. (12) and (3), along with expressing the linear attenuation coefficients of the three basis materials in terms of Eq. (12), the electron density ρ_e and effective atomic number Z_{eff} of an imaging object can be easily determined:

$$\rho_e = c_1 \rho_{e,1} + c_2 \rho_{e,2} + c_3 \rho_{e,3},$$

$$Z_{eff} = \frac{c_1 Z_1^n \rho_{e,1} + c_2 Z_2^n \rho_{e,2} + c_3 Z_3^n \rho_{e,3}}{c_1 Z_1 \rho_{e,1} + c_2 Z_2 \rho_{e,2} + c_3 Z_3 \rho_{e,3}}$$

where $\rho_{e,i}$ and Z_i ($i = 1, 2,$ or 3) represent the electron density and atomic number of the i th basis material, respectively. For more accurate calculations of ρ_e and Z_{eff} , our previous studies demonstrated that the post-processing method offers a clear advantage for ρ_e reconstruction, while the pre-processing method is preferred for Z_{eff} reconstruction [?]. This conclusion is applied in the subsequent retrieval of ρ_e and Z_{eff} .

If dual-energy spectra with gamma-ray peak energies of E_1 and E_2 , instead of triple-energy spectra, generated by an ICS light source are used for the CT scan, the electron density ρ_e and effective atomic number Z_{eff} of an imaging object can still be retrieved by neglecting the photoelectric term in Eq. (1) and utilizing only two basis materials (e.g., BM_1 and BM_2) in Eq. (3):

$$\rho_e = c'_1 \rho_{e,1} + c'_2 \rho_{e,2},$$

$$Z_{eff} = \frac{c'_{1Z} 1^n \rho_{e,1} + c'_{2Z} 2^n \rho_{e,2}}{c'_{1Z} 1 \rho_{e,1} + c'_{2Z} 2 \rho_{e,2}}$$

where the coefficients c'_1 and c'_2 can be determined either by solving the linear equation system

$$\begin{pmatrix} \mu(E_H) \\ \mu(E_L) \end{pmatrix} = B' \begin{pmatrix} c'_1 \\ c'_2 \end{pmatrix}$$

(post-processing method) or through CT reconstruction using the projections C'_1 and C'_2 , which are obtained by solving the linear equation system

$$\begin{pmatrix} P_H \\ P_L \end{pmatrix} = B' \begin{pmatrix} C'_1 \\ C'_2 \end{pmatrix}$$

(pre-processing method), with $B' = (\mu_{,1}(E) \mu_{,2}(E); \mu_{,1}(E) \mu_{,2}(E))$.

C. Monte Carlo simulation

To demonstrate the feasibility of high-accuracy ρ_e and Z_{eff} retrieval using gamma-ray triple-energy CT, Monte Carlo (MC) simulations were conducted using the Geant4 toolkit [?]. The imaging layout is illustrated in Fig. 2 [Figure 2: see original paper]. A fan-beam geometry and a linear detector were employed in the simulation. The gamma-ray source was modeled based on the very compact ICS gamma-ray source (VIGAS) [?, ?] currently under construction at Tsinghua University. The three gamma-ray spectra were modeled as Gaussian distributions with peak energies of $E = 4$ MeV, $E = 2$ MeV, and $E = 1$ MeV, each with an rms bandwidth of 1.5%. To satisfy the field-of-view (FOV) requirement of the imaging object (3 cm) while maintaining the quasi-monochromaticity of the incident gamma-rays (1.5% rms bandwidth), a large source-to-sample distance—typically tens of meters for MeV gamma-rays—is necessary for an ICS light source, as the gamma-ray peak energy is angular-dependent [?]. To avoid unnecessary gamma-ray transport before reaching the phantom, a two-dimensional (2D) quasi-parallel gamma-ray beam was used in the MC simulation. The incident gamma-rays were detected by an ideal transmission detector (100% detection efficiency and free of electronic noise) positioned 0.5 m downstream of the phantom. The spatial resolution of the transmission detector was modeled based on the imaging detector under development at the VIGAS, with a pixel size of 0.2 mm.

The phantom was designed as an aluminum (Al) cylinder with a diameter of 3.0 cm, containing four inner cylindrical columns, each with a diameter of 0.8 cm. The materials of the inner columns were lead (Pb), tungsten (W), gold

(Au), and copper (Cu), respectively. The phantom was centered within the 2D quasi-parallel gamma-ray beam and rotated around the central axis of the Al cylinder during the spectral CT scan.

In the MC simulation, the Geant4 physics list was configured as follows: for gamma photons, all relevant interaction processes—including Rayleigh scattering, the photoelectric effect, Compton scattering, and pair production—were fully incorporated using the Livermore model; for both electrons and positrons, interaction processes including multiple scattering, ionization, and bremsstrahlung were comprehensively modeled, with the annihilation process explicitly included for positrons; furthermore, a range cutoff value of 1 μm was applied to gamma photons, electrons, and positrons. For each gamma-ray spectrum CT scan, 180 projections were collected at 1° angular intervals. To achieve a balance between computational time and statistical accuracy, the number of incident gamma-ray photons was set to 2×10^8 for each projection.

Results and Discussions

The monochromatic CT reconstruction results of the phantom are displayed in Fig. 3 [Figure 3: see original paper]. In the MeV energy range, the linear attenuation coefficients of W and Au are very similar, rendering the two columns almost indistinguishable in the attenuation CT images. For quantitative analysis, five regions-of-interest (ROIs), indicated by white dotted squares in Fig. 3(c), were selected. The reconstructed linear attenuation coefficients for the five materials in the phantom, including their mean values and corresponding standard errors, are summarized in Table 1. Also given in Table 1 are the theoretical values of the linear attenuation coefficients and the relative error (RE) values. Given the quasi-monochromatic nature of the gamma-ray spectra from the VIGAS used in the MC simulation (1.5% rms bandwidth, Gaussian distribution), the reconstruction results show excellent agreement with the theoretical values for all materials except Al, with relative errors below 1% for the three gamma-ray spectra. The larger relative errors observed for Al at the three gamma-ray spectra are primarily attributed to horizontal streaks around the top and bottom regions of the circular inserts in the reconstructed CT images. These streaks are metal artifacts caused by the low spatial resolution of the transmission detector, particularly pronounced for high-Z materials.

The three basis materials used for decomposing the linear attenuation coefficient are aluminum (Al), iron (Fe), and lead (Pb). The linear attenuation coefficients, electron densities, and atomic numbers of these basis materials are available from the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) [?]. Using the three monochromatic CT images of the phantom, the decomposition coefficients in Eq. (3) were calculated via the post-processing method. Subsequently, the electron density image of the phantom was reconstructed using Eq. (14a), as shown in Fig. 4 [Figure 4: see original paper]. Additionally, the decomposition coefficients in Eq. (3) were also computed using the pre-processing method described in

Section II A. Based on these coefficients, the effective atomic number Z_{eff} image of the phantom was retrieved using Eq. (14b), with the result shown in Fig. 4(b). Compared to the attenuation μ images, the ρ and Z_{eff} images of the phantom exhibit significantly different contrast. In the ρ image, Cu and Pb are nearly indistinguishable, whereas they are clearly differentiated in the μ and Z_{eff} images. Furthermore, W and Au show similar contrast in the μ and ρ images but become distinguishable in the Z_{eff} image.

To quantitatively analyze the reconstruction results of ρ and Z_{eff} , the ROIs selected in Fig. 3(c) were also used. The reconstructed ρ and Z_{eff} values of the phantom, along with their theoretical values, are provided in Tables 2 and 3, respectively. Both ρ and Z_{eff} for the five materials in the phantom were accurately retrieved. For all five materials, the relative errors of ρ were all less than 1%, and the maximum relative error of Z_{eff} was below 3.5%. Compared to ρ , the reconstruction accuracy of Z_{eff} was slightly lower. This can be attributed to the division operation in Eq. (14b), which amplifies errors in the ρ image and results in a noisier Z_{eff} image, as shown in Fig. 4(b).

For comparison, the ρ and Z_{eff} images of the phantom were also reconstructed using dual-energy CT with gamma-ray peak energies of $E_1 = 4$ MeV and $E_2 = 1$ MeV, as shown in Fig. 5 [Figure 5: see original paper]. Although the ρ and Z_{eff} images of the phantom exhibit accurate spatial identification, the quantitative results are less reliable, particularly for Z_{eff} . For instance, the Z_{eff} values of Pb, W, and Au in Fig. 5(d) are negative, which is physically unrealistic. For quantitative comparison, the ROIs selected in Fig. 3(c) were also used. The ρ and Z_{eff} retrieval results from gamma-ray dual-energy CT are given in Tables 2 and 3, respectively. In gamma-ray dual-energy CT, the retrieval accuracy of ρ and Z_{eff} is heavily influenced by the choice of basis materials. When Al and Fe are selected as basis materials, the relative error of ρ exceeds 20% for high-Z non-basis materials, including Pb, W, and Au. Moreover, the Z_{eff} retrieval results for these non-basis materials are even worse, with relative errors exceeding 140%. However, when Al and Pb are chosen as basis materials, the ρ retrieval accuracy for non-basis materials can be reduced to less than 20%. Similarly, when Fe and Pb are selected as basis materials, the Z_{eff} retrieval accuracy for non-basis materials (except Al) can be improved to less than 10%. As expected, the ρ and Z_{eff} of basis materials are consistently retrieved with higher accuracy compared to non-basis materials. Notably, the ρ and Z_{eff} of Cu can be accurately retrieved when Fe is included as one of the basis materials, owing to the similar attenuation characteristics of Cu and Fe in this energy range [$\mu(E) \approx Z^2/Z_{\text{Cu}}^2 \mu(E)$]. Compared to gamma-ray dual-energy CT, the retrieval accuracy of ρ and Z_{eff} is significantly improved using gamma-ray triple-energy CT, as demonstrated in Tables 2 and 3. By including low-Z (Al), moderate-Z (Fe), and high-Z (Pb) materials as basis materials, an arbitrary material in the phantom can be more accurately approximated by a combination of these three basis materials, rather than just two, resulting in higher precision.

Due to the division operation involved in Z_{eff} retrieval in Eqs. (14b) and (15b), the Z_{eff} retrieval results for the phantom are less accurate than those of μ_{eff} for both dual-energy and triple-energy CT. Additionally, influenced by metal artifacts in the attenuation CT images, the Z_{eff} retrieval precision (standard error) for Al is worse compared to the other four materials in the phantom. For high-quality Z_{eff} image retrieval, deep learning techniques have been proven to be an effective approach [?]. By leveraging deep learning, gamma-ray triple-energy CT has the potential to achieve even higher accuracy in Z_{eff} retrieval. The retrieval of Z_{eff} can also be achieved through various methods, such as theoretical calculation [?, ?], the Compton backscattering method [?], and the estimation of mass collision stopping power based on charged particles [?]. Although these methods are straightforward to implement, they are either limited to materials with known compositions [?, ?] or unable to resolve the retrieval of Z_{eff} for each material in cases where different materials overlap [?, ?]. The gamma-ray triple-energy CT method proposed in this work effectively addresses the aforementioned limitations and achieves accurate retrieval of Z_{eff} for imaging materials. This advancement will significantly improve the accuracy of material identification, radiation shielding design, and radiation dose calculation.

Conclusion

An inverse Compton scattering (ICS) light source serves as an exceptional tool for gamma-ray spectral computed tomography (CT), as it is capable of producing quasi-monochromatic, continuously energy-tunable, and high-brightness gamma-rays. With an ICS light source, gamma-ray triple-energy CT can be easily achieved. By exploiting triple-energy CT, the linear attenuation coefficient of an imaging object can be decomposed into three components, either through three basis functions derived from photoelectric, Compton scattering, and pair production effects or via three basis materials, thereby extending the capabilities of conventional dual-energy CT. By selecting low-, moderate-, and high- Z materials as basis materials, the electron density ρ_e and effective atomic number Z_{eff} of an imaging object can be accurately retrieved. The efficacy of gamma-ray triple-energy CT based on an ICS light source has been validated through Monte Carlo (MC) simulations. The simulation results demonstrate that ρ_e and Z_{eff} can be retrieved with accuracies better than 1% and 3.5%, respectively.

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