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A new metal–organic framework with potential for adsorptive separation of methane from carbon dioxide, acetylene, ethylene, and ethane established by simulated breakthrough experiments†

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A new three-dimensional microporous metal–organic framework, Cu2(MFDI) (ZJU-60, H4MFDI = 5,5’-(9,9-dimethyl-9H-fluorene-2,7-diyl)disipthalic acid), was solvothermally synthesized. ZJU-60 features a three-dimensional structure with a rare sty-a type topology and has two different types of pore apertures. With open metal sites and suitable pore spaces, ZJU-60 can readily separate methane in nearly pure form from CO2 and C2-hydrocarbon quaternary gas mixtures at room temperature with high separation capacity and moderate selectivity. The separation feasibility has been further established by simulated breakthrough and pulse chromatographic experiments.

1. Introduction

Natural gas often contains impurities such as CO2, along with C2-hydrocarbons: C2H2, C2H4 and C2H6. In order to meet pipeline gas specifications, these impurities need to be removed. Methane has been widely utilized as an energy source and raw material. Compared to other conventional automobile fuels such as gasoline (petrol) and diesel, methane can be considered as a cleaner energy alternative due to its clean-burning characteristics, so separation of methane from C2-hydrocarbons (C2s) and CO2 is a very important industrial process.1 The traditional cryogenic distillation separation technology, which is based on their different vapour pressures and thus boiling points, is very energy-consuming, whereas the alternative oil-absorption method is not efficient.2 Adsorptive separation is one of the most promising alternative energy- and cost-efficient separation methods, so it is desirable to explore new microporous adsorbents which can selectively separate methane from CO2 and C2-hydrocarbons at room temperature.

Among the diverse adsorptive separation materials, metal–organic frameworks (MOFs) have recently shown great promise for such an important application. MOFs can be self-assembled from metal ions or metal-containing clusters with multi-dentate organic linkers through coordination bonding.3–7 The uniqueness of porous MOFs is that their pore sizes can be systematically tuned with organic linkers of different lengths and geometries while their pore surfaces can be functionalized by the immobilization of different functional sites, such as –NH2 and –OH, and open metal sites for their differential recognition for small molecules and thus for gas separation.8–15 The first examined MOF (ZIF-8) for C2s/C1 separation by ExxonMobil exhibits quite a low separation capacity and selectivity.16 We significantly enhanced the separation capacity up to about 3.0 mol kg−1 and the selectivity up to 35 via tuning the pore and cavity sizes in the MOF UTSA-34 for C2s/C1 separation.17 Given the fact that porous MOFs with higher separation capacity and selectivity for the C2s/C1 separation can significantly save the energy cost, pursuit of new porous MOF materials for this important application is highly desirable. Herein we report a new copper–organic framework, Cu2(MFDI) (ZJU-60, ZJU = Zhejiang University, H4MFDI = 5,5’-(9,9-dimethyl-9H-fluorene-2,7-diyl)disipthalic acid), which can separate methane in nearly pure form from CO2 and C2-hydrocarbon gas mixtures at room temperature, which has been established exclusively by the sorption isotherms and simulated breakthrough and pulse chromatographic experiments.
2. Experimental

2.1 Materials and measurements

All the chemicals were commercially available and used without further purification. $^1$H NMR spectra were recorded on a Bruker Advance DMX500 spectrometer using tetramethylsilane (TMS) as an internal standard. Elemental analyses for C, H, and N were performed on an EA1112 microelement analyzer. Powder X-ray diffraction (PXRD) patterns were collected in the 29 = 3–30° range on an X’Pert PRO diffractometer with Cu Kα radiation ($\lambda = 1.542 \text{ Å}$) at room temperature. Thermogravimetric analyses (TGA) were conducted on a Netszch TGA 209 F3 thermogravimeter with a heating rate of 10 °C min$^{-1}$ in a N$_2$ atmosphere.

2.2 Gas sorption measurements

A Micromeritics ASAP 2020 surface area analyzer was used to measure gas adsorption. To have a guest-free framework, the fresh sample was guest-exchanged with dry acetone at least 10 times, filtered and vacuumed at room temperature for 12 h and then at 383 K until the outgas rate was 5 μmHg min$^{-1}$ prior to measurements. The sorption measurement was maintained at 77 K with liquid nitrogen and at 273 K with ice-water bath (slush), respectively. As the center-controlled air condition was set up at 23.0°C, a water bath of 23.0°C was used for adsorption isotherms at 296.0 K.

2.3 X-ray collection and structure determination

Crystallographic measurements were taken on an Oxford Xcalibur Gemini Ultra diffractometer with an Atlas detector using graphite-monochromatic Cu Kα radiation ($\lambda = 1.54178 \text{ Å}$) at 293 K for ZJU-60. The measurements of the unit cells and data collections for the crystals of ZJU-60 were performed with CrysalisPro. The datasets were corrected by empirical absorption correction using spherical harmonics, implemented in the SCALE3 ABSPACK scaling algorithm. The structure was determined by direct methods and refined by the full-matrix least-squares method with the SHELX-97 program package. All non-hydrogen atoms, including solvent molecules, were located successfully from Fourier maps and were refined anisotropically. H atoms on C atoms were generated geometrically. The solvent molecules in ZJU-60 are highly disordered. The SQUEEZE subroutine of the PLATON software suite was used to remove the scattering from the highly disordered guest molecules. Crystallographic data are summarized in Table S1.†

2.4 Synthesis of ZJU-60

A mixture of H$_2$MDDI (1.04 mg, 0.0020 mmol) and Cu(NO$_3$)$_2$·2.5H$_2$O (1.949 mg, 0.0080 mmol) was dissolved in DMF-H$_2$O (3 mL, 4 : 1, v/v) in a screw-capped vial. After HNO$_3$ (40 μL) (69%, aq) was added to the mixture, the vial was capped and placed in an oven at 65°C for 48 h. The resulting hexagonal flake-shaped single crystals were washed with DMF several times to give ZJU-60. Elemental analysis: calcd for [Cu$_2$(C$_{31}$H$_{18}$O$_8$)(H$_2$O)$_2$](DMF)$_8$(H$_2$O)$_{12}$: C, 44.56; H, 6.93; N, 7.56; Found: C, 44.56; H, 6.95; N: 7.56%.

3. Results and discussion

ZJU-60 was synthesized from Cu(NO$_3$)$_2$·2.5H$_2$O and H$_2$MFDI in DMF–H$_2$O with addition of a small amount of nitric acid at 60°C for 2 days as small blue cuboid block-shaped crystals. The structure of ZJU-60 was characterized by single-crystal X-ray diffraction studies, and the phase purity of the bulk material was independently confirmed by powder X-ray diffraction (PXRD, Fig. S1†) and thermogravimetric analysis (TGA, Fig. S2†).

The single-crystal X-ray diffraction analysis reveals that ZJU-60 crystallizes in a hexagonal space group of P6$_3$/mmc. The framework is composed of paddle wheel dinuclear Cu$_2$(COO)$_4$ units which are bridged by organic linkers to form a 3D rare-styrene-type structure. The 3D framework of ZJU-60 has two different types of pores. The large irregular elongated cage of about 4.4 × 8.6 Å$^2$ runs through the a axis (Fig. 1a). Another one along the c axis is about 5.4 Å in diameter, taking into account the van der Waals radii (Fig. 1b).

To characterize the permanent porosity, the N$_2$ sorption isotherm experiments were performed at 77 K. It shows that the suitably activated ZJU-60a exhibits reversible Type-I sorption behaviour, characteristic of microporous materials with the saturated sorption amount of N$_2$ of 561 cm$^3$ g$^{-1}$ (Fig. 2a). The Brunauer–Emmett–Teller (BET) and Langmuir surface areas of ZJU-60a are 1627 and 2394 m$^2$ g$^{-1}$, respectively. As expected, these values are higher than those of MOF-505 because of the longer value.

Establishment of the permanent porosity of ZJU-60a encourages us to examine its potential application in gas storage and selective gas separation. As shown in Fig. 2b and c, ZJU-60a can take up moderate amounts of C$_2$H$_2$ of 178.66 and 150.57 cm$^3$ g$^{-1}$ at 273 and 296 K, respectively, under 1 atm. The
amount of adsorbed C2H2 in ZJU-60a at 296 K is slightly higher than that in MOF-505 (148 cm3 g⁻¹).²³

ZJU-60a can take up C2H2 (178.67 cm³ g⁻¹), C2H4 (158.71 cm³ g⁻¹), C2H6 (177.59 cm³ g⁻¹), and CO2 (97.69 cm³ g⁻¹) at 1 atm and 273 K, and C2H2 (150.57 cm³ g⁻¹), C2H4 (132.55 cm³ g⁻¹), C2H6 (135.66 cm³ g⁻¹) and CO2 (73.3 cm³ g⁻¹) at 1 atm and 296 K, which are much higher than the amount of CH4 (26.4 cm³ g⁻¹) at 273 K and that of CH4 (19.06 cm³ g⁻¹) at 296 K. Such different sorption enables ZJU-60a to be a promising material for highly selective adsorptive separation of C2-hydrocarbons and CO2 from CH4.

In order to establish the feasibility of these gas separations, we performed calculations using the Ideal Adsorbed Solution Theory (IAST) of Myers and Prausnitz.²⁴ Fig. S3† presents calculations using IAST for the component loading in the adsorbed mixture in equilibrium with an equimolar 5-component C2H2/C2H4/C2H6/CH4/CO2 gas mixture at 296 K in ZJU-60a. The IAST calculations indicated that the hierarchy of adsorption strengths is C2H2 > C2H4 > C2H6 > CO2 > CH4.

The isosteric heat of adsorption, Qₘ, defined as

\[ Q_m = RT \left( \frac{\partial \ln p}{\partial T} \right)_q \]

was determined using the pure component isotherm fits. Fig. S4† shows data on the loading dependence of Qₘ for adsorption of CH4, CO2, C2H2, C2H4 and C2H6 on ZJU-60a. The isosteric heat of adsorption of CH4 on ZJU-60a is 12.0 kJ mol⁻¹, whereas the isosteric heats of adsorption of C2H2, C2H4, C2H6 and CO2 are 17.6, 21.4, 19.8 and 15.2 kJ mol⁻¹, respectively. The higher adsorption heats for C2 hydrocarbons and CO2 might be due to the comparable pore sizes and open metal sites in ZJU-60a with these small C2 hydrocarbons and CO2, thereby enforcing their interaction with the host framework, and thus leading to moderately high C2-hydrocarbons/CH4 and CO2/CH4 selective separation.

To obtain pure CH4 from natural gas streams, the adsorption selectivity of CO2 with respect to CH4 is very important. We used two different metrics to evaluate the performance of ZJU-60a for the CO2/CH4 separation. The first metric is the adsorption selectivity. Fig. 3 shows the IAST adsorption selectivity, Sₘₐₓ, for equimolar CO2/CH4 mixtures at 296 K in ZJU-60a. The adsorption selectivities of CO2 with respect to CH4 are higher than 5 for ZJU-60a for a range of pressures to 100 kPa, indicating that ZJU-60a is feasible to separate methane from CO2 and C2-hydrocarbons.

Besides the CO2/CH4 selectivity, another important metric for pressure swing adsorbers is the uptake capacity for impurities. Fig. 4 presents the IAST calculations for the uptake capacities for the total of four impurities (C2H2 + C2H4 + C2H6 + CO2) in the 5-component mixture. We note that the capacity of ZJU-60a for impurity uptake reaches 3 mol L⁻¹ at 100 kPa and 296 K, which is higher than that of our recently developed UTSA-34.²⁹

In order to properly evaluate the feasibility for the practical separation, the breakthrough experiments were simulated based on the established methodology described in the work of...
Fig. 4  IAST calculations for the uptake capacities for impurities (C$_2$H$_2$ + C$_2$H$_4$ + C$_2$H$_6$ + CH$_4$ + CO$_2$).

Fig. 5 Breakthrough simulation results for ZJU-60a for separation of an equimolar C$_2$H$_2$/C$_2$H$_4$/C$_2$H$_6$/CH$_4$/CO$_2$ mixture in a fixed bed adsorbent in the total bulk gas phase at 296 K and 100 kPa. The x-axis represents the dimensionless time, $\tau$.

Krishna and Long which has been exclusively confirmed by the experimental breakthrough experiments. Fig. 5 presents data on the concentrations at the exit of the adsorber for the chosen MOFs, for illustration purposes. The x-axis in Fig. 5 is dimensionless time, $\tau$, defined by dividing the actual time, $t$, by the characteristic time, $L^2/u$. We note that the sequence of breakthroughs for the MOFs is CH$_4$, CO$_2$, C$_2$H$_6$, C$_2$H$_4$, and C$_2$H$_2$. The adsorbent has the ability to separate CH$_4$ in pure form from this quaternary mixture. From the data presented in Fig. 5, we can determine the mol % CH$_4$ in the exit gas stream. Fig. 6 shows the %CH$_4$ exiting the bed adsorber packed with ZJU-60a. The inlet gas consists of an equimolar 5-component C$_2$H$_2$/C$_2$H$_4$/C$_2$H$_6$/CH$_4$/CO$_2$ gas mixture at 296 K and 100 kPa.

Fig. 6  The %CH$_4$ exiting the bed adsorber packed with ZJU-60a. The inlet gas consists of an equimolar 5-component C$_2$H$_2$/C$_2$H$_4$/C$_2$H$_6$/CH$_4$/CO$_2$ gas mixture at 296 K and 100 kPa.

4. Conclusions

In summary, we have synthesized a novel three-dimensional porous metal–organic framework ZJU-60 for separation of methane in nearly pure form from CO$_2$ and C$_2$-hydrocarbon quaternary gas mixtures at room temperature with high separation capacity and moderate selectivity. The high separation capacity is attributed to the suitable pore space and open metal sites within pores of the framework to take up a large amount of hydrocarbons and CO$_2$. It is expected that this work will initiate more investigations on the emerging MOFs for such industrially important separation.

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Notes and references


