

A two-dimensional zeolitic imidazolate framework with a cushion-shaped cavity for CO₂ adsorption†

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A new two-dimensional zeolitic imidazolate framework (named as ZIF-L) was synthesized in zinc salt and 2-methylimidazole (Hmim) aqueous solution at room temperature. ZIF-L (Zn(mim)₂(Hmim)_{1/2}(H₂O)_{3/2} or C₁₀H₁₆N₅O_{3/2}Zn) has unique cushion-shaped cavities and leaf-like crystal morphology, and exhibits excellent CO₂ adsorption properties.

Zeolitic imidazolate frameworks (ZIFs) are highly ordered porous solids, which consist of inorganic metal ions in tetrahedral environments bridged by imidazolate ligands.^{1–3} The topological and porous structure of ZIFs can be designed and controlled by using various imidazolate units.^{2,3} A large variety of ZIFs have been reported, and they are typically synthesized in organic solvents such as *N,N*-dimethylformamide (DMF), diethylformamide or methanol.^{1,2,4,5} More recently, ZIF-8 and ZIF-67 have also been synthesized in aqueous solutions.^{6–8} It has been shown that synthesis conditions have a significant effect on the ZIF crystallization process and thus crystal morphology, size, and topology.^{8,9} For example, the crystal size of ZIF-8 could be adjusted by varying the concentration of 2-methylimidazole (Hmim) and zinc ions in the aqueous based reaction.⁷ ZIF-8 crystals with different morphologies including hexagonal plates and rhombic dodecahedrons were synthesized by addition of an organic polymer¹⁰ or cetyltrimethylammonium bromide,¹¹ respectively. However, to date no new topologies of Hmim and a zinc source have been reported.

ZIFs have been widely studied for their potential use as adsorbents and membranes for carbon dioxide capture as part of global

efforts in reducing the sharply rising level of atmospheric carbon dioxide resulting from anthropogenic emissions.^{12–15} Strategies developed for designing high-efficiency CO₂ selective ZIFs or MOFs thus far include the construction of large cages, tailoring of pore apertures and framework chemistry.¹⁶ For instance, a large volume of CO₂ can be effectively retained in the colossal cages of ZIF-95 and ZIF-100 while the other gases pass through without hindrance due to the combined effects of the slit width of the pore apertures being similar in size to linear and centrosymmetric carbon dioxide and the strong quadrupolar interactions of carbon with nitrogen atoms present in the ligands.¹ Sod-ZMOF was shown to have superior CO₂ adsorption capacity compared to ZIF-8 though ZIF-8 has a much higher surface area; this was likely because ZIF-8 adsorbed CO₂ through van der Waals forces only whereas ZMOF materials with cations inside the pores could interact with CO₂.¹⁷

Herein we report a new two-dimensional zeolitic imidazolate framework (ZIF) with a cushion-shaped cavity between layers with a dimension of 9.4 Å × 7.0 Å × 5.3 Å and a leaf-shaped morphology (named as ZIF-L). This cushion-shaped cavity is unique, and well suited to accommodate CO₂ molecules. ZIF-L is comprised of the identical building blocks of ZIF-8 Hmim and zinc nitrate but possesses a different topology.

ZIF-L was synthesized from zinc nitrate hexahydrate and Hmim in deionized water at room temperature, and its key synthesis parameter was the ratio of Hmim/zinc ion molar ratio (*e.g.*, 8). The yield of ZIF-L was over 80% on the basis of the amount of zinc nitrate used. The composition of ZIF-L prior to activation was determined to be Zn(mim)₂(Hmim)_{1/2}(H₂O)_{3/2} (C₁₀H₁₆N₅O_{3/2}Zn) by elemental analysis, which was confirmed by TG analysis (Fig. S1, ESI†). The single crystals were not suitable for single crystal determination due to their small sizes; however, we successfully determined the structure of ZIF-L from synchrotron powder X-ray diffraction data (Table S1, ESI†). As shown in Fig. 1, the Rietveld refinement shows good agreement with the experimental X-ray diffraction results with agreement factors of $R_p = 8.02\%$, $R_{wp} = 7.55\%$, and $GOF = 1.538$, which validate our structure solution. ZIF-L crystallizes in the orthorhombic system, space group *Cmce*, with cell parameters of $a = 24.1191(5)$ Å, $b = 17.0604(3)$ Å and $c = 19.7398(4)$ Å. There are two crystallographically different Zn(II) ions, four Hmim ligands and one “free” Hmim molecule (Hmim-5)

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† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available: Synthesis and characterization, CO₂ and CH₄ adsorption isotherms, three cycles of CO₂ adsorption and desorption isotherms, structure determination and stability; Tables S1 and S2 and Fig. S1–S11. See DOI: 10.1039/c3cc44342f

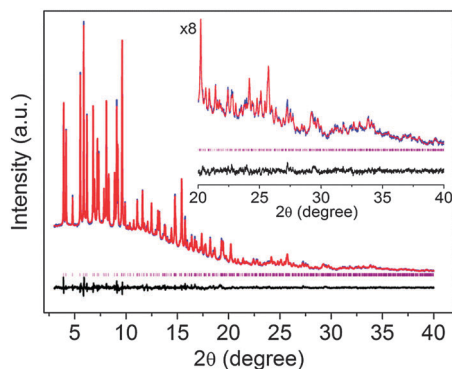


Fig. 1 Rietveld refinement profile for the ZIF-L sample showing observed (blue line), calculated (red line), and difference (black line) plots. The positions of Bragg reflections (tick marks) are shown for ZIF-L. The data were collected at a wavelength of 0.8237 Å at room temperature.

in the asymmetric unit (Fig. 2). Each Zn atom adopts a regular $[ZnN_4]$ tetrahedral geometry where Zn1 is coordinated by four μ_2 -bridging N atoms (N16, N16, N26 and N26) of two imidazole units while Zn2 is coordinated by N atoms (N15, N25, and N35) of three imidazole units and a monodentate one containing N45. The Hmim-1 ligand with N15/N16 as a μ_2 -bridge links Zn1 and Zn2 ions with a distance of 6.01 Å while Hmim-2 with N25/N26 connects Zn1 and Zn2 ions with a distance of 5.96 Å (Fig. 2). In addition, Hmim-3 forms a μ_2 -bridge between 2 Zn2 ions with a distance of 6.07 Å.

Six μ_2 -bridging Hmim ligands bind two Zn1 ions in opposite position and four Zn2 ions to form a large hexagon, while four μ_2 -bridging Hmim ligands bind two Zn1 and two Zn2 ions to produce a smaller parallelogram. These hexagons and parallelograms are interconnected to create a 2D layer network along the *ab* plane and these layers are then stacked along the *c* direction (Fig. 3a). These layers are part of the sodalite (SOD) topology found in the 3D structure of ZIF-8 (Fig. 3b).⁴ The 2D network is further stabilized by the interdigitating interactions with the help of the terminal Hmim-4 ligands containing N46 atoms and the “free” Hmim-5 between the layers (Fig. 4). Hmim-5 is hydrogen bonded to the N46 atoms of Hmim-4 and its ring lies parallel to the ring of Hmim-3, potentially forming a weak interaction with the neighbouring layer.

ZIF-L does have one large zero-dimensional pore or cavity with dimensions of 9.4 Å × 7.0 Å × 5.3 Å. This cushion-shaped cavity is shown in Fig. 5a. In principle, such a unique cavity is well suited to accommodate CO₂ molecules as determined by a Rietveld refinement. ZIF-L structure does not change after CO₂ adsorption, as confirmed

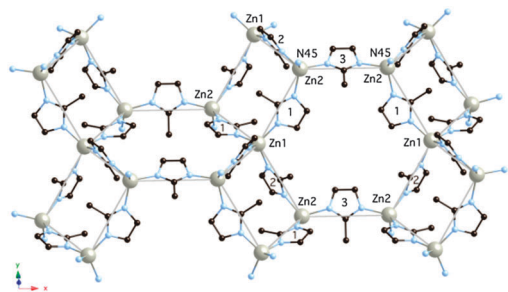


Fig. 2 The 2D layer in ZIF-L showing the linking Hmim molecules (numbers 1 to 3) and the N atom (N45) of the monodentate Hmim-4. C: black; N: light blue; Zn: gray. Hydrogen atoms are omitted for clarity.

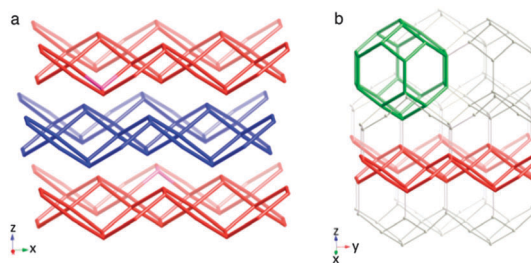


Fig. 3 (a) Two-dimensional layer structure of ZIF-L along *z*, (b) sod topology of ZIF-8. Relationship between ZIF-8 and ZIF-L: ZIF-8 framework (grey color) with a sodalite cage highlighted in green and the layer corresponding to ZIF-L in red. Only the network of the Zn atoms is shown.

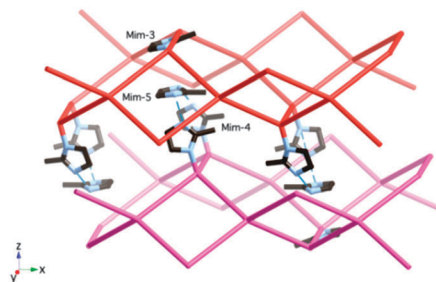


Fig. 4 The interdigitating interactions between neighboring 2D networks in ZIF-L. The groups formed by Hmim-4 and Hmim-5 molecules point into the “cups” of the opposing layer. For clarity not all Hmim molecules are shown.

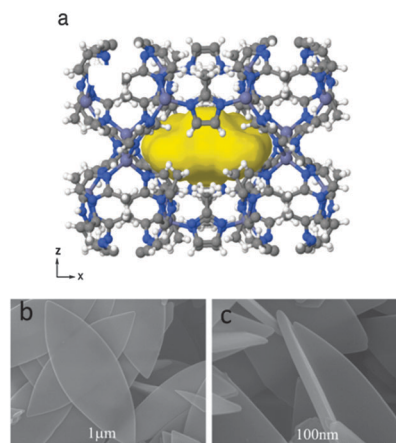


Fig. 5 (a) The structure of ZIF-L viewed along *y* with an isosurface showing the location and approximate shape of the cavity (yellow). This isosurface was calculated using the program Jmol (Jmol: an open-source Java viewer for chemical structures in 3D. <http://www.jmol.org/>). (b, c) SEM images of typical ZIF-L crystals: (b) top view image showing leaf-like shape and (c) side view image showing the crystal thickness.

by its XRD pattern (Fig. S2, ESI[†]). SEM images of typical ZIF-L crystals are shown in Fig. 5b and c. These ZIF-L crystals exhibit a unique leaf-like shape with a size of about 5 μm × 2 μm and a thickness of about 150 nm. ZIF-L crystals with two-dimensional leaf-like morphology may be very useful as building blocks for the fabrication of thin ZIF-L membranes and nanocomposite membranes for separation applications.^{18,19}

Like ZIF-8, ZIF-L does not have a channel system, so the CO₂ sorption must also occur *via* a gate opening mechanism as proposed for ZIF-8 and other ZIFs and MOFs (Fig. S3, ESI[†]).^{20–23} Such a cavity

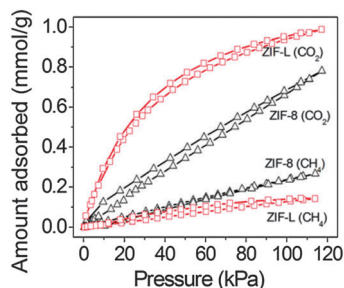


Fig. 6 CO₂ and CH₄ adsorption–desorption isotherms of ZIF-L and ZIF-8 measured at 298 K.

is much more flexible than the tetrahedral structure of ZIFs because it is located between the 2D layers that are weakly connected by the terminal Hmim-4 and “free” Hmim-5. The superior CO₂ adsorption selectivity of ZIF-L was confirmed by adsorption experiments. The CO₂ and CH₄ adsorption–desorption curves of ZIF-L at room temperature are shown in Fig. 6. ZIF-L crystals adsorb CO₂ preferentially over CH₄, and exhibit superior CO₂ adsorption capacity (0.94 mmol g⁻¹) and CO₂/CH₄ adsorption selectivity (7.2) as compared with other ZIFs with large cages (Table S2, ESI†).

This result should be attributed to unique cushion-shaped cavities and strong interactions between CO₂ molecules and Hmim molecules. The shortest distances from the O atoms of the CO₂ molecules to H atoms of methylimidazole molecules are those to H43 and H52 of the Hmim-4 and Hmim-5 molecules. The Hmim-4 molecule is only connected to one zinc atom in ZIF-L structure and the Hmim-5 molecule is totally “free”. Contrary to what one might expect, there is no direct contact with the N atoms of any Hmim molecules in ZIF-L. It is noted that the ZIF-L sample has a micropore volume of 0.066 cm³ g⁻¹, a BET surface area of 161 m² g⁻¹ and a Langmuir surface area of 212 m² g⁻¹. The surface area and micropore volume of ZIF-L are lower than those of ZIF-8 (Fig. S3, ESI†).⁴ This is because ZIF-L has smaller pore size and higher density (density of metal atoms per unit volume) than ZIF-8. As summarized in Table S2 (ESI†), ZIF-L shows higher CO₂ adsorption capacity and CO₂/CH₄ adsorption selectivity than ZIF-8, ZIF-95, and ZIF-100 although ZIF-L has much lower surface area than other ZIFs; but ZIF-L has lower CO₂ adsorption capacity and CO₂/CH₄ adsorption selectivity than some MOFs such as NOTT-300 (Table S2, ESI†). In order to evaluate the reversibility of CO₂ adsorption on ZIF-L, the CO₂ adsorption–desorption process was repeated at 298 K for three cycles. The curves for the 2nd and the 3rd cycle are very similar to that for the 1st cycle of the CO₂ adsorption–desorption process, suggesting that CO₂ can be easily adsorbed and desorbed from ZIF-L (Fig. S4, ESI†). The preferential adsorption of CO₂ over other gases makes ZIF-L crystals highly attractive for CO₂ separation and capture in many industrial processes.

We also studied the thermal stability of ZIF-L (Fig. S5–S10, ESI†), and the results showed that ZIF-L is stable at 150 °C in air. To study the structural stability of ZIF-L, X-ray diffraction experiments were performed at high pressures by Synchrotron measurements (Fig. S11, ESI†). Except for the peak broadening, no drastic structural changes of the diffraction pattern were observed up to 6.3 GPa. Due to limited peak intensities, detailed structure investigation was not possible from the data. After the pressure was released, the XRD peaks somewhat shifted to lower angles compared with the XRD pattern collected before the high-pressure study (Fig. S11, ESI†). A slightly larger unit cell was

observed in the recovered sample likely because the pressure medium was pressed into ZIF-L structure pores. Therefore, this result indicates that ZIF-L exhibits excellent structural stability at high pressures.

A new two-dimensional ZIF-L structure was synthesized at ambient temperature by controlling the Hmim/Zn ratio in an aqueous solution. Leaf-shaped ZIF-L crystals have cushion-shaped cavities that ideally accommodate CO₂ molecules; they exhibit higher CO₂ adsorption capacity and selectivity than the ZIFs with large cages such as ZIF-8, ZIF-95 and ZIF-100 under ambient conditions. This result indicates that tailoring the cavity shape can be an effective way to design ZIFs with enhanced adsorption properties. Owing to its excellent CO₂ adsorption properties and high pressure stability, ZIF-L shows great potential for use as an adsorbent and membrane material for CO₂ adsorption and separation applications.

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