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# Precise Control of Thermal and Redox Properties of Organic Hole-Transport Materials

Valerie A. Chiykowski,<sup>†[a]</sup> Yang Cao,<sup>†[a]</sup> Hairen Tan,<sup>[b]</sup> Daniel P. Tabor,<sup>[c]</sup> Edward H. Sargent,<sup>\*[b]</sup> Alán Aspuru-Guzik,<sup>\*[c][d]</sup> and Curtis P. Berlinguette<sup>\*[a][e][f]</sup>

**Abstract:** We report design principles of the thermal and redox properties of synthetically accessible spiro-based hole transport materials (HTMs) and show the relevance of these findings to high-performance perovskite solar cells (PSCs). The chemical modification of an asymmetric spiro[fluorene-9,9'-xanthene] core is amenable to selective placement of redox active triphenylamine (TPA) units. We therefore leveraged computational techniques to investigate five HTMs bearing TPA groups judiciously positioned about this asymmetric spiro core. It was determined that TPA groups positioned about the conjugated fluorene moiety increase the free energy change for hole-extraction from the perovskite layer, while TPAs about the xanthene unit govern the  $T_g$  values. The synergistic effects of these characteristics resulted in an HTM characterized by both a low reduction potential (~0.7 V vs NHE) and a high Tg value (>125 °C) to yield a device power conversion efficiency (PCE) of 20.8% in a PSC.

Hole-transport materials (HTMs) are a key component of organic lightemitting diodes (OLEDs)<sup>[1–3]</sup> and solid-state solar cell devices.<sup>[4,5]</sup> High performance HTMs for perovskite solar cells (PSCs) should exhibit high glass transition temperatures ( $T_g$ ) to suppress the formation of grain boundaries in glassy films which can impede effective charge transfer.<sup>[6,7]</sup> It is imperative that the HTM contains an appropriately positioned and reversible redox couple to mediate charge extraction from the photo-oxidized perovskite material, and be capable of conducting charge through the charge transport layer.<sup>[8,9]</sup> These materials should also have high temporal stability under elevated temperatures and humidity.<sup>[10–12]</sup>

- [a] V. Chiykowski, Dr. Y. Cao, Prof. Dr. C. P. Berlinguette Department of Chemistry, The University of British Columbia, 2036 Main Mall, Vancouver, British Columbia, V6T 1Z1, Canada E-mail: cberling@chem.ubc.ca
- [b] Dr. H. Tan, Prof. Dr. E. H. Sargent Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Toronto, 10 King's College Road, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 3G4, Canada.
- E-mail: ted.sargent@utoronto.ca
   [c] Dr. D. P. Tabor, Prof. Dr. A. Aspuru-Guzik
   Department of Chemistry and Chemical Biology, Harvard University, 12 Oxford St., Cambridge, Massachusetts, 02138, USA.
   Email: alan@aspuru.com
- [d] Department of Chemistry and Department of Computer Science, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H6, Canada and Vector Institute, Toronto, ON M5G 1M1, Canada.
- [e] Department of Chemical and Biological Engineering, The University of British Columbia, 2360 East Mall, Vancouver, British Columbia, V6Y 1Z3, Canada.
- [f] Stewart Blusson Quantum Matter Institute, The University of British Columbia, 2355 East Mall, Vancouver, British Columbia, V6T 1Z4, Canada.
- † These authors contributed equally to this work.

Supporting information and the ORCID identification numbers for the authors of this article can be found under: a link at the end of the document.



Figure 1. Molecular representations of Spiro-OMeTAD<sup>[15]</sup> and the HTM series under investigation.

Organic HTMs are amenable to low-temperature solution processing while also being capable of mediating high power conversion efficiencies (PCEs).<sup>[13,14]</sup> Spiro-OMeTAD<sup>[15]</sup> (Figure 1) is a widely used organic HTM and is capable of reaching PCEs greater than 20% when integrated in PSCs. [16,17] However, Spiro-OMeTAD is expensive to manufacture because the tetrahedral spiro carbon that bridges the two perpendicular fluorene moieties (9,9'-spirobifluorene) can only be accessed through a succession of substitution, lithiation, condensation and bromination steps.<sup>[18]</sup> Notwithstanding, the molecule teaches how a spiro carbon center can impart a rigid 3D structure that leads to a high T<sub>g</sub> (125 °C).<sup>[19]</sup> The redox-active TPA substituents functionalized with methoxy groups also yield reversible redox couples at potentials appropriate for use in a PSC.<sup>[20]</sup> This combination of structural and electrochemical properties contributes to the high hole mobilities (2 × 10<sup>-4</sup> to 5 × 10<sup>-5</sup> cm<sup>2</sup> V<sup>-1</sup>s<sup>-1</sup>) that have proven so effective for Spiro-OMeTAD.[21]

Hagfeldt and Sun,<sup>[22]</sup> and Robertson<sup>[23]</sup> and their respective coworkers recently independently disclosed that the alternative spiro-based HTM "X60" exhibits performance parameters competitive to Spiro-OMeTAD. X60, denoted herein as **HTM-FX** (Figure 1), is an important discovery because it can be synthesized using a simple one-pot condensation reaction between phenols and a fluorenone moiety. This condensation yields juxtaposed fluorene and xanthene units at a tetrahedral carbon centre. This asymmetric fluorene-9,9'-xanthene core can be functionalized with TPA groups, analogous to that of Spiro-OMeTAD, to generate hole-transport properties that produce high PCEs in the PSCs.<sup>[20,22,23]</sup>



**Figure 2.** Differential pulse voltammograms (DPVs) for HTM series normalized to their first oxidation event. The number of electrons that contribute to each redox process was determined by integrating the area beneath the peak fitting. (a) The first deconvoluted oxidation events are shown in shaded colors to highlight the progressively anodic shift of  $E_{HOMO}$  for HTM-F, HTM-X and HTM-X', respectively. Traces for (b) HTM-FX and (c) HTM-FX' are deconvoluted to highlight that the  $E_{HOMO}$  is linked to the TPA unit positioned on the fluorene unit.

The simple reaction chemistry associated with spiro-based HTM-FX inspired us to elucidate how each of the TPA units about the asymmetric spiro-core affects the HTM properties and the corresponding performance in a PSC. We discovered that the TPA groups positioned about the highly conjugated fluorene fragment are the relevant electrochemically active units (i.e., associated with the redox couple that represents the HOMO energy level, EHOMO) while those positioned on the xanthene moiety affect the structural and thermal properties. We were able to resolve this structure-property relationship by placing TPA groups exclusively on the fluorene (HTM-F) or the xanthene (HTM-X) units. These results pointed to the xanthene substituents governing the thermal properties, prompting us to test how paraand meta-substitution of TPAs at the xanthene moiety (i.e., HTM-X and HTM-X') affects the thermal properties. This decoupling of the  $E_{HOMO}$  levels and bulk thermal properties (e.g.,  $T_g$ ) yielded HTM-FX' characterized by a strikingly high  $T_q$  of 137 °C. This HTM was found to be capable of generating a PCE of 20.8% in a PSC, a value that compares favorably with those measured for Spiro-OMeTAD and HTM-FX under the same experimental conditions. Moreover, devices containing HTM-FX' could be prepared with a notably high level of reproducibility. This identification of how the TPAs impact the redox activity, thermal properties and device characteristics will guide the design of new high-performance asymmetric HTMs with orthogonal halves.

Table 1. Electrochemical and Hole-Transport Properties of HTMs.

Compound	Е <sub>номо<sup>[а]</sup> (V vs NHE)</sub>	<sup>£номо<sup>[b]</sup> (V vs NHE)</sup>	τ <sub>g</sub> [c] (°C)	Hole Mobility <sup>[d]</sup> (× 10 <sup>-4</sup> cm <sup>2</sup> V <sup>-1</sup> s <sup>-1</sup> )
Spiro- OMeTAD	0.63	-5.13	125	6.9
HTM-FX	0.67	-5.17	107	1.4
HTM-F	0.67	-5.17	104	0.4
нтм-х	0.76	-5.26	94	0.5
НТМ-Х'	0.97	-5.47	130	0.3
HTM-FX'	0.66	-5.16	137	4.8

[a] The half-wave potential corresponding to the first oxidation process in the cyclic voltammogram. Measured in DCM and referenced to NHE by addition of ferrocene. [b]  $\varepsilon_{HOMO} = -(E_{HOMO} + 4.50 \text{ eV})$ . [c] Determined by differential scanning calorimetry (DSC). All  $T_m$  values determined to be >300 °C and above the detection limits of our instrument. [d] Determined by space-charge-limit current (SCLC) method from doped HTMs.

Replacing one of the two fluorene units in Spiro-OMeTAD with a xanthene unit to form HTM-FX<sup>[22,23]</sup> enables us to test which specific TPA groups affect the redox properties and thermal temperatures of HTMs. We used computational methods to screen the five HTMs in Figure 1 containing this asymmetric core for appropriate frontier orbital energy levels, low reorganization energies and photophysical properties. The frontier orbitals were modeled (Figure S1) and the computed reduction potentials corresponding to the first oxidation event ( $\varepsilon_{HOMO}$ ) were predicted to all exhibit suitable reduction potentials for hole extraction from the perovskite layer. The reorganization energies (Ereorg) for the entire HTM series (Table S1) were evaluated using Nelsen's four point method.<sup>[22,24,25]</sup> HTMs containing TPA moieties at the R<sub>x</sub> or Rx' positions of the HTM scaffold were predicted to exhibit smaller Ereorg values that are favorable for efficient hole transport according to Marcus theory.<sup>[26]</sup> The vertical electron affinity of the cation at the adiabatic cation minimum appears to be the more dominant factor that affects Ereorg, and HTM-F was found to contain the largest relative contribution from this term. Modeling the spin-density differences of the adiabatic minima for the singly oxidized molecules of the series (Figure S2) provides a visualization of the hole on an oxidized HTM and reveals differences in hole delocalization within the series. Fluorene was confirmed to be a highly conjugated unit and the positions of TPA groups on the xanthene moieties affect the electronic structure of the oxygen bridge. All computed Ereorg were between 0.14-0.20 eV and close to that of Spiro-OMeTAD (0.14 eV).

The preparation of **HTM-FX** followed a modified literature procedure where 2,7-dibromofluorenone is reacted with 4-bromophenol to yield a tetra-brominated product that, in turn, undergoes a Pd-catalyzed Buchwald-Hartwig coupling with 4,4'-dimethoxyphenylamine to yield the product.<sup>[22]</sup> This procedure was adapted to access the rest of the **HTM** series (Scheme S1) using either non-brominated fluorenone for **HTM-X** and **HTM-X'** and **HTM-X'**. All compounds

in the **HTM** series were prepared in merely two reaction steps under relatively benign reaction conditions and a single column purification step. By contrast, the Spiro-OMeTAD core requires a multi-step synthesis involving highly air and moisture-sensitive reagents, hazardous lithiation reactions and several timeconsuming column chromatographic purification steps.<sup>[15]</sup>

The melting point ( $T_m$ ) and  $T_g$  of each HTM measured by differential scanning calorimetry (DSC) is tabulated in Table 1. The  $T_m$  and  $T_g$  values for every member of the series were measured to be >300 °C and >93 °C, respectively. (A minimum  $T_g$  value of 90°C is required to avoid morphology changes during solar cell operation<sup>[6]</sup>.) There is no apparent trend between number of TPA units and glass transition temperature. However, substitution at the *meta*-position of the xanthene moiety was found to increase  $T_g$  by over 30 °C (e.g.,  $T_g$  (**HTM-X'**) = 130 °C *c.f.*  $T_g$  (**HTM-X**) = 94 °C). This striking increase in  $T_g$  through *meta*substitution of the xanthene was also observed in the case of **HTM-FX'** ( $T_g$  = 137 °C *c.f.* 107 °C for **HTM-FX**).

Cvclic voltammograms (CVs) for each HTM was recorded in 0.1 M n-NBu<sub>4</sub>PF<sub>6</sub> DCM solutions to determine the E<sub>HOMO</sub> for the series (Table 1 and Figure S15). The E<sub>HOMO</sub> values for HTMs bearing TPAs on the fluorene (HTM-F, HTM-FX, and HTM-FX') were all found to be ~0.66 V vs NHE, which is slightly more positive than Spiro-OMeTAD (0.63 V vs NHE) and therefore appropriate for energy alignment with the perovskite layer. Differential pulse voltammetry (DPV) was used to deconvolute and quantify each of the successive oxidation events for the series (Figure 2 and Table S3). The number of oxidation events tracked the number of TPA units on the HTM, and we were able to assign the redox activity to each TPA unit by taking a number of different observations into account. For example, the EHOMO levels for the HTMs with only para- or meta-substituted xanthene TPAs (HTM-X and HTM-X', respectively) are higher than that of the HTM with only fluorene TPAs (HTM-F) and reflect a lower degree of electronic coupling based on successive oxidation of their two TPA groups (Figure 2a). This conjecture is fully supported by the trend in computed  $\varepsilon_{HOMO}$  values (Table S1). The first reduction potentials ( $E_{HOMO}$ ) for HTM-FX and HTM-FX' can therefore be linked to the first oxidations of the fluorene TPAs (EF1), in that the first oxidation event of HTM-FX and HTM-FX' matches that measured for HTM-F (0.67 V vs NHE). The second oxidation event for HTM-FX at 0.87 V vs NHE is attributed to the first oxidation of the xanthene TPAs (Ex1) by benchmarking against HTM-X (0.78 V vs NHE). We can assign the third and fourth oxidations events of HTM-FX to the second faradaic events for HTM-F (EF2) and HTM-X (Ex2) according to their electronic coupling ( $\Delta E_{1/2}$  in Figure 2) with the first two oxidations. Similarly, all four oxidation events for HTM-FX' have been resolved even though the second to fourth oxidation features overlapped significantly and appeared to be a three-electron process (0.8 to 1.1 V vs NHE). Our assignments of the redox activity for each TPA unit, which was corroborated by modeling the degree of hole delocalization of the cationic HTM species (Figure S2) provides a visualization of the hole on an oxidized HTM, clearly shows that the relevant redox activity is confined to the TPA groups appended to the fluorene units. This finding indicates that the xanthene units can be modified without compromising the EHOMO levels corresponding to the fluorene TPA units. The similar UVvisible absorption and emission maxima (Table S2) of HTM-F,

**HTM-FX** and **HTM-FX'** confirm the similar electronic structures of the compounds' frontier orbitals. All HTMs under study have limited light absorption in the visible region which may be beneficial in maximizing light absorption by the perovskite layer (Figure S14).

The hole mobilities were determined using the space-chargelimited current (SCLC) method (Table 1). The J-V characteristics of hole-only devices with various HTMs are shown in Figure 3a. The HTMs are doped with 4-tert-butylpyridine (tBP) and bis(trifluoromethane)sulfonimide lithium salt (LiTFSI). The mobilities of Spiro-OMeTAD, HTM-FX and HTM-FX' obtained here are comparable to the previous reported values.<sup>[21,22,27]</sup> The mobility of HTM-FX' is close to that of Spiro-OMeTAD and is much higher than that of all other HTM compounds in the series under study. While the EHOMO level of HTM-FX' is similar to HTM-FX, the higher mobility is ascribed to the meta-substitution affecting the chemical structure or electronic delocalization. The low hole mobilities of HTM-X and HTM-X' may be due to the EHOMO levels being too high in energy for efficient doping by LiTFSI. Given that the extent of hole doping for HTM-F and HTM-FX by LiTFSI is expected to be similar based on the similarities in E<sub>HOMO</sub>, the low mobility of HTM-F is attributed to the higher Ereorg value (0.21 eV) relative to the other HTMs (<0.16 eV). Each of the HTMs were then tested in planar PSCs with the device architecture glass/ITO/TiO2-CI/perovskite/HTM/Au.[17] Table 2 summarizes the statistical performance of devices fabricated with otherwiseidentical device processing for each HTM, and the J-V curves of champion devices for each HTM are shown in Figure 3b.



Figure 3. Performance of perovskite solar cells with HTMs: (a) *J-V* curves of hole-only devices with various HTMs; (b) *J-V* curves of solar cells with various HTMs measured under solar simulator (100 mW cm<sup>-2</sup>); (c) Histogram of PCEs for 44 devices with HTM-FX'; (d) *J-V* curves of champion device with HTM-FX' scanned in reverse and forward directions (scanning rate of 20 mV/s).

Table 2. Electrochemical and Hole-Transport Properties of HTMs.<sup>[a]</sup>

Compound	V <sub>oc</sub> (V)	J <sub>sc</sub> (mA·cm⁻²)	FF	PCE (%)	Champion PCE (%)
Spiro- OMeTAD	1.16(2)	21.9(3)	0.78(2)	19.7(5)	20.4
HTM-FX	1.16(1)	21.2(3)	0.74(2)	18.2(7)	19.5
HTM-F	1.08(2)	14.7(9)	0.41(2)	6.5(5)	7.0
НТМ-Х	0.88(11)	3.8(6)	0.32(2)	1.1(2)	1.3
НТМ-Х′	0.77(6)	1.4(1)	0.26(1)	0.2(1)	0.3
HTM-FX'	1.17(1)	21.7(3)	0.78(2)	19.7(6)	20.8

Statistical performance of 41 Spiro-OMeTAD devices, 24 HTM-FX devices, 44 HTM-FX' devices, 8 HTM-F devices, and 4 devices for each HTM-X and HTM-X', is shown here.

The HTMs exhibit similar charge extraction kinetics and effective photoluminescence quenching for all HTMs as revealed by time-resolved and steady-state photoluminescence (PL) measurements (Figure S17). Hole extraction from the perovskites to each of the HTMs in this study was not found to be a limiting factor, except for **HTM-X'** which showed incomplete PL quenching (Figure S17a). The HTMs exhibit similar charge extraction kinetics between Spiro-OMeTAD, **HTM-FX**, and **HTM-FX'** (Figure S17b) though the initial PL decay rates in HTMs with only two TPA moieties follow the trend of **HTM-F > HTM-X > HTM-X'** (Figure S17c).

PSCs containing HTM-F, HTM-X, and HTM-X' all generated low PCE values. This observation is attributed to the low hole mobilities (Figure 3a) precluding effective transport of carriers through the HTM layers. HTM-FX results in PCEs that are lower than Spiro-OMeTAD and the best device yielded a PCE of 19.5% which is comparable to a previous report.[22] HTM-FX' outperformed HTM-FX (20.8% vs 19.5%, respectively) and the performance enhancement can be attributed to the 3-fold higher hole mobility imparted by the change of TPA substitution pattern on the xanthene group (4.8 vs  $1.4 \times 10^{-4} \text{ cm}^2 \text{V}^{-1} \text{s}^{-1}$ , respectively). HTM-FX' produced a device performance that rivals that of Spiro-OMeTAD. PSCs containing HTM-FX' exhibit excellent reproducibility, as indicated by the narrow PCE distribution over 44 devices (Figure 3c). Moreover, PSCs containing HTM-FX' also show negligible hysteresis in the J-V measurements (Figure 3d and Figure S16a). These results highlight the meta-substitution of the xanthene groups to be an important handle for achieving high-efficiency PSCs.

Breaking the symmetric core of Spiro-OMeTAD by replacing one of the two fluorene units with a xanthene unit to form **HTM-FX**<sup>[22]</sup> enabled us to experimentally resolve how the positions of TPA groups about the core affect the redox properties and glass transition temperatures of HTMs relevant to high efficiency PSCs. TPA groups positioned on the highly conjugated fluorene moiety renders the HTM easier to oxidize, which, in turn, increases the free energy change for hole-extraction from the perovskite layer.

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The glass transition temperatures, however, are governed by the TPAs about the xanthene unit: substitution at the *meta*-position raises the  $T_g$  by 30 °C over those substituted at the *para*-position. The synergistic effects of a positively shifted  $E_{HOMO}$  and high glass transition temperature in **HTM-FX'** yielded a device power conversion efficiency of >20.8%, which is commensurate with current state-of-the-art PSCs. Electrochemical, photophysical and structural findings were fully supported by computational analysis of the frontier orbital and reorganization energies of the neutral HTMs and spin density difference maps of cationic species, thereby highlighting the role predictive tools can play in screening future state-of-the-art HTMs. This set of design principles that enables selective control of redox and mesoscopic properties of asymmetric HTMs will be elaborated on in future studies in pursuit of robust higher performance PSCs.

**Keywords:** hole-transport materials; perovskite solar cells; solar energy; organic semiconductors; glass transition temperature

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