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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Wide-Range Color-Tunable Ultralong Organic Phosphorescence Materials for Printable and Writable Security Inks

Yunxiang Lei,<sup>†</sup> Wenbo Dai,<sup>†</sup> Jianxin Guan,<sup>†</sup> Shuai Guo, Fei Ren, Yudai Zhou, Jianbing Shi, Bin Tong, Zhengxu Cai,\* Junrong Zheng, and Yuping Dong\*

- [a] Y. Lei, W. Dai, S. Guo, F. Ren, Y. Zhou, Prof. J. Shi, Prof. B. Tong, Prof. Z. Cai, Prof. Y. Dong  
Beijing Key Laboratory of Construction Tailorable Advanced Functional Materials and Green Applications, School of Materials Science & Engineering  
Beijing Institute of Technology  
Beijing 100081, China  
E-mail: caizx@bit.edu.cn (Z. C.); chdongyp@bit.edu.cn (Y. D.).
- [b] J. Guan, Prof. J. Zheng  
Beijing National Laboratory for Molecular Sciences, College of Chemistry and Molecular Engineering  
Peking University  
Beijing 100871, China
- [†] These authors contributed equally.

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**Abstract:** Organic materials with long-lived, color-tunable phosphorescence are potentially used for optical recording, anti-counterfeiting, and bioimaging. Herein, we develop a series of novel host-guest organic phosphors allowing dynamic color tuning from the cyan (502 nm) to orange red (608 nm). Guest materials are employed to tune the phosphorescent color, while the host materials show a synergistic effect to the guest to activate the phosphorescence emission. These organic phosphors have an ultra-long lifetime of 0.7 s and a maximum phosphorescence efficiency of 18.2%. Although color tunable inks have already been developed using visible dyes, solution-processed security inks that are temperature dependent and display time-resolved printed images are unprecedented. This strategy can provide a crucial step towards the next-generation of security technologies for information handling.

## Introduction

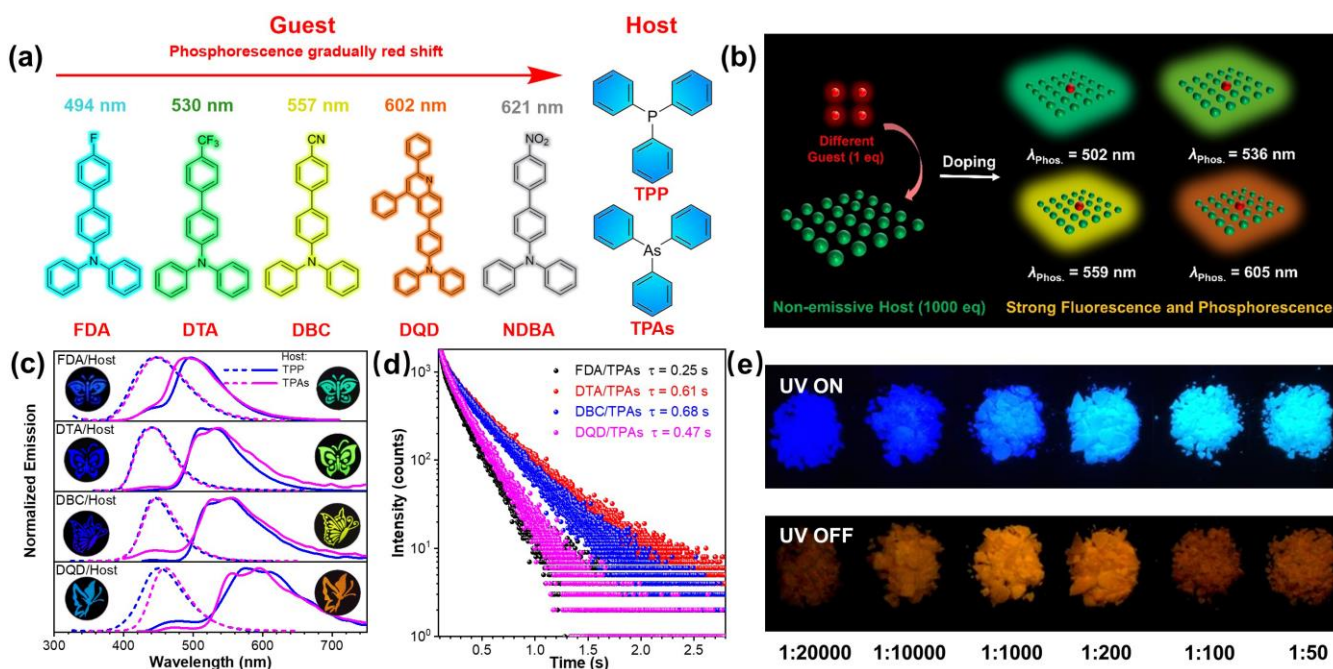
Purely organic room temperature phosphorescence (RTP) materials with long-lived, persistent luminescence in the visible spectrum are applicable in optical recording, anti-counterfeiting, and high contrast background independent bioimaging.<sup>[1]</sup> Fundamental understanding of luminescence process through molecular design is the central theme of organic RTP. A seemingly general strategy is to enhance the intersystem crossing (ISC) from the singlet state to triplet state.<sup>[2]</sup> Therefore, most traditional RTP materials are carbazole or phenothiazine based donor (D)-acceptor (A) small molecules with a distorted configuration.<sup>[2-3]</sup> The intramolecular D-A interaction can narrow the energy gap between the lowest singlet and triplet state ( $\Delta E_{ST}$ ).<sup>[4]</sup> Aldehyde group and halogens can also be introduced into small molecules to increase the spin-orbit coupling (SOC) constant.<sup>[4a,5]</sup> Small  $\Delta E_{ST}$  and large SOC constant are conducive to enhance the ISC ability of excitation.<sup>[2-4]</sup> However, this molecular design strategy faces several urgent issues, such as short phosphorescence wavelengths, low brightness, and lack of new systems.<sup>[1d-g,2-3]</sup>

Recently, a novel method to generate RTP was reported by embedding guest materials into a rigid or crystalline host matrix,

such as steroid analogue, the cavity of cyclodextrin, poly(vinyl alcohol), and poly(methyl methacrylate).<sup>[6]</sup> The rigidity of the matrix avoids quenching of the triplet excitations by interactions with the humidity and oxygen.<sup>[6a,6c,6e]</sup> In addition, the rigid host also restricts the molecular motion of the guest molecules, thereby promoting their phosphorescence.<sup>[6a,6b,6e]</sup> However, the major role of the matrix molecules in the multi-component RTP system remains elusive. Researchers still need to carefully choose the matrix for a guest phosphor. A rigid or crystalline matrix is unsuitable for all guest phosphors, resulting in a lack of wide range color tunable RTP materials.<sup>[6a,6c-e]</sup> Tunable emission color endows RTP materials with superior performance in optoelectronic applications. For instance, multicolor-encoded materials can serve as information carriers for encrypted data storage, high-density, and anti-counterfeiting.<sup>[7]</sup> Furthermore, long wavelength RTP materials are ideal biomarkers for bioimaging.<sup>[8]</sup> To date, the development of wide-range color-tunable emission RTP materials remains a formidable challenge, which greatly limits application of multi-component phosphorescence materials.<sup>[1b,1h,6f,6g]</sup>

In this work, we demonstrate a host-guest doping approach that can achieve wide-range color tuning of RTP emission. Both the host and guest molecules have no phosphorescence at the room temperature. When the guest molecules were doped into the host molecules, maximum phosphorescent quantum yield reaches 18.2%. The experimental results also reveal that the host molecules not only restrict the motion of the guest molecules, but also show a synergistic effect to the guest at excited state. The host materials of both triphenylphosphine (TPP) and triphenylarsenic (TPAs) exhibit low melting points and highly stable subcooling states. Therefore, the host-guest RTP system can be solution-processed in both molten state and solution state. The hand-writing characters of RTP inks and printing figure by the ink solution display similar color under sunlight and UV light, but show a dynamic color change after removal of UV light. In addition, RTP performance of the host-guest materials at high temperature is highly dependent on guest molecules. The three-component RTP system possesses a phosphorescent thermochromic property. Therefore, multiple dimensional, including color tunable, temperature dependent, and time-resolved, anti-counterfeiting

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**Figure 1.** (a) The molecular structures of guest and host molecules. (b) Schematic diagram of host-guest phosphorescence materials. (c) Fluorescence (dash line) and phosphorescence (solid line) spectra of host-guest crystalline materials. Insets show photographs of guest/TPAs materials with and without UV irradiation. (d) Phosphorescence decay curves of host-guest materials with TPAs as the host, excitation wavelength: 370 nm. (e) The fluorescence (top) and phosphorescence (down) images of the DQD/TPAs crystalline powders with different amount of DQD (Molar ratio).

techniques are achieved in the printable and writable host-guest inks.

## Results and Discussion

Figure 1a shows the molecular structures of the hosts and guests. TPP and TPAs were selected as the host molecules according to our previous results because triphenylamine (TPA) displayed good host capacity for TPA-based RTP guest materials. Since nitrogen, phosphorus and arsenic are in the same main element group, and heavy atom facilitates the intersystem crossing, TPP and TPAs as the host materials were expected to process enhanced RTP performance than TPA. Four TPA-based molecules with electron withdrawing groups (Figure 1a) were designed and synthesized as the guests (Schemes S1 and S2). Both TPP and TPAs have low melting points (Figure S2, 81.7 °C for TPP and 63.1 °C for TPAs) and stable subcooling states. Therefore, the guests dispersed in the host can be fabricated by the melt-casting method, in which blends of the materials are simply heated by hot water. All host-guest materials show visible afterglow after removal of irradiation, indicating the present of RTP properties. The concentration of the guest molecules play an important role in the performance of RTP.<sup>[9]</sup> Therefore, a series of host-guest materials with molar ratio of DQD to TPAs ranging from 1:50 to 1:20000 were prepared (Figure 1e). As ratio of DQD increases, the emission wavelength of the host-guest materials slightly red shift (Figure S4), likely due to the molecular aggregation of the guest molecules at high concentration.<sup>[9a]</sup> Notably, even the concentration of DQD is as low as 0.005 mol% (1:20000), the host-guest materials still produce obvious visible

afterglow. To the best of our knowledge, this value is the lowest guest concentration found in organic host-guest materials that can achieve RTP.

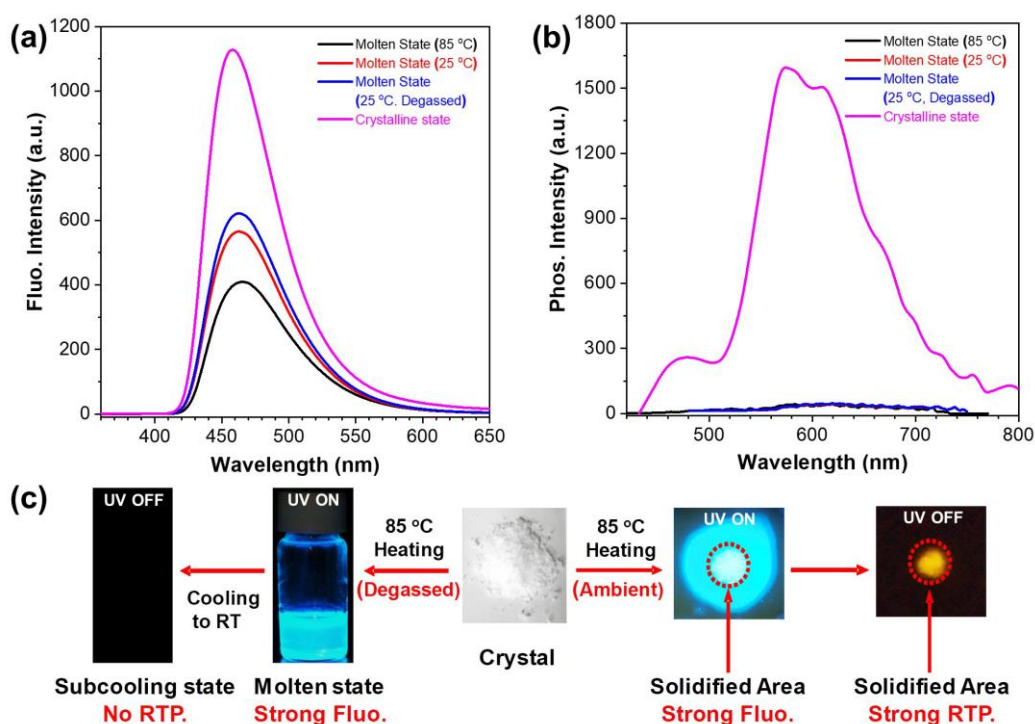
The melt-casting host-guest materials with 0.1 mol% guests dispersed in either TPP or TPAs exhibiting the best fluorescence and phosphorescence performance were selected for the photophysical investigation. The host-guest materials produce blue fluorescence emission with the wavelength ranging from 433 to 462 nm (Figure 1c, Table 1). The phosphorescence wavelengths of the host-guest materials gradually increase from 502 to 608 nm, achieving full emission coverage from cyan, to green, to yellow, and to orange-red (Figure 1c, Table 1). In addition, eight host-guest crystalline materials all exhibit high luminescent efficiency with phosphorescence quantum yields (Q. Y.) between 8% and 18%, and fluorescence Q. Y. higher than 70% (Table 1). The strong luminous ability of host-guest materials indicates that the host materials restrict the non-radiation transition, thus increasing the light conversion efficiency. On the basis of the RTP-decay curves, the phosphorescence lifetimes of doped crystalline powders ranging from 0.22-0.70 s (Figures 1c and S3c, Table 1), result in multicolor afterglow that last as long as 2-4 s under ambient conditions (Figure S5). In addition, the phosphorescence intensities of TPAs based materials are stronger than those of the TPP based materials (Table 1), likely due to the heavy atomic effect of arsenic. To calculate the triplet gap between  $T_1$  to ground state of the guest molecules, phosphorescence spectra of the guests were measured in toluene solution at 77 K (Figure S1c). The results indicate that  $\Delta E_{\text{ST}}$  of the guest in host-guest systems are smaller than the guests in toluene (Table S1). The smaller energy gap obviously facilitates the intersystem crossing of excitons, resulting in strong

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**Table 1.** Photophysical properties of host-guest materials.<sup>[a]</sup>

Sample	Fluo.			Phos.		
	$\lambda_{em}$ (nm)	$\Phi_F$ (%)	$\tau$ (ns)	$\lambda_{em}$ (nm)	$\Phi_P$ (%)	$\tau$ (s)
<b>FDA/TPP</b>	433	82.5	2.8	502	8.1	0.22
<b>DTA/TPP</b>	438	77.3	2.8	531	16.2	0.58
<b>DBC/TPP</b>	448	81.2	2.5	556	12.8	0.70
<b>DQD/TPP</b>	459	82.8	2.2	608	9.3	0.46
<b>FDA/TPAs</b>	434	80.9	3.2	504	9.2	0.25
<b>DTA/TPAs</b>	442	78.6	3.0	536	18.2	0.61
<b>DBC/TPAs</b>	448	77.6	2.1	559	15.5	0.68
<b>DQD/TPAs</b>	462	78.4	2.0	605	10.9	0.47

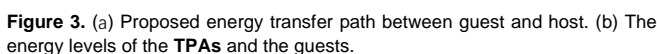
[a] Note: Guest: Host = 1:1000 (Molar ratio). Excitation wavelength: 370 nm. All samples are in the crystalline states.

**Figure 2.** (a) Fluorescence spectra of **DQD/TPP**. (b) Phosphorescence spectra of **DQD/TPP**. (c) Photographs of **DQD/TPP** in different state.

phosphorescence emissions of the host-guest systems at room temperature.<sup>[2-3]</sup> The color tunable property of host-guest materials provides an opportunity for constructing the white phosphorescence materials with two complementary emission of blue and yellow. **FDA**, **DBC** and **DQD** with **TPAs** (molar ratio: 1:1:1:1000) show a broad phosphorescence peak from 490 to 580 nm (Figure S6a). The Commission Internationale de L'Eclairage (CIE) chromaticity coordinate of **FDA-DBC-DQD/TPAs** powder was calculated as (0.31, 0.38) (Figure S6c), which is a bright cold white phosphorescence emission.

Generally, host molecules provide a rigid environment to avoid the quenching of the triplet excitons by interaction with oxygen.<sup>[6a-e]</sup> However, the degassed **DQD/TPP** (0.1 mol%) molten solution at 85 °C and room temperature (subcooling state) only show fluorescence but no phosphorescence (Figure 2). When the host-guest system begins to solidify, the fluorescence of **DQD/TPP** was enhanced and bright phosphorescence was generated (Figure 2). Therefore, the rigid host molecules not only play a role to avoid the quenching of the triplet excitons by oxygen, but also can restrict the motion of the guest molecules and decrease the non-radiation transitions.



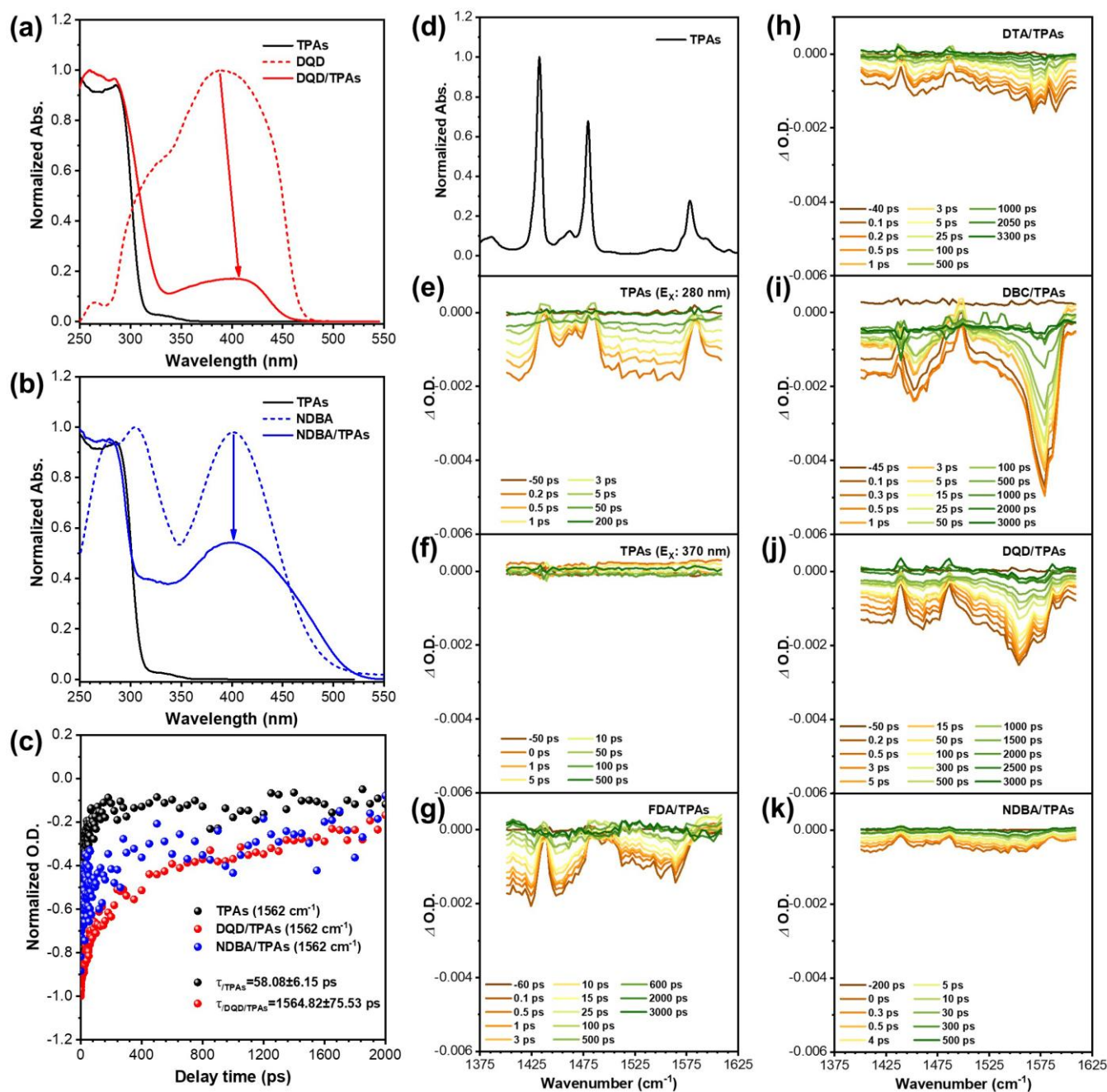


The solid-state UV-absorption experiments of **DQD/TPAs** and **NDBA/TPAs** were carried out to confirm the intermolecular interaction between the host and guest. The maximum absorption wavelength of **DQD/TPAs** shows a significant red shift compared to **DQD** powder, indicating the absence of the intermolecular charge transfer between the **DQD** and **TPAs** (Figure 4a). However, the maximum absorption wavelength of **NDBA/TPAs** is almost identical to **NDBA** powder due to lack of intermolecular interaction (Figure 4b). The solvatochromic experiments of **DQD**

To further investigate the host-guest interaction, waiting time-dependent spectra of **TPAs** host, five guests and corresponding host-guest materials were measured (guest and host molar ratio = 1:10000; excitation wavelength: 370 nm). Transient infrared (IR)-absorption spectra and vibrational relaxation kinetics of five guests are presented in Figure S11 and S12. The absorption peaks of solid samples ( $1375\sim1625\text{ cm}^{-1}$ ) correspond to benzene skeleton vibration modes. Upon excitation, the molecules reach high vibrational level of their excited states without conformation changes, according to the Frank-Condon principle.<sup>[13]</sup> Then the excited molecules relax back to the ground state via vibration relaxation from excited vibrational level to the ground vibrational level. The fast relaxation lifetime, within 2 ps (Figure S12), are heavily distorted by nonlinear effects arising from the temporal overlap of the pump and probe pulse, at the first several picoseconds of our decay signal.<sup>[14]</sup> All the guest molecules exhibit the similar vibrational lifetimes ranging from 120 to 170 ps, whereas the vibrational lifetime of the **TPAs** is only 62 ps, which is significantly shorter than those of the guest molecules (Figure S12). Since the maximum absorption wavelength red shifts from 321 nm to 407 nm from **FDA** to **NDBA** (Figure S8a), and **DQD** shows the maximum molar absorption coefficient at 370 nm, **DQD** possesses the highest excitation efficiency. The broad absorption in the transient IR-absorption spectra illustrates that the free electron moves among solid molecules.<sup>[15]</sup> In addition, all guest molecules show a long-lived process, where the persistent mid-IR absorption may arise from a population of singlet excited state that cannot undergo singlet decay, probably due to singlet trapping or disorder in the films.

Transient IR-absorption spectra of five host-guest materials are presented in Figure 4g-k. **TPAs** show a strong absorption peak with an excitation wavelength at 280 nm, but almost no absorption peak under 370 nm excitation (Figures 4d-f). However, when the four host-guest materials are excited by an excitation source at 370 nm, **TPAs** molecules display relatively strong absorption peaks (Figures 4g-j). Once the guest molecules are excited, the excitation energy can transfer from the guest to the host, indicating the existence of intermolecular interaction between these molecules. The vibrational lifetimes of the host in host-guest materials are three-fold longer than that of pure host molecule excited under 280 nm (Figures 4c, S13). In addition, the interaction between **DBC** to **TPAs** is strongest among the four host-guest materials, which is consistent with the fact that **DBC/TPAs** has the longest phosphorescence lifetime. Furthermore, the **NDBA/TPAs** with non-RTP phenomenon shows an extremely weak absorption signal in transient IR-absorption measurement (Figure 4k). Therefore, the rigid host is not only used to minimize oxygen effects and restrict the motion of the guest molecules on the phosphorescence processes. A synergistic interaction between the host and guest is an indispensable factor for the realization of RTP in host-guest system.

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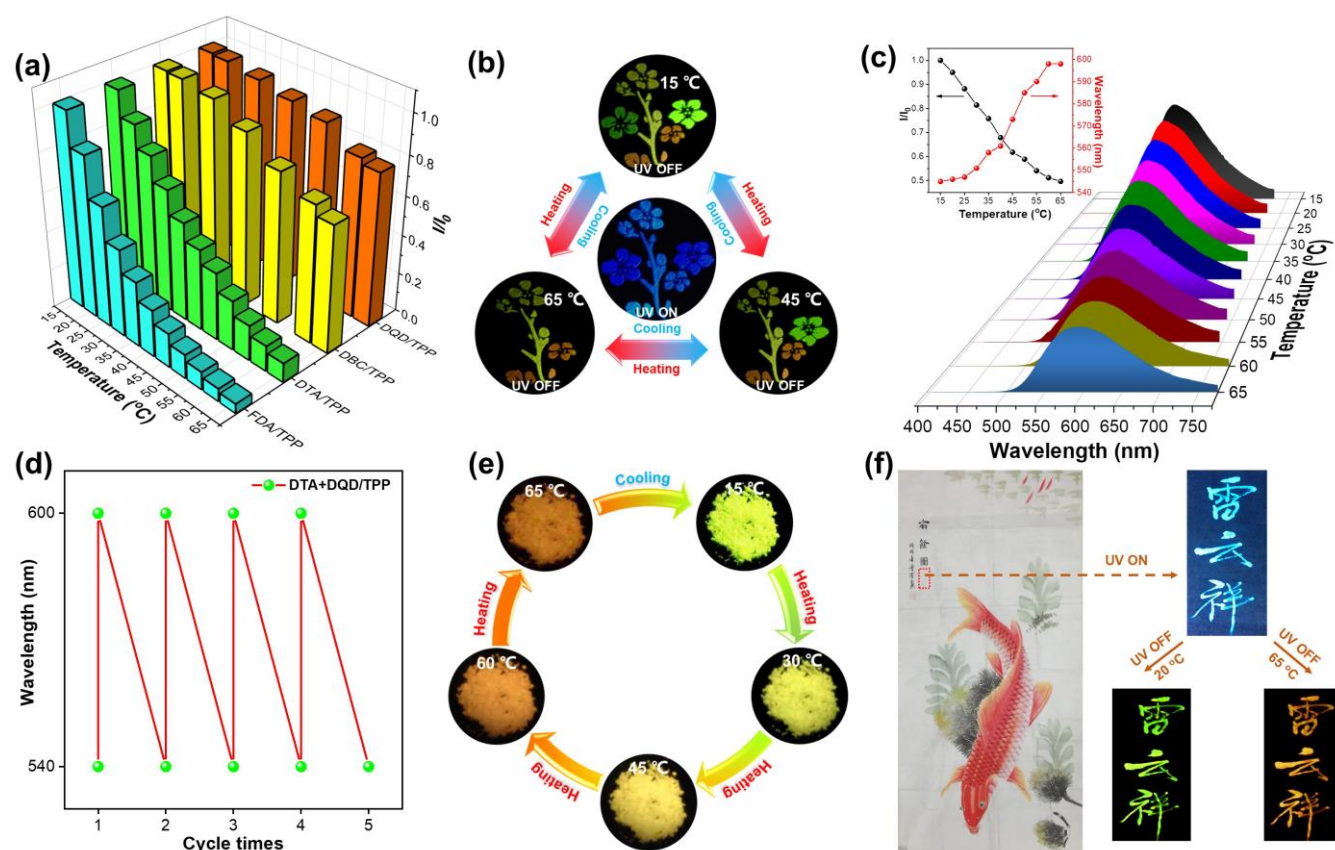
**Figure 4.** (a) UV absorption spectra of TPAs, DQD and DQD/TPAs. (b) UV absorption spectra of TPAs, NDBA and NDBA/TPAs. (c) The vibrational relaxation kinetics of TPAs, DQD/TPAs, NDBA/TPAs (TPAs, excitation wavelength: 280 nm. DQD/TPAs and NDBA/TPAs, excitation wavelength: 370 nm). (d) IR-absorption of TPAs. (e) Transient IR-absorption spectra of TPAs, excitation wavelength: 280 nm. (f) Transient IR-absorption spectra of TPAs, excitation wavelength: 370 nm. (g)-(k) Transient IR-absorption spectra of five host-guest materials, excitation wavelength: 370 nm.

The vibrational freedoms of host-guest systems are largely affected by noncryogenic temperature changes below their melting points. This phenomenon offers the possibility of enhancing the effect of temperature on phosphorescence intensity. The phosphorescence intensity of **FDA/TPP**, **DTA/TPP**, **DBC/TPP**, **DQD/TPP** quench by 96%, 85%, 36%, 21%, respectively, when the temperature increases from 15 to 65 °C (Figure 5a and S14). The difference in intensity quenching can be attributed to the difference in vibrational freedoms between the

host and guest. Strong electron withdrawing substitute promotes strong host-guest interaction, thus decreasing the molecular vibration. As shown in Figure 5b, the pattern displays different information at different temperatures, which can be exploited for thermochromic anti-counterfeiting. Three-component host-guest material of **DTA-DQD/TPP** (molar ratio: 1:1:1000) was also prepared for the investigation of phosphorescent thermochromic property. **DTA-DQD/TPP** shows green phosphorescence at 15 °C due to high phosphorescence Q. Y. of **DTA/TPP**. As the



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**Figure 5.** (a) *In situ* phosphorescence intensity of host-guest materials in the temperature range of 15–65 °C. (b) Photographs of the flower before (in the middle) and after removing the excitation source at different temperatures. (c) Phosphorescence wavelength and intensity of **DTA-DQD/TPP** materials at different temperatures. (d) *In situ* phosphorescence wavelength of **DTA-DQD/TPP** materials during four cycles. (e) Phosphorescence color of **DTA-DQD/TPP** host-guest material at different temperatures. (f) Application of **DTA-DQD/TPP** in anti-counterfeiting of calligraphy and artworks.

temperature increases, a dramatic decrease in phosphorescence intensity of **DTA/TPP** and slight decrease in phosphorescence intensity of **DQD/TPP** are observed. Therefore, the phosphorescence wavelength of **DTA-DQD/TPP** gradually red-shift to orange with increasing temperature (Figure 5c and 5e). The *in situ* phosphorescence spectra of the heating and cooling in the temperature range of 15–65 °C was recorded in order to monitor the thermal response reversibility. Reversible phosphorescence is repeated in four consecutive cycles, indicating that thermochromic anti-counterfeiting that utilize this system can be reusable (Figure 5d). The host-guest materials can be easily heated to the molten state (85 °C) as the ink for calligraphy with the writing brushes. As shown in Figure 5f, the characters show a bright cyan fluorescence under UV-radiation. After removing the excitation source, the characters display green phosphorescence at room temperature. Slight heating results in a bright orange afterglow. Therefore, the time-resolved thermochromic property of **DTA-DQD/TPP** can be explored as sensitive, inert, and cheap materials for anti-counterfeiting.

The counterfeiting of currency, valuable documents, and branded commodities has become a challenging issue that has serious economic, security and health ramifications for governments and businesses.<sup>[16]</sup> Therefore, the development of security inks that are not able to be photocopied, but are readable only under special conditions has become of increasing

importance. In addition to be used as the security inks at subcooling state, our host-guest materials are also considered to be conjoined with a facile process, such as writing and printing in solution state. The filter paper can be first soaked with the molten host molecules. The guest molecules can be dissolved in their good solvents, such as DCM or tetrahydrofuran at a concentration of  $1 \times 10^{-4}$  mol/L. Furthermore, various complicated patterns have been written or printed with good resolution by using guest solution (Figure S16). As shown in Figure S16a, a butterfly was drawn with four types of guest inks. After thorough drying under ambient conditions, it is invisible under ambient light. Upon irradiation with 365 nm UV lamp, a bright blue pattern emerges due to similar fluorescence of the four guest-host system. In addition, the butterfly changes to a brilliant colorful self-protective RTP after removal of the UV lamp. The security badge was also printed on A4 paper using an ijd300 printer where a vacant black cartridge is injected with guest solutions ( $1 \times 10^{-4}$  mol/L in DCM). As shown in Figure S16b, the information on the badge was invisible both under ambient light and under UV light due to the strong fluorescence background of the A4 paper (Figure S15). The colorful information, including the portrait, the name, the organization, and the badge number is readable after removal the irradiation. Therefore, the information on the badge can only be read and identified, but cannot be photocopied and duplicated even when was stolen. Notably, the long-lived afterglow

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phenomenon with color tunable, temperature-dependent, and time-resolved properties provides a very high level of security application for protecting the authenticity of many important and valuable items.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we developed a series of host-guest materials with RTP properties. The phosphorescence color can be tuned from 502 to 608 nm under ambient conditions by selecting different guests. This opens up a broad class of pure organic compounds to new applications in phosphor design. In light of both the experimental results and simulation, we believe that the host molecules can not only restrict the molecular motion and avoid the triplet quenching from the oxygen, but also exhibit a synergistic effect for the realization of RTP. These materials with color tunable, temperature dependent, and time-resolved emissive properties can be used as writable and printable inks for multiple-dimensional anti-counterfeiting.

## Acknowledgements

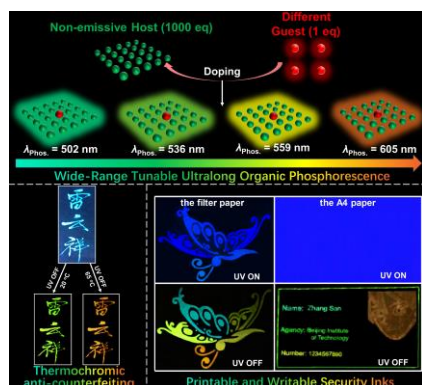
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**Keywords:** color-tunable • host-guest synergistic effect • room temperature phosphorescence • printable and writable security inks • multi-dimension anti-counterfeiting

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE



A facile doping approach was developed for color-tunable organic phosphorescence materials. The hosts not only restrict the molecular motion and avoid the triplet quenching from the oxygen, but also exhibit a synergistic effect to the guests for the realization of phosphorescence. Color tunable, temperature dependent, and time-resolved anti-counterfeiting techniques are achieved by the printable and writable materials.

Yunxiang Lei,<sup>†</sup> Wenbo Dai,<sup>†</sup> Jianxin Guan,<sup>†</sup> Shuai Guo, Fei Ren, Yudai Zhou, Jianbing Shi, Bin Tong, Zhengxu Cai,<sup>\*</sup> Junrong Zheng, and Yuping Dong<sup>\*</sup>