

Hydrogen Evolution Reaction Hot Paper

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Porous Molybdenum Phosphide Nano-Octahedrons Derived from Confined Phosphorization in UIO-66 for Efficient Hydrogen Evolution

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Abstract: Herein, a series of porous nano-structured carbocatalysts have been fused and decorated by Mo-based composites, such as Mo₂C, MoN, and MoP, to form a hybrid structures. Using the open porosity derived from the pyrolysis of metal-organic frameworks (MOFs), the highly dispersive MoO_2 small nanoparticles can be deposited in porous carbon by chemical vapor deposition (CVD). Undergoing different treatments of carbonization, nitridation, and phosphorization, the Mo₂C-, MoN-, and MoP-decorated carbocatalysts can be selectively prepared with un-changed morphology. Among these Mo-based composites, the MoP@Porous carbon (MoP@PC) composites exhibited remarkable catalytic activity for the hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) in $0.5 \text{ M} H_2 SO_4$ aqueous solution versus MoO2@PC, Mo2C@PC, and MoN@PC. This study gives a promising family of multifunctional lab-on-a-particle architectures which shed light on energy conversion and fuel-cell catalysis.

Recently, the rapid consumption of fossil energy has led to environmental issues, especially global warming and haze. It is urgent to find clean and renewable energy sources to replace fossil energy. Hydrogen (H₂) produced from splitting water by electrochemical process has shown a lot of advantages as a new type of renewable and clean energy.^[1] To date, platinum (Pt) has been recognized as one of the most active catalyst for the hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) due to the low Tafel slope and onset potential.^[2] However, its high cost and scarce reserves prevents its extensive and practical application.^[3] Hence, searching the non-noble-metal HER catalysts can largely remit the environmental and energy issues.^[4] Owing to the similar electronic structure as Pt-group metals, transition-metal phosphides, such as tungsten (W) and molybdenum (Mo) phosphides, recently received increasing attention and intensive investigation by more and more researchers.^[5] These emerging materials, even the bulk particles or amorphous structure, could exhibit outstanding catalytic performance for HER.^[6] Therefore, there is still room to further enhance their properties by decreasing the size of nanoparticles (NPs) and/or regulating the specific nanostructures. The phase-forming temperature of MoP is usually above 800 °C,^[6b] thus gaining well-crystallized nanostructured MoP and preventing its aggregation and coalescence at high temperature is still a great challenge.

Metal–organic frameworks (MOFs) are a class of porous materials and have been extensively applied to gas adsorption, separation, sensing, and catalysis.^[7] Utilizing their periodic pores and regular architecture, the MOFs could serve as support or counterparts to integrate the active species and finally generate functional hybrid structures.^[8] For example, the high surface area and tunable gas adsorption permit the gas harvest on metal surface and acceleration of gas-related catalytic process.^[9] The ultrafine porosity can be also used as molecular sieve if the active metal catalysts are fully encapsulated.^[10] Beyond that, if the carburization process is limited in carbonaceous matrix, the regular pores of MOFs can effectively host the nanosized Mo-based materials and prevent their agglomeration at high reaction temperatures.

Herein, we demonstrated a MOFs-assisted strategy to develop MoP nanoparticles distributing in porous carbon as efficient HER catalysts. As illustrated in Scheme 1, we select a UIO-66 MOF as the host, whose formula of unit cell is $Zr_{24}O_{120}C_{192}H_{96}$ ($Zr_6O_4(OH)_4(CO_2)_{12}$ as structure building unit (SBU) and 1,4-dicarboxybenzene (H₂BDC) as



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linker).^[11] This initial MOF was prepared from the solvothermal reaction, exhibiting uniform octahedral shape and narrow size distribution (Figure S1 in the Supporting Information). Distinct from previous studies, this preparation of Mo-based hybrid used the commercially available MoO₃ (Figure S2) which is easily obtained. Under the CVD condition (Figure S3), the ultrafine pores of UiO-66 (0.6 nm) capture the vaporized MoO₃ which sublimes above 600°C (Figure S4).^[12] Afterwards, the adsorbed MoO₃ species are reduced by the corresponding confined carburization reaction to produce small MoO₂ nanocrystallites. The carburization process effectively avoided the aggregation of MoO₂ nanoparticles (NPs), which is different from the previously reported one-pot strategy.[13] Meanwhile, the SBUs are transferred in situ into the ZrO_2 due to the pyrolysis of carboxylate groups. Furthermore, the inert ZrO₂ NPs were removed by HF solution to expand the surface reactive area. Finally, the MoO₂ NPs are converted into MoP at 850 °C by PH₃ which was generated in situ from the thermal decomposition of $(NH_4)_2HPO_4.^{[6b]}$

As shown in Figure S5, MoO_2 and ZrO_2 nanoparticles within $MoO_2/ZrO_2@C$ both distributed homogeneously in the nano-octahedral carbon and retained their monodispersity. As verified by the missing peaks from X-ray diffraction (XRD) spectra, the inert ZrO_2 nanoparticles were readily etched by HF solution, leaving the monoclinic phase of MoO_2 . Thus, a porous nanooctahedral carbon composed of small MoO_2 nanocrystals with a diameter of 3 nm was obtained, which was defined as $MoO_2@PC$ (Figure 1 a and Figure S6). The weight percentage of



Figure 2. a) XRD pattern of $MoO_2@PC$ and MoP@PC. b) N_2 adsorption/desorption isotherms of $MoO_2/ZrO_2@C$, $MoO_2@PC$, and MoP@PC. Inset: the corresponding pore size distribution. XPS spectra of c) Mo 3d, d) O 1s in $MoO_2@PC$ and e) Mo 3d, f) P 2p in MoP@PC.



Figure 1. a) TEM image, b) high-resolution TEM image, and c) EDS mapping of $MoO_2@PC.$ d) TEM image, e) high-resolution TEM image, and f) EDS mapping of MoP@PC.

MoO₂ was estimated about 82.8% according to the thermogravimetric (TG) analysis in air (Figure S7). The high resolution TEM image (Figure 1b) clearly showed the MoO₂ nanocrystallites were embedded in the amorphous carbon matrix, whose specific lattice spacing of {110} facet could be measured as 0.336 nm. Careful examinations on different areas confirmed the size of MoO₂ was typically smaller than 4 nm. The elemental mapping was employed to confirm the uniform distribution of Mo, O, and C through the whole octahedrons (Figure 1c). After phosphorization by $(NH_4)_2$ HPO₄ heated at 850 °C in H₂/Ar (10%) gas flow, the hybrid of MoO2@PC was converted in situ into hexagonal MoP@PC, which was verified by XRD pattern in Figure 2a. The reaction that MoO₂ underwent was believed to follow the equation: $2MoO_2 + 2PH_3 + H_2 \rightarrow 2MoP + 4H_2O$. Carful check on TEM images revealed this phosphorization would not result in large MoP NPs that were more than 5 nm within the octahedral support (Figure S8). Moreover, this mild reaction

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2

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would not destroy the well-defined octahedral morphology (Figure 1 d and S9), demonstrating the process occurred in the cages of UIO-66. As clearly seen in Figure 1 e, a closer TEM examination locating at the edge of a MoP nano-octahedron gives more details of the lattice fringes of MoP NPs, which was consistent with the d spacing of the (100) planes. The EDS mapping collaboratively support the MoP NPs distributed homogeneously within the whole composites (Figure 1 f).

The BET specific surface area of the as-prepared samples were obtained by recording nitrogen adsorption-desorption isotherms at 77 K (Figure 2b). The BET surface area of MoO₂/ZrO₂@C, MoO₂@PC, and MoP@PC were 132, 554, and $328 \text{ m}^2 \text{g}^{-1}$, respectively, demonstrating the treatment by HF could effectively remove the inert ZrO₂ and expand the reactive surface area. It was found nitrogen uptake exhibited a prominent increase at a relative low pressure $(P/P_0 < 0.01)$, which indicated the inherent micropores of MoO2@PC and MoP@PC. This result was consistent with the pore size distribution obtained from adsorption data calculated by BJH method (Figure 2b, inset), which showed a dominant pore with diameter centering at 1.8 nm for both of MoO₂@PC and MoP@PC. It is worth mentioning there was no clear peak at the curve of pore size distribution for MoO₂/ZrO₂@C. So, the pore centered at 1.8 nm was apparently derived from etching of the ZrO₂ nanoparticles by HF. In addition, the pore distribution and pore volume of $(0.341 \text{ cm}^3 \text{g}^{-1})$ MoP@PC remained unchanged after phosphorization at high temperature.

The X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) was further used to characterize the valence state and composition evolution from MoO₂@PC to MoP@PC. The survey spectrum (Figure S10) showed that MoO₂@PC and MoP@PC were composed of Mo, O, C and Mo, P, C, respectively. Figure 2c indicated four peaks with lower energy spin-spin doublet were attributed to the oxidation state of the $\mathrm{Mo}^{\mathrm{IV}}$ at 232.9 and 229.7 eV due to Mo $(3d_{3/2})$ and Mo $(3d_{5/2})$, respectively. The peaks at 235.8 and 231.5 eV were assigned to the Mo $(3d_{3/2})$ and Mo $(3d_{5/2})$ of Mo^{VI}, respectively. The O1s peak can be split into three deconvoluted components. Two components at 531.5 and 533.2 eV were O=C and O-C derived from incomplete deoxidization of carboxyl. The third component at 530.5 eV arises from the O-Mo bonds (Figure 2d).^[14] Figure 2e shows that two doublets at 235.6 eV/232.7 eV (Mo^{VI} $3d_{3/2}/3d_{5/2}$) and 232.6 eV/229.2 eV (Mo^{IV} $3d_{3/2}/3d_{5/2}$) can be assigned to high oxidation state of Mo (MoO₃ and MoO₂).^[15] The rest of two double peaks could be ascribed to MoP, which was presented at 231.8 eV and 228.5 eV.^[16] Therefore, the surface of small MoP NPs in porous carbon was slightly oxidized, which was due to their high surface energy.^[14] This oxidation of MoP was also observed in the XPS spectrum of P 2p. That is, the peak at 134.0 eV could be attributed to PO_4^{3-} or P₂O₅ caused by slightly oxidized P (Figure 2 f).^[17] Meanwhile, the doublet (130.4 eV/129.5 eV) can be assigned to P-Mo species in MoP@PC.

With minor modification, this MOFs-assisted strategy to generate Mo-based composites could be readily generalized to other hybrids. For example, Mo₂C and MoN nanoparticles were systematically synthesized under different atmosphere

of H₂/Ar (10%) and NH₃ at 800°C, using MoO₂@PC as precursor. As verified by XRD patterns, the Mo₂C and MoN NPs confined in the mesoporous carbon both exhibited typical hexagonal phase after the transformation. (Figure S11). Furthermore, they both kept the initial porous structure and octahedral morphology. The EDS mapping confirmed the uniform distribution of C, N, Mo and C, Mo, respectively, in the whole nano-octahedral carbon (Figure S12). SEM images revealed the Mo₂C@PC and MoN@PC both exhibited regular octahedral morphology and the average sizes were both 250 nm (Figure S13). Moreover, XPS spectrums further confirm the successful phase evolution from MoO₂ to Mo₂C and MoN, respectively, whose details about valence state can be seen in the Figure S14.

Not only the nanocrystallization of MoP originated from the confinement of porous carbon, but also the extraordinary accessibility and stability endowed by the carbon shell could benefit the application of MoP@PC in electrocatalysis. The electrocatalytic activity of Mo-based composites including MoP@PC, Mo2C@PC, MoN@PC, and MoO2@PC were further investigated towards HER. All the loading of electrocatalysts were set to 0.41 mg cm⁻² on the glassy carbon electrode and the electrocatalysis were all conducted in N2saturated $0.5 \text{ M H}_2\text{SO}_4$ solution with a scan rate of 50 mV s^{-1} . The representative polarization curves in Figure 3 a indicated the bare porous carbon (PC) and MoO₂@PC both exhibited poor HER activity. The MoP@PC was unexpectedly active for HER. As summarized in Table 1, MoP@PC possessed a lower onset potential of 77 mV compared to Mo₂C@PC (115 mV) and MoN@PC (258 mV). As a comparison, we deliberately synthesized bulk MoP using commercial MoO3 and $(NH_4)_2$ HPO₄ as precursors under the atmosphere of Ar and H_2 (10%) at 850°C (see details in Supporting Information). Shown in Figure S15, the bulk MoP with hexagonal phase and irregular morphology had been successfully obtained. The current density at 200 mV of MoP@PC was higher than the Mo₂C@PC, MoN@PC, MoO₂@PC, and bulk MoP, revealing its higher electrocatalytic activity. To achieve current density of 10 mA cm⁻², the MoP@PC catalyst required smaller overpotential of 153 mV compared to Mo₂C@PC (177 mV), MoN@PC (393 mV) and bulk MoP (217 mV). To further study the HER activity, Figure 3b clearly showed the Tafel plots which are calculated from polarization curves by Tafel equation. MoP@PC and bulk MoP exhibited the similar Tafel slope, which can be inferred the similar reaction mechanism of MoP@PC and bulk MoP, although the difference in the onset potential and inherent exchange current. In contrast, the Tafel slopes of Mo2C@PC and MoN@PC were 96 mV dec^{-1} and 167 mV dec^{-1} , respectively, which were quite bigger than that of MoP@PC. Electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) measurement was adopted to provide further insight into the electrical conductivity of electrocatalysts. MoP@PC showed a small value of charge transfer resistance (26 ohm) due to superior synergistic effect and stronger interaction between the nanosized MoP particles and porous carbon compared to that of Mo₂C@PC (77 ohm) and bulk MoP (124 ohm; Figure 3c). From Figure S16, the other electrocatalysts showed larger values of charge transfer resistance revealing low HER kinetics at its interface. To

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activity and stability for HER

MoO₂@PC, and bulk MoP, bene-

fiting from the outstanding size

effect of small nanoparticles and

highly exposed and accessible sur-

face area. Our findings opened

a new opportunities to synthesize

other MOFs-based composites for

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Mo₂C@PC, MoN@PC,

versus

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Figure 3. a) Polarization curves for six electrocatalysts. b) Tafel plots calculated from polarization curves. c) EIS (electrochemical impedance spectra) of three electrocatalysts. Rs and Rct represent the electrolyte, charge transfer resistance, respectively. d) Durability of MoP@PC and Mo₂C@PC.

Table 1: Summary of electrocatalytic performance of four catalysts.

Catalyst	Onset Potential [mV] ^[a]	Tafel slope [mV*dec ⁻¹]	$\eta_{10} \ [{ m mAcm^{-2}}]^{[a]}$	$\int_0 [A cm^{-2}]^{[b]}$
MoP@PC	77	66	153	2.1×10^{-4}
Mo ₂ C@PC	115	96	177	1.6×10^{-4}
MoN@PC	258	167	393	8.5×10^{-5}
Bulk MoP	125	74	217	1.3×10^{-5}

[a] The potential measured versus RHE. [b] J₀ values were calculated from Tafel curves using an extrapolation method.

assess the durability of MoP@PC and Mo₂C@PC, accelerated linear potential sweeps were conducted repeatedly on the electrodes (Figure 3 d). Mo₂C@PC both exhibited a continuous but small loss of activity on repeated potential sweeps, implying minor corrosion of electrocatalysts in the acid condition. Meanwhile, the rapid rotation could also be responsible for the degradation of the catalytic performance.^[4b] In contrast, there was no obvious activity decay observed for the durability test of MoP@PC. Furthermore, these Mo-based compositions were investigated in 1m KOH solution (Figure S17). As shown, the MoP@PC, Mo₂C@PC and MoN@PC all showed comparable HER activity, although the poor activity of MoO₂@PC can be found.

In summary, a series of Mo-based nanostructures, such as MoO_2 , Mo_2C , MoN and MoP, have been successfully synthesized by a MOFs-assisted strategy as highly active electrocatalysts for HER. This strategy relies on the in situ carburization, nitridation, and phosphorization reactions on commercial MoO_3 which were confined in the ultrafine pores of UIO-66. The MoP@PC shows remarkable electrocatalytic [1] J. A. Turner, Science 2004, 305, 972-974.

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Communications

Hydrogen Evolution Reaction

J. Yang, F. Zhang, X. Wang, D. He, G. Wu, Q. Yang, X. Hong, Y. Wu,* Y. Li* ______

Porous Molybdenum Phosphide Nano-Octahedrons Derived from Confined Phosphorization in UIO-66 for Efficient Hydrogen Evolution



Decorated for HER: Using the open porosity derived from the pyrolysis of metal–organic frameworks (MOFs), MoO_2 small nanoparticles can be deposited in the porous carbon by chemical vapor deposition. Carbonization, nitridation, or phosphorization, selectively gives Mo_2C -, MoN-, and MoP-decorated carbocatalysts with unchanged morphology. The catalysts are promising for the hydrogen evolution reaction.

6 www.angewandte.org

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