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## Ultrafine NiMoO<sub>x</sub> nanoparticles confined in mesoporous carbon for the reduction of nitroarenes: effect of the composition and accessibility of the active sites†

Shuna Li, Yipin Lv, Guolong Song, Cuncheng Li,  Daowei Gao\* and Guozhu Chen \*

The design of ultrafine NiMoO<sub>x</sub> nanoparticles (NPs) confined in hierarchically porous carbon remains a great challenge due to its high calcination temperature. In addition, the composition of active sites of NiMoO<sub>x</sub> NPs for the hydrogenation reaction is still ambiguous. Herein, we report a general approach for the synthesis of ultrafine NiMoO<sub>x</sub> NPs confined in mesoporous carbon with different morphologies and compositions using the replication method with SBA-15 as a hard template. The pore structure of mesoporous carbon and the Ni/Mo composition valence-state were discovered to be the main factors in the reduction of nitroarenes. The NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/mesoporous carbon-platelet (NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL) with short mesochannels (~350 nm) and high surface area (~995 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>) possessed excellent catalytic activity towards the reduction of 4-nitrophenol, whereas NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/mesoporous carbon-hexagonal-prism (NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-HP), NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/mesoporous carbon-long-rod (NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-LR), and NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/mesoporous carbon-spherical (NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-SP) with long mesochannels and relatively less surface area exhibited poor catalytic performance. The bifunctional mechanism or electronic synergistic effects of Ni and Mo species enhanced their catalytic performance. A good balance between MoO<sub>x</sub> and metallic Ni (NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450) was found to be suitable for the reduction of 4-NP.

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## 1. Introduction

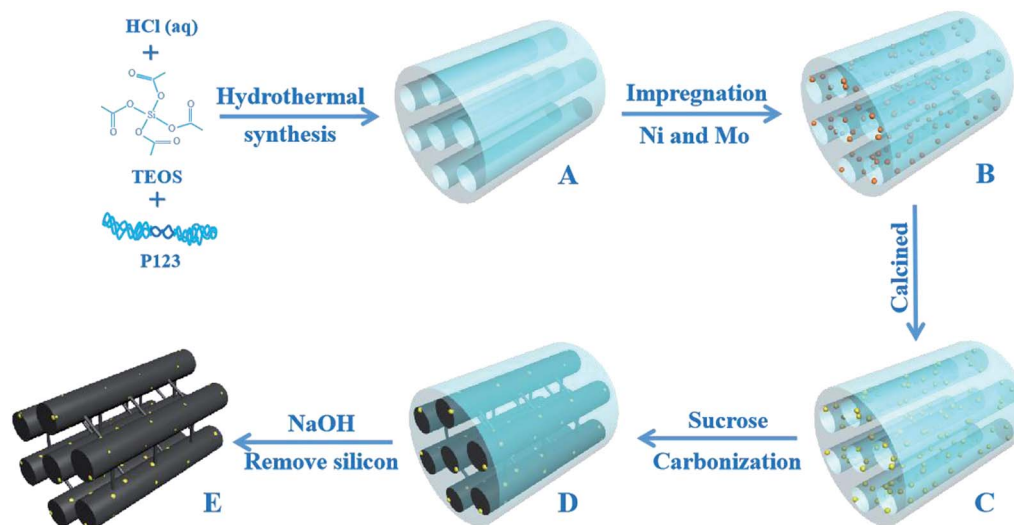
Nitroarenes are regarded as the most common pollutants from chemical, pharmaceutical, and industrial sources.<sup>1-4</sup> 4-Nitrophenol (4-NP), one typical species of nitroarenes, is difficult to dispose of due to its high stability in water. At present, the most common methods for treating 4-NP include microbial degradation, electrochemical treatment, and catalytic reduction.<sup>5-7</sup> Among them, the selective reduction of 4-NP to 4-aminophenol (4-AP) with NaBH<sub>4</sub> is of much interest because not only is this catalytic reaction green and effective, but also 4-AP is an important intermediate as a reduction product that can be widely applied in various fields such as dyes and pharmaceuticals.<sup>8,9</sup> It is generally recognized that precious metals (*e.g.*, Au, Pt, and Pd) exhibit a superior performance for the reduction of 4-NP.<sup>10-12</sup> However, the high cost and shortage of resources would inevitably become an obstacle to the wide application of precious metals. Therefore, transition metals with low costs and large storage capacities, especially Ni with a high selectivity and

activity, have attracted widespread attention.<sup>13,14</sup> Compared to pure Ni, Ni-based catalysts exhibit a much higher catalytic performance owing to the so-called synergistic effect. For example, Zhao *et al.* reported that Ni/TiO<sub>2</sub>-C composites possessed an excellent catalytic performance owing to the synergistic effect between Ni and TiO<sub>2</sub>.<sup>15</sup> Xu *et al.* synthesized Ni/CeO<sub>2-x</sub>/Pd by the hydrothermal method. Due to their synergistic effect, Ni/CeO<sub>2-x</sub>/Pd manifested a super catalytic activity and stability for the hydrogenation of styrene and 4-NP.<sup>16</sup> The different components in the Ni-based catalysts also had a great influence on the catalytic properties. Lu *et al.* found that Ni-MoO<sub>3</sub>/CN@SBA-15 showed an outstanding catalytic performance and chemoselectivity towards the reduction of various substituted nitroarenes compared to those of Ni/CN@SBA-15.<sup>17</sup> Although great efforts have been made in the synthesis and catalysis of Ni-based catalysts, there are still a few issues that we need to address. First, further stabilization of Ni-based NPs is a priority because the interaction between Ni-based NPs and supports is not strong enough. Hence, aggregation and leaching of Ni-based NPs would result in the significant loss of catalytic activity.<sup>18,19</sup> Second, the influence of the support morphology and components of the Ni-based catalysts on the catalytic performance still needs to be explored to fully understand the mechanism for the reduction of 4-NP.

School of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering, University of Jinan, Jinan 250022, PR China. E-mail: chm\_gaodw@ujn.edu.cn; chm\_chengz@ujn.edu.cn

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**Scheme 1** Illustration of the synthesis of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-LR. (A) Ordered mesoporous silica SBA-15-LR template. (B) A after the impregnation of Ni and Mo. (C) B after being calcined at 550 °C for 4 h. (D) C after the impregnation of sucrose and carbonization. (E) Ordered mesoporous NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-LR.

To enhance the stability of Ni-based catalysts, various structures were designed to fix the Ni-based NPs such as the core-shell structure (Ni/nanorod-CeO<sub>2</sub>@SiO<sub>2</sub> and NiCo<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub>@MnO<sub>2</sub>), encapsulation into molecular sieve pores (Ni-ZrO<sub>2</sub>/MCM-41 and NiO-CuO/SBA-15), and carbon nanotubes (NiCo<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub>/CNT and Ni-CeO<sub>2</sub>/CNT).<sup>20–25</sup> It is well-known that the molecular sieve with a porous structure can not only prevent the aggregation and loss of NPs, but the channel can also facilitate the diffusion of substrate molecules, which is beneficial to catalytic reactions.<sup>26</sup> More importantly, with the development of nanotechnology, researchers could precisely control the dimensions of molecular sieves (*e.g.*, morphology, pore size, and pore length), which was absolutely helpful to study the kinetic process of catalytic reactions that used molecular sieves as catalyst supports. In addition to mesoporous molecular sieves, mesoporous carbon (MC) was also widely used in various catalyst supports because of its good alkali resistance and electrical conductivity.<sup>27</sup> However, mesoporous carbon often has difficulty in controlling the pore size distribution and pore uniformity. When the mesoporous carbon was derived from mesoporous molecular sieves that acted as templates, the as-prepared carbon inherited the unique structural characteristics of molecular sieves as well as combined efficiently the structural advantages of mesoporous molecular sieves and carbon.

Herein, we report a general synthesis procedure for the ultrafine NiMoO<sub>x</sub> NPs confined in MC with a tunable pore structure and NiMo composition valence-state using SBA-15 as a hard template. First, the NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/SBA-15 catalysts were synthesized by co-impregnating Ni and Mo precursors into the mesochannels of SBA-15 (Scheme 1A–C). Second, NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC catalysts were prepared by the replication method using NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/SBA-15 as a hard template (Scheme 1C–E). The ultrafine NiMoO<sub>x</sub> NPs with diameters less than 2 nm were uniformly distributed on the mesochannel structure of the mesoporous

carbon and had a high stability attributed to the confinement of the mesochannel. The bifunctional mechanism or electronic synergistic effects of Ni and Mo species for the reduction of 4-NP and other nitroarenes with different substituent groups were systematically investigated. A possible mechanism for the reduction of nitroarenes catalyzed by the NiMoO<sub>x</sub> bimetallic catalysts was also proposed.

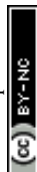
## 2. Experimental

### 2.1 Materials

All chemicals were analytical grade reagents and used without further purification. Sucrose (C<sub>12</sub>H<sub>22</sub>O<sub>11</sub>), sodium hydroxide (NaOH), sodium borohydride (NaBH<sub>4</sub>), and ethanol (C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub>O) were obtained from Sinopharm Chemical Reagent Co. Ltd. Carbon disulfide (CS<sub>2</sub>) and *p*-nitrophenol (C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>5</sub>NO<sub>3</sub>) were purchased from Shanghai Macklin Biochemical Co. Ltd. Sulfuric acid (H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>) was purchased from Beijing Chemical Reagent Company.

### 2.2 Synthesis of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC catalysts with different morphologies

The mesoporous SBA-15 silica used as the template was synthesized according to the literature.<sup>28</sup> The NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/SBA-15 catalysts with different morphologies were synthesized by the impregnation method. After impregnation, the samples were dried at 100 °C for 4 h and then calcined at 550 °C for 4 h. The procedure is shown in Scheme 1. For MC, a typical synthesis method was followed: 1.0 g of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/SBA-15 was dissolved in 5 mL of water containing 1.25 g of sucrose and 0.14 g of H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>. The mixture was stirred for 1 h and dried at 100 °C for 5 h. The mixture was then dried at 160 °C for 5 h. The obtained powder was mixed with a solution that included 0.8 g of sucrose and 0.14 g of H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>. The mixture was then heated at 100 °C for 5 h



and dried at 160 °C for 5 h. The black powder was calcined under N<sub>2</sub> atmosphere at 800 °C for 2 h. The resulting composite was added into a 2 M NaOH solution at room temperature to remove the silica. After filtration and washing, all samples were dried in an oven. The obtained catalysts were denoted as NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL (NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/mesoporous carbon-platelet), NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-SP (NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/mesoporous carbon-spherical), NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-LR (NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/mesoporous carbon-long-rod), and NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-HP (NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/mesoporous carbon-hexagonal-prism). For comparison, catalysts with different compositions were prepared by the same method, and were designated as NiO/MC-PL, MoO<sub>3</sub>/MC-PL, NiMoO<sub>x</sub>, and MC-PL. For further comparison, catalysts with different Ni/Mo valence-states were prepared by hydrogen reduction at different temperatures (450 °C and 750 °C) and CS<sub>2</sub> vulcanization (referred to as NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450, NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-750, and NiMoS/MC-PL, respectively).

### 2.3 Catalyst characterization

The X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns of the catalysts were characterized with a powder X-ray diffractometer (Shimadzu XRD 6000). The surface morphologies of the catalysts were obtained

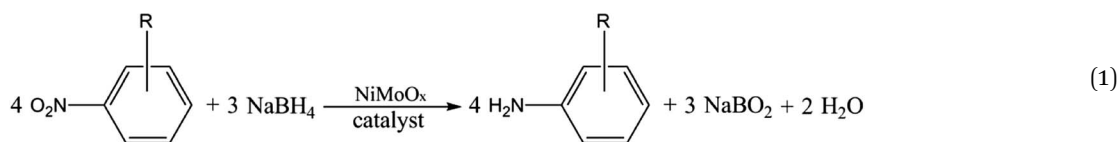
oxidation states of the chemical species were characterized using a X-ray photoelectron spectrometer (XPS) on the PHI5000 Versaprobe system. The contents of Ni and Mo were obtained from an inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometer (ICP-MS, Thermo Scientific XSeries-2).

The hydrogen temperature-programmed reduction (H<sub>2</sub>-TPR) was performed on a PCA-1200 instrument. The NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL catalyst was pretreated under an Ar atmosphere (30 mL min<sup>-1</sup>) at 100 °C for 30 min. The samples were then reduced with 7% H<sub>2</sub>/Ar mixed gas (30 mL min<sup>-1</sup>) from 25 °C to 700 °C.

### 2.4 Catalyst measurements

The catalytic reduction of 4-NP over catalysts was carried out at room temperature, which was analyzed by a UV-Visible spectroscopy instrument (TU-1901). Freshly prepared NaBH<sub>4</sub> solution (1.25 mL, 0.02 M), a certain amount of catalyst solution (1.25 mL, 0.4 mg mL<sup>-1</sup>), and 4-NP (25 μL, 0.012 M) were mixed together. Subsequently, the absorbance of the solution in the range of 200 to 500 nm was measured using an UV-Vis absorption spectrometer. The corresponding reduction equations are as follows:

The conversion of 4-nitrophenol is expressed by



using an emission scanning electron microscope (SEM-SU8010). High-resolution transmission electron microscopy (HRTEM) and elemental mapping were performed with a Tecnai F20 instrument at 200 kV. The surface area and pore size were analyzed on a Micromeritics TriStar II 3020 analyzer. The

$$\text{Conversion}(4\text{-NP}) = \left(1 - \frac{A_t}{A_0}\right) \times 100\% \quad (2)$$

where  $A_0$  and  $A_t$  are the absorbance of 4-NP at time 0 and  $t$ , respectively.

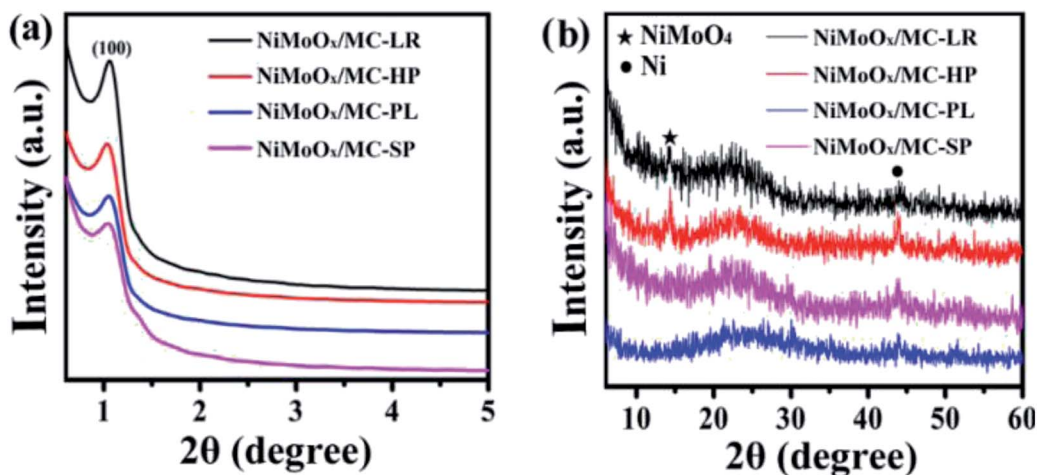


Fig. 1 XRD patterns for various morphologies of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC (a and b) in the small-angle and wide-angle.





$$k = \frac{-\ln(C_t/C_0)}{t} \quad (3)$$

$$K = -\frac{k}{m} \quad (4)$$

where  $k$  is the rate constant,  $C_0$  and  $C_t$  are 4-NP concentrations at time 0 and  $t$ , respectively. Also,  $m$  represents the mass of the catalyst.

Typically, in a glass reactor, a solution of the catalyst (0.5 g L<sup>-1</sup>, 1 mL), NaBH<sub>4</sub> (0.4 mol L<sup>-1</sup>, 0.75 mL) and nitroarenes (1 mmol L<sup>-1</sup>, 8 mL) were stirred. The reaction was then quenched by adding NH<sub>4</sub>Cl solution and the reaction mixture was extracted with ethyl acetate. Subsequently, the mixture was dried using MgSO<sub>4</sub>. The product obtained was analyzed using gas chromatography (GC-2010 Plus, capillary column, KB-1) and gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS, Thermo-Finnigan Trace DSQ coupled with a HP-5MS column).

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1 Characterization of the as-synthesized catalysts

The XRD patterns of different morphologies of the catalysts are displayed in Fig. S1† and 1. Fig. S1(a)† and 1(a) show the small-angle XRD patterns of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/SBA-15 and the corresponding NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC. All samples displayed a sharp diffraction peak below 1.1° and two other peaks between 1.1° and 2.0° that can be indexed as (100), (110) and (200) diffraction signals associated with an ordered hexagonal mesostructure. The unchanged ordered structure was a good indication that the NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC material could be replicated from NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/SBA-15. In addition, compared with the XRD patterns of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/SBA-15, the characteristic diffraction peaks attributed to the (100) in the XRD patterns of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC shifted to the wide-angle direction, thus indicating that the pore size of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC was smaller than that of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/SBA-15.<sup>29</sup> Fig. S1(b)† reveals the wide-angle XRD patterns of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/SBA-15 catalysts. There was one broad peak between 20° and 30° for all the catalysts, which could be indexed to amorphous silica. One peak centered at 27.5° was attributed to the (011) crystal plane of MoO<sub>3</sub> (JCPDS card 47-1320).<sup>30,31</sup> Interestingly, the dispersion of MoO<sub>3</sub> was different with respect to the support morphology changes. Among the four samples, the (011) peak intensity of MoO<sub>3</sub> in NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/SBA-15-PL was higher than those of the other catalysts, which indicated that MoO<sub>3</sub> had poor dispersibility in NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/SBA-15-PL. The wide-angle XRD patterns for NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC with different morphologies exhibited three main diffraction peaks, as illustrated in Fig. 1(b). One wide diffraction peak between 20° and 30° was attributed to carbon. The diffraction pattern at 14.3° originated from the NiMoO<sub>4</sub> phase (JCPDS card 33-0948), which was ascribed to (110). Another diffraction pattern at 44.5° originated from metallic Ni (JCPDS card 04-0850), which was assigned to (111) of metal Ni.<sup>32,33</sup>

The surface morphology of the NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC catalysts was investigated by SEM, as shown in Fig. 2. The length and width of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL were ~1075 nm and ~350 nm, and those of the NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-LR catalyst were ~820 nm and ~230 nm,

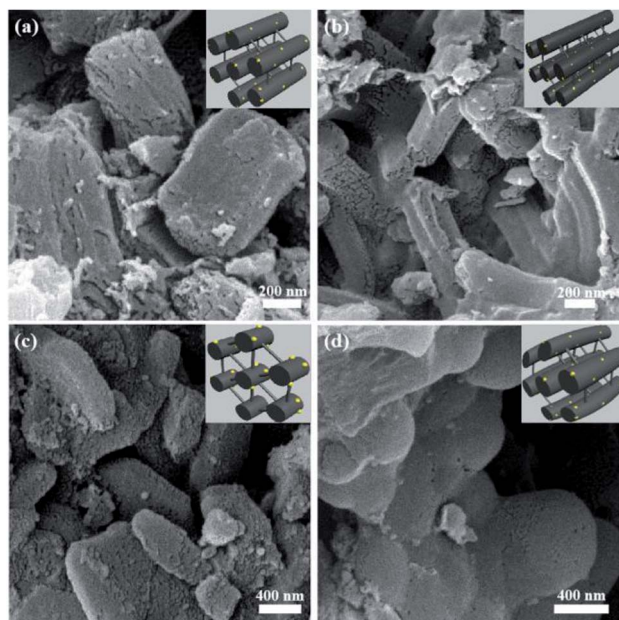


Fig. 2 SEM images of as-prepared NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC catalysts with different morphologies. Note: (a) hexagonal prisms, (b) long rods, (c) platelets, and (d) spherical.

respectively. Moreover, the length and width of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-HP were ~755 nm and ~530 nm, respectively. For NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-SP, the particle diameter was measured to be ~745 nm. From Fig. 2, it can be seen that these four catalysts retained the original

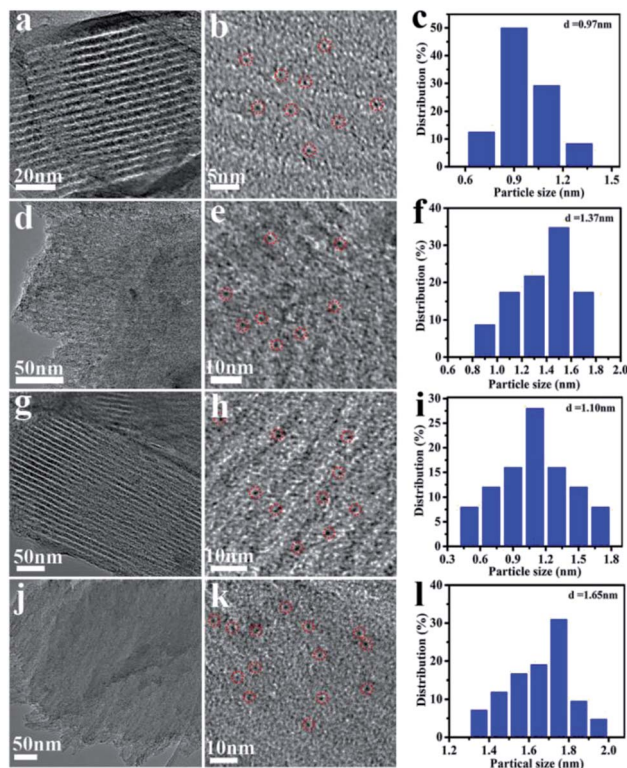


Fig. 3 TEM images and NiMoO<sub>x</sub> particles size distribution histograms of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC. Note: (a–c) NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-HP, (d–f) NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL, (g–i) NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-LR and (j–l) NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-SP.



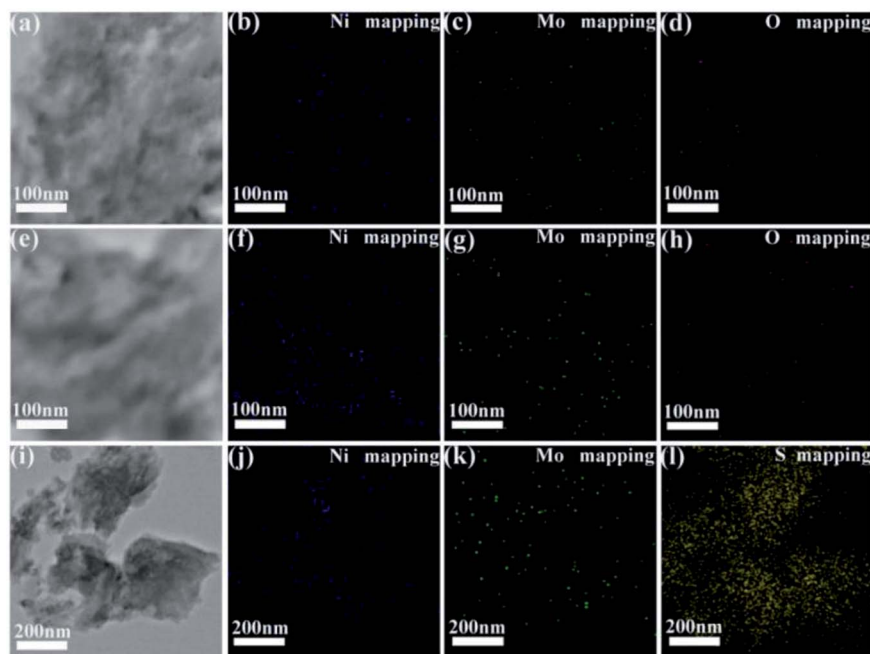


Fig. 4 HRTEM images and the corresponding EDS elemental mapping images of (a–d) NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL, (e–h) NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450 and (i–l) NiMoS/MC-PL.

morphology of their corresponding NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/SBA-15, indicating that the high calcination temperature did not destroy the structures of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/SBA-15 during the replication process.

The TEM images and NiMoO<sub>x</sub> NPs size distribution histograms of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC are shown in Fig. 3. From Fig. 3(a, d, g and j), it can be seen that all catalysts had a highly-ordered mesoporous structure, which was consistent with the small-angle XRD patterns. Importantly, ultrafine NPs were highly dispersed without any aggregation and well-encapsulated into the mesopores. As seen in the size distribution histograms, the average sizes of the NiMoO<sub>x</sub> NPs of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-HP, NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-LR, NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL, and NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-SP were  $\sim$ 0.97,  $\sim$ 1.10,  $\sim$ 1.37 and  $\sim$ 1.65 nm, respectively. Furthermore, the corresponding elemental mapping images of Ni, Mo, and O for

the NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL and NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450 catalysts are shown in Fig. 4, which reveal that the three elements were homogeneously distributed in the structure of the catalyst.<sup>34</sup> The molar ratio of Ni to Mo was about 2, which was obtained from the TEM-EDS of NiMoS/MC-PL (Fig. S2†).

The nitrogen adsorption–desorption isotherms, pore size distribution, and the corresponding parameters of the catalysts with different morphologies are displayed in Fig. 5 and Table 1. The nitrogen adsorption–desorption isotherms exhibited typical type IV patterns with hysteresis loops and capillary condensation, which indicated the presence of mesopores.<sup>35,36</sup> The pore size distributions of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL and NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-SP were about 4.0 nm, which indicated that the as-synthesized mesoporous materials had a uniform pore size distribution.<sup>37</sup>

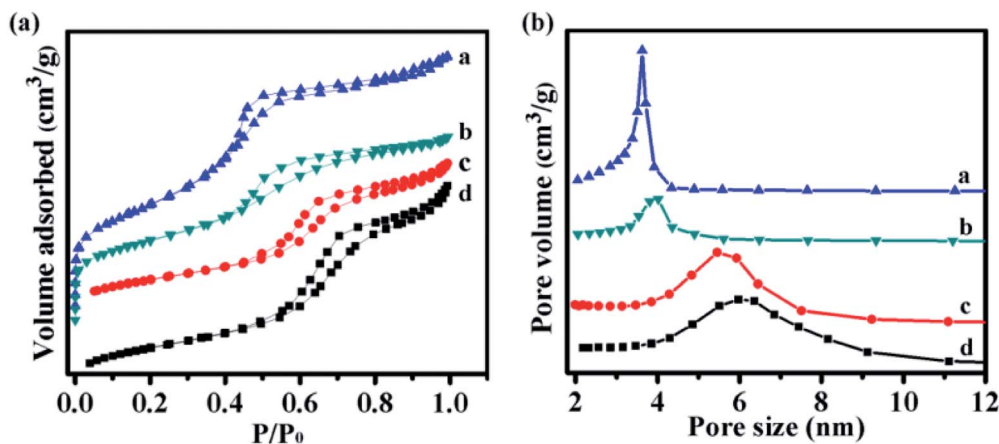


Fig. 5 The N<sub>2</sub> adsorption–desorption isotherms and pore size distribution of (a) NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL, (b) NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-SP, (c) NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-HP, and (d) NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-LR.



Table 1 The structural characteristics of mesoporous NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC

Samples	Dimensions (ca. nm)	$S_{\text{BET}}^a$ (m <sup>2</sup> g <sup>-1</sup> )	$S_{\text{mic}}^b$ (m <sup>2</sup> g <sup>-1</sup> )	$V_{\text{mic}}^c$ (cm <sup>3</sup> g <sup>-1</sup> )	$V_{\text{mes}}$ (cm <sup>3</sup> g <sup>-1</sup> )	$d_{\text{BJH}}^d$ (nm)
NiMoO <sub>x</sub> /MC-PL	1075 × 350	995	42	0.02	0.98	4.0
NiMoO <sub>x</sub> /MC-LR	820 × 230	795	360	0.19	0.81	5.0
NiMoO <sub>x</sub> /MC-SP	755 × 530	762	185	0.09	0.66	3.9
NiMoO <sub>x</sub> /MC-HP	745 × 745	673	298	0.15	0.61	4.5

<sup>a</sup> BET surface area. <sup>b</sup> Calculated using the *t*-plot micropore area. <sup>c</sup> Calculated using the *t*-plot micropore volume. <sup>d</sup> Pore diameter was calculated with the BJH method.

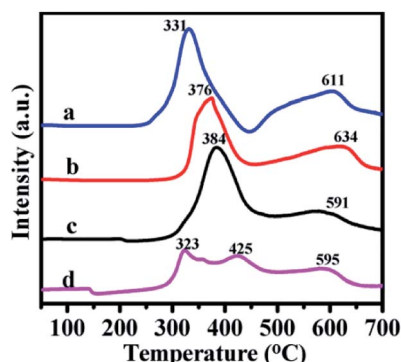


Fig. 6 H<sub>2</sub>-TPR profiles of catalysts (a) NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL, (b) NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-LR, (c) NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-HP and (d) NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-SP.

As shown in Table 1, the surface area of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL was ~995 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>, which was larger than those of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-HP, NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-LR, and NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-SP. Therefore, the NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL catalyst provided a large surface area for the dispersion of the active sites. The average pore size of the NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC catalyst followed the order: NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-LR (5.0 nm) > NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-HP (4.5 nm) > NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL (4.0 nm) > NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-SP (3.9 nm).

The H<sub>2</sub>-TPR technique was used to study the reducibility of the Ni and Mo oxides on the support. The profiles are listed in Fig. 6. The profiles of the as-prepared catalysts exhibited two wide peaks in the 320–430 °C and 590–640 °C ranges.

The first reduction peak was derived from nickel oxide and a portion of the molybdenum oxide. The second peak was ascribed to the second step reduction of MoO<sub>x</sub>. The different peak reduction temperatures were ascribed to the differences in the reducibility of the oxide. Compared to the Mo species, the Ni species was easier to reduce. According to the reference, the reduction peak for pure NiO (Ni<sup>2+</sup> to Ni<sup>0</sup>) was centered around 350–400 °C<sup>38</sup> and the reduction peak for MoO<sub>3</sub> (Mo<sup>6+</sup> to Mo<sup>4+</sup>) appeared at about 430 °C.<sup>39</sup> Compared to pure NiO, the reduction peak of the different catalysts for the Ni species migrated to a lower temperature. This result was attributed to the phenomenon of hydrogen overflow from molybdenum oxide to nickel, which promoted the reduction of nickel oxide.<sup>40</sup>

XPS is a surface analytical technique that reveals information on the chemical state and surface composition of the catalysts. The XPS spectra and related parameters for NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL, NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450, NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-750, and NiMoS/MC-PL are displayed in Fig. 7 and Table S1.† The Ni 2p spectra showed four main peaks, which could be assigned to Ni<sup>0</sup>, NiO, Ni(OH)<sub>2</sub>, and the satellite signal.<sup>41,42</sup> The ratio defined as Ni<sup>0</sup>/

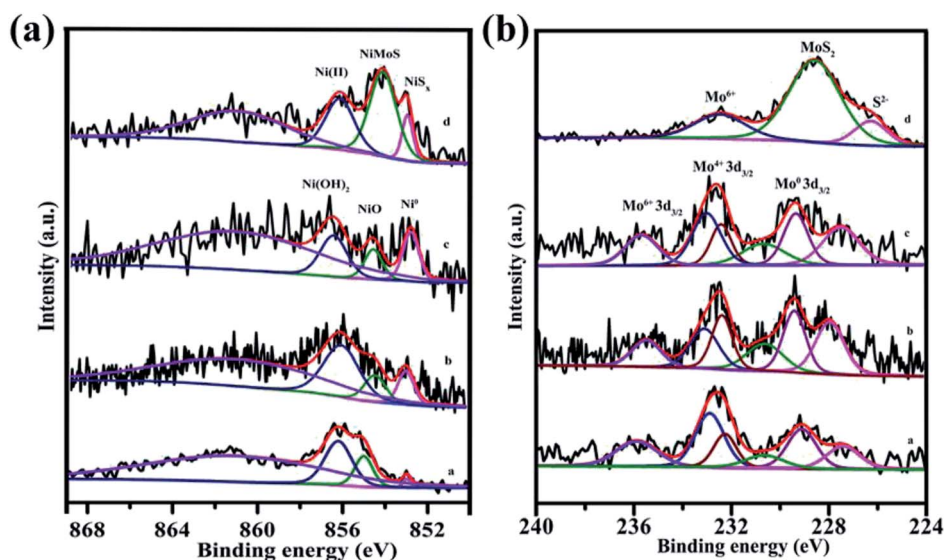


Fig. 7 XPS spectra of Ni 2p and Mo 3d for different catalysts. Note: (a) NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL, (b) NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450, (c) NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-750, and (d) NiMoS/MC-PL.





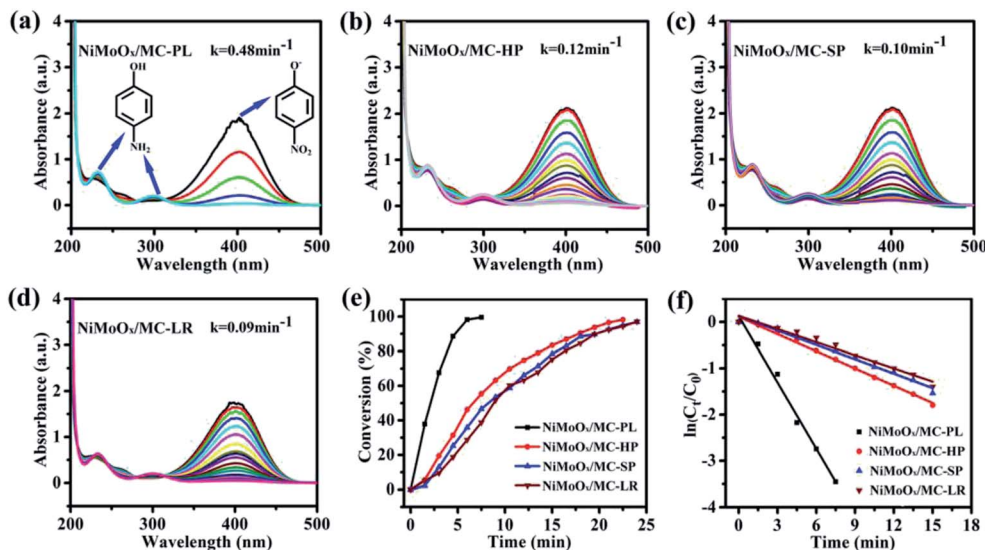


Fig. 8 The reduction of 4-NP recorded every 1.5 min over NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL (a), NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-HP (b), NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-SP (c), and NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-LR (d). The relationship between conversion and reaction time (e). Plots of  $\ln(C_t/C_0)$  versus reaction time (f).

(Ni<sup>0</sup>+Ni<sup>2+</sup>) followed the order of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-750 > NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450 > NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL, which correlated well with the H<sub>2</sub>-TPR spectra. The results showed that the content of metallic nickel and the active site increased with the increase in the reduction temperature. The Mo 3d XPS spectra for the different catalysts showed several pairs of corresponding peaks, which could be assigned to Mo<sup>6+</sup>, Mo<sup>4+</sup>, and metal Mo<sup>0</sup>. Compared to NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL, the binding energy of Mo<sup>4+</sup> and Mo<sup>6+</sup> in NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450 and NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-750 shifted to lower values, respectively, indicating that more unsaturation sites were generated. From Table S1,<sup>†</sup> the percentage of MoO<sub>x</sub> species, defined as (Mo<sup>6+</sup> + Mo<sup>4+</sup>)/(Mo<sup>0</sup> + Mo<sup>4+</sup> + Mo<sup>6+</sup>), exhibited a significant change in different catalysts; it dropped from an initial of 88% to 63.7% with the increase in the reduction temperature. These results indicated that the molybdenum oxide on the surface of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC was not completely reduced, even when the temperature was relatively high. In the case of NiMoS/MC-PL, the XPS peaks of Ni and Mo demonstrated the formation of the NiMoS nanocrystal.

### 3.2 Catalytic activity towards the reduction of 4-nitrophenol

The catalytic performance of the catalysts was evaluated by the reduction of 4-nitrophenol (4-NP) in the presence of NaBH<sub>4</sub>. The reduction process of 4-NP was monitored by measuring the UV-Vis absorbance of the solution. According to the reference, the aqueous solution of 4-NP showed a strong absorption band at 317 nm. The absorption band shifted to 400 nm, when NaBH<sub>4</sub> was added into the above solution, which indicated the formation of the nitrophenolate ion.<sup>43</sup> The catalytic properties of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC with different morphologies towards the reduction of 4-NP were comparatively studied, as displayed in Fig. 8. With the prolongation of the reaction time, the intensity of absorption peak at 400 nm decreased while another absorption band at 300 nm appeared.<sup>44</sup> After the completion of the reaction, the peak corresponding to the nitrophenolate ion was not observed, revealing that 4-NP was completely reduced. From Fig. 8(e), it can be observed that the reaction times for the conversion of 50% of 4-NP to 4-AP in the presence of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL, NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-HP, NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-SP, and NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-LR

Table 2 The kinetic constants, turnover frequencies (TOF), and metal Ni loading with different catalysts

Samples	$k$ (min <sup>-1</sup> )	$K$ (min <sup>-1</sup> g <sup>-1</sup> )	Ni loading <sup>a</sup> (wt%)	TOF <sup>b</sup> × 10 <sup>3</sup> (s <sup>-1</sup> )
NiMoO <sub>x</sub> /MC-PL	0.48	960	4.05	175.8
NiMoO <sub>x</sub> /MC-HP	0.12	240	3.2	69.3
NiMoO <sub>x</sub> /MC-SP	0.10	200	2.78	64.7
NiMoO <sub>x</sub> /MC-LR	0.09	180	3.37	49.9
NiMoO <sub>x</sub> /MC-PL-450	0.65	1300	4.05	241.5
NiMoO <sub>x</sub> /MC-PL-750	0.18	360	4.05	53.8
NiMoS/MC-PL	0.03	60	4.05	—
NiO/MC-PL	0.16	320	4.05	56.2
MoO <sub>3</sub> /MC-PL	0.002	4	—	—
NiMoO <sub>x</sub>	0.17	2073	24.7	103.8
MC-PL	0.001	2	—	—

<sup>a</sup> Determined by ICP-MS. <sup>b</sup> Calculated on the basis of total catalyst and a conversion rate of 50%.



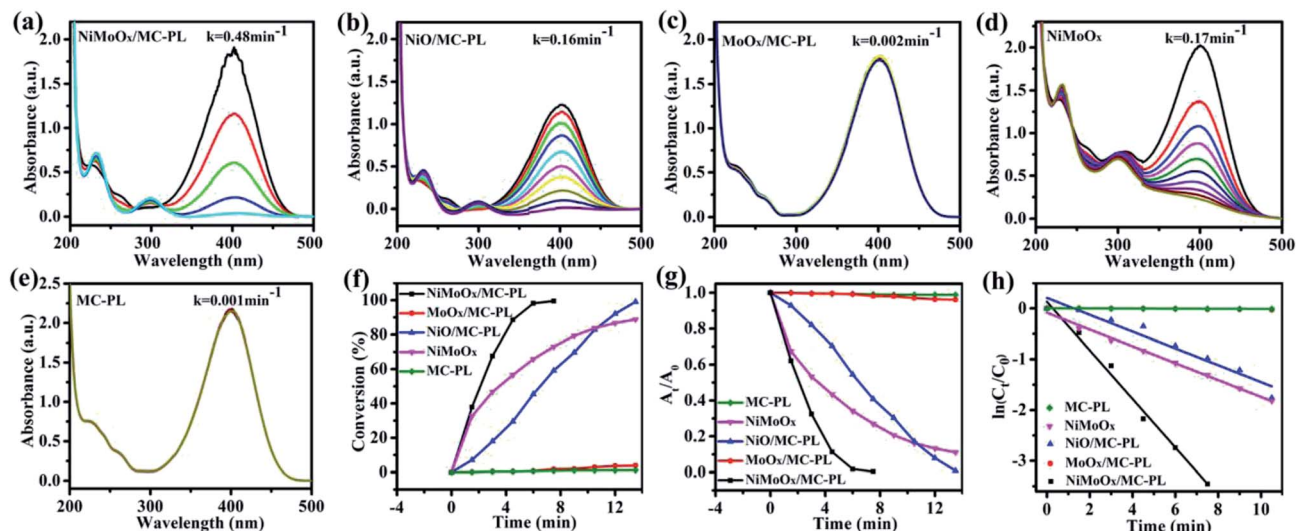


Fig. 9 Catalytic reduction of 4-NP for a time period of 1.5 min over NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL (a), NiO/MC-PL (b), MoO<sub>3</sub>/MC-PL (c), NiMoO<sub>x</sub> (d), and MC-PL (e). The conversion of 4-NP with reaction time over different catalysts (f). The relationship between  $A_t/A_0$  and time (g). Plots of  $\ln(C_t/C_0)$  versus time (h).

catalysts were 2.0 min, 6.6 min, 8.2 min, and 8.7 min, respectively. To qualify the reactivity, the reaction was regarded as a pseudo-first-order reaction. From Fig. 8(f), it can be observed that the reaction time is linear with respect to  $\ln(C_t/C_0)$ , which was consistent with first order kinetics. In order to compare the catalytic performances of different catalysts, the rate constants,  $k$  ( $\text{min}^{-1}$ ) and  $K$  ( $\text{min}^{-1} \text{g}^{-1}$ ), and the value of TOF ( $\text{s}^{-1}$ ) of the catalysts were calculated. It can be found (Table 2) that the morphology of the catalysts had an important effect on the  $K$  and TOF values. Among the four different morphologies of the catalysts, the NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL catalyst exhibited the highest  $K$  ( $960 \text{ min}^{-1} \text{g}^{-1}$ ) and TOF ( $0.176 \text{ s}^{-1}$ ) values. According to the HRTEM results, the size of the NiMoO<sub>x</sub> NPs of the catalysts was similar. Therefore, the difference in the catalytic activities of

NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL, NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-HP, NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-LR, and NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-SP was mainly attributed to their different pore diameters, channel lengths, and surface areas. The NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL catalyst had short channels, which shortened the diffusion route for the reactants in the pores. This made the reactants to have easier contact with the active sites, thus favoring 4-NP reduction. In addition, the NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL catalyst exhibited a super catalytic performance owing to its large specific surface area ( $\sim 995 \text{ m}^2 \text{g}^{-1}$ ) and short channel length ( $\sim 351 \text{ nm}$ ). A larger specific surface area provided more attachment sites for NiMoO<sub>x</sub> NP and then increased the active sites. However, NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-HP, NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-LR, and NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-SP catalysts had long channel lengths, which made 4-NP to

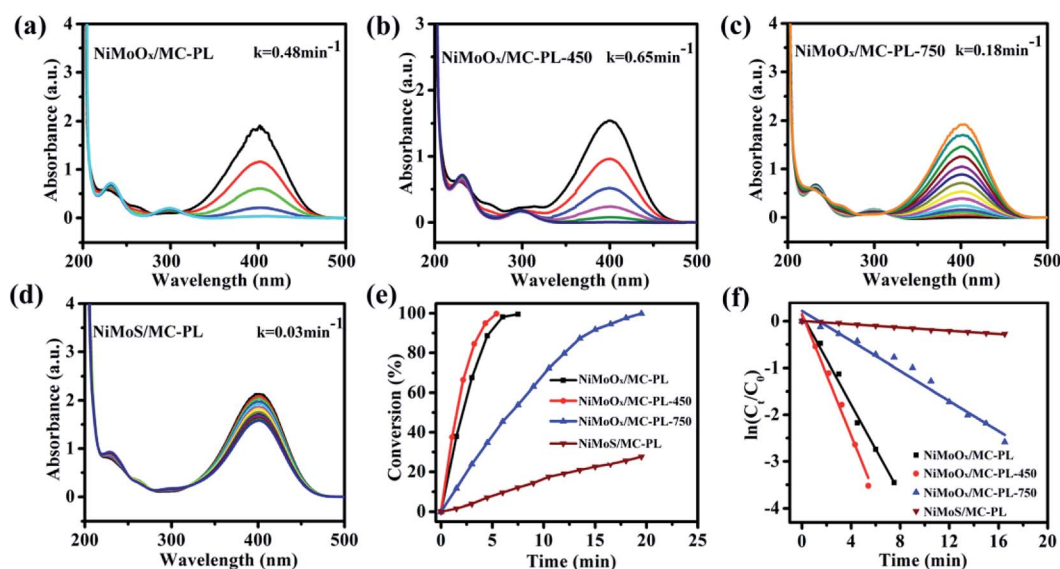


Fig. 10 Catalytic reduction of 4-NP over NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL (a), NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450 (b), NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-750 (c), and NiMoS/MC-PL (d). Plots of the conversion of 4-NP versus time (e). The relationship of  $\ln(C_t/C_0)$  and the reaction time (f).





Table 3 The reduction of nitroarenes over the NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450 catalyst<sup>a</sup>

Entry	Substrate	Product	Time (min)	Conv. (%)	<i>k</i> (min <sup>-1</sup> )	<i>K</i> (min <sup>-1</sup> g <sup>-1</sup> )	TOF <sup>b</sup> × 10 <sup>3</sup> (s <sup>-1</sup> )
1			10.0	97.2	—	—	37.6
2			40.0	68.1	0.039	78	6.6
3			10.0	97.5	—	—	37.7
4			20.0	88.4	0.128	256	17.1
5			10.0	99	—	—	38.3
6			40	99	0.039	78	9.6
7			40	61.5	0.018	36	6.0
8			10.0	66.5	0.287	574	25.7

<sup>a</sup> Reaction conditions: catalyst (0.5 g L<sup>-1</sup>, 1 mL), nitroarenes (1 mmol L<sup>-1</sup>, 8 mL), NaBH<sub>4</sub> (0.4 mol L<sup>-1</sup>, 0.75 mL), 600 rpm, room temperature. <sup>b</sup> The turnover frequencies (TOF) denote the moles of 4-NP converted per mole of Ni or Mo per second, calculated on the basis of total Ni and Mo loading in this research system.

diffuse for a longer period of time in contact with the active sites and therefore exhibited relatively inferior catalytic activities.

To further investigate the effect of composition on the reduction of 4-NP, the NiO/MC-PL, MoO<sub>3</sub>/MC-PL, NiMoO<sub>x</sub> and MC-PL catalysts were also prepared and compared with NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL. For NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL, NiO/MC-PL, and NiMoO<sub>x</sub>, the reaction times for the conversion of 50% of 4-NP were 2.0, 6.5 and 3.5 min in (Fig. 9), respectively. However, 4-NP displayed almost no change over the MoO<sub>3</sub>/MC-PL and MC-PL catalysts with the reaction time of 14.0 min, indicating that the sole Mo species and MC exhibited no activity for the 4-NP reduction. As shown in Table 2, the composition of the catalyst played an important effect on the values of *K* and TOF. The TOF values for these catalysts followed the order of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL (0.176 s<sup>-1</sup>) > NiMoO<sub>x</sub> (0.104 s<sup>-1</sup>) > NiO/MC-PL (0.056 s<sup>-1</sup>) > MoO<sub>3</sub>/MC-PL (0 s<sup>-1</sup>) = MC-PL (0 s<sup>-1</sup>). It was evident that the NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL

catalyst had the largest TOF, indicating that the Ni species in the NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC was the main active site, while the Mo species contributed to the performance of the Ni catalyst. Compared with NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL, the NiMoO<sub>x</sub> catalyst exhibited almost no catalytic activity. The enhanced catalytic properties of the NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL catalyst could be attributed to the synergistic effect of Mo and Ni species, as well as the strong interaction between the metal species and MC.

To further study the influence of valence-states of Ni and/or Mo on the catalytic performance, the NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL catalyst was reduced by hydrogen at different temperatures.

NiMoS/MC-PL was also prepared for comparison. It can be concluded from Fig. 10(e) that the conversion of 4-NP followed the order of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450 > NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL > NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-750 > NiMoS/MC-PL. From Table 2, it can be found that the valence-states of the metal also played a great role in the *K*



and TOF. The NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450 catalyst had the largest  $K$  (1300 min<sup>-1</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>) and TOF (0.242 s<sup>-1</sup>) values. Among these four catalysts, NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450 exhibited the highest TOF value, which was attributed to the excellent synergistic effect between Ni and Mo species. According to the results of H<sub>2</sub>-TPR and XPS, after reduction at temperature 450 °C, most of the Ni species is converted to metallic nickel, while the MoO<sub>x</sub> species is still present. The results demonstrate that the metallic Ni had more activity than NiO towards the reduction of 4-NP. Moreover, metallic Ni and MoO<sub>x</sub> possessed the best synergistic effect for the reduction of 4-NP. With regard to the catalyst reduced at 750 °C, the proportion of Mo<sup>0</sup> and Mo<sup>4+</sup> species increased. However, the activity of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-750 was lower than that of NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450, clarifying that MoO<sub>3</sub> could contribute more to the reduction properties of Ni compared to metallic Mo and MoO<sub>2</sub>. In addition, NiMoS/MC-PL showed a poor reaction rate, which indicated that the NiMoS species was less active than the corresponding metallic and oxidized NiMoO<sub>x</sub> species.

### 3.3 The effect of reaction parameters on the reduction of 4-NP

It is well known that the reaction rate of a chemical reaction is related to the concentration of reactants and other factors. In this research, the amount of catalyst and 4-NP as well as the concentration of NaBH<sub>4</sub> were systematically studied. The concentration of NaBH<sub>4</sub> was varied, while all other parameters were kept constant (the concentration of 4-NP was 12 mM and the amount of catalyst was 0.5 mg). From Fig. S3 and Table S2,<sup>†</sup> it can be seen that the reaction rate increased as the concentration of NaBH<sub>4</sub> increased. Interestingly, the reaction rate increased rapidly as the concentration of NaBH<sub>4</sub> ranged from 0.005 to 0.02 M, whereas the rate increased slowly as the concentration of NaBH<sub>4</sub> ranged from 0.02 to 0.04 M. As we can see from the Table S2,<sup>†</sup> the variation tendency of TOF was similar to that of the rate constant as the concentration of NaBH<sub>4</sub> changed. It is concluded that the reduction rate and TOF were closely related to the concentration of NaBH<sub>4</sub>.

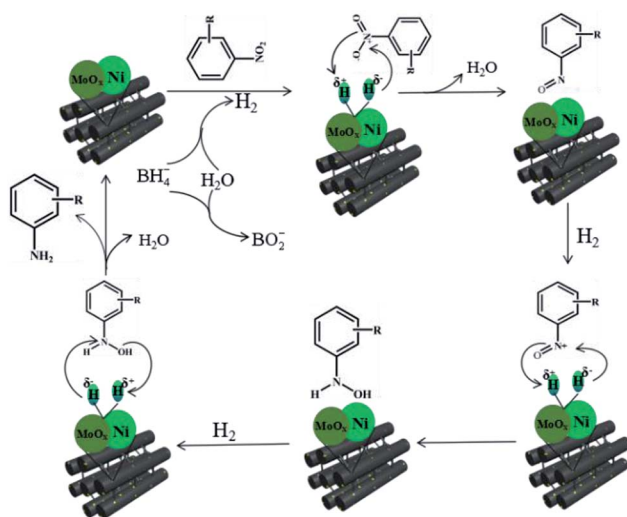
The effect of the amount of catalyst on the reduction of 4-NP is shown in Fig. S4 and Table S3.<sup>†</sup> It can be observed that  $k$  increased as the amount of catalyst increased. As seen in Fig. S4(h),<sup>†</sup>  $k$  was almost linear with respect to the amount of catalyst in the reaction system. This indicated that the increase in the catalyst amount resulted in more surface active sites. More chemical reactions then occurred, thus increasing the overall rate. The effect of the dosages of 4-NP on this reaction is shown in Fig. S5 and Table S4.<sup>†</sup> From Fig. S5(h),<sup>†</sup> it can be found that the reaction rate had an indirect relationship with the amount of 4-NP. The reaction rate decreased as the amount of 4-NP increased. This phenomenon can be ascribed to the competition between the reactants and free sites on the surface of NiMoO<sub>x</sub> NPs. When reactants were adsorbed on the surface of the catalyst, the reaction occurred. In addition, adsorption of excessive reactants reduced the whole reaction rate.

### 3.4 The universal applicability of the NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450 catalyst towards the reduction of nitroarene

In order to demonstrate the universal applicability of the NiMoO<sub>x</sub> catalyst in reducing the nitroarenes to aniline, various nitroarenes with different substituents were selected as the substrates.<sup>45</sup> NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450 was used as the catalyst and the results are listed in Table 3. NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450 exhibited an efficient catalytic activity to selectively reduce nitroarenes with different functionalities. Almost no by-products were detected. The nitroarenes were converted to the corresponding amines in the yield of >84.0% (Table 3, entries 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6), while 4-nitroanisole and 2-amino-4-nitrotoluene showed a relatively low conversion (less than 70%) under the same conditions. The NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450 catalyst demonstrated a high performance towards the reduction of nitroarenes under the optimized conditions. Therefore, the NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450 catalyst is of great significance for the reduction of nitroarenes with different functional groups.

### 3.5 The proposed mechanism towards the reduction of nitroarenes

According to the above experimental results, the NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450 catalyst exhibited a high performance, which was mainly ascribed to the synergistic effect between metal Ni and MoO<sub>x</sub> species. A possible mechanism was proposed towards the reduction of nitroarenes in the presence of NaBH<sub>4</sub> over the NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450 catalyst in Scheme 2.<sup>46</sup> The typical steps are described below. First, the hydrolysis of NaBH<sub>4</sub> produced active hydrogen and electrons that were adsorbed on the surface of the NiMoO<sub>x</sub> catalyst. Then, the active hydrogen was transferred from the surface of the NiMoO<sub>x</sub> catalyst to nitroarenes, which were adsorbed on the catalyst surface. Second, the nitroso intermediates were formed after the loss of water molecules. The intermediates were then rapidly reduced to a stable hydroxylamine. Finally, the final product amine was obtained



Scheme 2 The mechanism towards the reduction of nitroarenes over the NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450 catalyst.



by dehydroxylation of hydroxylamine and then desorption from the catalyst, which was the rate-determining step.

## 4. Conclusions

In summary, the inexpensive NiMoO<sub>x</sub> catalysts confined in the mesoporous carbon with different morphologies and compositions were prepared using SBA-15 as a hard template with the replication method. For the catalysts with different morphologies, NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL contributed to the dispersion of NiMoO<sub>x</sub> NPs and the diffusion of 4-NP owing to its large specific surface area and shorter channel length, exhibiting outstanding activity. For the catalysts with different metal valence states, the NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC-PL-450 catalyst showed the highest *k* (0.650 min<sup>-1</sup>) and TOF (0.242 s<sup>-1</sup>) values towards the reduction of 4-NP owing to the excellent synergistic effects of metallic Ni and MoO<sub>x</sub> species. The as-prepared NiMoO<sub>x</sub>/MC with efficient accessibility and suitable composition of the active sites illustrated a promising way for other reactions to design a novel non-noble catalyst.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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