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#### Introduction

Direct air capture (DAC) of  $CO_2$  has emerged as a promising carbon negative approach to achieving carbon neutrality.<sup>1-5</sup> However, the extremely low concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> in the air (~410 ppm) presents a significant challenge. Various solid adsorption materials such as zeolite, activated carbon, porous silicon, coordination polymers, metal-organic frameworks (MOFs), and covalent organic frameworks (COFs) have been explored for CO2 capture.6-20 MOFs, with their diverse structures and post-modification functionalization,<sup>21</sup> show potential for CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption, but are still challenging for low-concentration CO<sub>2</sub> capture, especially for DAC. Currently, only a few ultra microporous MOFs and bioinspired MOFs are capable of capturing ultra-low concentrations of CO2.22-31 One of the most widely studied strategies for achieving low-concentration CO2 adsorption is amine modification, which has ultra-strong affinity for CO2 molecules.32-37 However, amine adsorption suffers from low adsorption kinetics, low amine efficiency and loss of amines, limiting its practical application.<sup>38,39</sup> Therefore, the development of non-amine modified low-concentration CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption MOFs-based materials is necessary. Zr-based MOFs with secondary building units (SBUs) show promise due to their

# Controlled alkali etching of MOFs with secondary building units for low-concentration CO<sub>2</sub> capture<sup>†</sup>

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Low-concentration CO<sub>2</sub> capture is particularly challenging because it requires highly selective adsorbents that can effectively capture CO<sub>2</sub> from gas mixtures containing other components such as nitrogen and water vapor. In this study, we have successfully developed a series of controlled alkali-etched MOF-808-*X* (where *X* ranges from 0.04 to 0.10), the FT-IR and XPS characterizations revealed the presence of hydroxyl groups (–OH) on the zirconium clusters. Low-concentration CO<sub>2</sub> capture experiments demonstrated improved CO<sub>2</sub> capture performance of the MOF-808-*X* series compared to the pristine MOF-808 under dry conditions (400 ppm CO<sub>2</sub>). Among them, MOF-808-0.07 with abundant Zr–OH sites showed the highest CO<sub>2</sub> capture capacity of 0.21 mmol g<sup>-1</sup> under dry conditions, which is 70 times higher than that of pristine MOF-808. Additionally, MOF-808-0.07 exhibited fast adsorption kinetics, stable CO<sub>2</sub> capture under humid air conditions (with a relative humidity of 30%), and stable regeneration even after 50 cycles of adsorption and desorption. *In situ* DRIFTS and <sup>13</sup>C CP-MAS ssNMR characterizations revealed that the enhanced low-concentration CO<sub>2</sub> capture is attributed to the formation of a stable six-membered ring structure through the interaction of intramolecular hydrogen bonds between neighboring Zr–OH sites *via* a chemisorption mechanism.

SBUs and high coordination numbers.<sup>40</sup> Controlled etching of these MOFs exposes more M–OH sites, and the microporous environment of MOFs enhances local CO<sub>2</sub> enrichment and capture, but exploration in this area is still limited.

In this study, we synthesized a series of controlled alkalietched MOF-808-*X* (*X*: 0.04–0.10) materials with enhanced lowconcentration CO<sub>2</sub> capture capacity under simulated air conditions compared to the pristine MOF-808. Among these materials, MOF-808-0.07 exhibited a CO<sub>2</sub> capture capacity of 0.21 mmol g<sup>-1</sup> under simulated air conditions, which is 70 times higher than that of the pristine MOF-808. Additionally, MOF-808-0.07 displayed excellent stability over 50 cycles of adsorption and desorption. *In situ* DRIFTS and <sup>13</sup>C CP-MAS ssNMR analysis revealed that the increased low-concentration CO<sub>2</sub> capture capacity is attributed to the formation of a stable six-membered ring structure through the interaction of intramolecular hydrogen bonds between neighbouring Zr–OH sites in the micro-mesoporous environment of MOF-808-*X*.

#### Results and discussion

MOF-808 was synthesized according to the reported method.<sup>40,41</sup> And MOF-808-X (X: 0.04–0.10) series were prepared by various degrees of alkali etching of MOF-808 (Scheme 1). In Fig. 1a, the FT-IR analysis of these samples reveals that the infrared absorption peaks at 1630 and 1400–1600 cm<sup>-1</sup>, which correspond to the stretching vibration peak of C=O and the benzene ring, respectively, display varying degrees of weakening. This

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Scheme 1 Schematic diagram of degree of etching for MOF-808 and series of MOF-808-X (X: 0.04–0.10).

suggests that the benzene ring in MOF-808 has undergone degradation to different extents. In Fig. 1b, the powder X-ray diffraction (PXRD) patterns of the as-synthesized MOF-808 are shown, which match well with the simulated PXRD pattern obtained from single crystal analysis.<sup>40</sup> However, the PXRD peaks of the MOF-808-*X* (*X*: 0.04–0.10) series gradually weaken with increasing etching degree, until all XRD diffraction peaks disappear. Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) images of the as-synthesized MOF-808 exhibit octahedral morphology (Fig. S1a†), consistent with previous literature reports. The alkali-etched MOF-808-*X* (*X*: 0.04–0.10) series show almost the same morphology as MOF-808 with varying degrees of etching (Fig. S1b–f†).

X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) analyses were conducted to investigate the electronic structure of MOF-808 and MOF-808-X (X: 0.04-0.07) series (Fig. 1c). In Fig. 1d, the C 1s high-resolution spectrum of MOF-808 and MOF-808-X series displays two distinct binding energy peaks at 284.8 and 288.5 eV, corresponding to the binding energy peaks of C-C and C-O. The O 1s high-resolution spectrum of MOF-808 in Fig. 1e shows a binding energy peak of C-O-Zr bond at 532.5 eV. However, a new binding energy peak appeared in the O 1s HR-XPS spectrum at 530.5 eV, which gradually increased with the increase of the alkali etching degree of MOF-808, and the new binding energy peak was attributed to the Zr-OH generated by alkali etching. Moreover, it is obvious from Fig. 1f that the binding energy peak of Zr 3d is shifted towards a lower binding energy in MOF-808-X series compared to the pristine MOF-808. These results suggest that electron-donating groups exist on the Zr site.

 $N_2$  adsorption and desorption isotherms were employed to further characterize the pore structure and BET surface area of MOF-808 and MOF-808-*X* series. The isotherms of these materials exhibit a typical type I adsorption pattern (as shown in Fig. S2†), indicating the presence of micro-mesoporous structure. The BET specific surface area of MOF-808 was found to be 1614 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>, whereas for MOF-808-*X* (*X*: 0.04–0.07) series, the BET specific surface area gradually decreases with the increase in the degree of etching and is found to be 300, 229, 225, 221, and 144 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>, respectively. This suggests that the BET surface area changes as the degree of etching increases due to the gradual collapse of the MOF-808 framework.

Due to the presence of numerous Zr–OH sites in the MOF-808-X series, we were prompted to investigate the  $CO_2$  adsorption characteristics of these materials. As shown in Fig. 2a, the



Fig. 1 (a) FT-IR spectra, (b) PXRD patterns and (c-f) XPS survey, and high-resolution XPS spectra of the C 1s, O 1s, and Zr 3d of MOF-808 and MOF-808-X (X: 0.04-0.1).



Fig. 2 (a) and (b)  $CO_2$  adsorption isotherm for MOF-808 and MOF-808-X (X: 0.04–0.07) series. The dynamic  $CO_2$  breakthrough curves for MOF-808 and MOF-808-X (X: 0.04–0.07) series (c) and 13X zeolite under dry conditions (d). (e) The dynamic  $CO_2$  breakthrough curves for MOF-808-0.07 at 0 and 30 RH%. (f) Comparison of  $CO_2$  capture capacity for MOF-808-0.07 and 13X zeolite at 0 and 30 RH%, respectively. (g) The cycling stability of  $CO_2$  capture for MOF-808-0.07.

CO2 adsorption isotherms of the MOF-808-X series demonstrate improved CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption at low pressures compared to the pristine MOF-808. Particularly, the MOF-808-X series materials with Zr-OH sites exhibit a strong affinity for CO2 at low concentrations, as evidenced by the steepness of the CO2 adsorption isotherms and the attainment of a plateau at very low pressures. Further analysis of the CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption behaviour (Fig. 2b) within a low-pressure range of 400 ppm reveals that MOF-808-0.07 exhibits a high  $CO_2$  uptake of 0.28 mmol g<sup>-1</sup>, which is comparable to the values obtained for MOF-808-0.04  $(0.01 \text{ mmol } g^{-1})$ , MOF-808-0.05  $(0.08 \text{ mmol } g^{-1})$ , MOF-808-0.06 (0.16 mmol  $g^{-1}$ ), and the pristine MOF-808 (0.008 mmol  $g^{-1}$ ). This highlights the significantly enhanced CO<sub>2</sub> uptake and the interactions between CO<sub>2</sub> and Zr-OH sites in the MOF-808-X series materials compared to the pristine MOF-808. Additionally, the MOF-808-X series exhibits excellent thermal stability up to 200 °C (Fig. S3<sup>†</sup>).

The dynamic  $CO_2$  capture performance of MOF-808 and MOF-808-X series were assessed in a fixed-bed reactor packed with a column of simulated ambient air (400 ppm  $CO_2$  and argon as balance gas) under flow conditions (5 mL min<sup>-1</sup>) at 298 K. The detailed experimental procedure is provided in the ESI.† Fig. 2c depicts the short-term  $CO_2$  breakthrough process of

pristine MOF-808 in simulated dry air conditions (0 RH%), resulting in low CO<sub>2</sub> capture capacities of 0.003 mmol  $g^{-1}$ . In contrast, MOF-808-X (X: 0.04-0.10) series exhibited long-term dynamic CO<sub>2</sub> breakthrough processes with enhanced CO<sub>2</sub> capture capacity compared to the pristine MOF-808. The dynamic CO<sub>2</sub> capture capacity of MOF-808-X (X: 0.04-0.10) series under simulated dry air conditions were 0.06, 0.09, 0.13, 0.21, and 0.205 mmol  $g^{-1}$ , respectively. Notably, the MOF-808-0.07 demonstrated the highest CO<sub>2</sub> capture capacity, which is a 70-fold increase in CO2 uptake capacity compared to the pristine MOF-808. Although the MOF-808-X series exhibited lower CO<sub>2</sub> capture capacity than the 13X zeolite (0.39 mmol  $g^{-1}$ ) under simulated dry air conditions, they demonstrated faster adsorption kinetics than 13X zeolite, as illustrated by the sharper breakthrough profile for MOF-808-0.07 compared to 13X (Fig. 2e). Additionally, Fig. 2d indicates that MOF-808-0.07 exhibited almost the same CO2 breakthrough curves under simulated dry and humid air conditions (0 and 30 RH%). In contrast, the 13X zeolite in Fig. 2f exhibited significantly reduced CO<sub>2</sub> capture capacity under humid air conditions (30 RH%), indicating that MOF-808 has higher moisture resistance. Moreover, Fig. 2g demonstrates that MOF-808-0.07 exhibited stable CO<sub>2</sub> capture performance with minimal losses after 50



Fig. 3 (a) TPD results for CO<sub>2</sub> desorption from MOF-808-0.07 in dry conditions after being saturated with CO<sub>2</sub> from a gas stream of 400 ppm CO<sub>2</sub>. (b) Microkinetic analysis assuming first order desorption.

cycles (Fig. S4<sup>†</sup>). In addition, the MOF-808-0.07 after CO<sub>2</sub> capture was evaluated by FT-IR, PXRD, SEM, XPS and N<sub>2</sub> adsorption and desorption isotherms, all results show the structure integrity for MOF-808-0.07 in CO<sub>2</sub> capture processing (Fig. S5–S9<sup>†</sup>). The above results indicate that the MOF-808-0.07 has superior CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption–desorption stability.

In order to illustrate the low-concentration  $CO_2$  adsorption process of MOFs containing Zr-SBUs at low concentrations, we synthesized a series of MOFs with different M-SBUs, including MIL-101-Fe with Fe<sub>3</sub>-SBU cluster, MIL-101-Cr with Cr<sub>3</sub>-SBU cluster, and MIL-125-Ti with Ti<sub>4</sub>-SBU cluster. Through controlled etching, as confirmed by PXRD analysis (Fig. S10†), we obtained MOFs with varying degrees of etching. The dynamic CO<sub>2</sub> capture results revealed that all MOFs with varying degrees of etching exhibited a CO<sub>2</sub> capture process, but their capture capacities were not comparable to that of MOF-



Fig. 4 In situ DRIFTS of (a) MOF-808-0.07-CO<sub>2</sub> for desorption CO<sub>2</sub>, (b) MOF-808-0.07 for adsorption CO<sub>2</sub>, (c) MOF-808-0.07-CO<sub>2</sub> for the 2nd desorption CO<sub>2</sub>, (d) MOF-808-0.07 for the 2nd adsorption CO<sub>2</sub>.



Fig. 5 Stacked plots of solid-state <sup>13</sup>C CP-MAS NMR spectra of MOF-808-0.07 before and after adsorption of <sup>13</sup>CO<sub>2</sub>.

808-X with controlled etching with  $Zr_6$ -SBU cluster (Fig. S11<sup>†</sup>). This suggests that MOFs with higher coordination numbers exhibit superior CO<sub>2</sub> capture abilities.

To investigate the desorption kinetics of MOF-808-0.07 in dry air conditions, we employed temperature programmed desorption (TPD) to evaluate its desorption energy. The activation energies of desorption for MOF-808-0.07 were calculated using the method proposed by Cvetanovic and Amenomiya, by measuring the TPD-CO<sub>2</sub> signal at different heating rates, as presented in Fig. 3a and b.<sup>42</sup> Our results demonstrate that MOF-808-0.07 exhibits a higher desorption energy (56.51 kJ mol<sup>-1</sup>) than 13X zeolite (48.14 kJ mol<sup>-1</sup> (ref. 42)) under simulated dry air conditions (Table S1†), indicating that CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption by MOF-808-0.07 occurs through chemical adsorption.

In order to verify the adsorbed species in CO<sub>2</sub> capture for MOF-808-0.07, the *in situ* diffuse reflectance infrared Fourier transform spectroscopy (*in situ* DRIFTS) of MOF-808-0.07 with adsorbing CO<sub>2</sub> in simulated dry air (MOF-808-0.07-CO<sub>2</sub>) was carried out. Fig. 4a shows two distinct infrared absorption peaks at 1685 and 3000–3600 cm<sup>-1</sup> in the *in situ* DRIFTS spectra of MOF-808-0.07-CO<sub>2</sub> after heat treatment (140 °C),

corresponding to the stretching vibration peak of C=O (-OCO<sub>2</sub>H), and -OH (M-OH with broad peak and hydrogenbonding), respectively. The results display that the CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption within the MOF-808-0.07 framework is in the form of bicarbonate species and hydrogen bonding interactions under dry conditions. Furthermore, the heat-treated MOF-808-0.07 is subjected to in situ CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption again in dry conditions, the in situ DRIFTS spectra in Fig. 4b show obvious infrared absorption peaks in 1685 and 3000-3500 cm<sup>-1</sup> corresponding to the stretching vibration peak of C=O (-OCO<sub>2</sub>H) and hydrogen-bonding. After heat treatment again, the infrared absorption peak of C=O and hydrogen-bonding gradually disappeared again (Fig. 4c), demonstration of the breaking of hydrogen bonding and the successful complete desorption of CO<sub>2</sub>. Further elucidating the adsorptiondesorption stability, the second in situ CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption also showed that the C=O and hydrogen-bonding infrared absorption peak gradually strengthens with various adsorption time (Fig. 4d). As a comparison, the control experiments of pristine MOF-808-CO<sub>2</sub> shows no obvious infrared absorption peak for CO<sub>2</sub> desorption at 140 °C. And the heat-treated MOF-808 is subjected to in situ CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption again in dry conditions along with various time, the in situ DRIFTS spectra show no obvious change in infrared absorption peaks (Fig. S12<sup>†</sup>). The results show that parent MOF-808 does not have low concentration CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption capacity. Based on the above in situ DRIFTS results, showing that the alkali etched MOF-808-0.07 has enhanced low concentration CO<sub>2</sub> capture capacity compared to parent MOF-808 under dry air conditions due to the presence of Zr-OH adsorption sites.

To elucidate the formation of  $-OCO_2H$  species under dry conditions, solid-state cross-polarization magic-angle spinning (CP-MAS) <sup>13</sup>C NMR experiments were conducted on variant MOF-808-0.07 to investigate the change in chemical species before and after capturing <sup>13</sup>CO<sub>2</sub> (isotopic gas). Fig. 5 displays the <sup>13</sup>C CP-MAS ssNMR spectrum of the pristine MOF-808 without adsorbed CO<sub>2</sub>, showing no observable chemical shifts, indicating complete etching of the carbon framework in MOF-808. Upon adsorption of <sup>13</sup>CO<sub>2</sub> under dry conditions, two distinct chemical shifts appeared in the <sup>13</sup>C CP-MAS ssNMR spectrum at  $\delta$  <sup>13</sup>C = 166.8 and 164.4 ppm. Combining these



Fig. 6 Proposed low-concentration CO<sub>2</sub> capture mechanism for MOF-808-X series.

results with the *in situ* DRIFTS data, it can be inferred that these shifts are attributed to -OCO<sub>2</sub>H groups and -OCO<sub>2</sub>H groups involved in intramolecular hydrogen bonding, respectively.

Based on the above *in situ* DRIFTS and <sup>13</sup>C CP-MAS ssNMR characterizations, we proposed a possible mechanistic of lowconcentration CO<sub>2</sub> capture process in MOF-808 series. (1) When the two Zr–OH sites within the MOF-808-*X* framework are distanced apart, each Zr–OH site can adsorb one CO<sub>2</sub> molecule, forming Zr–O<sub>2</sub>COH species (Fig. 6a). (2) When the neighbouring Zr–OH sites within the MOF-808-*X* framework are in close proximity. As shown in Fig. 6b, first, a Zr–OH site adsorbs a CO<sub>2</sub> molecule to form a Zr–O<sub>2</sub>COH species, and the Zr–O<sub>2</sub>COH species forms intramolecular hydrogen bonding with the neighbouring Zr–OH site. Subsequently, the neighbouring Zr–OH re-adsorbs a CO<sub>2</sub> molecule with it to form two opposing Zr–O<sub>2</sub>COH species, which interact to form a stable six-membered ring structure through the interaction of intramolecular hydrogen bonding to complete an adsorption process.

#### Conclusions

In conclusion, we have demonstrated that controlled alkali etching of MOF-808 leads to the formation of MOF-808-X series, which exhibit significantly enhanced low-concentration CO2 capture compared to the pristine MOF-808 under dry air conditions. Among the MOF-808-X series, MOF-808-0.07 displays the highest  $CO_2$  capture capacity of 0.21 mmol g<sup>-1</sup> in simulated dry air conditions, which is 70 times higher than the pristine MOF-808. The desorption kinetics of the MOF-808-0.07 also show higher desorption energy compared to the commonly used 13X zeolite. Our control experiments suggest that MOFs with high coordination numbers show higher CO<sub>2</sub> capture performance under dry air conditions. Furthermore, in situ DRIFTS and <sup>13</sup>C CP-MAS ssNMR results indicate that the enhanced low-concentration CO2 capture is due to the formation of a stable six-membered ring structure through intramolecular hydrogen bonds between Zr-OH sites of neighbouring micro-mesoporous environments of MOF-808-X. Overall, these findings suggest the potential of MOF-808-X series as promising materials for low-concentration CO<sub>2</sub> capture.

#### Data availability

The authors declare that all data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

#### Author contributions

Hong Dong: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, funding acquisition, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing. Lihua Li: investigation and formal analysis, Can Li: supervision, funding acquisition, project administration and writing – review & editing.

### Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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