

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

View Article Online  
View Journal | View IssueCite this: *Mater. Chem. Front.*,  
2023, 7, 3146Distance produces beauty? regulating the distance of Fe atomic pairs to enhance electrocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction†Xiaofei Wei, Huakai Xu, Chuanhai Jiang, Zhifei Wang, Yuguo Ouyang, Chunyu Lu, Yuan Jing, Shiwei Yao, Xiaoqing Lu<sup>✉</sup> and Fangna Dai<sup>✉\*</sup>

Metal atom dispersed catalysts with high catalytic activity and accurate active sites are considered as promising catalyst materials for electrocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction reactions (CO<sub>2</sub>RRs). Electronic structure regulation of active sites is a crucial means to improve the catalytic performance. Hence, Fe atom catalysts (FeN<sub>4</sub>-D<sub>x</sub> (x = 1, 2, 3, and 4)) with pairs of Fe atoms at different distances were constructed and the effect of distance on the catalytic performance was further investigated. Based on the structural stability and the activation effect for CO<sub>2</sub>, the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure (D1 = 2.39 Å) exhibited good CO<sub>2</sub>RR selectivity and catalytic activity for producing CO. Moreover, due to the double active sites of Fe atomic pairs, the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure had superior catalytic performance and selectivity for the CO<sub>2</sub>RR to ethanol by the \*CO-\*CHO coupling with low reaction free energy. Combined with detailed calculations of the electronic structure, a suitable distance of Fe atomic pairs regulated the d-band center of active sites, which modified the interaction between the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure and \*CO intermediates and promoted the C-C coupling process. Therefore, the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure can be used as a promising electrocatalyst for the CO<sub>2</sub>RR to C<sub>2</sub> products and the accurate regulation method of active sites may provide new ideas for the design of efficient catalysts.

Received 14th March 2023,  
Accepted 24th April 2023

DOI: 10.1039/d3qm00261f

rsc.li/frontiers-materials

## 1. Introduction

Electrocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction reaction (CO<sub>2</sub>RR) is an effective method to mitigate the greenhouse effect and promote the conversion of carbon into value-added chemicals.<sup>1–4</sup> On the basis of high metal atom utilization rate and easily regulated active sites, atom-dispersed catalysts have broad application prospects in the CO<sub>2</sub>RR.<sup>2,5–7</sup> Further, several means have been used to further improve the catalytic activity of the active sites, such as structural defects,<sup>8,9</sup> introducing heteroatoms,<sup>10–12</sup> axial coordination,<sup>13–15</sup> bimetallic centers,<sup>16–18</sup> and regulating the distance of the active sites.<sup>19,20</sup> However, the distance effect of the active sites on the catalytic performance of atom-dispersed catalysts for the CO<sub>2</sub>RR is rarely reported. The double active sites of catalysts have two adsorption positions for the reaction intermediates, which may facilitate C-C coupling to proceed and C<sub>2</sub> products to form in the CO<sub>2</sub>RR. Therefore, investigating the distance effect of the active sites on the

catalytic performance of atom-dispersed catalysts is of great significance for enhancing CO<sub>2</sub> catalytic conversion.

Generally, Cu-based materials are considered as effective catalysts for the CO<sub>2</sub>RR to multi-carbon products,<sup>21–24</sup> however, their poor product selectivity and weak interaction with CO<sub>2</sub> inhibit the activity for electrochemical CO<sub>2</sub> reduction.<sup>24–26</sup> Recently, Fe atom catalysts have been found to exhibit outstanding electrocatalytic activity in the CO<sub>2</sub>RR.<sup>5,6,12,14,27</sup> Due to the stable adsorption interaction between CO<sub>2</sub> molecules and Fe active sites, the reaction free energy of initial CO<sub>2</sub> hydrogenation on the surface of Fe atom catalysts can be reduced. In addition, regulating the adsorption of key intermediates on Fe-based catalysts was an effective way to facilitate the C-C coupling process and the conversion of CO<sub>2</sub>RR to C<sub>2</sub> products.<sup>27–29</sup> The Fe-n-f-CNT single-atom catalyst synthesized by Hwang *et al.* exhibited superior electrocatalytic performance for the CO<sub>2</sub>RR to ethanol with 45% faradaic efficiency.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, An *et al.* designed a hybrid Fe-B dual-atom center to facilitate C-C coupling of low free energy barrier by enhancing the spin state of Fe, which proved that Fe sites had the potential of producing C<sub>2</sub> products in the CO<sub>2</sub>RR process.<sup>29</sup> Considering the size effect, single-atom catalysts can exhibit unique product selectivity.<sup>7,30–32</sup> And regulating the distance of active sites may further improve the catalytic activity.<sup>19,20</sup> Yu *et al.* synthesized

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† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available. See DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1039/d3qm00261f>

FeN<sub>4</sub> single-atom catalysts with accurate structural control and found that the Fe atomic sites at a specific distance could exhibit strong oxygen reduction reaction activity by regulating the filling of occupied d orbitals of Fe sites.<sup>20</sup> However, the electrocatalytic activity for the CO<sub>2</sub>RR on Fe atomic pair sites is rarely reported and the intrinsic mechanism of electronic structure regulation in Fe atomic pairs is not clear. Combining the superior adsorption and activity of Fe single atoms on CO<sub>2</sub>, Fe atomic pairs may also exhibit good performance in the C–C coupling process. Therefore, catalyst materials with high electrocatalytic activity and product selectivity can be designed by adjusting the electronic structure between Fe atomic pair active sites, which is of great significance to promote the development of the CO<sub>2</sub>RR.

Hence, in this work, FeN<sub>4</sub>-D<sub>x</sub> ( $x = 1, 2, 3$ , and  $4$ ) structures of four Fe atomic pairs at different distances were designed, and the effect of distance on their electrocatalytic performance in the CO<sub>2</sub>RR was investigated by density functional theory (DFT). Firstly, the structural stability of the four catalysts was analyzed from the perspectives of geometrical structure, electronic structure, thermodynamics, and electrochemistry by calculating geometric optimization, bonding interaction, formation energy, and dissolution potential, respectively. To analyze the initial catalytic activity of the four Fe atom pairs on CO<sub>2</sub>, the adsorption and activation of CO<sub>2</sub> were calculated and compared in detail. Subsequently, the catalytic performance of FeN<sub>4</sub>-D<sub>x</sub> structures on the CO<sub>2</sub>RR was further investigated, including the free energy of potential limiting steps and the comparison of the CO<sub>2</sub>RR with side reactions. On the basis of double active sites, the C–C coupling process was calculated and possible C<sub>2</sub> products in the CO<sub>2</sub>RR were analyzed. Finally, the electronic structure of the key intermediates was analyzed in detail, and the effect of distance on the electrocatalytic performance of the CO<sub>2</sub>RR was discussed.

## 2. Computational method

All calculations in this work were performed by spin-polarized density functional theory (DFT) in Vienna Ab initio Simulation Package (VASP) 6.1.1.<sup>33</sup> Projector augmented wave (PAW) and Perdew–Burke–Ernzerhof (PBE) generalized gradient approximation (GGA) were used to describe the ion–electron interaction and electronic exchange–correlation energy, respectively.<sup>34</sup> The plane wave cutoff energy was set as 450 eV. *K*-Point meshes of  $3 \times 3 \times 1$  and high-density  $15 \times 15 \times 5$  were used to optimize geometry structures and accurately analyze electronic structures such as Bader charge transfer, charge difference density, and density of states (DOS).<sup>35</sup> The electronic energy and the force of catalysts converged to  $1.0 \times 10^{-5}$  eV per atom and  $0.02 \text{ eV } \text{\AA}^{-1}$ , respectively. The lattice parameters of FeN<sub>4</sub>-D<sub>x</sub> structures were as follows:  $a = 14.76 \text{ \AA}$ ,  $b = 12.78 \text{ \AA}$ , and  $\alpha = \beta = \gamma = 90^\circ$ . Besides, in order to minimize the interactions of repeated slabs, a vacuum space of  $15 \text{ \AA}$  was constructed along the *c*-axis. And the Grimme (DFT+D3) method was performed to correct the van der Waals interactions. Considering the solvent

effect of water, the VASPsol package was used to build an implicit solvent model.<sup>36</sup>

Generally, the adsorption energy ( $E_{\text{ads}}$ ) between catalysts and adsorbates can be calculated by the following formula:

$$E_{\text{ads}} = E_{\text{a}} - E^* - E_{\text{a}} \quad (1)$$

where  $E_{\text{a}}$ ,  $E^*$ , and  $E_{\text{a}}$  represent the total energy of the system, the energy of the catalyst structures, and the energy of the adsorbates, respectively.

Charge density difference ( $\Delta\rho$ ) can be used to analyze the electron transfer direction after the interaction between two fragments (A and B), which can be calculated by

$$\Delta\rho = \rho_{\text{AB}} - \rho_{\text{A}} - \rho_{\text{B}} \quad (2)$$

And the plane-averaged electron density difference along the *z* axis ( $\Delta\rho(z)^{\text{avg}}$ ) is described as follows:<sup>37</sup>

$$\Delta\rho^{\text{avg}}(z) = \int \sum (z) dx dy \Delta\rho = \sum_{ij} \Delta x_i \Delta y_j \Delta\rho_{i,j} \quad (3)$$

where the *z* axis is along the *c*-axis lattice of the structural model and *x/y* is the cross-section of the *x*–*y* plane at *z*, and *i* and *j* are the one-point divided lattice axis and *b*-axis lattice, respectively.

The calculation of reaction free energy was based on the computational hydrogen electrode (CHE) model.<sup>38</sup> And the values of the reaction free energy difference ( $\Delta G$ ) can be obtained by the following formula:

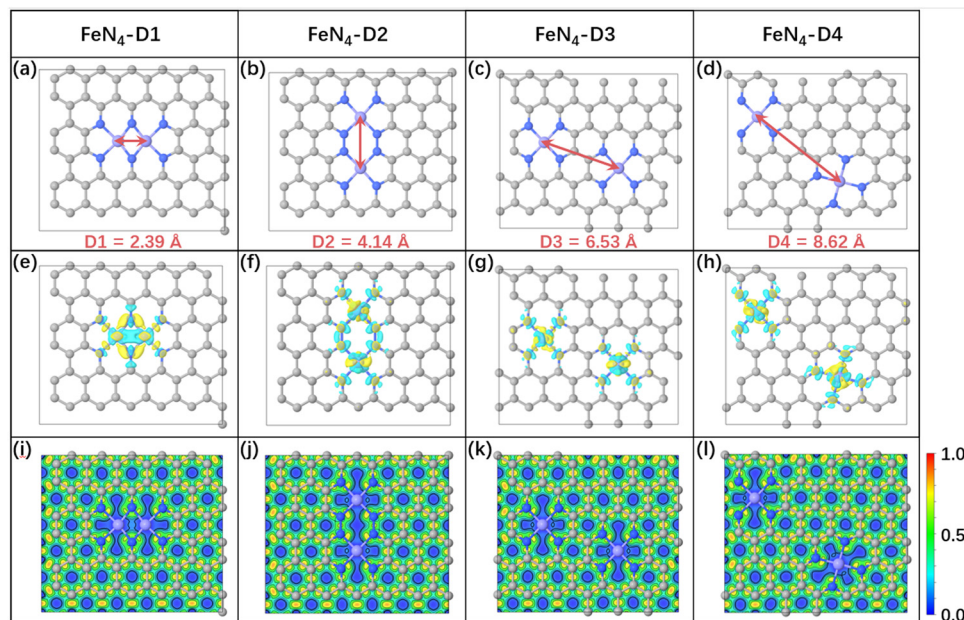
$$\Delta G = \Delta E + \Delta E_{\text{ZPE}} + \int C_p dT - T\Delta S \quad (4)$$

where  $\Delta E$  is the energy change calculated by DFT.  $\Delta E_{\text{ZPE}}$  is the zero-point energy correction.  $\int C_p dT$  and  $\Delta S$  are the enthalpic temperature correction and the reaction entropy change at room temperature ( $T = 298.15 \text{ K}$ ), respectively. Specifically, the saturated vapor pressure of 0.035, 0.053, 0.166, and 0.077 atm was employed for H<sub>2</sub>O, HCOOH, CH<sub>3</sub>OH, and C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>5</sub>OH, respectively. And VASPKIT software was used to post-process the relevant results.<sup>39</sup>

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1 Structure stabilities

To investigate the distance effect of metal atomic pairs on electrocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction, four typical structures (FeN<sub>4</sub>-D<sub>x</sub>,  $x = 1, 2, 3$ , and  $4$ ) containing double FeN<sub>4</sub> active sites were constructed in this work. And every Fe metal site was anchored by four nitrogen atoms to ensure its same coordination environment. The optimized structural models of FeN<sub>4</sub>-D<sub>x</sub> ( $x = 1$ – $4$ ) are displayed in Fig. 1a–d, in which the distances of Fe atomic pairs were 2.39, 4.14, 6.53, and  $8.62 \text{ \AA}$ , respectively. Four FeN<sub>4</sub>-D<sub>x</sub> structures all had no obvious bending deformation in the geometry optimization. The detailed structural parameters are summarized in Table S1 (ESI<sup>†</sup>) and the Fe–N bond average lengths were between  $1.87 \text{ \AA}$  and  $1.91 \text{ \AA}$ . Further, charge density difference between the metal atom and nitrogen-doped carbon and corresponding Bader charge transfer indicated



**Fig. 1** The optimized structures of four different Fe atomic pairs (a–d), charge density difference between metal atoms and nitrogen-doped carbon (e–h) (the regions in yellow and cyan represent, respectively, electron accumulation and deletion. The isosurface levels are  $0.01 \text{ e bohr}^{-3}$ ) and the corresponding electron localization function (i–l).

that Fe atomic pairs transferred electrons to adjacent nitrogen atoms, which can be anchored stably by coordinated pyridine nitrogen atoms (Table S1, ESI† and Fig. 1e–h). Based on the distance effect of the Fe atomic pairs, the magnetic moments and d-band centers of the four catalysts in Table S1 (ESI†) were different from each other, which may change the catalytic properties of Fe atom catalysts. According to the analysis of electron localization function in Fig. 1i–l, there is an obvious concentrated distribution of electrons in Fe–N bonds, indicating that Fe metal atoms have relatively strong electronic interaction with doped nitrogen. Moreover, projected density of states (PDOS) between Fe-3d and N-2p was used to analyze further their valence orbital interaction (Fig. S1, ESI†). Notably, Fe-3d orbitals in the four FeN<sub>4</sub>-Dx structures have good orbital overlapping with N-2p near the Fermi level, which indicates that the different distance Fe atomic pairs anchored by pyridine nitrogen atoms have great structural stability in the electronic structures.

Formation energy ( $E_f$ ) and dissolution potential ( $U_{\text{diss}}$ ) are used to evaluate structural stability in thermodynamics and electrochemistry, which can be calculated as follows:  $E_f = (E_{\text{total}} - E_{\text{NC}} - E_{\text{Fe}} \times 2)/2$  and  $U_{\text{diss}} = U^0 - E_f/ne$ , respectively.  $E_{\text{total}}$ ,  $E_{\text{NC}}$ , and  $E_{\text{Fe}}$  represent the energies of the total FeN<sub>4</sub>-Dx system, metal free nitrogen-doped carbon material, and Fe metal atom, respectively.  $U^0$  and  $n$  are, respectively, the standard dissolution potential of bulk metal and the number of electrons transferred during the dissolution of the metal atom. As can be seen from Fig. S2 (ESI†), FeN<sub>4</sub>-Dx structures have negative  $E_f$  values (from  $-9.29 \text{ eV}$  to  $-7.21 \text{ eV}$ ) and positive  $U_{\text{diss}}$  values of  $3.16$ – $4.20 \text{ V}$ , which ensures that FeN<sub>4</sub>-Dx structures have stable thermodynamic and electrochemical stability, respectively. Combined with previous reports,<sup>20</sup> FeN<sub>4</sub>-Dx structures containing

different distance metal atomic pairs have great potential to be synthesized and applied in electrocatalysis. Therefore, the distance effect of Fe atomic pairs might also enhance the performance of electrocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction reaction, which can be further investigated in detail.

### 3.2 Initial CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption and activation

In general, the initial adsorption and activation of CO<sub>2</sub> molecules on electrocatalysts is considered as the first step in the CO<sub>2</sub> reduction reaction process, which is closely related to the catalytic activity of the electrocatalyst. The optimized CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption structures and structural parameters of the four FeN<sub>4</sub>-Dx catalysts are summarized in Table S2 (ESI†). The C–Fe bond lengths between CO<sub>2</sub> and active sites ranged from  $2.02$  to  $2.11 \text{ Å}$  and the bond angles of O–C–O were activated to bend ( $132.99^\circ$ – $137.75^\circ$ ) after CO<sub>2</sub> adsorbed on the four FeN<sub>4</sub>-Dx structures. Obvious structural deformation indicated that CO<sub>2</sub> molecules can be efficiently activated by Fe atomic pairs and exhibit stable chemisorption on metal centers. Further, Bader charge transfer and charge density difference of CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption structures were calculated to analyze the interaction between CO<sub>2</sub> molecules and metal centers (Fig. 2). As shown in Fig. 2, according to the Bader charge transfer, Fe metal centers mainly acted as electron donors, while CO<sub>2</sub> accepted most electrons to be activated. Charge density difference distribution and the corresponding profile map indicated that CO<sub>2</sub> can be adsorbed stably on FeN<sub>4</sub>-Dx structures by strong C–Fe bond interaction. Moreover, the adsorption energies of CO<sub>2</sub> on FeN<sub>4</sub>-Dx structures also indicated that Fe metal centers had a stable adsorption interaction with CO<sub>2</sub> (Table S2, ESI†). Partial density of states (PDOS) in Fig. S3 (ESI†) showed the valence

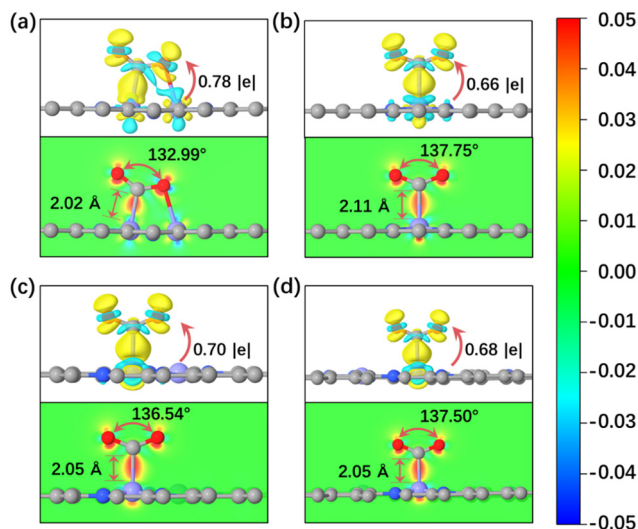


Fig. 2 (a–d) Charge density difference and Bader charge transfer of CO<sub>2</sub> adsorbed on FeN<sub>4</sub>-D<sub>x</sub> ( $x = 1, 2, 3$ , and  $4$ ) (the regions in yellow and cyan represent, respectively, electron accumulation and deletion. The isosurface levels are  $0.005 \text{ e bohr}^{-3}$ ).

orbital electron interaction between the Fe 3d-orbital of active sites and CO<sub>2</sub> 2p-orbital. The orbital overlapping between Fe-3d and CO<sub>2</sub>-2p orbitals near the Fermi level further proved that the four types of Fe active sites all had good interaction with CO<sub>2</sub> molecules. Obvious bending deformation of CO<sub>2</sub> molecules on the four types of atomic pairs proved that different distance metal centers all had catalytic potential in the CO<sub>2</sub>RR. Specifically, CO<sub>2</sub> was adsorbed on the bridge sites of the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure due to its close Fe pair sites. And the stable adsorption configuration showed that CO<sub>2</sub> was more easily activated and adsorbed on FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 than on the top sites of other FeN<sub>4</sub>-D<sub>x</sub> structures. In addition, the values of the Bader charge transfer between CO<sub>2</sub> molecules and FeN<sub>4</sub>-D<sub>x</sub> structures show a similar trend with the change of CO<sub>2</sub> bond angles (Table S2, ESI<sup>†</sup>). Therefore, the special Fe pair sites of the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure may have an advantage in promoting the initial CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption and activation.

### 3.3 CO<sub>2</sub>RR to C<sub>1</sub> products and HER side reactions

Every elementary reaction of the CO<sub>2</sub>RR after CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption and activation is an important factor to analyze the catalytic reduction performance of electrocatalysts. Generally, the initial CO<sub>2</sub> reduction steps can be divided into two hydrogenation reactions: hydrogen protons attacking oxygen atoms ( $\text{*CO}_2 + \text{H}^+ + \text{e}^- \rightarrow \text{*COOH}$ ) and hydrogen protons attacking carbon atoms ( $\text{*CO}_2 + \text{H}^+ + \text{e}^- \rightarrow \text{*HCOO}$ ). Different reduction products can be produced by different reaction pathways, depending on intermediates with relatively low reaction free energy. As for the CO product, CO<sub>2</sub> prefers to undergo this reduction process:  $\text{CO}_2 \rightarrow \text{*CO}_2 \rightarrow \text{*COOH} \rightarrow \text{*CO} \rightarrow \text{CO}$ . As shown in Fig. 3a, the reaction free energies ( $\Delta G$ ) of the CO<sub>2</sub>RR to CO on FeN<sub>4</sub>-D<sub>x</sub> ( $x = 1, 2, 3$ , and  $4$ ) structures were compared and the  $\Delta G$  values of critical steps were labeled. Obviously, the potential limiting step (PLS) of the CO<sub>2</sub>RR to CO on FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 was the formation of the

\*COOH intermediate ( $\text{*CO}_2 + \text{H}^+ + \text{e}^- \rightarrow \text{*COOH}$ ,  $\Delta G = 0.31 \text{ eV}$ ). As for FeN<sub>4</sub>-D2, FeN<sub>4</sub>-D3, and FeN<sub>4</sub>-D4 structures, the CO desorption was the PLS. The high reaction free energy of the CO desorption on FeN<sub>4</sub>-D2, FeN<sub>4</sub>-D3, and FeN<sub>4</sub>-D4 structures indicated that the Fe atomic pair sites with long distance had powerful adsorption for CO and inhibited CO desorption. The PLS  $\Delta G$  value of  $0.31 \text{ eV}$  on FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 was much lower than those on FeN<sub>4</sub>-D2 ( $\Delta G = 1.32 \text{ eV}$ ), FeN<sub>4</sub>-D3 ( $\Delta G = 1.26 \text{ eV}$ ), and FeN<sub>4</sub>-D4 ( $\Delta G = 1.17 \text{ eV}$ ) structures, which showed that FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 had the superior catalytic performance in the CO<sub>2</sub>RR to CO compared to other catalyst structures. Formic acid (HCOOH), as another two-electron reduction product, had two reaction pathways: Path 1:  $\text{CO}_2 \rightarrow \text{*CO}_2 \rightarrow \text{*COOH} \rightarrow \text{*HCOOH} \rightarrow \text{HCOOH}$ , and Path 2:  $\text{CO}_2 \rightarrow \text{*CO}_2 \rightarrow \text{*HCOO} \rightarrow \text{*HCOOH} \rightarrow \text{HCOOH}$ . By comparing the free energy of the two reaction pathways and choosing the more favorable reaction process, the free energy profile of producing HCOOH on the four catalysts was compared and analyzed. As can be seen in Fig. 3b, FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1, FeN<sub>4</sub>-D3, and FeN<sub>4</sub>-D4 structures followed Path 1 to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> to HCOOH, while FeN<sub>4</sub>-D2 preferred to follow Path 2. And the PLS of forming HCOOH on the four catalysts was also different to some extent due to the distance difference of Fe atomic pair sites. By comparing the  $\Delta G$  values of the PLS, the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D3 structure was more advantageous than other catalysts in the CO<sub>2</sub>RR to HCOOH, and its  $\Delta G$  value was only  $0.22 \text{ eV}$ . Therefore, FeN<sub>4</sub>-D3 with specific distance ( $6.53 \text{ \AA}$ ) Fe pair sites had superior catalytic performance in producing formic acid compared to other catalyst structures.

It's worth noting that the hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) is considered to be the main side reaction for electrocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction, which inhibits the CO<sub>2</sub>RR process. Fig. 3c shows the reaction free energy of the HER on the four catalysts. On the basis of the high  $\Delta G$  value of  $0.33 \text{ eV}$ , the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure had a better inhibition effect on the HER than the other three catalyst structures, which was conducive to promoting the catalytic reduction of CO<sub>2</sub>. Moreover, the selectivity of FeN<sub>4</sub>-D<sub>x</sub> ( $x = 1, 2, 3$ , and  $4$ ) structures between the HER and CO<sub>2</sub>RR was further investigated by comparing the  $\Delta G$  values of first electron transfer proton coupling (Fig. 3d). The  $\Delta G$  values of forming \*COOH intermediates on the four catalyst structures were below the dotted line, which indicated that they all had good CO<sub>2</sub>RR selectivity. Therefore, the Fe atomic pair sites in FeN<sub>4</sub>-D<sub>x</sub> ( $x = 1, 2, 3$ , and  $4$ ) structures were worthy to further investigate their catalytic performance in the CO<sub>2</sub>RR. Considering the stable adsorption of CO on FeN<sub>4</sub>-D<sub>x</sub> ( $x = 1, 2, 3$ , and  $4$ ) catalysts, the multi-electron reduction products of the CO<sub>2</sub>RR, such as methanol (CH<sub>3</sub>OH) and methane (CH<sub>4</sub>), were further compared and analyzed. On the basis of reaction free energy of different intermediates in Table S3 (ESI<sup>†</sup>), the optimal reaction pathways of the CO<sub>2</sub>RR to CH<sub>3</sub>OH and CH<sub>4</sub> on the four catalysts are summarized in Fig. 3e and f, respectively. Based on the linear scaling relations,<sup>40,41</sup> the stable adsorption interaction between \*CO intermediates and FeN<sub>4</sub>-D<sub>x</sub> ( $x = 2, 3$ , and  $4$ ) structures resulting in the \*CO hydrogenation ( $\text{*CO} + \text{H}^+ + \text{e}^- \rightarrow \text{*CHO}$ ) was still the rate-determining step of multi-electron C<sub>1</sub> reduction products. And the  $\Delta G$  values of the PLS were as follows: FeN<sub>4</sub>-D3 ( $\Delta G = 0.73 \text{ eV}$ ) > FeN<sub>4</sub>-D4



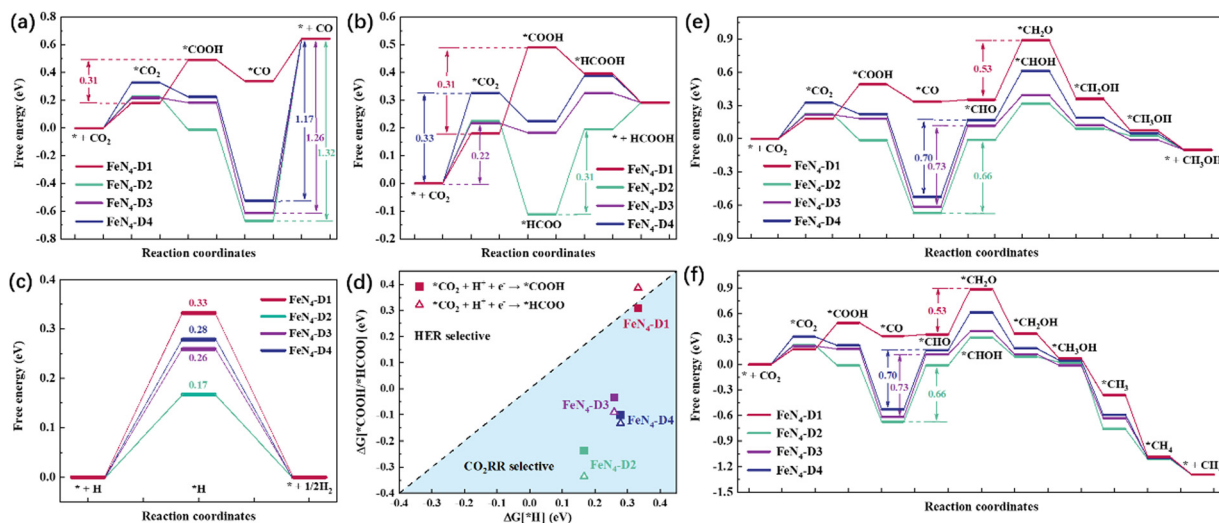


Fig. 3 Reaction free energy profile of CO<sub>2</sub> reduction to CO (a) and HCOOH (b). HER free energy profile (c) and the comparison between the HER and CO<sub>2</sub>RR on the four catalysts (d). Reaction free energy profile of the CO<sub>2</sub>RR to CH<sub>3</sub>OH (e) and CH<sub>4</sub> (f) on FeN<sub>4</sub>-D<sub>x</sub> (x = 1, 2, 3, and 4) structures.

( $\Delta G = 0.70$  eV) > FeN<sub>4</sub>-D2 ( $\Delta G = 0.66$  eV). Specifically, the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 catalysts. The hydrogenation of  $\text{*CHO}$  to  $\text{*CH}_2\text{O}$  ( $\Delta G = 0.53$  eV) on the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure played the controlling role of producing

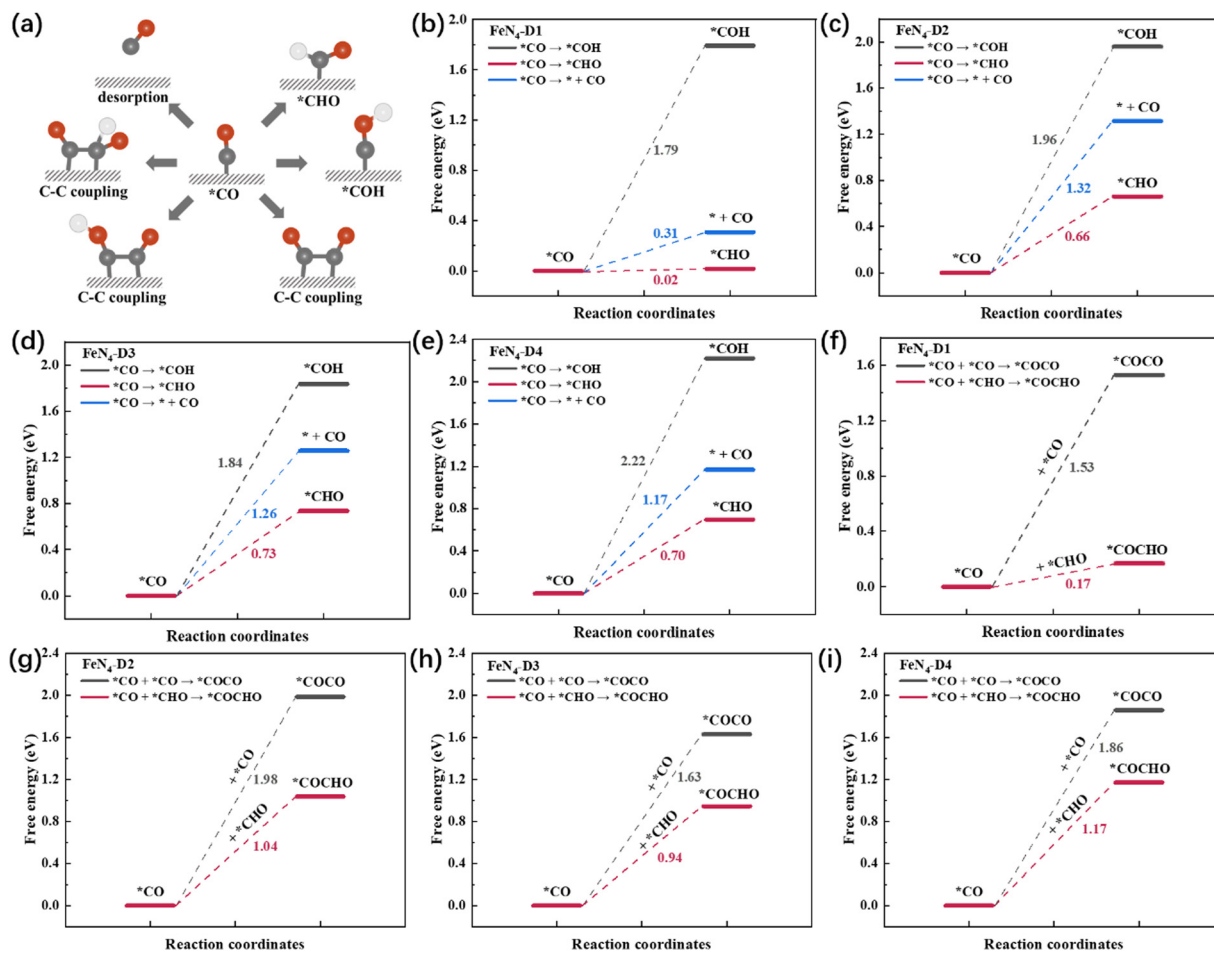


Fig. 4 (a) Schematic diagram of different reaction pathways of the  $\text{*CO}$  intermediate. (b-e) Free energy profile of CO desorption and  $\text{*CO}$  hydrogenation. (f-i) Comparison of C-C coupling on four FeN<sub>4</sub>-D<sub>x</sub> (x = 1, 2, 3, and 4) structures.

CH<sub>3</sub>OH thermodynamically. It's worth noting that there were similar reaction intermediates before \*CH<sub>3</sub>OH in the formation of CH<sub>3</sub>OH and CH<sub>4</sub>. Hence, the two reduction products would have the same PLS in the whole reaction process. Limiting potential ( $U_L$ , V) can be obtained by the  $\Delta G$  values of the PLS:  $U_L = -\Delta G_{\max}/e$ . As shown in Fig. S4 (ESI†), the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure exhibited superior potential for the CO<sub>2</sub>RR to CO and multi-electron C<sub>1</sub> reduction products, and the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D3 structure had the optimal  $U_L$  values on producing HCOOH in the four catalysts. In a word, adjusting the distance of Fe atomic pair sites has an important regulatory effect on the electrocatalytic performance. Moreover, two active sites of Fe atomic pairs have the potential to promote deep CO<sub>2</sub> reduction.

### 3.4 \*CO intermediate analysis and C-C coupling

\*CO was a key intermediate in the CO<sub>2</sub>RR process, participating in many possible reaction pathways such as CO desorption, two hydrogenation models, and three types of C-C coupling (Fig. 4a). In order to screen the optimal reaction pathway of \*CO intermediate on the four catalysts, reaction free energies of different pathways were calculated and are compared in Fig. 4b-i. Firstly, compared with CO desorption and \*CO hydrogenation to \*COH, \*CO intermediates were prone to form \*CHO intermediates with the lowest  $\Delta G$  pathway on the four FeN<sub>4</sub>-Dx ( $x = 1, 2, 3$ , and 4) structures (Fig. 4b-e). Therefore, the multi-electron reduction products might occupy a dominant position in the CO<sub>2</sub>RR process. Generally, C<sub>2</sub> products have three types of C-C coupling: \*CO-CO, \*CO-\*COH, and \*CO-\*CHO coupling. Due to the high  $\Delta G$  of \*CO hydrogenation to

\*COH intermediates, \*CO-\*COH coupling was not considered when comparing the optimal coupling model of the CO<sub>2</sub>RR process. As shown in Fig. 4f-i, the free energies of \*CO-CO coupling and \*CO-\*CHO coupling on the four catalysts were calculated, respectively. Obviously, \*CO-\*CHO coupling exhibited the superior advantage of lower  $\Delta G$  values than \*CO-CO coupling, which indicated that \*CO-\*CHO coupling might be the main C-C coupling mode on Fe atom dispersed catalysts with Fe pair sites. What's more, the \*CO-CHO coupling on the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure had the lowest free energy ( $\Delta G = 0.17$  eV) among the four catalysts, which indicated that the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure had more potential to produce C<sub>2</sub> products in the CO<sub>2</sub>RR process. The close Fe pair sites might also play an important role in reducing the energy required for the migration of critical intermediates. The  $\Delta G$  values of \*CO-CHO coupling on FeN<sub>4</sub>-D2, FeN<sub>4</sub>-D3, and FeN<sub>4</sub>-D4 catalysts were, respectively, 1.04, 0.94, and 1.17 eV. Thus, the high C-C coupling free energy may be the main reason that Fe single atom catalysts have a poor catalytic performance for the CO<sub>2</sub>RR to C<sub>2</sub> products. To sum up, precisely controlling the distance of Fe atomic pair sites may greatly improve their catalytic performance in the CO<sub>2</sub>RR.

To investigate the catalytic performance of the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 catalyst on the CO<sub>2</sub>RR to C<sub>2</sub> products, the reaction free energies of C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>4</sub> and C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>5</sub>OH were calculated (Table S4, ESI†) and the optimal reaction pathways are displayed in Fig. 5a. It can be seen that the endothermic process \*CHOCHOH + H<sup>+</sup> + e<sup>-</sup> → \*CHOCH + H<sub>2</sub>O ( $\Delta G = 0.34$  eV) was the key limiting step in producing C<sub>2</sub> products. And the key  $\Delta G$  values of C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>4</sub> and

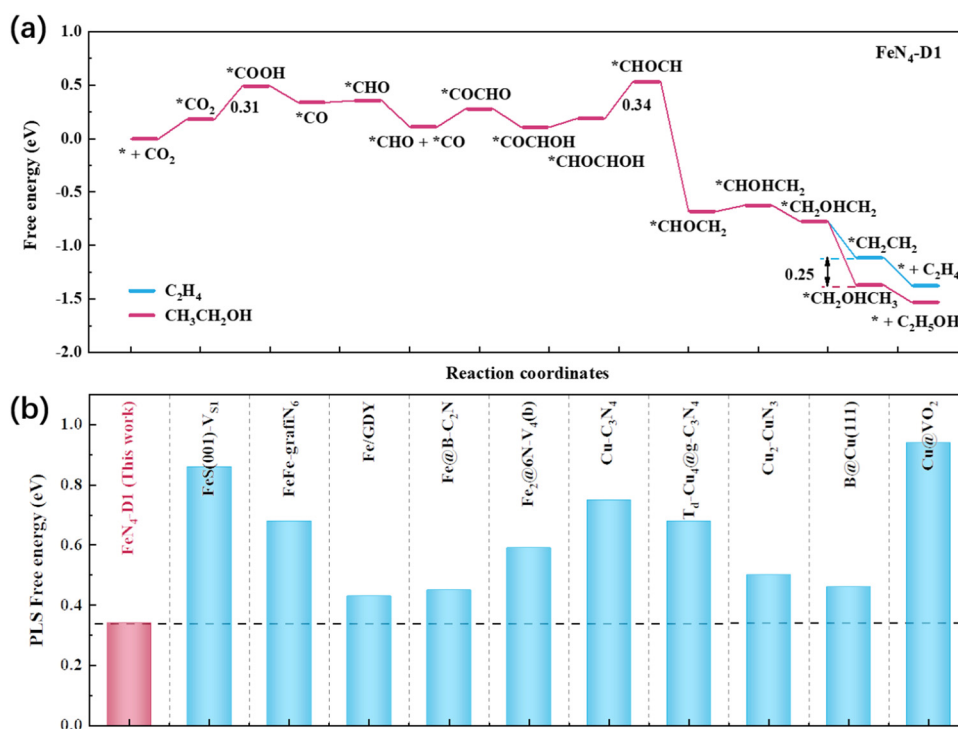


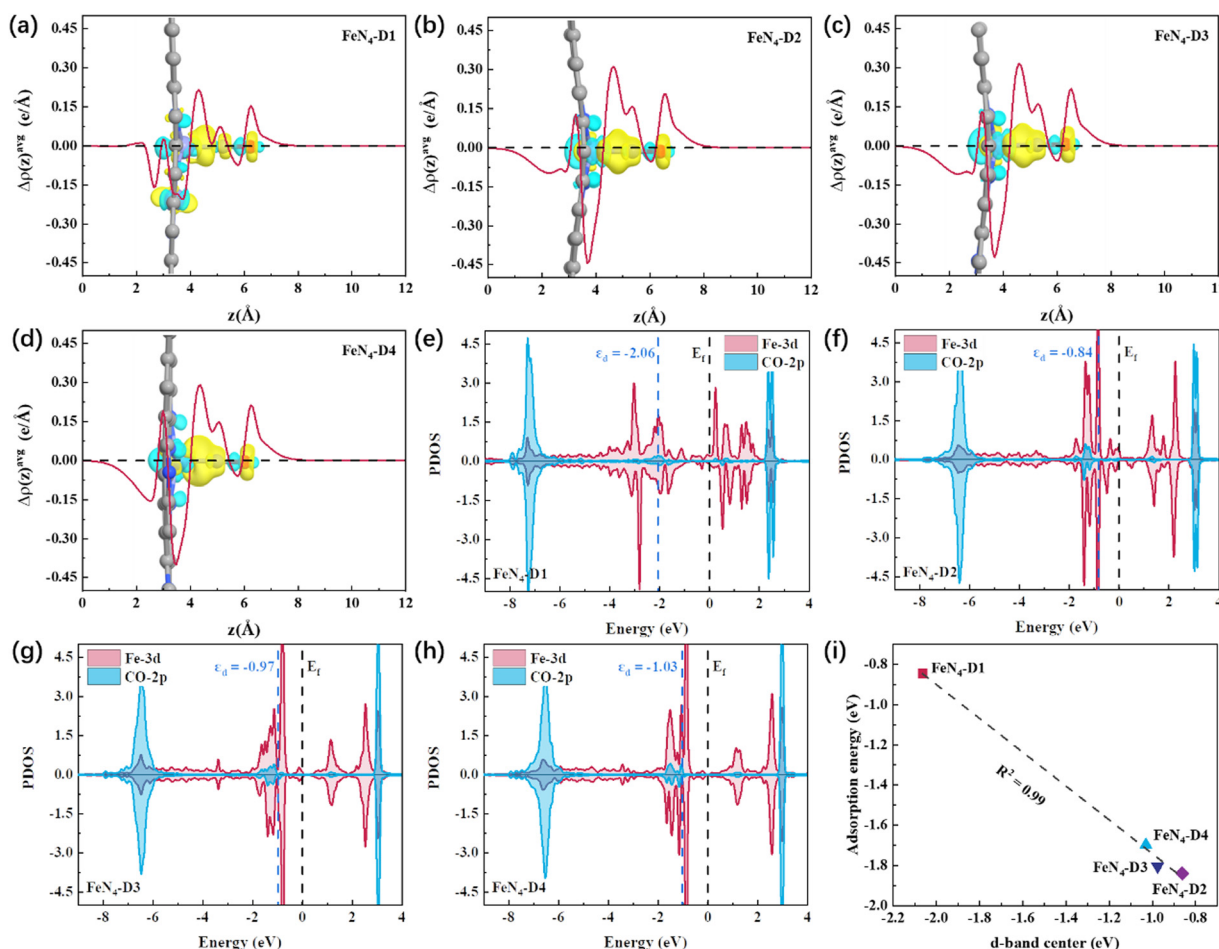
Fig. 5 (a) Reaction free energy profile of CO<sub>2</sub> reduction to C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>4</sub> and C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>5</sub>OH on the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure. (b) Comparison of the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure with some reported catalysts on the PLS free energy of C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>5</sub>OH.

C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>5</sub>OH were much lower than those of CH<sub>3</sub>OH and CH<sub>4</sub>, indicating that the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure was more inclined to deeply reduce CO<sub>2</sub> to C<sub>2</sub> products when \*CO intermediates were formed. Moreover, the \*CH<sub>2</sub>OHCH<sub>2</sub> intermediate was a watershed between C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>4</sub> and C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>5</sub>OH, which had two hydrogenation methods to form \*CH<sub>2</sub>CH<sub>2</sub> and \*CH<sub>2</sub>OHCH<sub>3</sub>, respectively, with endothermic reaction. The Boltzmann distribution formula  $\exp[-(\Delta G)/(k_B T)]$  can be used to estimate the selectivity of two pathways based on their free energy difference.<sup>28,42,43</sup> \*CH<sub>2</sub>OHCH<sub>3</sub> intermediates were more readily available than \*CH<sub>2</sub>CH<sub>2</sub>, with a free energy difference of about 0.25 eV. Thus,  $\Delta G = -0.25$  eV,  $T = 298.15$  K, and the molar ratio between C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>5</sub>OH and C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>4</sub> was about  $(1.68 \times 10^4):1$ , which indicated that the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure showed a better product selectivity toward C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>5</sub>OH than C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>4</sub> in the CO<sub>2</sub>RR. In order to highlight the catalytic performance of the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure on the CO<sub>2</sub>RR to C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>5</sub>OH, some reported catalysts were summarized and compared (Fig. 5b and Table S5, ESI†).<sup>23,24,28,29,44–49</sup> Compared with usual Cu catalysts and iron-containing catalysts, the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure with specific distance Fe atomic

pair sites exhibited more competitive catalytic performance for the CO<sub>2</sub>RR to ethanol. Therefore, the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure can be used as a promising electrochemical catalyst for producing ethanol.

### 3.5 Electronic structure analysis of \*CO intermediates

The FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure had the superior catalytic performance on the CO<sub>2</sub>RR to ethanol, which can be attributed to the mild interaction between the key reaction intermediates and Fe atomic pair active sites with a specific distance (2.39 Å). \*CO intermediates were important components in the C–C coupling process and played a pivotal role in the selectivity to C<sub>1</sub> and C<sub>2</sub> products. Therefore, the detailed electronic structures of \*CO intermediates on the four different distance Fe pair sites were calculated and analyzed, and the nature of the catalytic reaction mechanism was further investigated. Fig. 6a–d shows the charge density difference between \*CO intermediates and catalysts. To visualize the distribution of electron density intuitively, plane-averaged electron density difference along the z axis ( $\Delta\rho(z)^{\text{avg}}$ , e Å<sup>−1</sup>) was drawn together as well. It can



**Fig. 6** (a–d) Charge density difference and the corresponding plane-averaged electron density difference along the z axis of \*CO intermediates adsorbed on FeN<sub>4</sub>-D<sub>x</sub> (x = 1, 2, 3, and 4) structures (the regions in yellow and cyan represent, respectively, electron accumulation and depletion. The isosurface levels are 0.005 e bohr<sup>−3</sup>). (e–h) Partial density of states (PDOS) between the 2p-orbital of CO and 3d-orbital of adsorbed Fe sites on the four catalysts, respectively. (i) The relationship between the d-band center ( $\epsilon_d$ ) of adsorbed Fe sites and the adsorption energy of \*CO intermediates.

be observed in Fig. 6a–d that a large number of electrons were concentrated on the C–Fe bonds between Fe atom active sites and \*CO intermediates. Among them, the charge density concentration region of the \*CO intermediate adsorbed on the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure was weaker than that of other catalysts. And the curve of z axis plane-averaged electron density difference also indicated that the \*CO intermediate adsorbed on the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure had the lowest  $\Delta\rho(z)^{\text{avg}}$  peak ( $4 \text{ \AA} < z < 6 \text{ \AA}$ ) in the four \*CO intermediate adsorption configurations. Therefore, low charge density distribution of C–Fe bonds may weaken the interaction between \*CO intermediates and the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure. Further, partial density of states (PDOS) between the 2p-orbital of CO and 3d-orbital of adsorbed Fe sites was calculated to analyze their valence shell electron interaction (Fig. 6e–h). It was obvious that the overlapping region between CO-2p and Fe-3d orbitals of the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure below the Fermi level was the smallest among the four FeN<sub>4</sub>-Dx catalysts. Moreover, the antibonding orbitals formed by \*CO with FeN<sub>4</sub>-Dx ( $x = 2, 3$ , and  $4$ ) were all higher than those formed by \*CO with the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 catalyst, which enhanced the electronic interaction between \*CO and FeN<sub>4</sub>-Dx ( $x = 2, 3$ , and  $4$ ) catalysts. The d-band center ( $\epsilon_d$ ) of metal active sites can serve as a descriptor to compare the adsorption interaction.<sup>50</sup> It is worth noting that Fe active sites of the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 catalyst had the lowest d-band center position far away from the Fermi level. And the  $\epsilon_d$  values of the four catalysts followed FeN<sub>4</sub>-D2 ( $\epsilon_d = -0.84$ ) > FeN<sub>4</sub>-D3 ( $\epsilon_d = -0.97$ ) > FeN<sub>4</sub>-D4 ( $\epsilon_d = -1.03$ ) > FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 ( $\epsilon_d = -2.06$ ). Fig. 6i displays the relationship between the  $\epsilon_d$  values and \*CO intermediate adsorption energy. Obviously, the adsorption energies of \*CO intermediates were linearly correlated with the d-band center of Fe active sites. The FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 catalyst had the weak interaction with \*CO intermediates based on its low d-band center. Therefore, the appropriate distance of Fe atom pairs modulated the d-band center of active sites, which adjusted the interaction between key intermediates and catalysts, and promoted the catalytic performance of the CO<sub>2</sub>RR.

## 4. Conclusions

In this work, different distance Fe atomic pairs were anchored by pyridine nitrogen to construct four FeN<sub>4</sub>-Dx ( $x = 1, 2, 3$ , and  $4$ ) structures and the distance effect on the catalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction performance was further investigated. Combining charge density difference, electron localization function, and density of states between Fe atomic pair sites and coordination pyridine nitrogen, the four catalysts displayed good structural stability in electronic structure. Moreover, the negative  $E_f$  and positive  $U_{\text{diss}}$  indicated that the four different distance Fe atomic pairs can be stably anchored by nitrogen-containing carbon materials in thermodynamics and electrochemistry. The initial CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption and activation was the key to reflect the activity of the catalyst. The optimized adsorption geometry and Bader charge transfer displayed that the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure had the best activation effect on CO<sub>2</sub> molecules. Thus, the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1

structure had good catalytic potential in the CO<sub>2</sub>RR. On the basis of the free energy profile, the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure exhibited better catalytic performance for the CO<sub>2</sub>RR to produce CO than other catalysts in C<sub>1</sub> products. And compared with the HER side reaction, FeN<sub>4</sub>-Dx structures all showed better CO<sub>2</sub>RR selectivity, which further proved that Fe atomic pair catalysts had potential for application in electrocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub>RR. Considering the double sites of Fe atomic pair catalysts, the C–C coupling was further calculated and analyzed. The hydrogenation of the \*CO intermediate was prone to form \*CHO with lower reaction free energy rather than \*COH. And \*CO–\*CHO coupling with smaller  $\Delta G$  values might be the main C–C coupling method in producing C<sub>2</sub> products. Among the four catalysts, the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure had the lowest  $\Delta G$  values in the C–C coupling process, which indicated that the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure had good potential in reducing CO<sub>2</sub> to produce C<sub>2</sub> products. Further, the free energy profile showed that the CO<sub>2</sub>RR on the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure was prone to form ethanol with a low  $\Delta G$  value (0.34 eV) and high selectivity, which was superior to most reported catalysts. Charge density difference, PDOS, and d-band center of \*CO intermediates on the four catalysts proved that the distance regulation of Fe atomic pairs enabled the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure to have the best catalytic performance for the CO<sub>2</sub>RR to ethanol. To sum up, the accurate distance adjustment of Fe atomic pair active sites may greatly improve the electrocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub>RR performance, and the FeN<sub>4</sub>-D1 structure would have broad application prospects in electrochemical energy conversion.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no competing financial interests in this paper.

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by Natural Science Foundation of Shandong Province (ZR2020KB010), and the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities (22CX07010A).

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