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# An insight, at the atomic level, into the structure and catalytic properties of the isomers of the Cu<sub>22</sub> cluster†

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The study of structural isomerism in copper nanoclusters has been relatively limited compared to that in gold and silver nanoclusters. In this work, we present the controlled synthesis and structures of two isomeric copper nanoclusters, denoted as  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2, whose compositions were determined to be  $Cu_{22}$ (SePh)<sub>10</sub>(Se)<sub>6</sub>(P(Ph-<sup>4</sup>F)<sub>3</sub>)<sub>8</sub> through single-crystal X-ray diffraction (SCXRD). The structural isomerism of  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2 arises from the different arrangements of a few Cu(SeR)(PR<sub>3</sub>) motifs on the surface structure. These subtle changes in the surface structure also influence the distortion of the core and the spatial arrangement of the clusters, and affect the electronic structure. Furthermore, due to their distinct structures,  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2 exhibit different catalytic properties in the copper-catalyzed [3 + 2] azide-alkyne cycloaddition (CuAAC). Notably,  $Cu_{22}$ -1 demonstrates efficient catalytic activity for photoinduced AAC, achieving a yield of 90% within 1 hour. This research contributes to the understanding of structural isomerism in copper nanoclusters and offers insights into the structure-function relationship in these systems.

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#### Introduction

Ligand-protected nanoclusters have attracted significant attention due to their promising applications in catalysis, optical waveguides, fluorescence, and more.1-9 The increasing number of structurally-determined clusters has led to the discovery of various types of nanocluster isomerism, including chiral isomerism and structural isomerism, which serve as valuable for investigating models structure-property relationships. 10-17 Chiral isomerism is often observed in the crystal lattice, while structural isomerism can be achieved through ligand engineering or controlled synthesis methods. However, compared to chiral isomerism, the existence of "literal" nanocluster structural isomers, composed of identical constituent metals and ligands, is rarely reported. To date,

different ligand arrangements. This difference results in varied

catalytic selectivity for the 1O2 involved selective oxidation of

sulfides.41 Unlike the quasi-structural isomerism observed in

only seven pairs of such isomers have been fully structurally

determined, namely  $\mathrm{Au_4Cu_4}$ ,  $^{18}$   $\mathrm{Au_9}$ ,  $^{19}$   $\mathrm{Au_{23}}$ ,  $^{10}$   $\mathrm{Au_{28}}$ ,  $^{20}$   $\mathrm{Au_{36}}$ ,  $^{21}$   $\mathrm{Au_{38}}$ ,  $^{22}$  and  $\mathrm{Au_{42}}$ .  $^{23}$  The discovery of structural isomerism has

greatly contributed to our understanding of the correlation

between cluster structures and their properties. For instance, the Au<sub>36</sub>(SR)<sub>24</sub> cluster, with a two-dimensional (2D) arrangement of Au<sub>4</sub> tetrahedral units, has been found to exhibit higher efficiency in the intramolecular hydroamination of alkynes compared to the Au<sub>36</sub>(SR)<sub>24</sub> cluster with a one-dimensional (1D) arrangement of Au<sub>4</sub> tetrahedral units.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, two isomeric  $Au_{38}(PET)_{24}$  (PET = 2-phenylethanethiol) clusters have demonstrated distinctly different catalytic properties, while two isomeric Au<sub>42</sub>(TBBT)<sub>26</sub> (TBBT = 4-tert-butylbenzenethiol) clusters have exhibited diverse luminescence behaviors.<sup>22,23</sup> Efforts have been made to discover more pairs of nanocluster structural isomers. 25-39 The majority of research on structural isomerism in nanoclusters has focused on gold and silver nanoclusters, with limited exploration of copper nanocluster structural isomerism. 31,40,41 Quasi-structural isomerism has been identified in copper clusters based on the  $Cu_{20}H_{11}(S_2P(O^iPr)_2)_9$  and  $Cu_{20}H_{11}\{Se_2P(O^iPr)_2\}_9$  templates.<sup>40</sup> Then the Sun group synthesized two quasi-structurally isocopper nanoclusters, [Cu<sub>13</sub>Na<sub>2</sub>(CZ-PrA)<sub>6</sub>(TC<sub>4</sub>A)<sub>2</sub>Cl  $(CH_3OH)_2$ ] and  $[Cu_{13}Na(CZ-PrA)_6(TC_4A)_2(CH_3OH)]\cdot CH_3OH\cdot$ CH<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub>·CH<sub>3</sub>COCH<sub>3</sub>, with nearly identical Cu<sub>13</sub> cores but

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<sup>†</sup>Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available: Synthesis process, characterization, X-ray analysis, and Fig. S1, S12 and Tables S1–S6 offering more details on the nanoclusters Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 and Cu<sub>22</sub>-2. CCDC 2289673 for Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 and 2289674 for Cu<sub>22</sub>-2. For ESI and crystallographic data in CIF or other electronic format see DOI: https://doi.org/10.1039/d4nr00973h

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Nanoscale **Paper** 

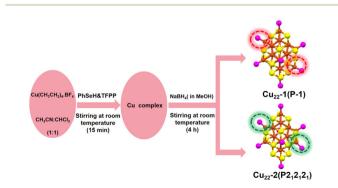
copper nanoclusters, reports of copper cluster isomers sharing the same molecular formula yet exhibiting different structures are exceedingly rare. Therefore, further investigations are necessary to explore the isomerism of copper nanoclusters.

In this study, we present the synthesis of two isomeric copper nanoclusters, namely Cu22-1 and Cu22-2, through the reduction of a copper salt (Cu(CH3CN)4·BF4) in the presence of PhSeH and P(Ph-4F)<sub>3</sub> ligands. The compositions of Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2 were determined to be  $Cu_{22}(SePh)_{10}(Se)_6(P(Ph^{-4}F)_3)_8$ . The Se<sup>2-</sup> in the clusters may be generated in situ by the decomposition of the PhSe ligands, whose C-Se bonds are broken under the reducing atmosphere. 42,43 Interestingly, during the crystal culture process,  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2 formed crystals with different crystal forms (Fig. S1†), enabling easy separation and subsequent analysis using single-crystal X-ray diffraction. Although Cu22-1 and Cu22-2 exhibit slight structural differences, they display distinct packing modes and demonstrate unique catalytic properties. This discovery of copper isomerism protected by PhSeand P(Ph-4F)<sub>3</sub> ligands contributes to the advancement of structural isomerism in this field.

#### Results and discussion

The synthesis of the two isomeric  $Cu_{22}(SePh)_{10}(Se)_6(P(Ph^{-4}F)_3)_8$ clusters was achieved using a one-pot method, followed by a crystal culture process to separate them (Scheme 1). In this procedure, Cu(CH<sub>3</sub>CN)<sub>4</sub>·BF<sub>4</sub> was added to a mixed solution of CH<sub>3</sub>CN and CHCl<sub>3</sub>. After 10 minutes, tris(4-fluorophenyl)phosphine (P(Ph-<sup>4</sup>F)<sub>3</sub>) and phenylselenol (PhSeH) were introduced. After an additional 15 minutes, a NaBH<sub>4</sub> solution was added. The resulting mixture was stirred for 4 hours, and then the solution was removed using a rotary evaporator. The obtained precipitate was washed multiple times with CH2Cl2 and *n*-hexane. The  $Cu_{22}(SePh)_{10}(Se)_6(P(Ph^{-4}F)_3)_8$  isomers were crystallized in a mixture of CH<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub> and n-hexane at room temperature for 2 weeks. Black block and yellow flake crystals were observed, which were identified as Cu22-1 and Cu22-2, respectively. The yield of the nanoclusters was about 10% and 15% for black block Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 and yellow flake Cu<sub>22</sub>-2, respectively.

Single-crystal structural analysis revealed both copper nanoclusters have identical compositions. Each consisted of 22



Scheme 1 The synthesis method of  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2.

copper atoms, 10 PhSe ligands, 8 P(Ph-4F)3 and 6 Se atoms, but they had different surface structures. The total structures of  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2 are shown in Fig. 1. The overall structures of Cu22-1 and Cu22-2 are very similar, and the structural isomerism of  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2 mainly resulted from different arrangements of a few Cu(SeR)(PR3) motifs which was highlighted by the red and green circles. It is worth noting that the structure of Cu22-1 was similar to the structures of  $[Cu_{22}Se_6(SePh)_{10}(PPh_2C_6H_4SMe)_8]^{44}$ and [Cu<sub>22</sub>Se<sub>6</sub>(S-C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>4</sub>- $Br)_{10}(PPh_3)_8]/[Cu_{22}Se_6(S-C_6H_4-OSiMe_3)_{10}(PPh_3)_8]$  reported by the Fuhr group, 45,46 while Cu22-2 had not been observed.

The structures of Cu22-1 and Cu22-2 were analysed and are presented in Fig. 2. Both clusters had similar Cu<sub>16</sub>Se<sub>6</sub> units, which were formed by the fusion of two distorted Ino decahedra Cu<sub>10</sub>Se<sub>3</sub> through the sharing of four Cu atoms (Fig. S2† and Fig. 2A and B). As shown in Fig. S3,† the arrangement of the Cu<sub>16</sub>Se<sub>6</sub> units in Cu<sub>22</sub>-2 was more orderly than that in Cu<sub>22</sub>-1. The Cu<sub>16</sub>Se<sub>6</sub> framework was then surrounded by two Cu(SeR)<sub>3</sub>(PR<sub>3</sub>) motifs. The isomeric structures of Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2 were achieved when the surface  $Cu_2(SeR)_2(PR_3)_2$  motifs capped the Cu<sub>16</sub>Se<sub>6</sub>@Cu<sub>2</sub>(SeR)<sub>6</sub>(PR<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub> framework. As shown in Fig. 2C and D, the difference in the bonding environment of the Cu<sub>2</sub>(SeR)<sub>2</sub>(PR<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub> motifs with the Cu<sub>16</sub>Se<sub>6</sub>@Cu<sub>2</sub>(SeR)<sub>6</sub>(PR<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub> framework can be observed, especially for the copper atoms (blue). The copper atoms in blue shift from the position near Cu(SeR)<sub>3</sub>(PR<sub>3</sub>) to the position of the nucleus, accompanied by the bond distance of Cu<sub>blue</sub>-Se<sub>red</sub> varying from 2.587 Å to 4.604 Å, and the bond distance of Cu<sub>blue</sub>-Se<sub>yellow</sub> varying from 4.446 Å to 2.553 Å (Fig. S4†). Therefore, the different arrangements of the surface motifs account for the isomerism of Cu<sub>22</sub>-

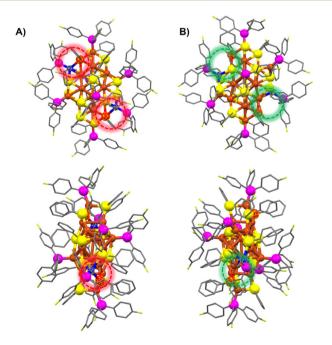


Fig. 1 The total structures of (A)  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and (B)  $Cu_{22}$ -2 from different views. Color labels: Cu = brown/blue, Se = yellow/red, P = purple, F = chartreuse, C = gray. For clarity, H atoms are omitted.

**Paper** Nanoscale

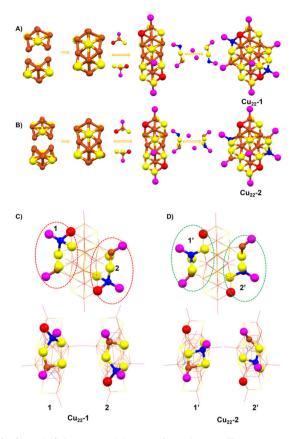


Fig. 2 (A and B) Anatomy of the two Cu<sub>22</sub> clusters. The copper atoms highlighted in blue and Se atom highlighted in red represent a slight change in bonding patterns in the surface structure. (C and D) The different bonding environments of Cu<sub>2</sub>(SeR)<sub>2</sub>(PR<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub> motifs with the  $Cu_{16}Se_6@Cu_2(SeR)_6(PR_3)_2$  framework. Cu = brown/blue, Se = yellow/red, P = purple. For clarity, C, H and F atoms are omitted.

1 and Cu22-2 clusters, which is similar to the case of  $Au_{23}(C \equiv CBu^t)_{15}$  and different from the case of  $Au_{38}(PET)_{24}$ , where completely different metal cores were observed in the two isomers. The Cu-Cu distances gave an average of 2.647 Å for Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 and 2.672 Å for Cu<sub>22</sub>-2, while the Cu-Se distances gave an average of 2.530 Å for  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and 2.519 Å for  $Cu_{22}$ -2, and the Cu-P distances gave an average of 2.223 Å for Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 and 2.228 Å for Cu<sub>22</sub>-2 (Fig. S5 and 6†). Furthermore, the differences in bonding modes between the two surface Cu-P ligands and the overall framework were found to be the main cause of isomerism of the  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2 clusters, as illustrated in Fig. S7.†

Regarding the crystal system, the two isomeric  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and Cu<sub>22</sub>-2 clusters exhibit different space groups despite sharing the same crystal condition ( $CH_2Cl_2$  and *n*-hexane).  $Cu_{22}$ -1 crystallized in the triclinic P1 space group, while Cu22-2 crystallized in the orthorhombic  $P2_12_12_1$  space group (Tables S1 and S2 $\dagger$ ). In the crystal unit cell of  $Cu_{22}$ -1 (Fig. 3A), only one nanocluster is observed, and these nanoclusters are arranged in the same direction in the packing model. On the other hand, Cu22-2 nanoclusters in the crystal unit cell are arranged in an alternating pattern (Fig. 3B, and Fig. S8†). This indicates that

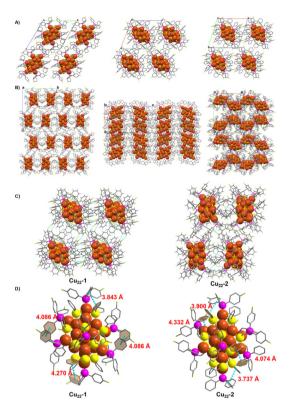


Fig. 3 Views of the assembled packing of (A) Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 and (B) Cu<sub>22</sub>-2 viewed along the a, b and c axes. (C) The intermolecular forces of C-F...H-C in the isomeric  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2. (D) The intramolecular forces of  $\pi \cdots \pi$  in the isomeric  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2. Cu = brown, Se = yellow P = purple, F = chartreuse, C = gray. For clarity, H atoms are omitted.

structural isomerism can effectively alter the stacking pattern of clusters. In the stacking pattern of Cu22-1 and Cu22-2, intermolecular forces such as C-F···H-C interactions are observed (Fig. 3C), with a higher occurrence in the stacking pattern of  $Cu_{22}$ -1. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that intramolecular  $\pi \cdots \pi$ interactions have been identified within both isomeric forms of Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 and Cu<sub>22</sub>-2 (Fig. 3D). These interactions, crucial for the stabilization of molecular structures, exhibit variations that can be attributed to the differing arrangements of surface ligands across the isomers. This observation underscores the significant role that ligand positioning plays in influencing the molecular interactions and, consequently, the overall behavior of these nanoclusters. These intramolecular and intermolecular forces contribute to the efficient stability of the two isomeric  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2 clusters.

As determined by single-crystal X-ray diffraction (SCXRD), the two isomeric Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 and Cu<sub>22</sub>-2 clusters were found to have the formula  $Cu_{22}(SePh)_{10}(Se)_6(P(Ph^{-4}F)_3)_8$ , with a total of 22 copper atoms, 10 SePh<sup>-</sup> ligands, 6 Se ligands, and 8 P(Ph-<sup>4</sup>F)<sub>3</sub> ligands. Both isomeric nanoclusters were found to possess 0 free electrons, calculated as 22 (Cu) - 10 (SePh) - 6 (Se)  $\times$  2 -0 (charge) = 0 e. To further validate the neutral state of the cluster, as indicated by X-ray single-crystal analysis, electrospray ionization time-of-flight mass spectrometry was conNanoscale **Paper** 

ducted in both positive and negative modes. No mass signal for the cluster was detected in either the positive or negative ion mode. The solubility of the Cu22 clusters was tested in solvents such as toluene, CH<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub>, CHCl<sub>3</sub>, CH<sub>3</sub>OH, CH<sub>3</sub>CH<sub>2</sub>OH and CH<sub>3</sub>CN. Cu<sub>22</sub> was found to be practically insoluble in CH<sub>3</sub>OH, CH<sub>3</sub>CH<sub>2</sub>OH and CH<sub>3</sub>CN, while showing limited solubility in toluene, CH<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub> and CHCl<sub>3</sub>. As Cu<sub>22</sub> exhibits stability for several hours in CH2Cl2 solution, CH2Cl2 was selected as the solvent for the UV-vis spectral analysis. The UV-vis spectra of Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 and Cu<sub>22</sub>-2 in CH<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub> are shown in Fig. 4A and B, respectively. Cu22-1 exhibited a shoulder band at 420 nm, with the optical energy gap being 2.60 eV, while Cu<sub>22</sub>-2 showed a very weak shoulder band at 382 nm, with the optical energy gap being 2.73 eV (Fig. S9†). These distinct UV-vis spectra indicated that the two isomeric  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2 clusters possess different electronic structures, which could potentially impact their catalytic performance. X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) was performed to confirm the formula. XPS analysis demonstrated the Cu/Se/P atomic ratio of 22/11.8/8.3 and 22/ 12.3/8.2 for Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 and Cu<sub>22</sub>-2, respectively, close to the ratio of 22/12/8 obtained from the crystal analysis results. The peak signals of Cu, Se, and P are shown in Fig. 4C and D. This result illustrated that the valence state of Cu in the Cu22 nanocluster was close to +1 (Fig. S10†). Elemental analysis (EA) measurement (Table S3†) was performed and the ratio of elements agrees well with that from the X-ray crystallographic analysis. In addition, powder X-ray diffraction (PXRD) was

0.6 0.2 0.2 400 500 600 700 800 900 1000 400 500 600 700 800 900 Wavelength (nm) Wavelength (nm) C) D) (a.u.) 400 200 600 400 200 600 Binding Energy (eV) Binding Energy (eV) ntensity (a.u.) 25  $2\theta$ (deg)

Fig. 4 The UV-vis spectra of isomeric (A) Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 dissolved in CH<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub> and (B) Cu<sub>22</sub>-2 slightly dissolved in CH<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub>; the XPS data of (C) Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 and (D) Cu<sub>22</sub>-2; the PXRD data of (E) Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 and (F) Cu<sub>22</sub>-2.

used to assess the purity of the nanoclusters (Fig. 4E and F). The results show that the experimental data is in good agreement with theoretical data, which confirmed their high phase purity. Fluorescence spectroscopy was conducted on the two isomers  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2 at low temperatures. As illustrated in Fig. S11,† it was observed that both isomers exhibited no fluorescence, whether in solution or in the solid state. Consequently, these findings categorized the two isomers of  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2 as non-fluorescent clusters.

Furthermore, the electronic structures of isomeric Cu22-1 and Cu<sub>22</sub>-2 were predicted by DFT calculation. <sup>47-51</sup> As depicted in Fig. 5, comparing the partial density-of-states (PDOS) diagrams of Cu22-1 and Cu22-2 provides a clearer insight into the atomic distribution within these two cluster structures and their respective contributions to orbitals across different energy levels. This comparative analysis helps to uncover both similarities and distinctions in the electronic structure of the two clusters. From Fig. 5, it is evident that in the low-energy occupied orbital regions of both clusters, the pink and orange curves are relatively prominent, indicating a significant role played by the Cu and Se atoms' orbitals in forming these occupied orbitals in Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 and Cu<sub>22</sub>-2. Conversely, the unoccupied orbitals in the higher energy range of the clusters were predominantly composed of C atom orbitals (as shown by the red curve in the PDOS). Furthermore, the DOS diagram reveals that the disparity in the HOMO-LUMO energy gaps between  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2 is minimal (2.86 eV and 2.73 eV, respectively), suggesting a similarity in their electronic structures. The HOMO-LUMO energy gaps agreed with the optical energy gap

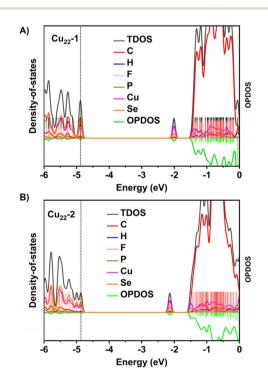


Fig. 5 Calculated PDOS for (A) Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 and (B) Cu<sub>22</sub>-2. Here the orbital energy range is set from -6 eV to 0 eV.

Paper Nanoscale

well. Nonetheless, there are subtle discrepancies in the DOS curves of the two clusters. Specifically, the TDOS curves (depicted in black) of Cu22-1 and Cu22-2 exhibit noticeable distinctions in the vicinity of the -5.0 eV energy level. More precisely, within this energy range, the two orbitals of Cu22-1 form a distinct higher peak. Conversely, due to a significant energy gap disparity between the two orbitals in Cu22-2, under the same broadening function and full width at half maximum (FWHM), the TDOS displays two shorter peaks. This implies that the orbital density in the -5.0 eV to -4.6 eV range differs between the two clusters. Furthermore, with a relative energy difference of 0.39 eV (Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 exhibiting lower energy than Cu<sub>22</sub>-2), it is evident that slight variances exist in the electronic structures of Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 and Cu<sub>22</sub>-2.

On the other hand, UV-visible absorption spectroscopy (UV-Vis) is a powerful tool to provide structural and electronic structure information, hence the UV-Vis spectra of Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 and Cu22-2 simulated by the TDDFT method provide an effective way to reveal the differences in the structure and electronic structure of the two clusters. Fig. 6A and B show the simulated UV-Vis spectra of  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2. It can be seen that the spectral curves of these two clusters have similarities but also show obvious differences. Briefly, both Cu22 isomers have four similar absorption peaks, namely peak  $\alpha$ , peak  $\beta$ , peak  $\gamma$  and peak  $\delta$ . For Cu<sub>22</sub>-1, the four absorption peaks of  $\alpha$ ,  $\beta$ ,  $\gamma$  and  $\delta$ are located at 605 nm, 485 nm, 418 nm and 366 nm, respectively. The corresponding four absorption peaks in Cu22-2 are located at 623 nm, 499 nm, 402 nm and 367 nm, respectively. Therefore, the electronic structures of the two Cu<sub>22</sub> are similar to a large extent. The transition modes shown in Tables S4 and 5† reveal the attributions of these absorption peaks. Obviously, the peak α in the two Cu<sub>22</sub> clusters' spectra has the same attribution, and both are obtained by broadening the first excited state and the second excited state. As shown in Table S4,† for  $Cu_{22}$ -1, the first excited state is characterized by  $H \to L$  contri-

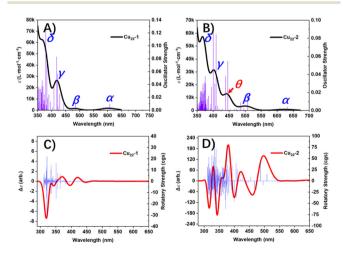


Fig. 6 Simulated UV-visible (UV-Vis) spectra and electronic circular dichroism (ECD) spectra for  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2 based on the TDDFT method. (A and B) UV-Vis spectra of Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 and Cu<sub>22</sub>-2, respectively; (C and D) ECD spectra of Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 and Cu<sub>22</sub>-2, respectively.

buting 66.6%, followed by  $H-1 \rightarrow L$  contributing 31.2%. The second excited state is characterized by an H-1 → L contribution of 66.2%, followed by an  $H \rightarrow L$  contribution of 31.0%. This is very similar to the assignment of the absorption peak  $\alpha$ in the Cu22-2 spectrum (Table S5†). However, Tables S5 and S6† show that there are obvious differences in the assignments of the absorption peaks  $\beta$ ,  $\gamma$  and  $\delta$  in the spectra of the two Cu22 clusters. Interestingly, as shown in Fig. 6B, due to the difference in geometric structure, Cu22-2 has an additional absorption peak  $\theta$  compared to  $Cu_{22}$ -1 (see Table S6† for its assignment). This shows that there are significant differences in the spectral characteristics of the two Cu<sub>22</sub> clusters, revealing the differences in their electronic structures. Furthermore, based on the rotatory strength from the ground state to each excited state calculated by TDDFT, we also plotted the electronic circular dichroism (ECD) spectra of the two Cu22 clusters, which are shown in Fig. 6C and D. It can be clearly found that the ECD spectra of the two Cu22 clusters are significantly different. The reason is that the ECD is extremely sensitive to conformation. Therefore, even if Cu22-1 and Cu22-2 only have a small difference in the shell structure, the difference can still be clearly reflected in the ECD.

The variations in surface shell ordering cause structural isomerism, altering the electronic structure, which then will influence the catalytic activity. To explore this, the copper-catalyzed [3 + 2] azide-alkyne cycloaddition (CuAAC) reaction was used as an example reaction, and the activity of Cu22-1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2 was evaluated (Table 1 and Table S6†). The reaction was conducted in acetonitrile, using 0.06 mol% of Cu22-1 and Cu<sub>22</sub>-2 crystals as catalysts suspended in the solvent. 52-56 After 24 hours at 50 °C, Cu22-1 achieved a product yield of 92%, while Cu<sub>22</sub>-2 yielded only 36% (Table S6†). A time-dependent kinetic study of the CuAAC reaction was also performed. Cu22-1 exhibited a catalytic efficiency of 64% at approximately 12 hours, whereas Cu<sub>22</sub>-2 had a catalytic efficiency of 32%. With an extended reaction time, Cu22-1 achieved a catalytic efficiency of 80% at approximately 18 hours and 92% at

Table 1 The catalytic performance of isomeric  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2. [3 + 2] cycloaddition between benzyl azide and phenylacetylene using isomeric Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 and Cu<sub>22</sub>-2 as catalysts under visible light<sup>a</sup>

GC-MS (%) Catalyst<sup>b</sup> Cycle 1 Cycle 2 Cu<sub>22</sub>-1  $Cu_{22}$ -2

<sup>a</sup> Benzyl azide (0.25 mmol, 1.0 equiv.), phenylacetylene (0.3 mmol, 1.2 equiv.) and acetonitrile (2 mL). b With respect to the amount of benzyl

The product yield determined by

Nanoscale **Paper** 

approximately 24 hours (Table S6†). On the other hand, Cu<sub>22</sub>-2 reached a catalytic efficiency of 35% at around 18 hours and 36% at around 24 hours. Additionally, due to the absorption peaks near 400 nm in both isomers, a photoinduced catalytic reaction was attempted using 405 nm blue LED irradiation. As shown in Table 1, Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 achieved a product yield of 90% after only 1.0 hour of irradiation, while Cu<sub>22</sub>-2 yielded only 10%. These differences in catalytic efficiency between Cu22-1 and Cu<sub>22</sub>-2 highlight how the structural isomerism, caused by the arrangement of the outer ligands, can effectively regulate the clusters' catalytic performance. TDDFT calculations indicated that the oscillator strength between the first excited state and the ground state of Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 is 0.01004, while in Cu<sub>22</sub>-2, this oscillator strength is only 0.00405, as evidenced by the height of the vertical line representing the lowest excited state in the spectral graph. Typically, an oscillator strength below 0.01 suggests a transition is forbidden, leading us to consider the lowest excited state of  $Cu_{22}$ -2 as a dark state. Therefore, even though the lowest excitation energy of Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 is slightly higher than that of  $Cu_{22}$ -2, the significant oscillator strength of  $Cu_{22}$ -1 facilitates the easy absorption of light at the corresponding frequency to form electron-hole pairs. This attribute makes Cu<sub>22</sub>-1 exhibit markedly better photocatalytic activity compared to Cu<sub>22</sub>-2. And as depicted in Fig. S12,† the UV-vis and P-XRD spectra demonstrate significant consistency before and after the photoinduced catalytic reaction, indicating the clusters maintain their integrity during the reaction process.

#### Conclusions

In summary, we have successfully synthesized and characterized two isomeric copper nanoclusters, Cu<sub>22</sub>(SePh)<sub>10</sub>(Se)<sub>6</sub>(P(Ph- $(Cu_{22}-1, P\bar{1})$  and  $Cu_{22}(SePh)_{10}(Se)_6(P(Ph^{-4}F)_3)_8-2$  ( $Cu_{22}-1$ ) 2,  $P2_12_12_1$ ), using SCXC.  $Cu_{22}(SePh)_{10}(Se)_6(P(Ph^{-4}F)_3)_8$  contains a Cu<sub>16</sub>Se<sub>6</sub> core formed by the fusion of two distorted Ino decahedron Cu<sub>10</sub>Se<sub>3</sub> clusters through the sharing of four Cu atoms. This Cu<sub>16</sub>Se<sub>6</sub> core is further capped by two Cu(SeR)<sub>3</sub>(PR<sub>3</sub>) motifs, two Cu(SeR)2(PR3)2 motifs and two PR3 phosphine ligands. The isomerism of  $Cu_{22}$ -1 and  $Cu_{22}$ -2 is due to the different arrangements of the surface motifs, which result in differences in electronic structure (as manifested by different UV absorption spectra, and DFT calculation) and catalytic efficiency in the copper-catalyzed [3 + 2] azide-alkyne cycloaddition (CuAAC). The clusters are highly stable due to  $\pi \cdots \pi$ intramolecular interactions and C-F···H-C intermolecular forces, making them difficult to dissolve. These two isomeric copper nanoclusters enrich the development of structural isomerism in copper nanoclusters and provide an opportunity to investigate the structure-function relationship.

#### Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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**Paper** Nanoscale

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