

Cite this: *RSC Adv.*, 2017, 7, 24453

# Facile synthesis of Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub>/MIL-101 nanocomposite as an efficient heterogeneous catalyst for degradation of pollutants in Fenton-like system

Chaocheng Zhao,<sup>id</sup>\*<sup>ab</sup> Pei Dong,<sup>id</sup><sup>ab</sup> Zongmei Liu,<sup>ab</sup> Guangrui Wu,<sup>ab</sup>  
Shuaijun Wang,<sup>ab</sup> Yongqiang Wang<sup>ab</sup> and Fang Liu<sup>ab</sup>

An active Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub>/MIL-101 hybrid material was prepared *via* a simple *in situ* solvothermal method and characterized as a heterogeneous Fenton-like catalyst for Rhodamine B (RhB) degradation. The Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub>/MIL-101 exhibited enhanced catalytic performance for RhB degradation in a neutral solution. Under optimized conditions, almost 100% removal of 10 mg L<sup>-1</sup> RhB was achieved in 30 min using 0.5 g L<sup>-1</sup> Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub>/MIL-101 and 20 mM H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> at initial pH 7. The reusability of Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub>/MIL-101 was also investigated after four runs. On the basis of the characterization of the catalyst, the results of metal leaching, the effects of radical scavengers, and hydroxyl radical (<sup>•</sup>OH) determination, it was concluded that RhB is decomposed mainly by the attack of the hydroxyl radical (<sup>•</sup>OH), generated by the reaction of Fe<sup>2+</sup> species with H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>. MIL-101 showed a significant synergistic effect with Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub>, in which it played the role of a solid-acid catalyst with Lewis acid sites on its surface, ensuring that a Fenton-like reaction occurred in the neutral solution.

Received 15th February 2017

Accepted 27th April 2017

DOI: 10.1039/c7ra01883e

rsc.li/rsc-advances

## 1. Introduction

The pollution of water resources by refractory organic compounds has become a serious environmental problem that has attracted much attention.<sup>1</sup> However, conventional wastewater treatment technology is not very effective for the degradation of refractory organic pollutants due to the stable structures of these organic compounds.<sup>2,3</sup> Among the available water remediation technologies, advanced oxidation processes (AOPs) are regarded as effective technologies for the degradation of hazardous organic pollutants in wastewater.<sup>4</sup> The Fenton oxidation process, one of the AOPs, seems to be promising due to its low cost and environmental benignity. However, in contrast with homogeneous Fenton oxidation, heterogeneous Fenton-like oxidation has received extensive attention, as it can overcome the drawbacks of homogeneous Fenton oxidation by working in mild conditions and producing almost no byproduct sludge after reaction.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, metal-organic frameworks (MOFs) have attracted great attention because of their salient features, including a porous structure, extremely high surface area, tunable pore size, and functionality.<sup>6–9</sup> These unique properties endow MOFs with wide applications in the areas of catalysis,<sup>10</sup> molecular separations,<sup>11</sup> sensing,<sup>12,13</sup> and gas adsorption,<sup>14</sup> *etc.* Moreover, MOF materials also exhibit tremendous potential in

the degradation of pollutants in the wastewater. For example, Jiang *et al.*<sup>15</sup> presented an approach to construct a photocatalytically active MOF as a catalyst for RhB degradation under visible light. Zhao *et al.*<sup>16</sup> reported that core-shell Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub>@MOFs could be used as a visible-light-driven catalyst for the degradation of dye pollutant with H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> as an electron acceptor. Jiang *et al.*<sup>17</sup> observed that MIL-53(Fe) could completely decompose RhB in the presence of H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> under visible light irradiation. Nevertheless, among all of them, the introduction of external energy is a vital factor to ensure their high catalytic activity, which will hamper their practical application caused by the large cost. To the best of our knowledge, excellent MOF-based Fenton-like catalyst without the aid of external energy has been rarely reported. Therefore, the goal of the present work is to provide a simply synthetic MOF-based Fenton-like catalyst which exhibits powerful efficiency for degradation of RhB without additional energy input and works in mild operation condition with wide application.

MIL-101(Fe) is a typical MOF material with an extremely large surface area and numerous transition metal sites.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, it has a zeotype crystal structure with high resistance to air, water and common solvents.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, MIL-101(Fe) was selected as the object of study in our research. Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> nanoparticles were used in the synthetic process and functionalized MIL-101(Fe) as a superparamagnetic model for degradation of RhB and magnetic recovery.

The proposed synthetic procedure involved *in situ* fabrication of MIL-101(Fe) in the presence of Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> nanoparticles, using a solvothermal method. The electrostatic interaction

<sup>a</sup>College of Chemical Engineering, China University of Petroleum, Qingdao 266580, China. E-mail: zhaoch0821@163.com

<sup>b</sup>State Key Laboratory of Petroleum Pollution Control, Beijing 102206, China



between  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  and metal ions induced chemical stabilization of magnetic nanoparticles. Thus, MOF crystals were uniformly enclosed by  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  to form a homogeneous magnetic product, identified as a  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$ . The physical and chemical characterization of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  was conducted, and the applicability of this hybrid material in heterogeneous Fenton-like reaction was evaluated in view of the effect of the various processes, material stability, degradation mechanism, and the roles of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  and MIL-101(Fe).

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Reagents and materials

Rhodamine B, *tert*-butanol and coumarin were obtained from Sigma-Aldrich, Taiwan.  $\text{FeCl}_3 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ,  $\text{FeCl}_2 \cdot 4\text{H}_2\text{O}$  and terephthalic acid ( $\text{H}_2\text{BDC}$ ) were purchased from Aladdin, China. The organic solvents used (*viz.*, ethanol, and dimethylformamide (DMF)) were obtained from Sinopharm, China. All reagents were of analytical grade without further purification.

### 2.2. Preparation of catalysts

First,  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  nanoparticles were synthesized *via* a chemical co-precipitation method.<sup>20</sup> Briefly,  $\text{FeCl}_2 \cdot 4\text{H}_2\text{O}$  (2.0 g) and  $\text{FeCl}_3 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$  (5.2 g) were dissolved in 25 mL deionized water, followed by the addition of 0.85 mL concentrated hydrochloric acid. The resulting solution was added into a 500 mL three-necked round flask, and then 250 mL of NaOH solution (1.5 M) was dropwise into the above solution under vigorous non-magnetic agitation and  $\text{N}_2$  protection at 80 °C. Afterwards, the obtained  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  suspension was aged for 30 min and cooled down to the room temperature. Finally, the black precipitate was isolated from the supernatant by magnetic decantation and washed with deionized water several times until the pH of the washings approached a neutral value.

For the preparation of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$ , the freshly wet magnetic  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  particles (equal to 40 mg of dried  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ ) were dispersed in 20 mL of  $\text{FeCl}_3 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$  (2700 mg) DMF solution with ultrasonication for 10 min, and then in 40 mL of  $\text{H}_2\text{BDC}$  (824 mg) DMF solution with ultrasonication for another 30 min. The mixture was transferred into a Teflon-lined autoclave bomb and heated at 110 °C for 20 h. Thereafter, the brown solid was separated from the reaction medium with an external magnet, washed several times, and dried overnight in vacuum at 50 °C. The resulting product was identified as  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$ . MIL-101 was synthesized as in the above procedure without adding  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ .

### 2.3. Catalyst characterization

The powder X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns of samples were collected using a diffractometer (X'Pert Pro, Holland) with  $\text{Cu K}\alpha$  radiation (40 kV, 40 mA). The microscopic feature of the samples was observed using a transmission electron microscope (TEM) (JEM 2010, JEOL, Japan) operated at 200 kV. A Fourier Translation Infrared Spectroscopy (FT-IR) Spectrometer (Nicolet Nexus 670, America) was used to record the spectra of the samples in a range from 500 nm to 2500 nm. Nitrogen

adsorption/desorption was analysed using a Micromeritics ASAP 2010 sorption analyser. The functional groups and the related oxidation state of the surface of the materials were analysed by X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) on a PHI 5000 Versaprobe spectrometer equipped with a rotating Al anode generating Al  $\text{K}\alpha$  X-ray radiation at 1486.6 eV. The X-ray beam was monochromatized using seven crystals that were mounted on three Rowland circles. The zeta potentials of samples were measured by micro-electrophoresis apparatus (JS94J, Shanghai).

### 2.4. Experimental procedures

Batch trials were performed in glass beakers (150 mL) with mechanical stirring in the dark. The reaction suspension was prepared by adding the required amount of catalyst into 100 mL of a 10 mg  $\text{L}^{-1}$  RhB solution that had been adjusted to the desired pH value by  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  or NaOH. The required amount of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  was added to the solution to initiate the reaction. Then, the samples were extracted at set intervals using a 5 mL syringe and filtered immediately through a 0.22  $\mu\text{m}$  filter film prior to analysis. To evaluate the contribution of homogeneous removal by the leaching ions, experiments were carried out as follows: after mixing  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  with deionized water (pH 7) for 30 min and removing the composite by filtering, the required amount of RhB was added into the filtrate. To test the stability of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$ , the catalyst was gathered, washed, dried under vacuum, and reused in a fresh solution of RhB and  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  several times. All experiments were conducted in duplicate, and the relative error was less than 5%. Unless specifically noted, each experiment was carried out at an ambient temperature of  $25 \pm 1$  °C and was exposed to air.

### 2.5. Sample analysis

The pH values were determined by a pH-meter (PHS-3C). The concentration of RhB was monitored at 554 nm with a dual-beam UV-visible spectrophotometer (TU-1901). The concentration of ferrous ions was measured colorimetrically with 1,10-phenanthroline at 510 nm on a UV/vis spectrophotometer (Lambda 25, PerkinElmer), as described previously.<sup>21,22</sup>  $\cdot\text{OH}$  produced in the Fenton-like system was estimated by employing coumarin (1.0 mM) as a selective trap for  $\cdot\text{OH}$ . The fluorescence intensity of 7-hydroxycoumarin was determined by a fluorescence spectrophotometer (F97PRO, Lengguang Tech.) at  $\lambda_{\text{excitation}} = 322$  nm and  $\lambda_{\text{emission}} = 455$  nm.<sup>23,24</sup>

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1. Characterization of catalysts

In this study,  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  with different  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  loading amounts (*e.g.*, 40 mg, 80 mg, 120 mg, and 200 mg) were prepared for characterization and performance measurements. The smallest  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  loading amounts was determined to be 40 mg mainly because when any smaller loading amount of the composite was used, some free MIL-101 crystals remained in the solution even after a magnetic field was applied to the side wall of the vessel. Wide-angle XRD was used to identify the



crystalline phase of the samples. Fig. 1 shows the XRD pattern of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ , MIL-101 and  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  with the least amount of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  (40 mg). The powder XRD patterns of MIL-101 were in accordance with the literature.<sup>18</sup> Five characteristic peaks for  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  and two characteristic peaks for MIL-101 were preserved in the pattern of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$ , revealing that this hybrid material was composed of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  and MIL-101.

Fig. 2 shows the morphologies of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  with  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  loading amount of 40 mg. It is apparent from the SEM images

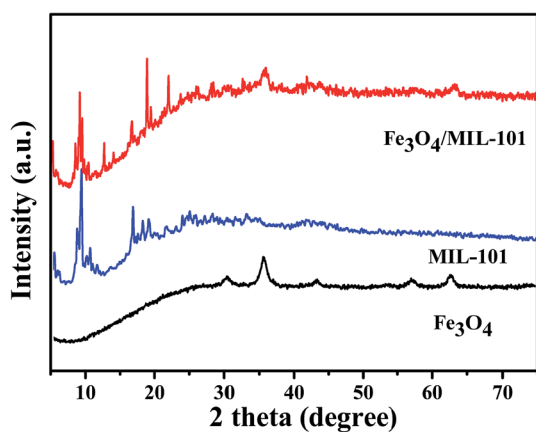


Fig. 1 XRD patterns of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ , MIL-101, and  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  with different  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  loading amounts of 40 mg, 80 mg, 120 mg and 200 mg.

(Fig. 2a) that MIL-101 exhibited a uniform size and the  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  nanoparticles attached to the external surface of the MIL-101 crystals were uniformly distributed, which is a result of the electrostatic interaction between the positively charged MIL-101 and negatively charged  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  (provided by the  $-\text{OH}$  on its surface). This interaction was supported by the zeta potentials of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  and MOF.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, Fig. 2b illustrates that the nanoparticles possess a uniform polyhedral morphology. From a suitable perspective, MIL-101 presented a perfectly analogous hexagonal morphology in the TEM image, with many nanoparticles of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  enclosing all loading amounts (Fig. 2c). The HRTEM image in Fig. 2d shows that the lattice fringe spacing of the nanoparticles was approximately 0.25 nm, which can be assigned to the (311) reflection of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ . More detailed information can be obtained from the TEM images (Fig. 3). The  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  particles were sparse when the loading amount was 40 mg, and the TEM images show clearly increasing  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  content on the surface of the hybrid material with increasing amounts of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ . This is consistent with the synthetic process with different loading amounts.

Fig. 4 shows the FT-IR spectra of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ , MIL-101 and  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  with the least amount of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  (40 mg). The FT-IR spectrum for  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  shows a typical band at  $3415\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , which is attributed to O-H stretching vibrations. For MIL-101, the peak at  $741\text{ cm}^{-1}$  is assigned to the out-of-plane bending vibration of C-H in the benzene ring of  $\text{H}_2\text{BDC}$ . The bands at  $1681$  and  $1506\text{ cm}^{-1}$  are assigned to the asymmetric stretching

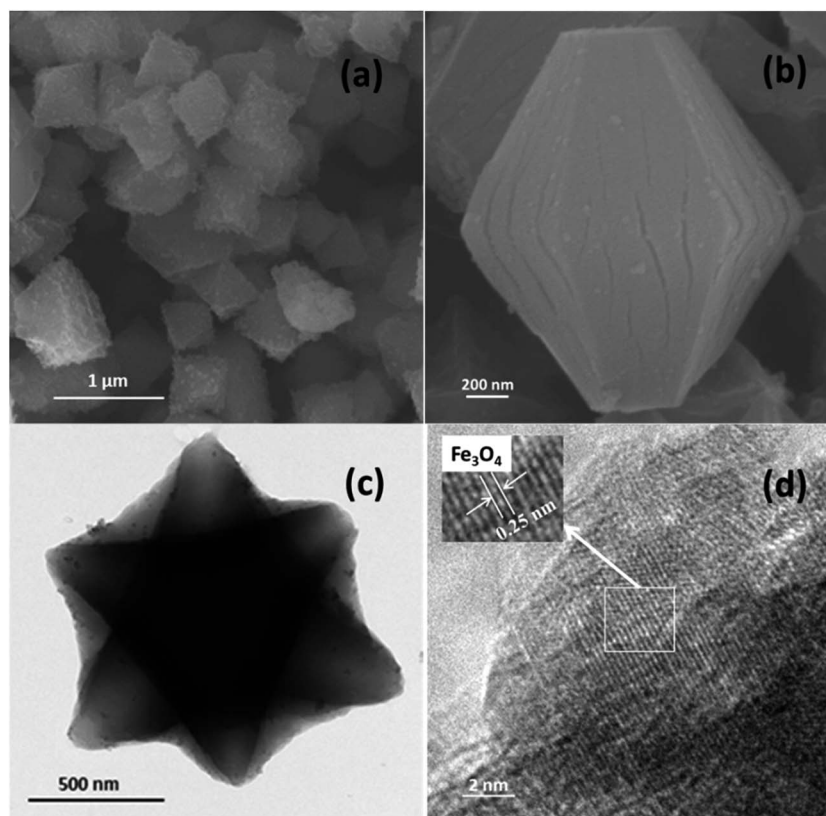


Fig. 2  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  composite with  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  loading amount of 40 mg SEM images (a) and (b), TEM image (c) and HRTEM image (d).



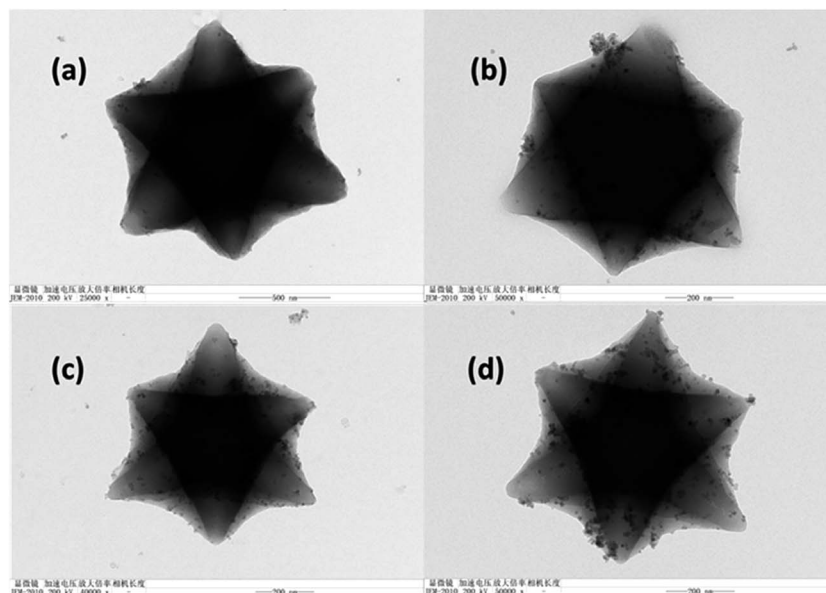


Fig. 3 TEM images of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  composites with  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  loading amounts of 40 mg (a), 80 mg (b), 120 mg (c) and 200 mg (d).

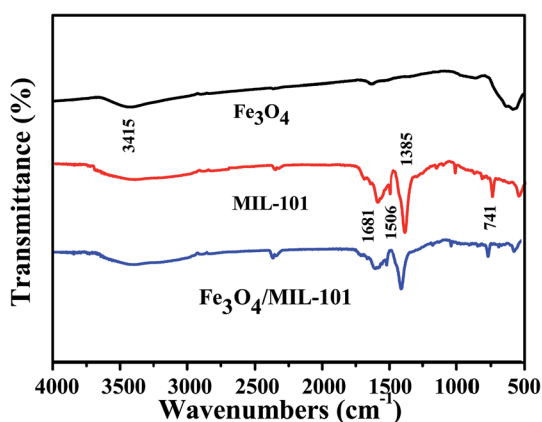


Fig. 4 FT-IR spectra of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ , MIL-101, and  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  with  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  loading amount of 40 mg.

of carboxyl groups in  $\text{H}_2\text{BDC}$ , whereas the band at  $1385\text{ cm}^{-1}$  is assigned to the symmetric stretching of carboxyl groups in  $\text{H}_2\text{BDC}$ .<sup>26</sup> No special differences between MIL-101 and  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  were observed, and all the bands demonstrate the dominance of the properties of MIL-101 in the hybrid material.

The textural properties of samples were characterized by nitrogen adsorption isotherms. MIL-101 powder has an extremely high BET surface area and porous volume ( $1987.05\text{ m}^2\text{ g}^{-1}$  and  $0.624\text{ cm}^3\text{ g}^{-1}$ , respectively). Compared with MIL-101 powder, the surface area of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  powder with  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  loading amounts of 40 mg was observed to be smaller by approximately 15.2% (Table 1). This may be due to the loading of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  in the MIL-101 material as well as the activating role of the  $\text{Fe(III)}$  salt. On the other hand, the insignificant change in porosity of the  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  and MIL-101 could result from the small loading amount of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ , which ensures that  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  remains higher surface area and porous volume. The

Table 1 BET properties of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$

Sample	$\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ (mg)	$S_{\text{BET}}$ ( $\text{m}^2\text{ g}^{-1}$ )	Pore size (nm)	Pore volume ( $\text{cm}^3\text{ g}^{-1}$ )
MIL-101	0	1987.05	2.68	0.624
$\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$	40	1685.89	2.73	0.632

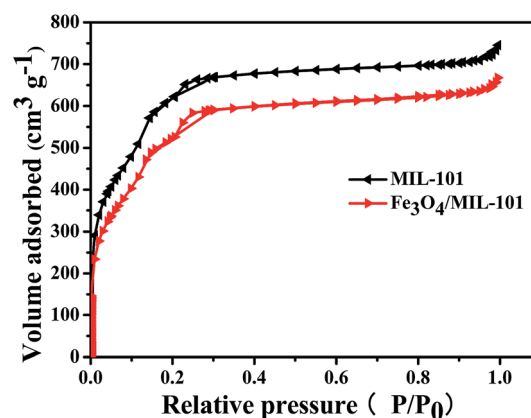


Fig. 5 Nitrogen adsorption-desorption isotherms for pure MIL-101 and  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  with  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  loading amount of 40 mg.

nitrogen adsorption-desorption isotherms exhibited a typical type-I form (Fig. 5), which indicates that the  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  composite has a typical microporous structure similar to that of pure MIL-101.

### 3.2. Catalytic activity of $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$

Control experiments were conducted to compare the removal efficiencies at initial pH 7 with RhB concentration of  $10\text{ mg L}^{-1}$ .





Fig. 6a shows the catalytic activity of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  with different  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  loading amounts (40 mg, 80 mg, 120 mg and 200 mg). It is clearly seen that with decreasing  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  loading, the hybrid material showed gradual improvement in catalytic activity, indicating that MIL-101 crystals played a key role in the degradation of RhB. The high porosity and the presence of a large amount of oxygen groups on the MOF surfaces resulted in their high surface area and moderate polarity, thus facilitating effective interaction with RhB and accelerating the catalytic process.  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  with the least  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  loading

amount of 40 mg provided the highest catalytic capacity. Therefore, it was employed in the following studies.

To clarify the excellent performance of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$ , MIL-101 and  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  were also prepared and examined under same experimental conditions. As seen from Fig. 6b, no noticeable removal of RhB was observed in the presence of RhB alone.  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  only led to a slight removal of RhB within 30 min. In the leached metal- $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  system, the oxidation efficiency was greatly limited, with approximately 2% of RhB degraded after 30 min. This indicates that nearly all of reactions occur on the surface of catalyst, thus proving the stability of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$ . In the presence of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$ , the removal of RhB using  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  as the heterogeneous Fenton-like catalyst was notably higher than that for pure MIL-101 and  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ , implying that the catalytic activity was enhanced by the introduction of MIL-101 and  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ . There is a synergistic effect in the hybrid material, which enhances the relative rates of mass transfer to reactive sites and subsequent chemical reaction at the reactive sites. With  $0.5 \text{ g L}^{-1}$   $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  only, approximately 65% removal was observed, mainly due to surface adsorption of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$ . Furthermore, the effect of surface adsorption was investigated. The adsorption of RhB is sensitive with surface charge of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$ . Therefore, the zeta potential of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  was provided to better understand the adsorption behavior of RhB in solution. As seen from Fig. 6c, the absolute values of zeta potential increased obviously with the increase of initial pH, which indicates that  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  has negative charge in solution at initial pH 3, 5, 7, 9 and 12, and the negative charges of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  particles increase with the increase of pH. As we know, RhB is a kind of cationic dyes. Thus, there are electrostatic interaction between  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  with negative charge and RhB molecule with positive charge, and the adsorption properties of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  increased gradually with the increase of zeta potential. Several experiments were performed to explore the interaction between catalysis and adsorption. Desorption was almost completely achieved *via* ultrasonic treatment of the used hybrid material for 30 min with using ethanol as solvent. The result was confirmed by desorbing RhB from  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  after the surface adsorption reaction, resulting in nearly 100% desorption. However, after the recovery of used  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  from the Fenton-like system, RhB desorption percentage was only approximately 14% in the same experiment conditions. All surface adsorption-desorption experiments demonstrate that  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  has a strong adsorption property. However, in the presence of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$ , catalytic action plays an absolutely leading role rather than adsorption. Also, it is speculated that the adsorption action of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  may facilitate the process of catalysis.

### 3.3. Effect of pH

It is well-known that the performance of the Fenton reaction is strongly correlated to the solution pH.<sup>27,28</sup> Therefore, the effect of the initial pH value on the degradation of RhB with  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  catalyst was determined as presented in Fig. 7. Approximately 65% and 63% of RhB were removed after 30 min of reaction at initial pH 3 and 12, respectively. The amount

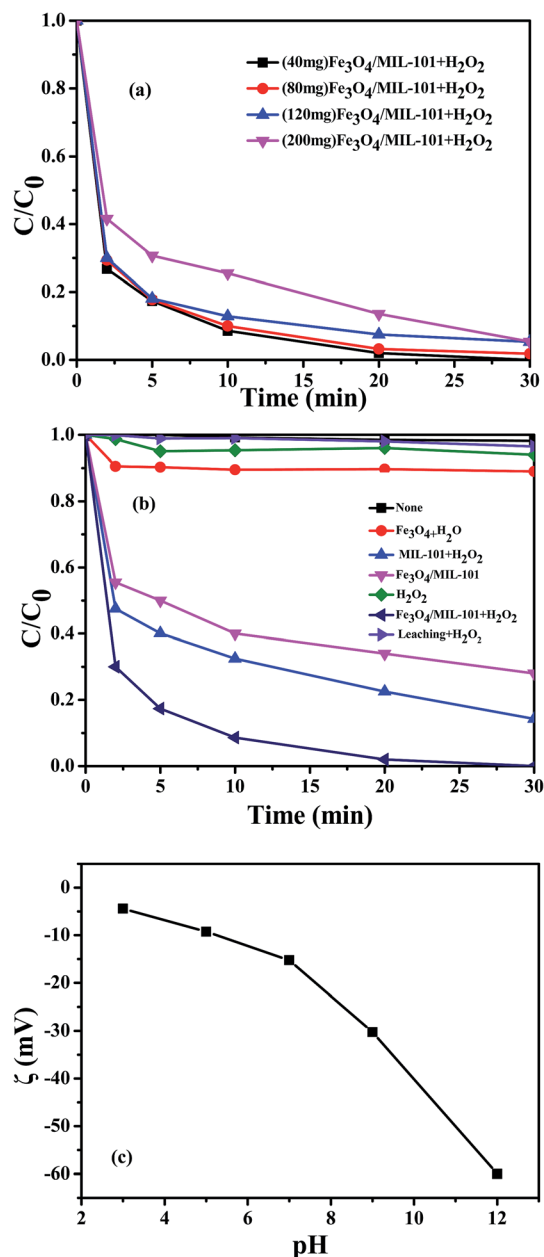


Fig. 6 (a) Removal of RhB with different loading amounts of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  as catalysts at initial pH 7; (b) removal of RhB under different reaction conditions at initial pH 7; (c) the zeta potential of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  at different pH values. Conditions: [catalyst] =  $0.5 \text{ g L}^{-1}$ , [RhB] =  $10 \text{ mg L}^{-1}$ ,  $[\text{H}_2\text{O}_2]$  =  $20 \text{ mM}$ .

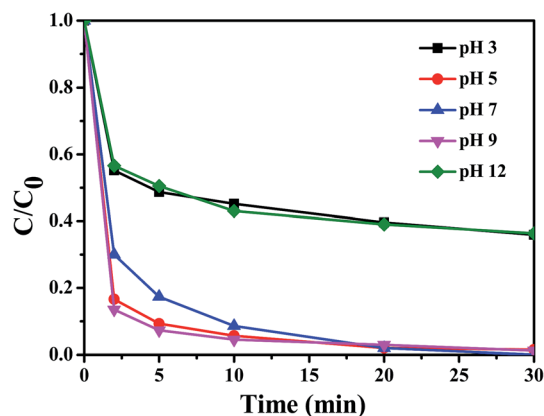


Fig. 7 Influence of initial pH on the degradation of RhB in the  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101-H}_2\text{O}_2$  system. Conditions:  $[\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}] = 0.5 \text{ g L}^{-1}$ ,  $[\text{RhB}] = 10 \text{ mg L}^{-1}$ ,  $[\text{H}_2\text{O}_2] = 20 \text{ mM}$ .

removed increased dramatically, reaching almost 100% at initial pH 5, 7, and 9. Thus, the effect of initial pH on the degradation of phenol is clear. The removal rate achieved highest efficiency when the initial RhB solution had a nearly neutral pH. In contrast to the general Fenton reaction activated in an acidic environment,  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  shows extraordinary performance as an efficient Fenton-like heterogeneous catalyst in a steerable neutral solution of the pollutant, which is a great advantage for improve efficiency and cost saving. This may be related to the function of solid-acid catalyst of the MIL-101,

which will be introduced in detail below. On the other hand, the amount removed decreased dramatically at initial pH 3 and 12, which is reasonable because compared to neutral environments, MOF materials lack stability in acidic and alkaline conditions, thus hindering the process of catalysis.

### 3.4. Stability of $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$

The stability of the catalyst was evaluated by reusing it in four successive experiments under same reaction conditions. When the initial solution pH was 7, approximately 60% of RhB could still be removed in the fourth run after 30 min (data not shown). Additionally, as seen from Fig. 8a, nearly 100% RhB was further removed in each cycle if the reaction time was extended to 60 min, indicating the good stability and long lifetime of the composite. The concentration of dissolved Fe in the solution was investigated during the Fenton-like oxidation of RhB (Fig. 8b). The concentration of ferrous ion increased and reached a maximum of approximately  $9 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$  at 30 min, when almost complete removal of RhB occurred. Following this, the  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  concentration decreased to approximately  $2 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$  at 60 min, similar to the results reported in earlier studies.<sup>29,30</sup> In the ascending interval, oxidation of the catalyst by  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  may have released ferrous ions into solution, generating  $\cdot\text{OH}$ . After RhB was almost completely removed, the decrease in concentration probably resulted from the oxidation of the dissolved ferrous ions to ferric ions by the remaining oxidants.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the increase of total dissolved iron may be a result of the leaching of ferrous and ferric ions from  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$ , as well as the

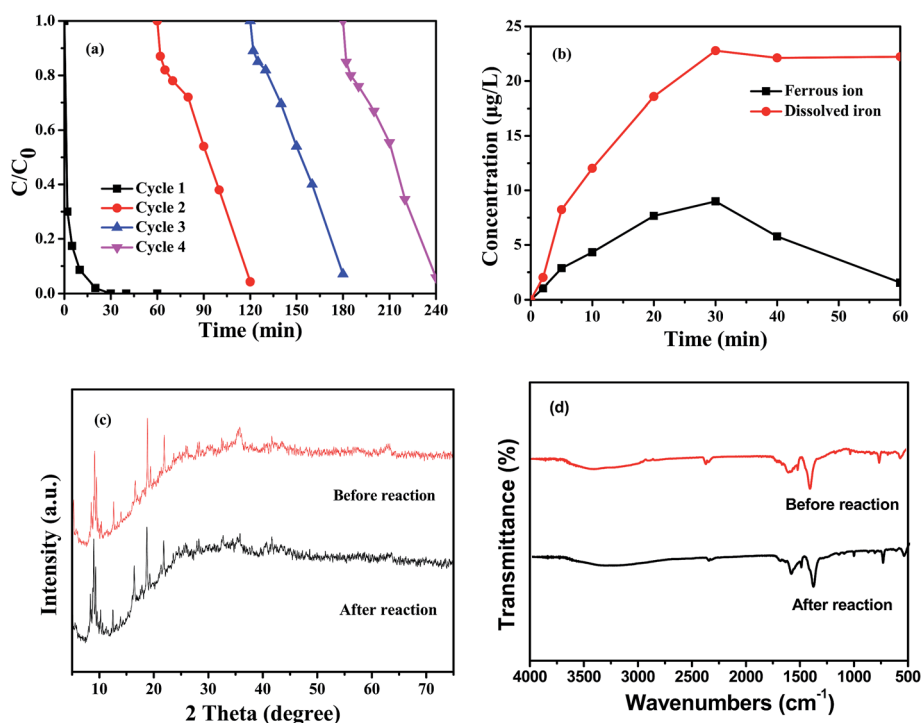


Fig. 8 (a) Catalytic property of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  during repeated use at neutral conditions; (b) variation of the concentration of dissolved iron and ferrous ion in solution during RhB degradation; (c) XRD patterns of the  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  before and after Fenton-like reaction; (d) FT-IR spectra of the  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  before and after Fenton-like reaction. Conditions:  $[\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}] = 0.5 \text{ g L}^{-1}$ ,  $[\text{RhB}] = 10 \text{ mg L}^{-1}$ ,  $[\text{H}_2\text{O}_2] = 20 \text{ mM}$ , initial pH 7.



oxidation of ferrous ions in solution. The loss of iron amounted to  $22.2 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ , negligible compared with the  $0.5 \text{ g L}^{-1}$  of catalyst used. To further check the structural stability of the catalyst, the phase structure and molecular structure of the  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  after four times of repeated use were recorded by XRD (Fig. 8c) and FT-IR spectra (Fig. 8d). The almost identical XRD patterns and FT-IR spectra before and after the Fenton-like reactions illustrates that the chemical and crystal structure of the catalyst are almost unchanged after four repeated reactions. These results demonstrate the high long-term stability of our  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  Fenton-like catalyst.

### 3.5. Mechanistic study

It is well-known that *tert*-butanol (TBA) is mainly used as a quenching agent for  $\cdot\text{OH}$  because of its high reactivity ( $k_{\text{OH}}: 3.8\text{--}7.6 \times 10^8 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}$ ).<sup>32–34</sup> The actual reactive specie mediating the process was identified by determining the influence of TBA as a radical scavenger on the degradation of RhB, as shown in Fig. 9a. When no quenching agent was added, approximately 100% RhB was degraded in 30 min. The addition of 100 mM TBA resulted in the decrease of RhB removal (in 30 min) to 95%, with almost no inhibition, because of a small amount of added radical scavenger. However, the amount removed decreased dramatically, reaching only 15%, with 1000 mM TBA. Thereafter, there was a second apparent jump when the added TBA was approximately 2000 mM, with nearly 100% inhibition. Reasonably, the inhibition was enhanced with the increase in the concentration of TBA, indicating that  $\cdot\text{OH}$  radicals were involved in the oxidation process. Moreover, excess TBA in solution not only scavenged all the produced  $\cdot\text{OH}$  but also resulted in competitive adsorption against RhB due to the interaction of functional groups between TBA and  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$ , so that the inhibition effect reached almost 100%.

The results of the radical scavenger experiments are validated by the fluorescence spectra in Fig. 9b. We observed that in the  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101-H}_2\text{O}_2$ -coumarin system, the oxidation of coumarin by the generated  $\cdot\text{OH}$  radicals resulted in a rapid increase of the fluorescence intensity of the product 7-hydroxycoumarin with increasing reaction time. Coumarin did not easily react with  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  in the absence of the catalyst. The fluorescence intensity in the system gradually increased, indicating that  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  activated by  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  produced strong oxidizing  $\cdot\text{OH}$  radical in the Fenton-like system.

The Lewis acid catalytic properties of MOFs have already been demonstrated for many reactions, including cyanosilylation of carbonyl compounds,<sup>35</sup> epoxide methanolysis,<sup>36</sup> isomerizations of  $\alpha$ -pinene oxide and citronella,<sup>37</sup> alkene cyclopropanation,<sup>38</sup> etc. The  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  fabricated in this study also has a solid-acid catalytic property, which stems from the creation of a coordination vacancy upon unsaturated coordination of Fe ions in the MIL-101 structure. To better understand the interaction between the Lewis acid character and the neutral reaction environment, the change of solution pH value was monitored as a function of time at different initial pH (Fig. 9c). Obviously, the pH values remained unchanged after 5 min at approximately 3.8, 4.1, and 4.2 when the initial pH values were 5, 7, and 9,

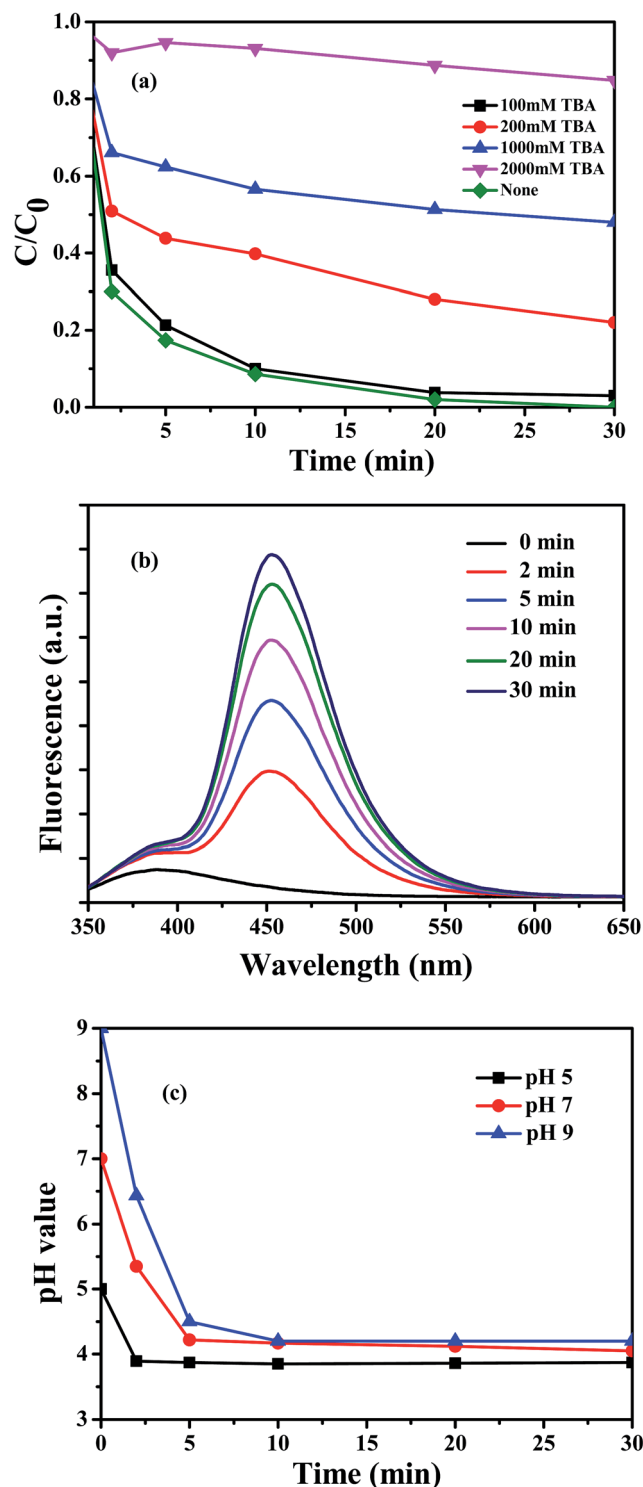


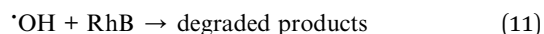
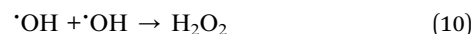
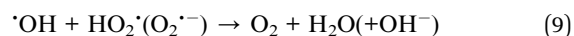
Fig. 9 (a) Effects of TBA on the degradation of RhB at initial pH 7; (b) fluorescence intensity of 7-hydroxycoumarin produced in the Fenton-like reaction at initial pH 7; (c) pH variation during the reaction in the  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101-H}_2\text{O}_2$  system at different initial pH. Conditions:  $[\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}] = 0.5 \text{ g L}^{-1}$ ,  $[\text{RhB}] = 10 \text{ mg L}^{-1}$ ,  $[\text{H}_2\text{O}_2] = 20 \text{ mM}$ .

respectively. The change of pH values was probably due to the effect of the Lewis acid sites in the structure of MIL-101, in which the incompletely coordinated Fe ions could coordinate



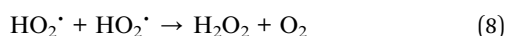
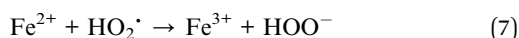
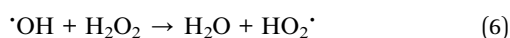
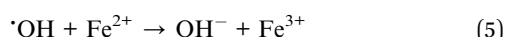
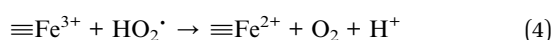
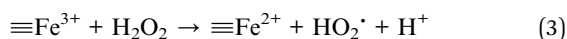
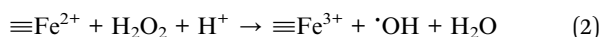
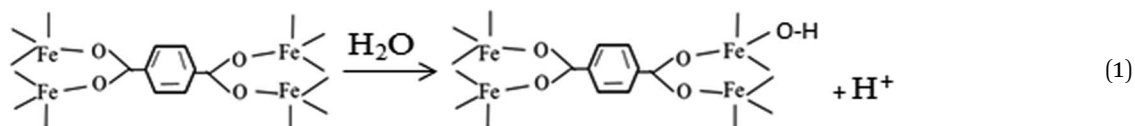
with  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  and supply  $\text{H}^+$  in the initially neutral Fenton-like system, as shown in eqn (1).

On the basis of the above information, a possible reaction mechanism for  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  activated by  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  under neutral conditions is proposed in Fig. 10. First of all, the Lewis acid sites in the structure of the MIL-101 provide  $\text{H}^+$  in initially neutral aqueous solution (eqn (1)). As reported by other researchers,<sup>39–41</sup> the initially generated  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  species can react with  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  to generate  $\cdot\text{OH}$  (eqn (2)), where  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  stands for  $\text{Fe(II)}$  sites on the catalyst surface. Additional  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  species are produced through the reactions of the formed  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$  species with  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  (eqn (3)) and  $\text{HO}_2\cdot$  (eqn (4)). This is further accompanied by competitive reactions that can negatively affect the oxidation process, as shown in eqn (5)–(10). Finally, RhB is broken down, mainly by hydroxyl radical on the surface of catalyst (eqn (11)). It is worth mentioning that all the reactions occur on the surface of the catalyst, in accordance with the result of the leaching experiment, as shown in Fig. 6b.



## 4. Conclusions

In this study,  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  was successfully synthesized *via* a simple solvothermal process and found to be highly efficient and environmentally benign for the heterogeneous activation of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  in Fenton-like system without additional energy input. The prepared  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  exhibited enhanced catalytic performance for degradation of RhB in a neutral Fenton-like solution, which was superior to those of pure  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  and MIL-101. This enhancement of the catalytic performance has been



demonstrated due to the significant synergistic effect between  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  and MIL-101, in which MIL-101 played the role of a solid-acid catalyst with Lewis acid sites on its surface. Compared with the traditional Fenton systems which work under strongly acidic environment, the neutral operation condition of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  is more suitable for practical water treatment. The as-prepared  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}$  sample exhibited magnetic property for easy separation and high long-term stability on the degradation of the organic pollutants. The results from this study shed light on the application of MOF-based solid-acid catalyst in environmental remediation field with mild conditions and low-energy treatment.

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the National Science and Technology Major Project (No. 2016ZX05040003); and the Postgraduate Innovation Project of China University of Petroleum (No. YCXJ2016035).

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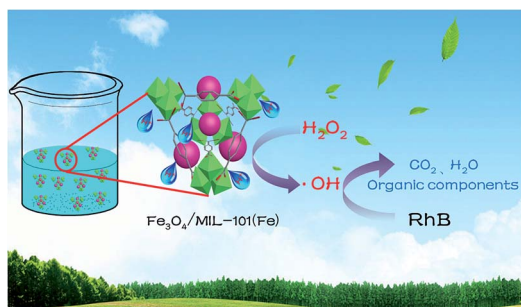


Fig. 10 Mechanisms for RhB degradation by  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4/\text{MIL-101}-\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  system.





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