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# A simple fluorescent probe for detection of $Ag^+$ and $Cd^{2+}$ and its $Cd^{2+}$ complex for sequential recognition of $S^{2-}$†

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In this study, we designed and synthesized a simple probe 2-(8-((8-methoxyquinolin-2-yl)methoxy) quinolin-2-yl)benzo[*d*]thiazole (**DQT**) for detection of $Ag^+$ and $Cd^{2+}$ in a $CH_3OH$/HEPES (9 : 1 v/v, pH = 7.30) buffer system. Its structure was characterized by NMR, ESI-HR-MS and DFT calculations, and its fluorescence performance was also investigated. Probe **DQT** showed fluorescence quenching in response to $Ag^+$ and $Cd^{2+}$ with low detection limits of 0.42 μM and 0.26 μM, respectively. Importantly, the complexation of the probe with $Cd^{2+}$ resulted in a red shift from blue to green, making it possible to detect $Ag^+$ and $Cd^{2+}$ by the naked eye under an ultraviolet lamp. The **DQT**-$Cd^{2+}$ complex could be used for sequential recognition of $S^{2-}$. The recovery response could be repeated 3 times by alternate addition of $Cd^{2+}$ and $S^{2-}$. A filter paper strip test further demonstrated the potential of probe **DQT** as a convenient and rapid assay.

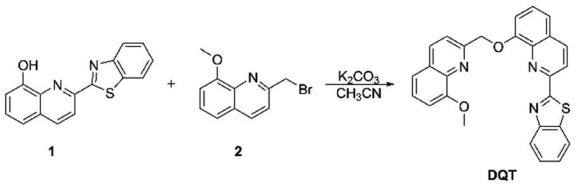


## Introduction

$Cd^{2+}$ and $Ag^+$ ions are important transition metal ions involved in various biological and environmental processes.[1–4] However, excessive intake of $Ag^+$ can cause serious harm to human health as it can inactivate thiolase and even have a carcinogenic effect.[5,6] $Cd^{2+}$ is one of the most serious air pollutants, and it is also highly toxic, causing serious health problems even at low concentrations.[7–10] It is reported that $Cd^{2+}$ ions are associated with the pathogenesis of many diseases including cancers.[11–14] Thus, it is necessary to detect $Cd^{2+}$ and $Ag^+$ in the environment. However, traditional methods such as capacity analysis,[15] ICP-MS[16] and atomic absorption method,[17] may be greatly limited due to requirement of equipment, high cost, cumbersome operation and low accuracy.[18] In comparison, the fluorescence detection method has advantages of high specific recognition ability, high sensitivity and short response time, making it useful for the detection of many metal ions such as $Hg^{2+}$, $Pb^{2+}$, $Cu^{2+}$ and $Zn^{2+}$.[19–23]

Two mechanisms namely PET and ICT are inclusively used as the basis for the design of fluorescent probes.[24–26] PET refers to the process of fluorescence quenching or enhancement caused by electron transfer between the excited electron donor or electron acceptor after photoexcitation.[27] In addition, the recognition groups of ICT probes are usually a part of the push–pull electron system, and thus the combination of these groups with metal ions may affect the push–pull electron effect of the fluorophore and the intramolecular charge transfer, thus leading to changes in fluorescence spectrum.[28]

Many fluorescent probes have been developed based on the two mechanisms for the detection of a variety of ions, such as $Cu^{2+}$/$Cd^{2+}$,[29,30] $Zn^{2+}$/$Cd^{2+}$,[31–33] and $Cu^{2+}$/$Cd^{2+}$/PPi.[34] However, there are fewer probes for the detection of $Ag^+$/$Cd^{2+}$/$S^{2-}$. In this work, a simple fluorescent probe **DQT** was successfully synthesized based on quinolone[35–38] and benzothiazole,[39–41] which showed high selectivity toward $Ag^+$ and $Cd^{2+}$ in $CH_3OH$/HEPES (9 : 1 v/v, pH = 7.30), and its $Cd^{2+}$ complex could be




Scheme 1 Synthesis of probe **DQT**.

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† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available: Appendix A includes the Experimental section, $^1$H NMR spectra, $^{13}$C NMR spectra, ESI-MS spectra and part of spectrums of probe **DQT**; Appendix B includes the detail crystal data, structure refinement, torsion angles and bond lengths and angles of probe **DQT**. CCDC 1975779. For ESI and crystallographic data in CIF or other electronic format see DOI: 10.1039/d0ra01768j

used for sequential recognition of $S^{2-}$. The paper strip test was carried out to verify its practicability (Scheme 1).

## Results and discussion

### X-ray structural analysis probe DQT

As shown in Fig. 1, the crystal structure without hydrogen atom of probe **DQT** was given. The cell parameters were $a = 21.767(3)$ Å, $\alpha = 90$ deg; $b = 4.8042(8)$ Å, $\beta = 103.866(7)$ deg; $c = 42.042(7)$ Å, $\gamma = 90$ deg. The detail crystal data, structure refinement, torsion angles and bond lengths and angles for probe **DQT** were shown in Tables S1–S3 of Appendix B.† More information has been uploaded to the Cambridge Crystallographic Date Center (CCDC 1975779).

### The fluorescence response of probe DQT towards $Ag^+$ and $Cd^{2+}$

To study the fluorescence selectivity of probe **DQT** toward metal ions, the fluorescence spectra of probe **DQT** upon the addition of 20 equiv. of $K^+$, $Na^+$, $Zn^{2+}$, $Cu^{2+}$, $Hg^{2+}$, $Pb^{2+}$, $Ba^{2+}$, $Cd^{2+}$, $Cs^+$, $Li^+$, $Ag^+$, $Mg^{2+}$, $Ca^{2+}$, $Al^{3+}$, $Ni^{2+}$ and $Fe^{3+}$ were recorded in $CH_3OH$/HEPES (9 : 1 v/v, pH = 7.30) ($\lambda_{ex} = 344$ nm). As shown in Fig. 2(a), no distinct changes were observed in fluorescence spectra of probe **DQT** ($\Phi = 0.308$) upon the containing of metal cations except that with the presence of $Ag^+$ ($\Phi = 0.002$) and $Cd^{2+}$ ($\Phi = 0.227$). Upon the addition of different metal ions, $Ag^+$ caused a 88% fluorescence quenching and displayed an "on–off" behavior. With $Cd^{2+}$, probe **DQT** showed a 33% fluorescence quenching with a spectral red-shift of 25 nm from 465 to 490 nm. This could be attributed to changes in the electronically conjugated structure of the molecule after the combination of the lone pair of electrons of N atoms with $Cd^{2+}$. In addition, due to the special molecular configuration and electronic structure of the compound, complex **DQT**-$Cd^{2+}$ was not interfered by other ions. Apparent color changes were observed, indicating that probe **DQT** could be used to detect $Ag^+$ and $Cd^{2+}$ by naked eye (Fig. 2(b) and (c)).

Competition experiments were performed to explore the effects of other metal ions on the recognition of $Ag^+$ and $Cd^{2+}$. It could be seen in Fig. 3(a) that there was significant change in fluorescence intensity after the addition of 20 equiv. of $Ag^+$. Clearly, the recognition of $Ag^+$ was affected by these metal ions. However, the recognition of $Cd^{2+}$ was not affected especially $Ag^+$ and the fluorescence color was still green under UV light, as

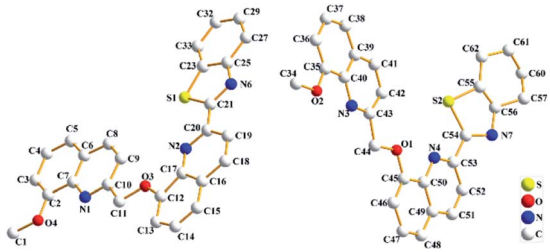


Fig. 1 The crystal structure without hydrogen atom of probe **DQT**.

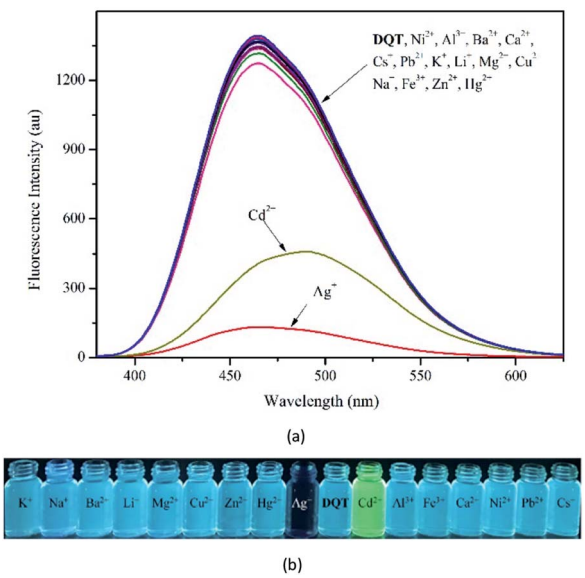



Fig. 2 (a) Fluorescence spectra of probe **DQT** upon the addition of various metal cations ($2 \times 10^{-4}$ mol $L^{-1}$) and blank. (b) Color changes of probe **DQT** with various metal cations in $CH_3OH$/HEPES (9 : 1 v/v, pH = 7.30) buffer system under UV light.

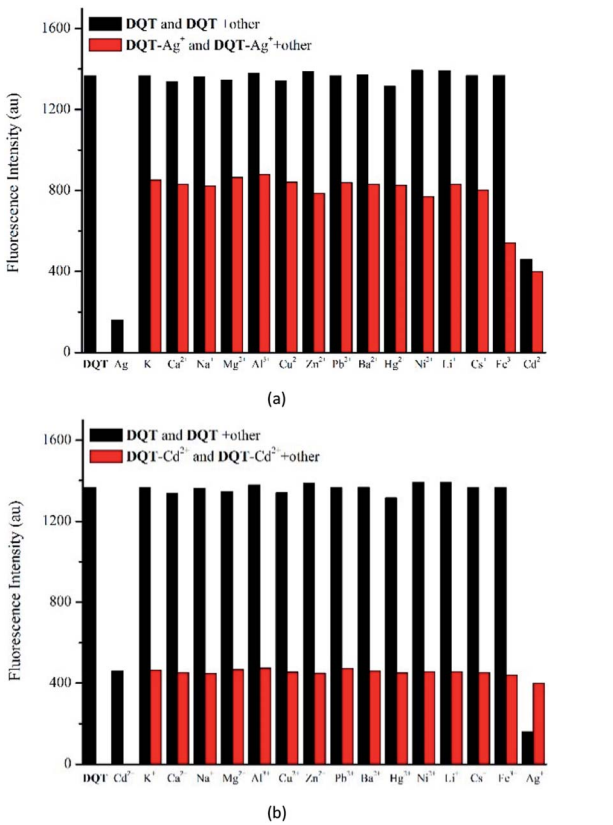



Fig. 3 Competitive selectivity of probe **DQT** (10 μM) toward $Ag^+$ (a) and $Cd^{2+}$ (b) (20 equiv.) in the absence (black bars) or presence (red bars) of specified ions (20 equiv.).

shown in Fig. 3(b). Compared to $Ag^+$, probe **DQT** had higher selectivity for $Cd^{2+}$.

To better understand the sensitivity of probe **DQT** toward $Ag^+$ and $Cd^{2+}$, the fluorescent titration of $Ag^+$ and $Cd^{2+}$ was carried out in $CH_3OH$/HEPES (9 : 1 v/v, pH = 7.30) buffer system at an excitation wavelength of 344 nm. As shown in Fig. 4(a), probe **DQT** exhibited an emission at 465 nm with an enormous Stokes shift of 121 nm. Upon incremental addition of $Ag^+$, the fluorescence emission gradually decreased until a plateau was reached at 20 equiv. of $Ag^+$. The limit of detection (LOD) was determined to be 0.42 μM based on LOD = $3\sigma/m$ (Fig. S6†). As shown in Fig. 4(b), the addition of $Cd^{2+}$ resulted in a red shift of the fluorescence emission of probe **DQT** to 490 nm, and probe **DQT** showed fluorescence quenching with a LOD of 0.26 μM for $Cd^{2+}$ (Fig. S7†). The stoichiometry determined by the Job's method was 1 : 1 for both **DQT**-$Ag^+$ and **DQT**-$Cd^{2+}$ complexes, as shown at the upper right corner of Fig. 4(a) and (b). The complexation constant of probe **DQT** to $Ag^+$ ($K_a = 2.68 \times 10^3$ $M^{-1}$) (Fig. S4,† $Y = 1.75 \times 10^{-7} \times X - 4.69 \times 10^{-4}$, $R^2 = 0.9953$) obtained according to the Benesi–Hildebrand plots was lower than that to $Cd^{2+}$ ($K_a = 2.23 \times 10^4$ $M^{-1}$) (Fig. S6,† $Y = 3.91 \times 10^{-8} \times X + 8.72 \times 10^{-4}$, $R^2 = 0.9967$). The titration results were consistent with the interference results, indicating that probe **DQT** had a better sensitivity for $Cd^{2+}$ than $Ag^+$.

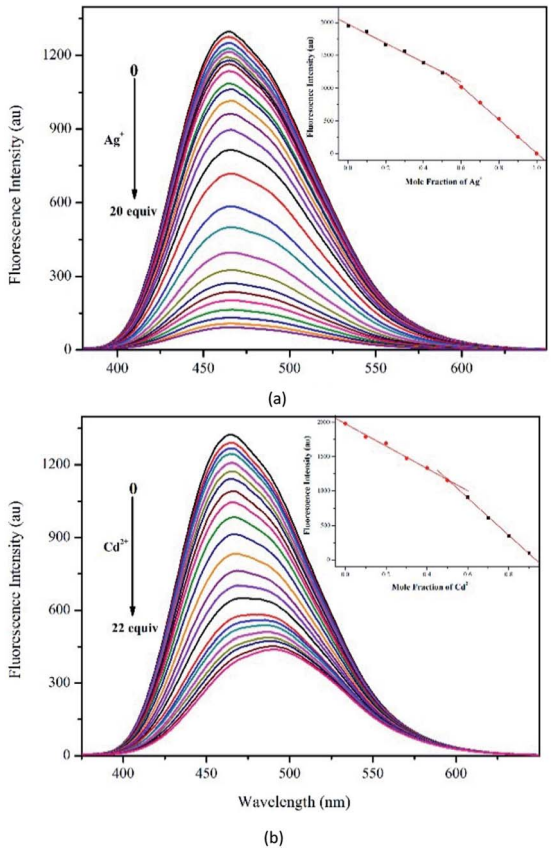



Fig. 4 The fluorescence intensity of probe **DQT** (10 μM) in $CH_3OH$/HEPES (9 : 1 v/v, pH = 7.30) buffer system upon incremental addition of $Ag^+$ (a) and $Cd^{2+}$ (b). Job's curves were shown at the upper right corner.

## Fluorescence recognition of DQT-$Cd^{2+}$ complex to $S^{2-}$

In the interference test, the detection of $Ag^+$ was easily affected by other metal ions, and thus we focused on the response of $Cd^{2+}$ and anions, including $S^{2-}$, $HSO_3^-$, $SO_3^{2-}$, $SO_4^{2-}$, $Br^-$, $F^-$, $CO_3^{2-}$, $Cl^-$, $OAc^-$, $HCO_3^-$, $I^-$, $NO_2^-$ and $NO_3^-$ in $CH_3OH$/HEPES (9 : 1 v/v, pH = 7.30) buffer system ($\lambda_{ex}$ = 344 nm). In Fig. 5, only $S^{2-}$ showed obvious fluorescence recovery with an enhancement efficiency of 64% and a blue shift from 490 to 465 nm. Competition experiments were performed to explore the effects of other anions on the recognition of $S^{2-}$. As exhibited in Fig. S8,† significant fluorescence recovery was observed upon the addition of 20 equiv. of $S^{2-}$. Obviously, these anions had no effect on the recognition of $S^{2-}$, especially sulfur-containing anions. Thus, **DQT**-$Cd^{2+}$ showed high specificity for $S^{2-}$.

The fluorescence titration with $S^{2-}$ was recorded in $CH_3OH$/HEPES (9 : 1 v/v, pH = 7.30) buffer system ($\lambda_{ex}$ = 344 nm). In Fig. 6, the intensity of the strongest fluorescence emission peak gradually increased and blue-shifted as the $S^{2-}$ concentration

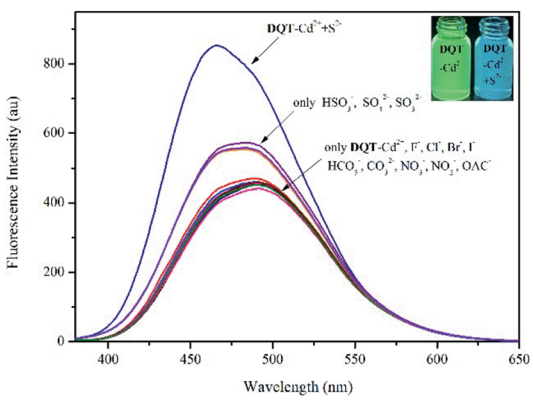



Fig. 5 Fluorescence spectra of **DQT**-$Cd^{2+}$ ($1 \times 10^{-5}$ mol $L^{-1}$) with the addition of various anions (20 equiv.) in $CH_3OH$/HEPES (9 : 1 v/v, pH = 7.30) buffer system.

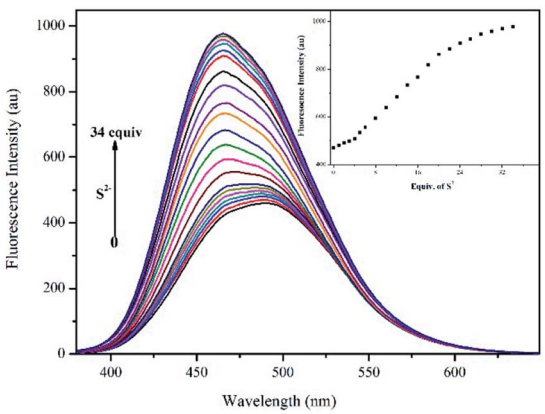



Fig. 6 Fluorescence spectra of **DQT**-$Cd^{2+}$ (10 μM) with $S^{2-}$ (0–34 equiv.) in $CH_3OH$/HEPES (9 : 1 v/v, pH = 7.30) buffer system ($\lambda_{ex}$ = 344 nm). Inset: the plot of fluorescence intensity **DQT**-$Cd^{2+}$ *versus* $S^{2-}$.

was increased to 34 equiv., after which it remained relatively constant. The LOD was calculated to be 11.50 μM by eqn (1) (Fig. S9,† $Y = 21.99 \times X + 420.56$, $R^2 = 0.9983$).

### Reversibility of probe DQT for $Cd^{2+}$ and $S^{2-}$

The reversibility was determined by alternating addition of $Cd^{2+}$ and $S^{2-}$. As illustrated in Fig. 7, the fluorescence intensity was quenched to 33% and the fluorescence colour changed from blue to green observed by naked eye with the addition of $Cd^{2+}$. However, the addition of $S^{2-}$ resulted in the recovery of the fluorescence intensity to about 64% and fluorescence colour change to blue. As the number of cycles increased, the recognition performance decreased gradually but still remained high after 3 cycles.

### Effect of pH

As shown in Fig. 8, probe **DQT** exhibited excellent sequence selectivity and a red-shift at pH = 4–8 with the addition of $Cd^{2+}$, and the fluorescence was replied with the addition of $S^{2-}$. The selectivity of probe **DQT** was affected under highly acidic or alkaline conditions, probably due to changes in the structure of the probe and the loss of the coordination with ions.

### DFT study

Gaussian 09 program was used for the density functional theory calculation at the level of B3LYP/6-31G (d, p) and B3LYP/LANL2DZ to gain a further insight into the photophysical properties and the nature of optical response of **DQT**, **DQT**-$Ag^+$ and **DQT**-$Cd^{2+}$. Fig. 9 showed the optimized structures and the electron dispersion of HOMO and LUMO. The molecular structure of probe **DQT** was planar, and most electrons in HOMO and LUMO were distributed on the 8-methoxyquinoline and quinolinylbenzothiazole groups, respectively. Its planarity was destroyed and the dihedral angles of quinolinobenzothiazole and 8-methoxyquinoline groups were 10° and 17° after coordinating with $Ag^+$ and $Cd^{2+}$, respectively. The electrons in HOMO were transferred to the binding site with $Ag^+$, which promoted the PET process and quenched the fluorescence. Similarly, the electrons in HOMO and LUMO were mainly concentrated on the quinolinylbenzothiazole group after coordination with $Cd^{2+}$, resulting in a red shift. The energy gaps of **DQT**, **DQT**-$Ag^+$ and **DQT**-$Cd^{2+}$ were 3.78 eV, 3.57 eV and 3.38 eV, respectively, indicating that the binding with $Cd^{2+}$ was more stable.

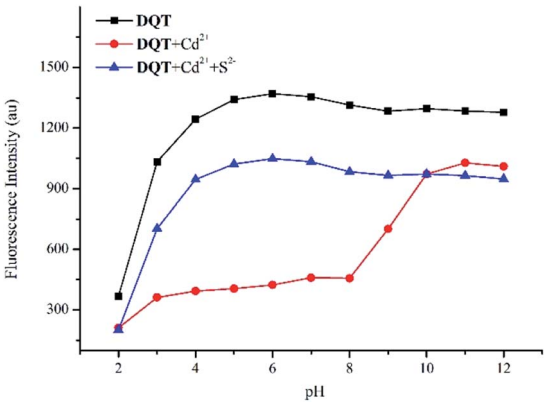



Fig. 8 Influences of the fluorescence intensity of probe **DQT** (10 μM) toward $Cd^{2+}$ (20 equiv.) and $S^{2-}$ (20 equiv.) at pH = 2–12 in $CH_3OH$/HEPES (9 : 1 v/v) buffer system at room temperature.

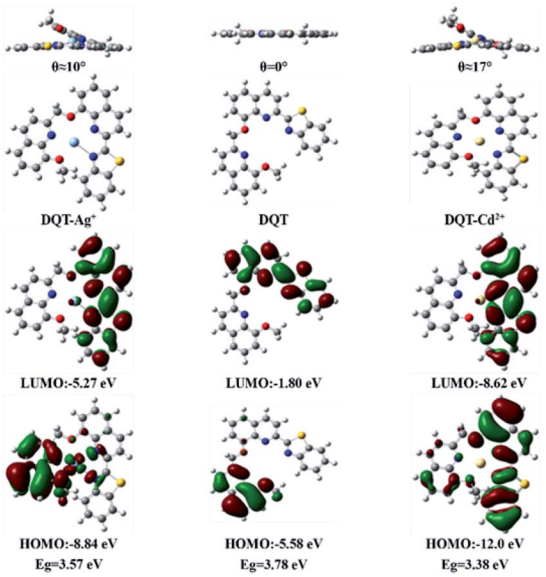



Fig. 9 Molecular orbital and electronic contributions of the relevant excitations.

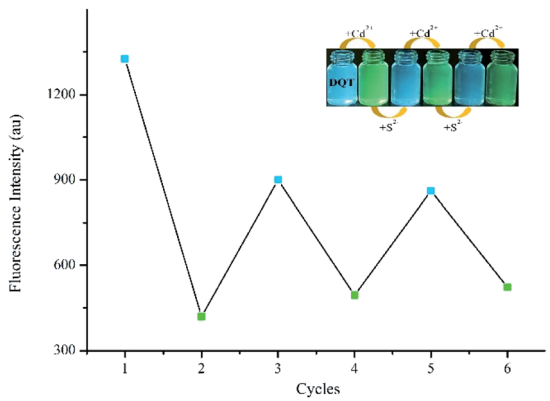



Fig. 7 Reversible changes in fluorescence intensity of probe **DQT** (10 μM) in $CH_3OH$/HEPES (9 : 1 v/v, pH = 7.30) buffer system upon alternate addition of $Cd^{2+}$ and $S^{2-}$.

### The possible mechanism

The possible mechanism is proposed as follows. The stoichiometry of the **DQT**-$Ag^+$ and **DQT**-$Cd^{2+}$ complex is determined to be 1 : 1. Given the fluorescence quenching and no red shift of emission wavelength, the binding mode of probe **DQT** and $Ag^+$ conforms to the PET process. The coordination mechanism of probe **DQT** and $Cd^{2+}$ can be attributed to ICT because the fluorescence emission wavelength is red-shifted after

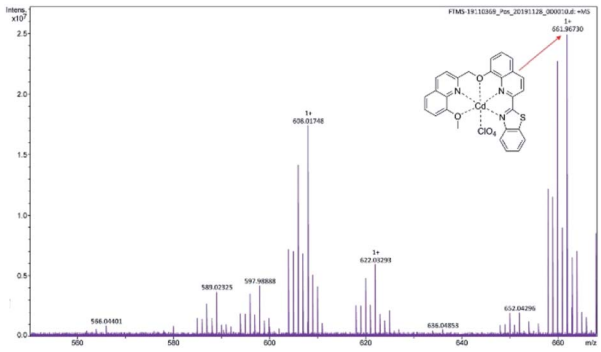
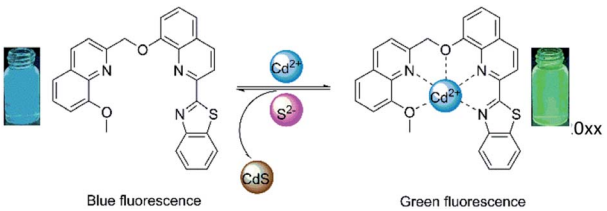


Fig. 10 ESI-MS spectra of **DQT**-$Cd^{2+}$.

coordination with $Cd^{2+}$.[34,42] Moreover, the molecular ion peak (ESI-MS) at 661.96730 [**DQT** + $Cd^{2+}$ + $ClO_4^-$; *m*/*z* calcd for 661.97167] (Fig. 10) indicates an 1 : 1 complexation between probe **DQT** and $Cd^{2+}$, and thus it can be concluded that all nitrogen and oxygen atoms of the molecule participate in coordination. Due to the strong interaction between $S^{2-}$ and $Cd^{2+}$, the overall fluorescence is recovered after the addition of $S^{2-}$, suggesting that $S^{2-}$ can form CdS precipitate with $Cd^{2+}$ and remove $Cd^{2+}$ from **DQT**-$Cd^{2+}$ complex. In summary, the Scheme 2 manifested the possible coordination mode.

### Practical application on test strips

Filter paper strip test was carried out to determine the practicability of probe **DQT**. Filter paper strips were immersed in $CH_3OH$/HEPES (9 : 1 v/v, pH = 7.30) buffer system of **DQT** at a concentration of $1 \times 10^{-3}$ M for 30 min and dried in air, and then smeared with $Ag^+$ and $Cd^{2+}$ solution respectively. The fluorescence changes were observed under UV light. Fig. 11 showed that the fluorescence color of the test strip which treated with $Cd^{2+}$ changed from blue (Fig. 11(b)) to green (Fig. 11(c)), while the fluorescence was quenched after treated with $Ag^+$ (Fig. 11(a)), suggesting that probe **DQT** could be used to distinguish for $Ag^+$ and $Cd^{2+}$ by naked eye under UV light.




Scheme 2 The possible mechanism.

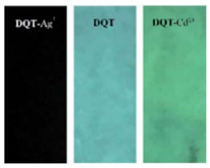



Fig. 11 Color changes on test paper (a) **DQT**-$Ag^+$; (b) **DQT**; (c) **DQT**-$Cd^{2+}$ under UV light.

## Conclusions

Herein, probe **DQT** was successfully synthesized for recognition of multiple ions. It showed fluorescence quenching towards $Ag^+$ based on the PET mechanism, but the complexation constant was low and the recognition of $Ag^+$ could be interfered by other ions. Probe **DQT** could also be used to detect $Cd^{2+}$ based on the ICT mechanism with a red shift of 25 nm of the fluorescence emission wavelength in the same $CH_3OH$/HEPES (9 : 1 v/v, pH = 7.30) buffer system. The **DQT**-$Cd^{2+}$ complex could be used for recognition of $S^{2-}$. Both $Ag^+$ and $Cd^{2+}$ could form complexes with probe **DQT** with a coordination ratio of 1 : 1. Finally, filter paper strip test verified its practicability.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

## Acknowledgements

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