A highly sensitive and selective on–off fluorescent sensor based on a complex of polySchiff–Fe$^{2+}$ for Cr(VI) detection in an aqueous medium†

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Designing exceptional probes to detect minute quantities of chromium(VI) is of huge importance for the safety and health of the human race. In this study, a green fluorescence emission probe (polyethylene Schiff base–chelated Fe$^{2+}$ complex) was synthesized by a one-pot synthesis method for the highly selective and sensitive detection of Cr(VI) in an aqueous solution. The complex of polyethylene Schiff–Fe$^{2+}$ was fully characterized, and it displayed satisfactory stability in the aqueous solution. The fluorescence emission could be quenched specifically by the introduction of Cr(VI) via the oxidation of the Fe$^{2+}$-centered polyethylene Schiff base complex. The fluorescence intensity decreases linearly with the concentration of Cr(VI), and the corresponding detection limit was calculated to be 0.18 μM. Thus, the obtained fluorescence detection system could be used for Cr(VI) detection in tap water. These features provide potential uses of the as-prepared polyethylene Schiff–Fe$^{2+}$ complex as a sensor for environmental applications.
Experimental

Reagents and instruments

All chemicals and solvents were of analytical grade and commercially available. Ferrous sulfate was purchased from Tianjin Fengchuan Chemical Reagent Technology Co., Ltd. PEI (1800), DHBFA, and Cr(vi) were bought from Shanghai Aladdin Biochemical Technology Co., Ltd. Double-distilled deionized water was used throughout all the experiments. All glassware was washed with aqua regia and rinsed with deionized water.

Discover SP (CEM, America) was used for the complex of PS-Fe²⁺ synthesis. Ultraviolet-visible (UV-vis) absorption spectroscopy was performed on a UV-2550 spectrophotometer (Shimadzu, Japan). An F-4600 fluorescence spectrophotometer (Shimadzu, Japan) was used for recording fluorescence spectra. The particle size was measured using a JSM-6700F transmission electron microscope (Japan). Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR) was carried out using an FTIR-8400 Fourier transform infrared spectrometer (Shimadzu, Japan). X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS, Shimadzu Japan) was used to characterize PS-Fe²⁺.

Preparation of PS-Fe²⁺

PS-Fe²⁺ were synthesized through the microwave-assisted synthesis. Briefly, 1 mL of FeSO₄ (0.1 mM), 4.0 mL of DHBFA (0.1 mM) and 4.0 mL of PEI (0.1 mM) were added into a flask, and the mixture was then diluted with water to 10 mL. The system was placed in a microwave generator with the microwave power of 325 W for 3 min, which was then cooled to room temperature and stored in dark at room temperature for further usage. Experiments were carried out with different reaction times, microwave power and composition of reactants to determine the optimum conditions.

Optical properties of PS-Fe²⁺ for Cr(vi) sensing

All the detection experiments were measured in aqueous solutions with appropriate pH values. The fluorescent spectra of the
analyte added PS-Fe²⁺ solutions were recorded by a fluorescence spectrometer with the excitation at 400 nm for 30 min. Parameters including reaction temperature, time-dependent responses, and pH values during the detection process were measured to optimize the detection performance of PS-Fe²⁺ towards Cr(VI) detection. Further, fluorescent responses of PS-Fe²⁺ towards various analytes including Cr₂O₇²⁻, Ca²⁺, Mg²⁺, Al³⁺, Na⁺, K⁺, CO₃²⁻, HCO₃⁻, F⁻, Br⁻, NO₃⁻, Cl⁻, OH⁻ and Cr³⁺ were measured, respectively, to evaluate the specificity. Then, the sensitivity of PS-Fe²⁺ towards Cr(VI) was evaluated upon addition of numerous concentrations of Cr(VI) into the PS-Fe²⁺ containing system and measured by the fluorescence spectrometer.

Results and discussion

Synthesis of the water-soluble PS-Fe²⁺

The microwave-assisted synthesis can effectively improve the complex synthetic efficiency with high yield and purity. Based on this strategy, we used DHBFA, PEI and ferrous sulfate as raw materials to synthesize PS-Fe²⁺ under microwave irradiation via a one-pot synthesis. Besides Fe²⁺, other ions including Fe³⁺, Zn²⁺, Ni²⁺, Co²⁺ were introduced to the reaction system, respectively. The corresponding fluorescence properties of the obtained products were tested and only the introduction of Fe²⁺ could induce green fluorescence emission (Fig. 2A). Then, we evaluated the different reaction conditions to optimize the preparation of the complex. As shown in Fig. 2B–D, the gradual elevation of the DHBFA, PEI or ferrous sulfate ratio induced distinct fluorescence intensity enhancement and then decreased, which obtained the best molar ratio (2 : 2 : 3) of ferrous sulfate, DHBFA and PEI. Further, reaction microwave power (Fig. 2E) and time (Fig. 2F) tests showed that 325 W and 3 min irradiation were the best conditions for the PS-Fe²⁺ synthesis, respectively.

Characterization of PS-Fe²⁺

PS-Fe²⁺ was prepared under the optimized conditions. In order to prove the successful preparation of PS-Fe²⁺, fluorescence spectra of PS-Fe²⁺, PS, DGBFA, PEI, Fe²⁺, DGBFA + Fe²⁺, PEI + Fe²⁺ were recorded upon excitation at 400 nm. All configuration concentrations were 1 mM. Except for Fe²⁺ (1.5 mL), the quantity of all the others were 1 mL. As shown in Fig. 3A, only PS-Fe²⁺ shows a fluorescence maximum emission peak at approximately 505 nm. Corresponding to the fluorescence emission spectrum of the obtained PS-Fe²⁺, its UV-vis absorption spectrum displayed a distinct signal at 343 nm (Fig. 3B). The shape and size of PS-Fe²⁺ were then examined via TEM. As shown in Fig. 3C, the as-synthesized PS-Fe²⁺ appears as dendritic particles with good dispersity. The average diameter is about 4 nm. The FTIR spectrum was obtained to understand the structure of PS-Fe²⁺. In the FTIR spectrum of DHBFA, distinct absorption band displayed at 3000–3600 cm⁻¹, which represented the vibration of the salicylaldehyde moiety with intramolecular hydrogen bonds (Fig. 3D). After the reaction, the peak in the corresponding region narrowed notably, which might be caused by the inhibition of the original intramolecular hydrogen bonds. In addition, DHBFA has two hydroxyl peaks, while PS-Fe²⁺ has only one redshifted hydroxyl peak, proving that a complex of
ring conjugate was synthesized due to complexation of O and Fe$^{2+}$. Simultaneously, the original signal at 1572 cm$^{-1}$, which represented the vibration of C=O in DHBFA, disappeared, while a new signal at 1651 cm$^{-1}$ appeared, which is the characteristic stretching vibration signal of C=N. In the XPS results (Fig. 3E), the binding energy of Fe 2p$_{3/2}$ for PS-Fe$^{2+}$ was 708.247 eV, which indicated the existence of Fe($\text{ii}$) in PS-Fe$^{2+}$. The specific binding energies of elements including C, N and O appeared significantly (Fig. 3F). The above results demonstrated that fluorescent PS-Fe$^{2+}$ was obtained utilizing the aforementioned method. The fluorescence quantum yield of the obtained PS-Fe$^{2+}$ was about 55% using quinine sulfate (58% in 0.1 M H$_2$SO$_4$) as a standard.

Results for the high-resolution spectra (Fig. S2†) indicated that the high-resolution C 1s spectrum could be deconvoluted into two peaks (285.08, 287.33 eV), corresponding to C=C/C=C, C=N/C=O bonds, respectively. Peaks were also recorded in the high-resolution N 1s spectrum (398.14 eV), corresponding to pyridinic C=N and amino N bonds, respectively. The presence of oxygenated carbon atoms (C=O/C=OH) can be verified from the spectrum peak (531.83 eV) recorded for high-resolution O 1s. Results from FT-IR and XPS analyses are consistent, suggesting that –NH$_2$ and –OH groups are present on PS-Fe$^{2+}$, enabling PS-Fe$^{2+}$ to have excellent water solubility and potential further application prospects in organisms.

The structures of Schiff base, Schiff base-Fe$^{2+}$ and Schiff base-Fe$^{3+}$ were optimized and their corresponding molecular orbital energy levels were calculated at the PBE1PBE/def2tzvp level. As shown in Fig. 4, the chelation of Fe$^{2+}$ lowered the HOMO energy level of the Schiff base. The results show that PS with Fe$^{2+}$ generates a circular fluorescent probe. Simultaneously, after the oxidation of Fe$^{2+}$ to Fe$^{3+}$, the HOMO energy level of the complex further decreases, which supports the oxidation-based Cr($\text{vi}$) detection process.

The stability of PS-Fe$^{2+}$ was further evaluated via the monitoring of its fluorescent intensity at 505 nm upon temperature, standing time change and pH. As shown in Fig. 5, the solution of PS-Fe$^{2+}$ is inert in the temperature range of 20–60 °C (Fig. 5A). The fluorescence intensity was stable within 90 min (Fig. 5B) and in the pH ranges from 6 to 9 (Fig. 5C). Besides, the appearance of redox substances such as Na$_2$SO$_3$ and H$_2$O$_2$ or NaCl did not interfere the fluorescent properties of PS-Fe$^{2+}$ (Fig. S4†). The present results not only demonstrate the high stability of the detection system, but also supported the possibility to detect Cr($\text{vi}$) with high specificity.

**Fluorescent responses of PS-Fe$^{2+}$ towards Cr($\text{vi}$)**

Supported by the aforementioned results, we then measured the possibility of PS-Fe$^{2+}$ to detect Cr($\text{vi}$) in aqueous solutions. Fig. 6A shows that there was an obvious decrease in the fluorescence intensity with the addition of Cr($\text{vi}$) to the PS-Fe$^{2+}$ solution, which provided the possibility to detect Cr($\text{vi}$) quantitatively with PS-Fe$^{2+}$ via a turn-off fluorescent method. To ensure the reliability of the detection process, we incubated the reaction mixture for different periods and the result showed that the reaction balanced within 15 min and the extended reaction time did not induce significant response change (Fig. 6B). Thus, the subsequent fluorescent data were all
obtained 30 min after the analyte addition. Further, the reaction temperature-related response changes were also evaluated and increased temperature did not induce significant fluorescent quenching change (Fig. 6C). Besides, pH ranges from 6 to 8 did not interfere with the detection process, which permitted the application of PS-Fe2+ for Cr(vi) detection in numerous systems (Fig. 6D). The detection process displayed maximal fluorescence intensity quenching with 3.0 mL Tris–HCl buffer pH 6.0 (Fig. 6E and F). Thus, the Tris–HCl buffer was chosen as the detection system in the following experiments.

The fluorescence spectra of the PS-Fe2+-containing solution for different concentrations of Cr2O7^{2-} were tested under the optimized reaction conditions. As shown in Fig. 7A, the inherent fluorescence intensity of PS-Fe2+ at 500 nm decreased gradually upon the addition of Cr2O7^{2-}. The fluorescence intensities of the detection system changed linearly with the concentrations of Cr2O7^{2-} ranging from 0.4 to 80 μM [ΔF = 52.2C + 839.7 (R² = 0.9935)] (Fig. 7B). The corresponding detection limit based on the IUPAC definition (CDL = 3 sb per m) was 0.18 μM from 10 blank solutions. For a fluorescent probe, specificity is the most important character to support its applications. The fluorescent responses of PS-Fe2+ towards numerous potentially interfering substances (Cr2O7^{2-}, Ca^{2+}, Mg^{2+}, Al^{3+}, Na^+, K^+, CO3^{2-}, HCO3^-, F^-, Br^-, NO3^- Cl^-, OH^-, Cr^{3+}, Cu^{2+}, Ni^{2+}, Mn^{2+}, Pb^{2+}, Zn^{2+}, Ag^+, Hg^2, Co^{2+}, Ba^{2+}, Cd^{2+}, Cr^{3+}, SO4^{2-}, NO2^-, SCN^-, PO4^{3-} and C2O4^{2-}, 2 equiv. over

Fig. 6 The optimization of the detection conditions of PS-Fe2+ for Cr(vi). (A) The fluorescence intensity of Cr(vi) to PS-Fe2+; (B) reaction period-induced response changes; (C) reaction temperature dependency response changes; (D) pH dependency response changes; (E) the buffer solution dependency response changes; and (F) selection of the amount of Tris–HCl. ΔF = F_0 – F. λex = 400 nm, slit: 10 nm/10 nm.

Fig. 7 Quantification of the detection of Cr(vi) using PS-Fe2+. (A) Fluorescence quenching of the PS-Fe2+-containing system upon different concentrations of Cr2O7^{2-} (0, 0.2, 0.4, 0.6, 0.8, 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, and 80 μM) addition; (B) working curve of PS-Fe2+ to detect Cr2O7^{2-}; (C) relative emission intensity decrease (ΔF/F_0) of the PS-Fe2+ in the presence of 0.1 mM of numerous analytes including Cr2O7^{2-}, Ca^{2+}, Mg^{2+}, Al^{3+}, Na^+, K^+, CO3^{2-}, HCO3^-, F^-, Br^-, NO3^-, Cl^-, OH^-, Cr^{3+}, Cu^{2+}, Ni^{2+}, Mn^{2+}, Pb^{2+}, Zn^{2+}, Ag^+, Hg^2, Co^{2+}, Ba^{2+}, Cd^{2+}, Cr^{3+}, SO4^{2-}, NO2^-, SCN^-, PO4^{3-} and C2O4^{2-}, 2 equiv. over
Cr(VI) were then evaluated. As shown (some of the ions, Fig. S3†) in Fig. 7C, only Cr$_2$O$_7^{2-}$ induced distinct fluorescent intensity decrease. The above-mentioned results demonstrated that PS-Fe$_2^+$ could be used for Cr(VI) detection quantificationally with high specificity.

**Detecting Cr(VI) in tap water**

In order to evaluate the practical utility of PS-Fe$_2^+$ to determine Cr(VI) in a real scenario, experiments were carried out to detect Cr(VI) in tap water by the recovery of standard addition. In a typical experiment, filtrated tap water (pH 6.0 adjusted by the addition of Tris–HCl) samples were spiked with different concentrations of Cr$_2$O$_7^{2-}$ (5 μM, 10 μM, and 20 μM) in the presence of PS-Fe$_2^+$, and the concentration of Cr$_2$O$_7^{2-}$ was determined using the calibration curve shown in Table 1. Recoveries ranged from 99.8% to 103.8% which demonstrated the applicability of PS-Fe$_2^+$ for Cr(VI) detection in real water samples. Therefore, the method can replace other methods to determine trace Cr(VI) in water.

The linear range and detection limit of our study were compared with other fluorescence methods for Cr(VI) detection (Table 2). It can be seen that the detection limit of our study was relatively lower.

**Conclusion**

In summary, the preparation of water dispersible PS-Fe$_2^+$ was reported via a facile, environmentally friendly one-pot microwave-assisted synthesis methodology. The PS with weak fluorescence emission was synthesized by PEI and DHBFA under microwave heating, and PS could chelate ferrous ions to obtain a new iron-based complex with strong fluorescence emission at 500 nm and excellent stability in aqueous solutions.

The fluorescence emission could be quenched specifically by the redox reaction of Cr(VI) and Fe$^{2+}$. Simultaneously, we further investigated the on–off–on sensing property of the PS-Fe$_2^+$ by adding Cr(VI) to the PS-Fe$_2^+$ fluorescent probe. By the redox reaction of Fe$^{2+}$ and Cr(VI), the concentration of the complex decreased, resulting in reduced fluorescence. The corresponding fluorescence intensity decreases are linear related to the concentration of Cr(VI) to realize Cr(VI) detection and the corresponding detection limit was calculated to be 0.18 μM. In addition, the proposed fluorescence method was successfully applied to the real sample analysis for the detection of Cr(VI) in drinking water samples with acceptable precision. The current synthesis method and the detection strategies for Cr(VI) may provide an easier and inexpensive process for the development of sensors for both environmental, biological applications, and domestic drinking water.

**Conflicts of interest**

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

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**References**


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Table 1  Detection of Cr(VI) in tap water

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<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Cr$_2$O$_7^{2-}$ added (μM)</th>
<th>Cr$_2$O$_7^{2-}$ recovered (μM)</th>
<th>Recovery (%)</th>
<th>RSD (%)</th>
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<td>Tap water</td>
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<td></td>
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Table 2  Comparison of methods for Cr(VI) determination

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<th>Detection limit (μM)</th>
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<td>g-C$_3$N$_4$ fluorescence probe</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>SiNP fluorescence sensor</td>
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<td>0.028</td>
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<td>GQD-modified membranes</td>
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<tr>
<td>CQD fluorescence sensor</td>
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