**A highly sensitive ppb-level H$_2$S gas sensor based on fluorophenoxy-substituted phthalocyanine cobalt/rGO hybrids at room temperature**

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The peripheral and non-peripheral substitution of 4-trifluoromethylphenoxy groups in the design of gas sensing phthalocyanine cobalt/reduced graphene oxide (rGO) hybrids with two different positions of the substituents was realized. Tetra-x(β)-(4-trifluoromethylphenoxy)phthalocyanine cobalt/reduced graphene oxide (3(4)-cF$_3$poPcCo/rGO) hybrids were prepared through noncovalent interaction, and were analyzed by FT-IR, UV-vis, TGA and SEM. The gas sensing performance of the cF$_3$poPcCo/rGO hybrid gas sensors towards ppb hydrogen sulfide (H$_2$S) was measured at room temperature. The results show that the 4-cF$_3$poPcCo/rGO sensor has better sensitivity, selectivity and reproducibility than the 3-cF$_3$poPcCo/rGO sensor, as well as a perfect linear response to the concentration of H$_2$S. For the 4-cF$_3$poPcCo/rGO sensor, the response sensitivity to 1 ppm H$_2$S is as high as 46.58, the response and recovery times are 600 s and 50 s for 1 ppm H$_2$S, and the detection limit is as low as 11.6 ppb. This is mainly due to the loose and porous structure of the cF$_3$poPcCo/rGO hybrids, the fact that graphene is an excellent conductive agent, and the fact that the electron-withdrawing capability of the trifluoromethyl group can increase the holes of rGO and PcCo. In addition, through electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) and I–V curves, and density functional theory, the influence of different positions of the substituents of cF$_3$poPcCo/rGO on the sensing performance and the sensing mechanism for improving sensitivity were discussed and confirmed in detail.

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the rapid development of the economy and society, people's demand for various resources in life has also increased. This leads to more and more serious environmental damage and pollution, especially air pollution. Among the common air pollutants, hydrogen sulfide (H$_2$S) is a highly toxic, dangerous and flammable gas with the smell of rotten eggs. H$_2$S is widely produced in the process of biodegradation in the petroleum industry, natural gas, food, organic materials and bacterial decomposition of human and animal feces. According to the safety standards established by the American Conference of governmental industrial hygienists, the threshold value of H$_2$S is about 10 ppm. In fact, many studies have shown that H$_2$S higher than 2–5 ppm will have adverse effects on the human respiratory system. Therefore, it is very important to realize the real-time monitoring and effective and accurate detection of the harmful H$_2$S gas at lower concentrations (such as ppb level).

Recently, many researchers have been devoted to the research and development of new hydrogen sulfide gas sensors based on high selectivity, high sensitivity, high efficiency, energy saving and low detection limit. The use of CuO, WO$_3$, ZnO, SnO$_2$, Fe$_2$O$_3$ and other metal oxides has been reported to detect H$_2$S at the ppm level. The detection limit of most materials is very low, but the optimal working temperature (OWT) is still very high and the sensitivity is very low. For example, in 2016, the $\alpha$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ sensor prepared by Lin et al. had a sensitivity of 11.7 for hydrogen sulfide at 350 °C and 100 ppm. The sensitivity of the $\alpha$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ sensor decorated with titanium dioxide developed by Kheel et al. to hydrogen sulfide at 200 ppm was only 7.4 at 300 °C. In 2018, p-type Co$_3$O$_4$ prepared by Quang et al. exhibited a sensitivity of only 4.5 for the detection of 100 ppm hydrogen sulfide gas at 300 °C. All of the above results confirm that a great breakthrough has been made in the detection of hydrogen sulfide, but it is still a challenge to develop a sensor material for detecting ppb level H$_2$S with high sensitivity at low temperatures.

Graphene-based carbon material, as a two-dimensional carbon material, has also made a great breakthrough in the
field of hydrogen sulfide gas sensing. For example, in 2014, Seon-Jin Choi et al. reported that the reduced graphene oxide-functionalized tin dioxide gas-sensitive material has a sensitivity of 34 for detecting 5 ppm hydrogen sulfide at 200 °C.14 In 2016, Shi et al. studied reduced graphene oxide/hexagonal WO3 nanosheet composites with a sensitivity of 45 for detecting 10 ppm hydrogen sulfide at 330 °C.15 In 2017, Yang et al. reported a NiO cube (hc-NiO)/nitrogen doped reduced graphene oxide (N-rGO) composite with a sensitivity of 54.06 for 100 ppm hydrogen sulfide at 92 °C.16 In 2018, Chu et al. reported that tin oxide-modified reduced graphene oxide (SnO2–rGO) had a response value of 34.31 to 100 ppm hydrogen sulfide at 125 °C.17 Modified graphene exhibits good performance for hydrogen sulfide, but the optimal operating temperature is still high, so gas-sensitive materials based on lower operating temperatures need further research.

As we all know, metal phthalocyanine is considered as an excellent organic thin film gas sensor because of its unique conjugated 18 π electron structure, the diversity of the central atoms and the fact that the hydrogen atoms around the external phthalocyanine ring can be replaced by other groups to form a variety of phthalocyanine compounds. Many studies have shown that metal phthalocyanine can work at room temperature, and has good selectivity, high sensitivity and short response time. Different kinds of inorganic gases (SO2, CO, CO2) have been detected by adjusting the substituents, and volatile organic compounds were detected by using metal phthalocyanines with different central atoms.25,26 However, single metal phthalocyanine gas sensors have a large resistance, and the original metal phthalocyanine gas sensor has fewer exposed active sites and a small contact area, which greatly limits its research in the field of gas sensing, so it has to be modified and assembled to enhance its gas sensing performance.

Based on the above research and discussion, in this paper, we use non covalent modification to prepare tetra-π-(4-trifluoromethylphenoxy)phthalocyanine cobalt/reduced graphene oxide (3-cF3poPcCo/rGO) and tetra-β-(4-trifluoromethylphenoxy)phthalocyanine cobalt/reduced graphene oxide (4-cF3poPcCo/rGO) hybrids. The strong π–π stacking between the reduced graphene oxide surface and the large π conjugated system of the phthalocyanine ring plane was used to induce the adsorption and assembly of phthalocyanine molecules on the graphene surface, so as to realize the improvement of the gas sensitivity of metal phthalocyanine and reduced graphene oxide. The effects of different substituent positions of the phthalocyanines on the gas sensing properties of the cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid materials were studied. Due to the nonplanar distortion of the 3-cF3poPcCo phthalocyanine complex, the (3-cF3poPcCo/rGO) hybrid easily exhibits nonplanar distortion. Therefore, this study shows that the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid has more excellent gas sensing performance than the 3-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid. Studies have shown that the sensitivity of 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO to 1 ppm H2S is as high as 46.58, and the minimum detection limit is 11.6 ppb at room temperature. In addition, the selectivity, reproducibility, stability, and gas sensing mechanism of hydrogen sulfide are discussed in detail (Scheme 1).

2. Experimental and calculation details

2.1 Materials and reagents

Flake graphite was purchased from Shenzhen Nanotech Port Co., Ltd. 3-Nitrophthalonitrile and 4-nitrophthalonitrile (99% purity), and DBU (98% purity) were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich Co. LLC. p-Trifluoromethylphenol (99% purity) was purchased from Shanghai SAEN Chemical Technology Co., Ltd. Ultrapure water (resistivity 18.2 MΩ cm) was obtained from a Milli-Q Water System (Millipore Corp., Bedford, MA, USA) and was used throughout the experiments. Graphene oxide (GO) was fabricated using the modified Hummers method from graphite powder, as described in our former reports.22 Trifluoromethyloxyphosphorylphthalocyanine cobalt (cF3poPcCo) was synthesized by using the reaction of trifluoromethoxyphosphorylphthalonitrile with anhydrous cobalt chloride(d) in the presence of 1,8-diazabicyclo[5,4,0]undec-7-ene (DBU) (see Experiment details in the ESI†). All other reagents were of analytical grade and utilized without further purification.

2.2 Preparation of cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrids

The cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrids were prepared by using the same general methods; GO (0.100 g) was dispersed in 30 ml of N,N-dimethylformamide (DMF) solution, and ultrasonication was performed at room temperature for 2 h. cF3poPcCo (0.200 g) dissolved in DMF solution (10 ml) was added to the dispersed GO solution dropwise. The subsequent mixture was ultrasonically treated at room temperature for 48 hours. Then, hydrazine hydrate (0.6 ml) and ammonia water (4 ml) were added and the mixture was stirred in a nitrogen atmosphere at 90–100 °C for 24 hours. After cooling, the solution was filtered through a 0.45 μm microporous filter, and washed with DMF, ethanol and acetone in turn until the filtrate was colorless. Then, the product was dried under vacuum at 50 °C for 5 h.

2.3 Fabrication and measurement of gas sensors

A full description of the gold electrodes and the gas sensor testing device is available in our previous research.27,28
In order to prepare the cF₃poPcCo/rGO hybrid gas sensor, the prepared cF₃poPcCo/rGO (1 mg) hybrid was dispersed in ethanol (1 ml) to obtain a uniform suspension of 1.0 mg ml⁻¹. After ultrasonic treatment for 3 hours, the dispersed solution was dropped onto an interdigital electrode with a micro syringe. After the solution was completely evaporated, the sensor device was dried in a vacuum oven at 80 °C for 2.5 hours to completely remove the solvent residue. For comparison, a similar process was used to prepare the rGO and cF₃poPcCo gas sensors.

A typical sensor test cycle consists of three steps to speed up the recovery of the sensor. First, the testing chamber was cleaned by continuously blowing clean air, and then was evacuated using a pump. After that, the target gas was injected into a vacuum glass chamber via a micro syringe, and then fresh air (45 ± 5 RH%) was passed into the chamber to balance the inside and outside pressure of the chamber. The sensor was inserted into the chamber to get the gas response, and removed from the chamber to obtain the gas recovery. To avoid the effect of residual H₂S on the gas response, the gas sensing measurement was carried out in the order of low to high H₂S concentration. Besides, ppb levels of H₂S can be obtained by injecting K₂CO₃ (45%), MgCl₂ (33%) and LiCl (11%).

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3. Results and discussion

3.1 Characterization of the PcCo/rGO hybrids

In this study, 3(4)-(4-trifluoromethylphenoxy)phthalonitrile and 3(4)cF₃poPcCo were synthesized. The GC-MS spectra of 3(4)-(4-trifluoromethylphenoxy)phthalonitrile are shown in Fig. S1 and S2,† which indicate that the rule of the molecular ion peaks is consistent with the structure of the molecular fragments. In order to confirm the preparation of cF₃poPcCo, the FT-IR characterization of these compounds is shown in Fig. 1A and S3A.† The vibration peak of O–H of 4-(trifluoromethyl)phenol disappeared at 3377 cm⁻¹, indicating the successful preparation of 4-(4-trifluoromethylphenoxy)phthalonitrile. Compared with 4-(4-trifluoromethylphenoxy)phthalonitrile, the C–N stretching vibration peak at 2243 cm⁻¹ in 4-cF₃poPcCo disappeared, which confirmed that 4-(4-trifluoromethylphenoxy)phthalonitrile had been cyclized to form 4-cF₃poPcCo. The absorption peaks of 4-cF₃poPcCo and 4-(trifluoromethylphenoxy)phthalonitrile at 1330 cm⁻¹ indicated that the characteristic vibration absorption peaks of C–F of 4-trifluoromethylphenol were retained, which also confirmed the successful preparation of 4-cF₃poPcCo and 4-(4-trifluoromethylphenoxy)phthalonitrile. Similarly, 3-cF₃poPcCo and 3-(4-trifluoromethylphenoxy)phthalonitrile are the same as 4-cF₃poPcCo and 4-(4-trifluoromethylphenoxy)phthalonitrile in Fig. S3A,† which shows that the metal phthalocyanine is formed by the cyclization of phthalonitrile, which also shows that the test results are consistent with the predicted structure.

Through the above discussion, we have successfully prepared metal cobalt phthalocyanine complexes. The infrared

2.4 Characterization

UV-vis absorption spectra were recorded with a UV-2700 UV-vis spectrometer (SHIMADZU, Japan). FT-IR spectra were recorded on a Spectra two FT-IR spectrometer (PerkinElmer, USA). The gaseous products after the cF₃poPcCo/rGO hybrid sensor contacted H₂S were investigated by gas chromatography/mass spectrometry (GC-MS, Thermo Scientific TRACE 1300). The scanning electron microscopy (SEM) images were recorded with a Hitachi S-4800 field emission scanning electron microscope operating at 15 kV. Thermogravimetric (TG) analysis was performed on a TA Q600 under a stream of nitrogen at a heating rate of 10 °C min⁻¹. Electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) was performed on a CHI760E electrochemical workstation at room temperature with a frequency range of 0.01 Hz to 100 kHz and an excitation amplitude of 0.2 V. The current voltage (I–V) characteristics of the sensor were measured by measuring the potential between −1 and +1 V at a scanning rate of 0.01 V s⁻¹ on a Keithley 4200 semiconductor parameter analyzer.

Fig. 1 (A) FT-IR spectra of 4-[(trifluoromethyl)phenol, 4-(4-trifluoromethylphenoxy)phthalonitrile and the 4-cF₃poPcCo complex; (B) FT-IR spectra of rGO, 4-cF₃poPcCo and the 4-cF₃poPcCo/rGO hybrid; (C) UV-vis spectra of rGO, 4-cF₃poPcCo and the 4-cF₃poPcCo/rGO hybrid in DMF; (D) TG profiles of rGO, 4-cF₃poPcCo and the 4-cF₃poPcCo/rGO hybrid.
spectrum of the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid is shown in Fig. 1B. There are strong absorption peaks at 1636 and 3440 cm\(^{-1}\) of rGO, which correspond to the vibration peaks of CC and O–H of rGO, respectively, but no obvious absorption peaks are found at other positions, which proves that a large number of hydroxyl and carboxyl groups are lost in the formation of rGO after reduction, which also proves the successful preparation of rGO.\(^{29}\) The vibration peaks of CC and O–H at 1636 and 3440 cm\(^{-1}\) were retained in the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid, and the characteristic absorption peaks of the 4-cF3poPcCo were also observed in the wavelength range of 900–1600 cm\(^{-1}\). For example, at about 1330 cm\(^{-1}\) is the stretching vibration peak of C–F, and at 1250 and 1086 cm\(^{-1}\) are the corresponding vibration peaks of aryl ether.\(^{29,31}\) Similarly, for the 3-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrids, the CC and O–H peaks of rGO can also be clearly seen at 1636 and 3440 cm\(^{-1}\), and the characteristic absorption peaks of the 3-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid can be seen within the wavelength range of 900–1600 cm\(^{-1}\) in Fig. S3B.\(^{†}\) In conclusion, all of these results confirm that the cF3poPcCo complex has successfully adsorbed onto the surface of rGO in a noncovalent manner. In order to further determine the prepared hybrids, we tested the UV-vis spectra of the rGO, 4-cF3poPcCo and 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrids in DMF solution, as shown in Fig. 1C. The UV-vis spectrum of rGO in DMF solution exhibits no absorption peaks, which may be due to the poor dispersion of rGO in the spectrum of rGO in DMF solution. The UV-vis spectra of the rGO, 4-cF3poPcCo and 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO was studied in a N\(_2\) atmosphere, as shown in Fig. 1D and S3D.\(^{†}\) The weight loss of rGO is about 17.22% in the range of 300–600 °C, which is mainly due to the destruction of oxidized species and residual amorphous carbon on the surface of rGO, as shown in Fig. 1D and S3D.\(^{†}\) The weight loss of 4-cF3poPcCo is 56.13% in the same temperature range, which is mainly due to the destruction of the phthalocyanine peripheral substituent group. The weight loss of 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO is 30.75%, originating from the above-mentioned destruction of the phthalocyanine and rGO. Thus, a corrected weight loss of 13.53% (30.75–17.22%) can be obtained, which comes from 4-cF3poPcCo in the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid. Considering the actual amount of 4-cF3poPcCo adsorbed on the surface of rGO, a real ratio of 24.10% (13.53%/56.13%) can be calculated. The content of 3-cF3poPcCo in the 3-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid was 11.95% by the same method. This result shows that the amount of phthalocyanine in the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid is higher than that of the 3-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid, and indicates that the non-planar distortion of 3-cF3poPcCo has a negative effect on the preparation of hybrids. Therefore, the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid may exhibit superior gas sensitivity compared to the 3-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid.

### 3.2 Gas sensing properties

The SEM image of the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid on an interdigital electrode is shown in Fig. 2A–C. Compared with the 3-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid (Fig. 2D–F), the scanning electron microscope layer of the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid is clearer, and it is distributed evenly and loosely between the two fingers of the interdigital electrode, which provides a continuous conductive path for electron transmission, a permeable channel for gas molecular diffusion, and more advantages at the active site. Moreover, the structure of reduced graphene oxide can be clearly seen on the interdigital electrode substrate. This porous surface morphology is conducive to the adsorption and
desorption of gas molecules, which will improve the sensing performance of the hybrid.

Through the observation of the 3-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid and the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid (Fig. 2 and S4†), the microstructure of the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid clearly exhibits a uniform lamellar structure with many gaps between the layers. However, the stacking phenomenon of the 3-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid also shows that the 3-cF3poPcCo with non-planarity cannot easily form a non-covalent hybrid with reduced graphene oxide, which will lead to the stacking phenomenon. The formation of this stacking phenomenon may lead to the difference in gas sensitivity between the two hybrids. Finally, the accuracy of this interpretation is confirmed by studying the sensitivity of the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid and 3-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid to hydrogen sulfide gas. Selectivity is a very important characteristic in the application of sensors at room temperature. The gas sensing characteristics of cF3poPcCo, rGO and the cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid sensors deposited on interdigital electrodes were studied using hydrogen sulfide as the target gas. The responses of the five sensors to 1 ppm H2S and 1000 ppm of 15 different other gases have been studied, and the results are shown in Fig. 3A. The sensors based on the cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrids show the highest response to H2S; in particular, the response value of 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO for 1 ppm H2S is as high as 46.58%. Compared with other gases, the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid exhibits excellent selectivity to H2S. For the other sensors, the sensitivity of phthalocyanine is not high enough, although its selectivity to H2S is high. However, the response and selectivity of the rGO sensor to H2S are poor, so we chose hydrogen sulfide as the research object of gas detection and carried out a series of tests. The influence of humidity on the sensor is also an important factor in the application of the sensor at room temperature. Therefore, the response of the cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid sensor to 1 ppm H2S was tested under different relative humidities at 25 °C. As shown in Fig. 3B, under different relative humidities, the response of the cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid sensor to 1 ppm H2S hardly changed, which indicates that the prepared material has strong stability in the ambient environment. Based on the above results, the cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid sensor shows higher selectivity and lower RH effect in terms of sensing response. Therefore, cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid materials are expected to be used as H2S sensing materials.

In order to further study the gas sensing characteristics of cF3poPcCo/rGO towards H2S, the dynamic response recovery curve of the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid to H2S at different concentrations was recorded as shown in Fig. 4A. The signal resistance is continuously recorded because the sensor sample is exposed to the target gas in a gas tight chamber and then recovers at room temperature. For comparison, the sensing response of 4-cF3poPcCo and rGO to H2S was also studied. Nine dynamic cycles corresponding to 0.1–40 ppm H2S concentration were recorded continuously at room temperature. It can be seen that with the increase of the H2S concentration, the response strength of all of the sensors will increase. In addition, the response of the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO sensor to the H2S concentration shows two good linear responses as shown in Fig. 4B. The concentration in the range of 0.1–1 ppm is 4.56% H2S per ppm, and the concentration in the range of 1–20 ppm is 0.27% H2S per ppm. The linear regression equation S = 4.56C (ppm) + 41.99 (r² = 0.999) is obtained from the calibration curve, which shows that the detection limit (LOD) of the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid sensor to H2S under different relative humidities at 25 °C.
sensor is as low as 11.6 ppb (S/N = 3) according to the reported method. The points were averaged and a standard deviation (S) was gathered as 0.25. Therefore, the sensor noise is 0.0177 according to eqn (2) and the theoretical detection limit (for a signal-to-noise ratio of 3) is approximately 11.6 ppb according to eqn (3). \[ \text{RMS}_{\text{noise}} = \sqrt{\frac{S^2}{N}} = 0.0177 \] \[ \text{LOD (ppm)} = 3 \times \frac{\text{RMS}_{\text{noise}}}{\text{slope}} = 11.6 \text{ ppb} \] Repeatability and stability are also important factors in the evaluation of gas sensors. The cycling stability and long-term stability of 1 ppm H2S were measured at room temperature. After 10 cycles, the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO sensor still maintains rapid response and recovery capability, and the response is almost the same, as shown in Fig. 4C. In addition, the response changes only about 5.0% after 50 days (Fig. 4D), which also shows that the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO sensor has excellent long-term stability for H2S.

The H2S sensing performance of the 3-cF3poPcCo/rGO sensor is shown in Fig. S5†. It also shows high sensitivity, good linear response, long-term stability and repeatability, as well as lower detection concentration. However, the sensitivity of the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid was higher than that of the 3-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid. As mentioned above in the UV-vis and TG spectra, the peripheral substituted group of the 4-cF3poPcCo complex tends to form a planar structure, and has a positive effect on the preparation of hybrids and the evenly distributed, loose and porous surface morphology of the sensor. Therefore, the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid shows better gas sensing performance than the 3-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid. As shown in Fig. S6A,† the sensitivity of 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO, 3-cF3poPcCo/rGO, 4-cF3poPcCo, 3-cF3poPcCo and rGO sensors at several different H2S concentrations was studied. For example, the sensitivity of the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid is about 2.98 times, 18.85 times, 41.58 times and 36.67 times higher than that of the 3-cF3poPcCo/rGO, 4-cF3poPcCo, 3-cF3poPcCo and rGO sensors for 1 ppm H2S, respectively. In particular, 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO also exhibits much higher sensitivity, lower detection limits and optimal operating temperatures compared to previously reported gas-sensitive materials (Table S1†). This is mainly because the introduced trifluoromethyl group will reduce the electron cloud density and increase the holes on the phthalocyanine, which will facilitate the adsorption of gas molecules and increase its gas sensitivity.

In order to further explore the effect of substituents on the gas sensing performance, the gas sensing properties of the tetra-β-(phenoxy)cobalt phthalocyanine and graphene oxide (4-poPcCo/rGO) and tetra-β-(carboxyphenoxy)cobalt phthalocyanine and graphene oxide (4-cpoPcCo/rGO) hybrids were tested. The research shows that the sensitivity to 1 ppm H2S of 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO is 9.1 times and 19.2 times higher than that of 4-cpoPcCo/rGO and 4-poPcCo/rGO, as shown in Fig. S6B,† thus successfully confirming that the substituent has a great influence on the sensitivity of the gas sensor. When the electron-withdrawing group is outside the phthalocyanine ring, it reduces the electron cloud density of the phthalocyanine ring and increases the holes on the phthalocyanine ring. Therefore, when the reductive gas H2S contacts with it, the lone pair electrons of the gas molecules will be more easily transferred to the phthalocyanine, which is conducive to increasing the resistance of the hybrid materials and the sensitivity of the gas sensor. Therefore, the corresponding gas sensing performance will also decrease in turn because the electronegativity of trifluoromethoxy, carboxyphenoxy and phenoxy decreases in turn.

3.3 Gas sensitivity mechanism

The sensing mechanism of phthalocyanine and graphite oxide for hydrogen sulfide is in accordance with charge transfer theory, as shown in Scheme 2. Therefore, the adsorption of the target gas on the surface of the H2S gas sensor changes its resistance, which is very similar to the principle of the sensing mechanism in metal oxide gas sensors. In air, oxygen molecules have high electron affinity (0.43 eV (ref. 39)) and can easily adsorb on the surface of the cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid. After that, the oxygen molecules capture the free electrons from the cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrids and generate chemically adsorbed oxygen substances in the form of O2– (eqn (4) and (5), T < 100 °C).50-53 This leads to an increase in the concentration of hole carriers. When exposed to H2S, the H2S gas will interact with the adsorbed oxygen O2– (eqn (6) and (7)).55,42 Meanwhile, a large number of electrons will be released. Electrons generated are trapped by the cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrids through the phthalocyanine absorbed on the surface of rGO. Electrons recombine with holes and decrease the density of the hole carriers in the process of sensing, which leads to an increase in resistance, as shown in Scheme 2. In order to verify the interaction between the cF3poPcCo/rGO sensor and H2S after the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid was exposed to H2S for 1 h, the gaseous product was measured by GC-MS. The results in Fig. 5 show that the molecular ion of SO2 (m/z = 64) appeared. These results indicate that H2S is oxidized to SO2, in accordance with the above sensing mechanism. 

\[ \text{O}_2(g) \rightarrow \text{O}_2(ads) \] (4)
ence in device current of the two cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrids is peripheral substituents have stronger electron-donating capability of the tri
characteristic curve of the sensing device is shown in Fig. 6 and
S7.† Why the cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrids display excellent H2S-sensing performance can be explained as follows: first, the loose and porous structure enables gas molecules to adsorb and transfer rapidly throughout the sensing layer, and provides more active sites and channels for the reaction between H2S gas and the adsorbed oxygen O2−. Second, the graphene is an excellent conductive agent. Adding an appropriate amount of graphene can quickly capture the generated electrons coming from eqn (7), leading to a fast and sensitive response. Finally, the electron-withdrawing capability of the trifluoromethyl group can increase the holes of rGO and PcCo. These holes quickly capture the generated electrons in the gas sensing process, which can reduce the carrier concentration of the cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid and the resistance of the cF3poPcCo/rGO sensor is increased. In this system, the electron-withdrawing capability of the trifluoromethyl group has a great influence on the H2S-sensing performance.

In order to verify the H2S sensing mechanism, the I–V characteristic curve of the sensing device is shown in Fig. 6 and S7.† The linearity and symmetry of the I–V curve indicate the ohmic contact between the sample and the gold electrode. Obviously, under the same voltage, the current of all kinds of sensing devices decreases gradually according to the law of rGO > 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO > 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO exposed to H2S > 4-cF3poPcCo, and 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO > 3-cF3poPcCo/rGO. Low current means that the sensor has a relatively high resistance. The cF3poPcCos show high resistance due to their inherently high resistance. For the cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrids, it may be due to the inherently high resistance of cF3poPcCo and the donation of electrons from p-type cF3poPcCo to p-type rGO to reduce the current of the device compared with rGO. The distinct difference in device current of the two cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrids is ascribed to the different position of the substituents. Non-peripheral substituents have stronger electron-donating capability than peripheral substituents.44 This can provide more electron binding on the holes of p-type semiconductor 3-cF3poPcCo and rGO. The combination of electrons and holes can reduce the carrier concentration of the system, which will further increase the resistance of the 3-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid. This is very consistent with the analysis results of the band gap from the UV-visible diffuse reflectance spectra (Fig. S8†). Hence, the response towards H2S is not as good as that of the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid. When the cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrids contact H2S, the resistance of the cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrids is further increased due to the fact that H2S is used as an electron donor with a pair of lone electrons. This is very consistent with the charge transfer mechanism.

In order to further evaluate the conductivity of cF3poPcCos, the HOMO–LUMO energy levels of 3-cF3poPcCo and 4-cF3poPcCo were calculated using density functional theory (DFT) with the spin-polarized gradient corrected functional of Perdew, Burke, and Ernzerhof (PBE) as implemented in the VASP package.45,46 The projector augmented wave (PAW) method with a plane wave basis set was employed.46 The F-point approximation was employed for Brillouin zone integration. Charge analyses were performed with Bader analysis. The calculation results show that the HOMO–LUMO energy level of 4-cF3poPcCo (1.12 eV) is slightly smaller than that of 3-cF3poPcCo (1.13 eV), which indicates that 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO has higher conductivity compared to 3-cF3poPcCo/rGO. Moreover, the valence and conduction bands of phthalocyanine correspond to the HOMO and LUMO of phthalocyanine molecules, respectively.47 In order to further determine the band gap of cF3poPcCos, UV-visible diffuse reflectance spectra of cF3poPcCos were measured. Fig. S8b–e† show the optical absorption spectra of cF3poPcCos, from which the band gaps of 3-cF3poPcCo and 4-cF3poPcCo can be estimated from the plot of (Ahr)½ (for direct band gap) versus photon energy (hv). The intercepts of the tangent to the x-axis give a good approximation of the band gap of 3-cF3poPcCo and 4-cF3poPcCo to be approximately 1.38 and 1.28 eV, respectively. Which further indicates that the conductivity of 4-cF3poPcCo is higher than that of 3-cF3poPcCo. Hence, the response of 3-cF3poPcCo/rGO towards H2S is not as good as that of the 4-cF3poPcCo/rGO hybrid.

(5) $O_2^{(ads)} + e^- \rightarrow O_2^{(ads)}$

(6) $H_2S(g) \rightarrow H_2S^{(ads)}$

(7) $2H_2S^{(ads)} + 3O_2^{(ads)} \rightarrow 2H_2O(g) + 2SO_2(g) + 3e^-$

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In order to study the charge transfer kinetics of the hybrids, we measured the electrochemical impedance of rGO, cF3-poPcCo and cF3-poPcCo/rGO, as shown in Fig. S8A.† The Nyquist diagram is installed through an appropriate electrical equivalent circuit, and the impedance diagram fitted by the equivalent circuit is shown in Fig. S8B.† It can be seen that the chemical impedance Nyquist diagram of the cF3-poPcCo/rGO hybrid after fitting shows a better relationship between the ground wire properties, as shown in Fig. S8C.† After fitting, the fitted electrode impedance parameters of rGO, cF3-poPcCo and the cF3-poPcCo/rGO hybrid are also obtained, as shown in Table 1. Rs is the uncompensated resistance of the electrolyte, separator and electrode, and Rct is the charge transfer resistance at the interface of the active material. It can be clearly seen that the Rs and Rct of the 4-cF3-poPcCo/rGO hybrid are 11.05 Ω and 9.56 Ω, respectively, and are smaller than those of 3-cF3-poPcCo/rGO (16.32 Ω, 27.57 Ω), 3-cF3-poPcCo (38.34 Ω, 201.01 Ω), 4-cF3-poPcCo (40.55 Ω, 200.21 Ω) and rGO (44.72 Ω, 1887 Ω). Rs and Rct are related to the conductivity and electron transport of materials. The lower the Rs and Rct values, the stronger the electron transport ability. This is in line with the results of electronic absorption spectra. Therefore, the 4-cF3-poPcCo/rGO hybrid shows better response to hydrogen sulfide than other sensing materials.

### Table 1 Fitted impedance parameters of rGO, cF3-poPcCo and cF3-poPcCo/rGO electrode

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Samples</th>
<th>Rs (Ω)</th>
<th>Rct (Ω)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4-cF3-poPcCo/rGO</td>
<td>11.05</td>
<td>9.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-cF3-poPcCo/rGO</td>
<td>16.32</td>
<td>27.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-cF3-poPcCo</td>
<td>38.34</td>
<td>201.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-cF3-poPcCo</td>
<td>40.55</td>
<td>200.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rGO</td>
<td>44.72</td>
<td>1887</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, by designing and adjusting the peripheral substitution and substituent position of phthalocyanine, two kinds of cF3-poPcCo/rGO hybrids were successfully prepared and used for a high performance ppb-level hydrogen sulfide (H2S) sensor at room temperature. The results show that the 4-cF3-poPcCo/rGO sensor exhibits improved gas sensing performance to H2S due to the 4-trifluoromethylphenoxy group and peripheral substituent position of 4-cF3-poPcCo, including enhanced selectivity and response, and decreased recovery time for 1 ppm H2S. In particular, the response sensitivity of the 4-cF3-poPcCo/rGO sensor to 1 ppm H2S can be as high as 46.58%, with a fast recovery time of 50 s and a low detection limit of 11.6 ppb. Such excellent ppb-level H2S gas sensing performance is mainly ascribed to the unique structure of the cF3-poPcCo/rGO hybrid. First, the loose and porous structure enables gas molecules to adsorb and transfer rapidly throughout the sensing layer, and provides more active sites and channels for the reaction between H2S gas and the adsorbed oxygen O2.