

## PAPER

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[View Journal](#) | [View Issue](#)Cite this: *Nanoscale Adv.*, 2024, 6, 1241Received 20th November 2023  
Accepted 29th December 2023

DOI: 10.1039/d3na01024d

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# Synthesis of polyoxometalate-pillared Zn–Cr layered double hydroxides for photocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction and H<sub>2</sub>O oxidation†

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Polyoxometalate (POM)-pillared Zn–Cr layered double hydroxides (LDHs) exhibited high photocatalytic activities in CO<sub>2</sub> reduction and H<sub>2</sub>O oxidation reactions. For CO<sub>2</sub> reduction in pure water, the CO production was 1.17 μmol g<sup>−1</sup> after a 24 h reaction. For O<sub>2</sub> evolution in NaO<sub>3</sub> solution, the O<sub>2</sub> production reached 148.1 μmol g<sup>−1</sup> after a 6 hour reaction. A mechanism study indicated that the electron transfer from Zn–Cr LDHs to POMs (SiW<sub>12</sub>O<sub>40</sub><sup>4−</sup>) promoted photocatalytic activities.

## Introduction

Layered double hydroxides (LDHs) constitute a class of multifunctional materials characterized by tunable chemical compositions, featuring cationic brucite host layers and anionic interlayer guests.<sup>1</sup> Owing to their favorable band positions, considerable attention has been directed towards their application in photocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction<sup>2–15</sup> and oxygen evolution.<sup>16–18</sup> Notably, within the realm of LDHs, Zn–Cr LDHs and their derivatives have demonstrated remarkable photocatalytic properties concerning CO<sub>2</sub> reduction and O<sub>2</sub> evolution in aqueous environments. For example, Jiang *et al.*<sup>6</sup> observed that CO<sub>3</sub><sup>2−</sup>-type Zn–Cr LDHs grafted with Cu<sub>2</sub>O nanoparticles could reduce CO<sub>2</sub> to CO and simultaneously oxidize water to O<sub>2</sub>.

Similarly, Hwang *et al.*<sup>19</sup> prepared mesoporous layer-by-layer ordered nanohybrids of Zn–Cr LDHs and layered titanate, showing improved photocatalytic O<sub>2</sub> generation activity. Polyoxometalates (POMs), also recognized as polyacids, represent a class of catalytically active inorganic compounds featuring highly symmetrical core assemblies of MO<sub>n</sub> units (M = V, Mo, or W).<sup>17</sup> Depending on the number of atoms and the combination mode, POMs exhibit diverse structures, including Keggin, Dawson, Anderson, Waugh, and Silver. Notably, Keggin-type POMs (XM<sub>12</sub>O<sub>40</sub><sup>n−</sup>, *e.g.*, H<sub>3</sub>PMo<sub>12</sub>O<sub>40</sub> and H<sub>4</sub>SiMo<sub>12</sub>O<sub>40</sub>) demonstrate the ability to oxidize and reduce adsorbed substances through a multi-electronic process (ESI Fig. 1†). This rapid multi-electronic redox property provides POMs with an advantage in heterogeneous catalysis. The hybrid systems of immobilized POMs on semiconductors,

such as POM-TiO<sub>2</sub><sup>20</sup> and POM-WO<sub>3</sub>,<sup>21</sup> presented enhanced photocatalytic performance owing to the effective charge transfer between the two components.

The introduction of POM anions into the interlayer gallery proves to be a simple and effective means of immobilizing POMs. The combination of POM pillared LDHs offers several advantages, including expanded interlayer gallery heights, controlled component losses of POMs in polar solvents, improved specific surfaces of LDHs and POMs, and easy separation and recovery from the reaction.<sup>21</sup> In previous studies, Mg–Al, Zn–Cr, and Zn–Al LDHs pillared by POMs including isopoly-type W<sub>7</sub>O<sub>6</sub><sup>−</sup>, substituted Keggin-type SiW<sub>11</sub>O<sub>39</sub>Mn(H<sub>2</sub>O)<sup>6−</sup>, and Preyssler-type NaP<sub>5</sub>W<sub>30</sub>O<sub>110</sub><sup>14−</sup> demonstrated noteworthy photocatalytic activity for the degradation of aqueous hexachlorocyclohexane (HCH).<sup>21,22</sup>

Gunjakar *et al.*<sup>23</sup> revealed the mechanism of electron transfer from LDHs to POMs by investigating photocatalytic O<sub>2</sub> generation using isopoly-type W<sub>7</sub>O<sub>24</sub><sup>6−</sup> and V<sub>10</sub>O<sub>28</sub><sup>6−</sup> pillared Zn–Cr LDHs in AgNO<sub>3</sub> aqueous solution.

Despite extensive studies on photocatalytic properties, the reliable synthesis of POM pillared LDHs remains a challenge due to the reactivity of some POMs, such as PW<sub>12</sub>O<sub>40</sub><sup>3−</sup> and SiW<sub>12</sub>O<sub>40</sub><sup>4−</sup>, which react with alkaline LDHs in aqueous solutions instead of forming a hybrid POM/LDH structure. Zhu *et al.*<sup>24</sup> found that the stability of polytungstate increased in aqueous solutions of ethanol or acetone at pH < 8, inspiring our approach to preparing POM pillared LDHs *via* ion exchange in organic solvents at a similar pH to circumvent the reaction between POMs and LDHs.

In this work, we fabricated a Zn–Cr LDH photocatalyst with Keggin-type SiW<sub>12</sub>O<sub>40</sub><sup>4−</sup> or Keggin-type H<sub>2</sub>W<sub>12</sub>O<sub>40</sub><sup>6−</sup> intercalated into the interlayer gallery *via* ion exchange in an ethanol–water mixed solvent. The photocatalytic activities of CO<sub>2</sub> reduction and O<sub>2</sub> evolution were systematically investigated.

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† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available. See DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1039/d3na01024d>

Fig. 1b shows the XRD patterns of ZCN and its ion-exchange derivatives ZCC, ZCHW, and ZCSW. For ZCN, the reflections at  $2\theta = 9.8^\circ$ ,  $19.8^\circ$ , and  $29.8^\circ$  are indexed to (003), (006), and (009), indicating a stacked structure of brucite-like layers with an interlayer spacing  $d_{003} = 9.00 \text{ \AA}$ , consistent with previously reported  $\text{NO}_3^-$ -type LDHs.<sup>19</sup> The reflection at  $2\theta = 59.6^\circ$  is assigned to the (110) plane. After ion exchange, for ZCC, the diffraction peaks of (003) and (006) planes are observed at  $11.7^\circ$  and  $23.5^\circ$ , respectively, which have shifted to the wide-angle direction compared to the diffraction peaks of ZCN. Meanwhile, the interlayer spacing has been narrowed down to  $7.56 \text{ \AA}$ , within the range of  $\text{CO}_3^{2-}$ -type LDHs.<sup>25</sup> The reflection of (009) cannot be well distinguished because it overlaps with the

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POM-pillared LDHs, the structure of brucite-like host layers remained even after ion exchange. The schematic representations of the possible LDH structures before and after ion exchange are displayed in Fig. 1a.

Fig. 1c shows the FT-IR spectra of the as-prepared LDHs and the pristine POMs. In all LDHs, a prominent and broad band is observed around  $3400\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , along with a weaker band at  $1620\text{ cm}^{-1}$ . These bands correspond to the stretching and bending modes of hydroxyl groups in the LDH host layers and interlayer water molecules, respectively. The peaks in the range of  $400\text{--}600\text{ cm}^{-1}$  are assigned to the lattice vibrations of Zn–O–Cr or Zn(Cr)–O. For ZCN, the band observed at  $1401\text{ cm}^{-1}$  corresponds to the antisymmetric stretching mode of  $\text{NO}_3^-$  ions. Following ion exchange in ZCC, the vibration peak of  $\text{NO}_3^-$  was replaced by  $\text{CO}_3^{2-}$ , observed at  $1356\text{ cm}^{-1}$ . In the spectra of ZCHW and ZCSW, the fingerprint peaks of Keggin-type polytungstate appearing at  $700\text{--}1100\text{ cm}^{-1}$  proved the success of ion exchange, but their positions have been more or less shifted compared with pristine  $\text{H}_2\text{W}_{12}\text{O}_{40}^{6-}$  and  $\text{SiW}_{12}\text{O}_{40}^{4-}$ , respectively (Table S1†). The position shifts of fingerprint peaks are common in POM-based hybrid composites, usually suggesting interaction between POM ions and other components.<sup>29,30</sup> Here, the peak shifts can be ascribed to the intensive hydrogen-bond interaction and the reduced symmetry and freedom degrees in the interlayer gallery. However, the ion exchange with  $\text{SiW}_{12}\text{O}_{40}^{4-}$  was not complete because the vibration peak of  $\text{NO}_3^-$  remains in the spectrum of ZCSW, although it is much weaker than that in the pristine  $\text{NO}_3^-$ -type LDH. It is probably because the charge densities of the LDH host layer and POM anion are inconsistent.  $\text{NO}_3^-$  may play an essential role in the accommodation of local charge imbalance by compensating for the excess cationic host layers. Note that although the ion exchange with  $\text{H}_2\text{W}_{12}\text{O}_{40}^{6-}$  was processed completely, the presence of  $\text{NH}_4^+$ , which was the counter-ion of  $\text{H}_2\text{W}_{12}\text{O}_{40}^{6-}$  in the pristine polytungstate salt, has been confirmed.  $\text{NH}_4^+$  is presumed to act as a compensation of excess POM anions *via* coordination interaction.

Fig. 2 and ESI 9† show the SEM images of all the samples and the EDS-mapping results of POM pillared LDHs. The SEM images displayed the retention of agglomerated, winding, and intertwined plate-like morphology after ion exchange, demonstrating that the introduction of acidic POM molecules did not cause any noticeable damage to the LDH frameworks. From the EDS-mapping analysis, besides the elements zinc and chrome attributed to the host layers, W derived from  $\text{H}_2\text{W}_{12}\text{O}_{40}^{6-}$  and Si and W derived from  $\text{SiW}_{12}\text{O}_{40}^{4-}$  are uniformly dispersed in the image regions of ZCHW and ZCSW, respectively, indicating a perfect bond between Zn–Cr host layers and polytungstate anions.

In the TEM images, as shown in ESI Fig. 9,† all the as-prepared LDHs show sheet-like morphologies. The brucite-like layers are preserved after ion exchange. POM clusters were highly dispersed in the interlayer galleries of LDHs. No agglomerated POMs were observed in ZCHW and ZCSW.

ESI Fig. 10† shows the UV-vis diffuse reflection spectra of the as-prepared LDHs. In the UV region, ZCN and ZCC show the

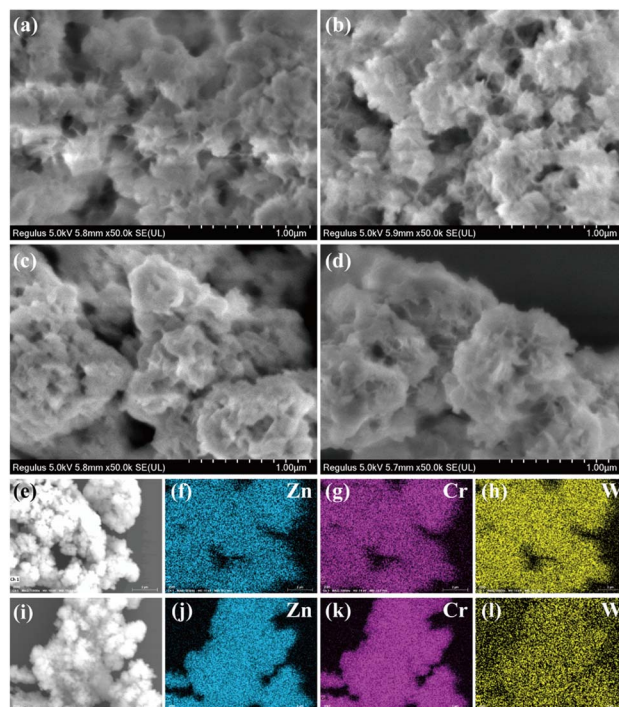


Fig. 2 SEM images of (a) ZCN, (b) ZCC, (c) ZCHW, and (d) ZCSW, and EDS mapping results of (e–h) ZCHW and (i–l) ZCSW.

intrinsic absorption bands of the ligand–metal charge transfer (LMCT) from the O 2p orbital to Zn 4s and Cr 3d orbitals. The absorption fringes at 260 and 318 nm correspond to the band gaps  $E_g = 4.8\text{ eV}$  and  $3.9\text{ eV}$  for ZCN and ZCC, respectively. The shoulder peak at 280–320 nm in the spectrum of ZCC is attributed to the metal–metal charge transfer (MMCT) from Cr 3d to Zn 4s,<sup>31</sup> while the weak absorption around 300 nm in the spectrum of ZCN is attributed to the UV excitation of  $\text{NO}_3^-$  ions. For ZCHW and ZCSW, their intrinsic absorptions have been overlapped by the O 2p  $\rightarrow$  W 5d LMCT of POMs within 400 nm.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the redshifts of  $\text{Cr}^{3+}$  d–d transition<sup>27</sup> are observed for all the ion-exchanged samples, indicating that interlayer anions influence the electronic structure of host layers.

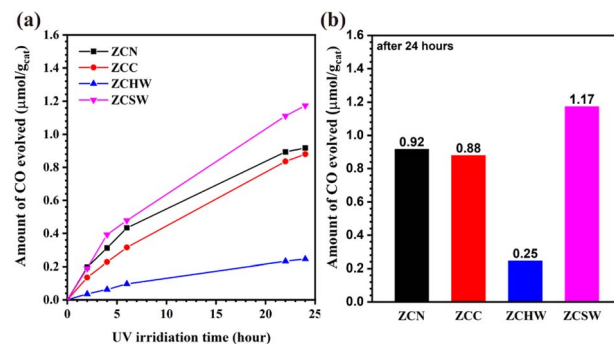


Fig. 3 (a) Time course of CO evolution and (b) total amounts of CO generated after 24 hours for the photo-reduction of  $\text{CO}_2$  in water using Zn–Cr LDHs intercalated with various inorganic anions.





Fig. 3 displays the temporal variation of CO generation and the final output in the photo-reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> in pure water using the as-prepared Zn–Cr LDHs intercalated with different kinds of inorganic anions. The CO production over ZCN was 0.92  $\mu\text{mol g}^{-1}$  after 24 hours of UV irradiation. The CO<sub>3</sub><sup>2-</sup> ion-exchanged sample showed a slightly lower activity, of which the CO production was 0.88  $\mu\text{mol g}^{-1}$ . The disparity in photocatalytic activity is probably owing to the different adsorption characteristics toward CO<sub>2</sub> of the two samples. After being ion-exchanged with H<sub>2</sub>W<sub>12</sub>O<sub>40</sub><sup>4-</sup>, the yield of CO dropped sharply to 0.25  $\mu\text{mol g}^{-1}$  after 24 hours, with only 27% of the activity exhibited using the pristine NO<sub>3</sub><sup>-</sup>-type LDH. This result suggests that the interlayer H<sub>2</sub>W<sub>12</sub>O<sub>40</sub><sup>4-</sup> ions did not function as the reaction sites for the multi-electron reduction of CO<sub>2</sub>. In contrast, ZCSW exhibited the highest CO production among all the as-prepared samples, which was 1.17  $\mu\text{mol g}^{-1}$  after 24 hours. Likely, the photo-reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> was promoted due to the host–guest synergistic effect involving charge transfer and the multi-electronic redox ability of SiW<sub>12</sub>O<sub>40</sub><sup>4-</sup>.

For all the as-prepared samples, only trace amounts of CH<sub>4</sub> were detected, while the amount of H<sub>2</sub> generated from water splitting was below the detection limit of the GC–TCD. A blank test was carried out to verify whether CO is derived from CO<sub>2</sub> by repeating UV irradiation toward ZCSW in an Ar atmosphere. The result shows that <0.03  $\mu\text{mol g}_{\text{cat}}^{-1}$  of CO was generated after 24 hours, showing that CO was the reduction product of CO<sub>2</sub>.

To further investigate the photocatalytic redox properties of POM-pillared LDHs, the photo-oxidation of water for O<sub>2</sub> generation over the as-prepared samples was carried out in a NaIO<sub>3</sub> solution. As shown in Fig. 4, ZCN, ZCC, ZCHW, and ZCSW exhibited 65.7, 81.1, 128.0, and 148.1  $\mu\text{mol g}^{-1}$  of O<sub>2</sub> after 6 hour irradiation. The solutions turned pale yellow after the photocatalytic reaction and turned blue after adding starch suspension, indicating the formation of I<sub>2</sub>. The slight increase in photocatalytic activity with ZCC is attributed to the band-gap narrowing from the MMCT effect.<sup>30</sup> The enhanced photocatalytic activity with POM-pillared Zn–Cr LDHs toward water oxidation is likely owing to the effective electronic coupling between the semiconductor-like LDH host layers and the catalytically active interlayer species.

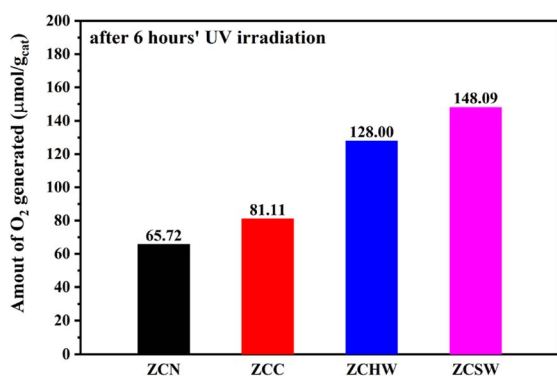


Fig. 4 Total amounts of O<sub>2</sub> generated after 6 hours in NaIO<sub>3</sub> aqueous solution for the photo-oxidation of water by using Zn–Cr LDHs intercalated with various inorganic anions.

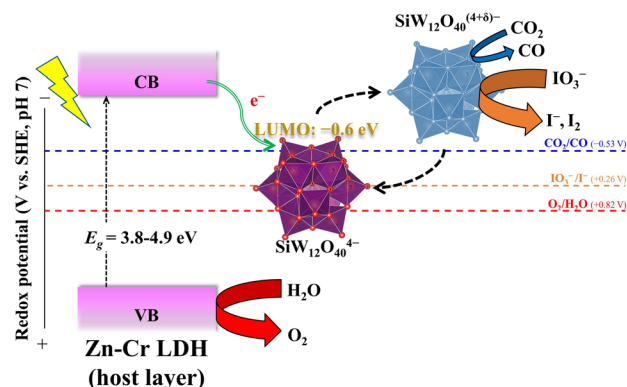


Fig. 5 Possible mechanism and charge transfer route between LDH host layers and POM anions in the photo-reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> and photo-oxidation of water.

In previous work, Nakajima *et al.*<sup>33</sup> reported charge transfer in polytungstate–TiO<sub>2</sub> hybrids. The photo-generated electrons in the CB of anatase transferred to the LUMO and HOMO of polytungstate. Similar to anatase, Zn–Cr LDH host layers also inject the photo-generated electrons to the LUMO and HOMO of POMs to realize charge separation. In the case of ZCSW, the data of half-wave potentials for the 1-electron reduction reported indicated the LUMO of SiW<sub>12</sub>O<sub>40</sub><sup>4-</sup> lies at –0.6 eV (pH = 7), which can withstand the reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> and IO<sub>3</sub><sup>-</sup>.<sup>34</sup> However, SiW<sub>12</sub>O<sub>40</sub><sup>4-</sup> is likely more favorable to reduce IO<sub>3</sub><sup>-</sup> than CO<sub>2</sub> because of the more significant potential drop between the LUMO energy and the reduction potential (Fig. 5). Due to the pseudo-liquid phase and multi-electron redox properties, IO<sub>3</sub><sup>-</sup> can freely enter or leave the framework of POMs and be rapidly reduced without barriers in the reaction kinetics.

## Conclusions

In this work, Zn–Cr LDH photocatalysts were prepared. Keggin-type polyanion SiW<sub>12</sub>O<sub>40</sub><sup>4-</sup> and H<sub>2</sub>W<sub>12</sub>O<sub>40</sub><sup>6-</sup> pillared Zn–Cr LDHs (ZCHW and ZCSW) were synthesized through ion exchange using a NO<sub>3</sub><sup>-</sup>-type LDH (ZCN) as the raw material. In the photo-reduction of CO<sub>2</sub>, ZCSW produced up to 1.17  $\mu\text{mol g}^{-1}$  CO after 24 hour UV irradiation, which was 1.2-fold higher than that of ZCN. In the photo-oxidation of water in the presence of IO<sub>3</sub><sup>-</sup>, ZCSW produced up to 148.1  $\mu\text{mol g}^{-1}$  O<sub>2</sub> after 6 hour irradiation, which was 2.2-fold higher than that of ZCN. The results of characterization and mechanistic investigations indicated that the electron transfer from the conduction band of the Zn–Cr LDH to the lowest unoccupied molecular orbital (LUMO) of SiW<sub>12</sub>O<sub>40</sub><sup>4-</sup> probably contributes to the enhanced photocatalytic activity in CO<sub>2</sub> reduction and water oxidation.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (grant number 22272078) and the Frontiers Science Center for Critical Earth Material Cycling of Nanjing University.

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