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# A robust aluminum-octacarboxylate framework with scu topology for selective capture of sulfur dioxide†

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The high structural diversity and porosity of metal–organic frameworks (MOFs) promote their applications in selective gas adsorption. The development of robust MOFs that are stable against corrosive SO<sub>2</sub> remains a daunting challenge. Here, we report a highly robust aluminum-based MOF (HIAM-330) built on a 4-connected Al<sub>3</sub>(OH)<sub>2</sub>(COO)<sub>4</sub> cluster and 8-connected octacarboxylate ligand with a (4,8)-connected scu topology. It exhibits a fully reversible SO<sub>2</sub> uptake of 12.1 mmol g<sup>-1</sup> at 298 K and 1 bar. It is capable of selective capture of SO<sub>2</sub> over other gases (CO<sub>2</sub>, CH<sub>4</sub>, and N<sub>2</sub>) with high adsorption selectivities of 60, 330, and 3537 for equimolar mixtures of SO<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub>, SO<sub>2</sub>/CH<sub>4</sub>, and SO<sub>2</sub>/N<sub>2</sub>, respectively, at 298 K and 1 bar. Breakthrough measurements verified the capability of HIAM-330 for selective capture of SO<sub>2</sub> (2500 ppm) over CO<sub>2</sub> or N<sub>2</sub>. High-resolution synchrotron X-ray powder diffraction of SO<sub>2</sub> loaded HIAM-330 revealed the binding domains of adsorbed SO<sub>2</sub> molecules and host–guest interactions.

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## Introduction

By 2050, fossil fuels are predicted to account for 77% of global energy production, with coal emerging as the primary source in the global energy supply matrix.<sup>1</sup> Exhaust gases from pulverized coal combustion consist of 10–12% CO<sub>2</sub> and 500–3000 ppm SO<sub>2</sub>,<sup>2</sup> the latter is a toxic and corrosive gas that will pose significant threats to human health and the environment.<sup>3,4</sup> While current flue gas desulfurization (FGD) technologies can remove most SO<sub>2</sub> from flue gases,<sup>5–7</sup> they generate a tremendous amount of solid waste and suffer from high energy input. Achieving complete removal of trace SO<sub>2</sub> proves challenging, as it necessitates a capture system with low selectivity for both dinitrogen and carbon dioxide coupled with remarkable material stability to withstand the highly corrosive nature of SO<sub>2</sub>.<sup>8,9</sup>

Selective capture of SO<sub>2</sub> by dry, regenerable adsorbents under ambient conditions has attracted growing interest and is perceived as a promising strategy for eliminating trace SO<sub>2</sub>.<sup>10</sup> This new method offers advantages such as lower energy consumption and minimized solid waste compared with the FGD strategy. Additionally, the recovered SO<sub>2</sub> can be used to produce valuable chemicals such as sulfuric acid. While porous materials such as zeolites,<sup>8</sup> activated carbon,<sup>11</sup> and silica<sup>12</sup> have been employed for SO<sub>2</sub> capture, their adsorption capacity is generally low,<sup>13,14</sup> limiting the overall capture efficiency. Metal–organic frameworks (MOFs) have garnered substantial attention for gas adsorption, due to their high porosity, structural diversity, precisely tunable pore dimensions, and highly customizable functionality.<sup>9,15,16</sup> However, to date, only a limited number of MOFs have exhibited reversible SO<sub>2</sub> adsorption and structural stability upon adsorption–desorption cycles.<sup>17–19</sup> This is due to the highly corrosive nature of SO<sub>2</sub>, which can cause framework degradation in many MOFs.<sup>1,20–22</sup> Thus, the ability of a MOF to maintain its structural integrity and retain its adsorption capacity after repeated cycles of SO<sub>2</sub> adsorption and desorption is a crucial factor for its practical application in desulfurization processes. Furthermore, highly stable and crystalline MOFs can enable the study of host–guest interactions using *in situ* X-ray diffraction techniques to understand the underlying mechanism of selective adsorption. To this end, the development of MOFs with reversible SO<sub>2</sub> adsorption and excellent structural stability remains a challenging and important area of research.

Over the past few years, Al-MOFs and Zr-MOFs have demonstrated superior efficacy in the adsorption of SO<sub>2</sub>,

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underpinned by their high stability.<sup>23,24</sup> Their framework robustness arises not only from the strong Al–O and Zr–O bonds but also from the highly connected multinuclear inorganic clusters.<sup>25</sup> The ability of these clusters to link with multiple ligands bolsters the stability of the MOFs. Using highly connected organic ligands to synthesize MOFs is an effective strategy for improving framework stability. Thus, the combination of multinuclear inorganic building blocks and multi-topic organic linkers usually leads to MOFs with intriguing connectivity and topology. However, the construction of MOFs from high valence metals ( $\text{Al}^{3+}$ ,  $\text{Zr}^{4+}$ ,  $\text{Ti}^{4+}$ , *etc.*) and organic linkers with high connectivity (>6) is particularly challenging due to the inherent synthetic difficulties. For example, only a handful of Zr-MOFs built on hexacarboxylates and octacarboxylates<sup>26–30</sup> have been reported, while only a single example of Al-MOF incorporating hexacarboxylates exists.<sup>31</sup> Yet, no examples of Al-MOFs made of an octacarboxylate linker have been reported to date.

Here, we report the incorporation of an octacarboxylate, 4',4''',4''''',4''''''-(ethene-1,1,2,2-tetrayl)tetrakis([1,1'-biphenyl]-3,5-dicarboxylic acid) ( $\text{H}_8\text{ettbpdcc}$ ) into a robust aluminum-based MOF, denoted as HIAM-330. It features a 4,8-c **scu** topology, built on 4-connected  $\text{Al}_3\text{O}_2(\text{COO})_4$  clusters and 8-connected  $\text{ettbpdcc}^{8-}$  linkers. The structure contains two distinct types of cavities and demonstrates a  $\text{SO}_2$  adsorption capacity of  $12.1 \text{ mmol g}^{-1}$  at 298 K and 1 bar. The adsorption was fully reversible and the adsorption capacity was retained after multiple  $\text{SO}_2$  adsorption/desorption cycles. HIAM-330 exhibits selective capture of  $\text{SO}_2$  in the presence of  $\text{CO}_2$  and  $\text{N}_2$ . Molecular insights into the selective adsorption mechanism were achieved through X-ray diffraction analysis on  $\text{SO}_2$ -loaded HIAM-330, which elucidated the binding domains and host-guest interactions.

## Results and discussion

$\text{H}_8\text{ettbpdcc}$  was selected as the organic building block for constructing the Al-octacarboxylate MOF due to its well-defined rigidity, planar geometry and facile synthesis. It was synthesized from 1,1,2,2-tetrakis(4-bromophenyl)ethylene *via* the Suzuki coupling reaction (Fig. S1–S3†). Subsequently, block-shaped crystals of HIAM-330 were solvothermally synthesized at  $150 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  by reacting  $\text{Al}(\text{NO}_3)_3 \cdot 9\text{H}_2\text{O}$  and  $\text{H}_8\text{ettbpdcc}$  in DMF/formic acid/acetonitrile mixed solvent (Fig. S5†). Single-crystal X-ray diffraction analysis revealed that it crystallized in the tetragonal crystal system with a space group of  $I4/mmm$  (Table S1†). The crystal structure of HIAM-330 is built on a trinuclear  $\text{Al}_3\text{O}_2(\text{COO})_4(\text{H}_2\text{O})_6$  cluster. In each cluster, the central  $\text{Al}^{3+}$  is octahedrally coordinated to four carboxylate oxygen atoms and two bridging oxygen atoms, while the terminal  $\text{Al}^{3+}$  is octahedrally coordinated to two carboxylate oxygen atoms, one bridging oxygen atom, and three water molecules (Fig. 1 and S6†). Thus, the trinuclear  $\text{Al}_3$  clusters act as 4-connected nodes in the structure of HIAM-330, bridged by  $\text{ettbpdcc}^{8-}$  organic struts. It is noteworthy that the  $\text{Al}_3$  cluster observed here is distinct from the commonly observed triangular trinuclear  $\text{Al}_3$  SBU, where a  $\mu_3\text{-O}$  connects three  $\text{Al}^{3+}$  to form a 6-connected node.<sup>25</sup> The octacarboxylate organic linker  $\text{ettbpdcc}^{8-}$  is fully deprotonated and connected to sixteen  $\text{Al}^{3+}$  centers from eight  $\text{Al}_3$  clusters, with all carboxylates coordinated in bidentate mode (Fig. S7†). The overall structure of HIAM-330 features 4,8-c **scu** topology. It is intriguing that its connectivity is in sharp contrast to that of previously reported **scu** Zr-MOFs. The latter, as exemplified in PCN-606,<sup>32</sup> is constructed on 8-connected  $\text{Zr}_6$  nodes and 4-connected organic linkers (usually tetracarboxylates, Fig. 1). Nevertheless, in HIAM-330, the  $\text{Al}_3$  clusters serve as the 4-connected nodes and the organic ligands act as the 8-connected

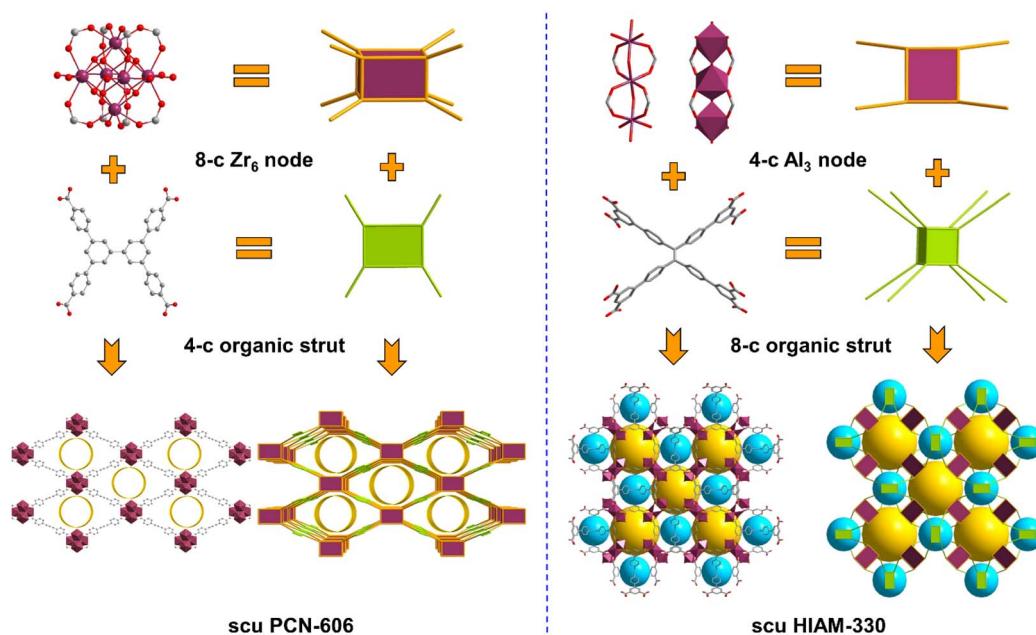


Fig. 1 Building blocks and crystal structure of PCN-606 (left) and HIAM-330 (right).



units. This also leads to a different pore structure. The commonly observed **scu**-type Zr-MOFs such as PCN-606 or Zr-btc possess one-dimensional rhombic channels, derived from the cubic cages of 4,12-**c** **ftw**-type connectivity.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, in HIAM-330, there are two distinct types of cages, with large and small cages arrayed in alternating sequences (Fig. 1 and S8†).

The phase purity of HIAM-330 was verified through powder X-ray diffraction (PXRD) analysis (Fig. 2a). Thermogravimetric analysis (TGA) of as-synthesized HIAM-330 displayed a continuous weight loss, while that of the methanol-exchanged sample showed a plateau from 120–270 °C, indicating the successful exchange of high boiling point solvents by methanol (Fig. S9†). During the subsequent activation of the methanol-exchanged HIAM-330 by heating at 150 °C, its crystal structure was fully retained. Our experimental investigation suggests that HIAM-330 exhibits excellent stability, as evidenced by its fully preserved PXRD patterns after being heated at 150 °C in open air for 1 week, immersed in water at 80 °C for 1 week, or exposed to 90% humidity for 1 week (Fig. 2a). The permanent porosity of HIAM-330 was evaluated by N<sub>2</sub> adsorption measurements at 77 K (Fig. 2b). The N<sub>2</sub> isotherm displays a typical type I profile, yielding a BET surface area of 1624 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>-1</sup> and a pore volume of 0.65 m<sup>3</sup> g<sup>-1</sup> (Fig. S10†). The pore size distribution curve, determined using the NLDFT model, was centered at approximately 5.5, 8.5, and 13.0 Å (Fig. S11†), which is consistent with the value estimated from Zeo++ software based on the crystal structure (Fig. S12†).

Single-component adsorption isotherms of SO<sub>2</sub> were collected at 298, 283, and 273 K (Fig. S13†). HIAM-330 exhibits fully reversible adsorption for SO<sub>2</sub> with a high adsorption uptake of 12.1 mmol g<sup>-1</sup> at 298 K and 1 bar. This value is higher than those of most of the MOFs studied for SO<sub>2</sub> capture, such as Zr-btpc, UiO-66, UiO-66-NH<sub>2</sub>, and Zr-DMTDC,<sup>24</sup> but is lower

than those of the recently reported MFM-190 series showing higher porosity<sup>34</sup> (Fig. S14†). Furthermore, the adsorption uptake increased dramatically at relatively low pressure, indicating its ability to capture trace SO<sub>2</sub>. The calculated isosteric heat of adsorption ( $Q_{st}$ ) is 38.0 kJ mol<sup>-1</sup> at zero coverage. To study the capability of HIAM-330 for selective capture of SO<sub>2</sub> from other light gases that often co-exist in the flue-gas stream, its adsorption towards CO<sub>2</sub>, CH<sub>4</sub>, and N<sub>2</sub> was also evaluated. HIAM-330 adsorbs 2.60 mmol g<sup>-1</sup> of CO<sub>2</sub>, 0.68 mmol g<sup>-1</sup> of CH<sub>4</sub>, and 0.09 mmol g<sup>-1</sup> of N<sub>2</sub> at 1 bar and 298 K, substantially lower than that of SO<sub>2</sub> (Fig. 2c). The  $Q_{st}$  of CO<sub>2</sub> calculated from adsorption isotherms at 298, 283, and 273 K is 16 kJ mol<sup>-1</sup> at zero coverage, indicating its notably weaker adsorption affinity compared to that of SO<sub>2</sub> (Fig. 2e). The selectivities of HIAM-330 for SO<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub>, SO<sub>2</sub>/N<sub>2</sub> and SO<sub>2</sub>/CH<sub>4</sub> were calculated *via* ideal adsorbed solution theory (IAST) at 298 K (Fig. 2d). Due to the negligible adsorption capacity for nitrogen, the calculated SO<sub>2</sub>/N<sub>2</sub> selectivity values are unusually high (>1000) and are subject to large uncertainties. HIAM-330 also shows high selectivity values of 60 and 330 for equimolar binary mixtures of SO<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub> and SO<sub>2</sub>/CH<sub>4</sub>, respectively at 298 K and a total pressure of 1 bar. The values remain similar when the concentration of SO<sub>2</sub> decreased to 10%, resulting in selectivities of 44 and 239 for SO<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub> and SO<sub>2</sub>/CH<sub>4</sub>, respectively. These results suggest the preferential adsorption of SO<sub>2</sub> over other light gases by HIAM-330.

While many MOF materials exhibit high adsorption capacities for SO<sub>2</sub> due to high porosity, only a small number of them show fully reversible adsorption and retain their crystallinity when exposed to highly corrosive SO<sub>2</sub>. HIAM-330 demonstrates the ability to maintain its structure after undergoing SO<sub>2</sub> adsorption–desorption tests (Fig. 2a). In consideration of practical applications, cyclic adsorption–desorption experiments were also conducted. In five consecutive adsorption/

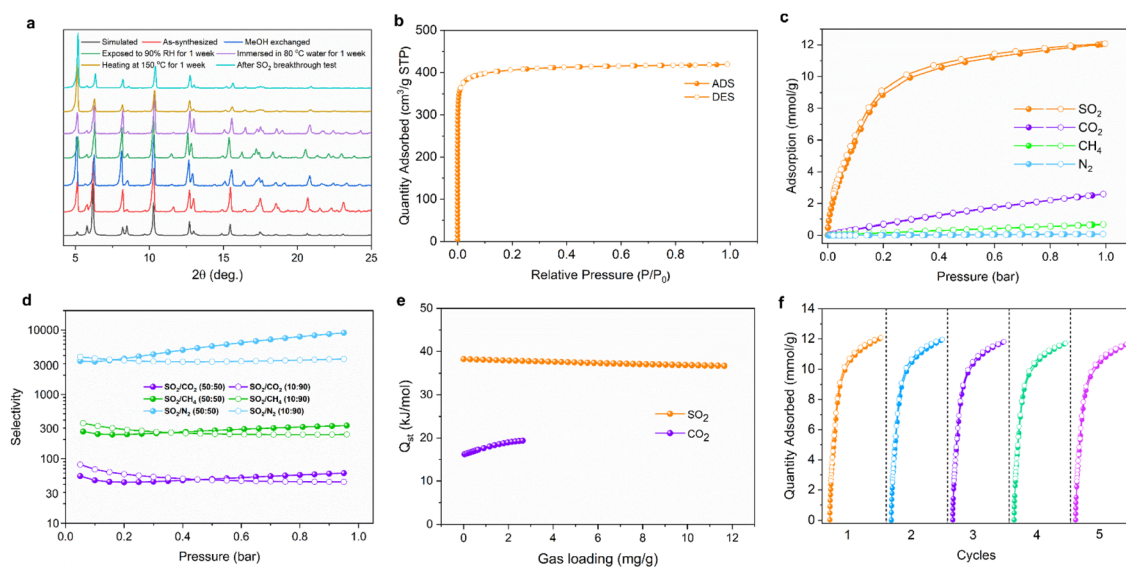


Fig. 2 Gas adsorption on HIAM-330. (a) PXRD patterns of HIAM-330 under various conditions. (b) Adsorption–desorption isotherms of N<sub>2</sub> at 77 K by HIAM-330. (c) Adsorption isotherms of SO<sub>2</sub>, CO<sub>2</sub>, CH<sub>4</sub>, and N<sub>2</sub> at 298 K. (d) IAST selectivities of SO<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub>, SO<sub>2</sub>/CH<sub>4</sub>, and SO<sub>2</sub>/N<sub>2</sub> at 298 K in HIAM-330. (e)  $Q_{st}$  curves for SO<sub>2</sub> and CO<sub>2</sub> in HIAM-330. (f) Five adsorption–desorption cycles for SO<sub>2</sub> in HIAM-330 at 298 K and 1 bar.



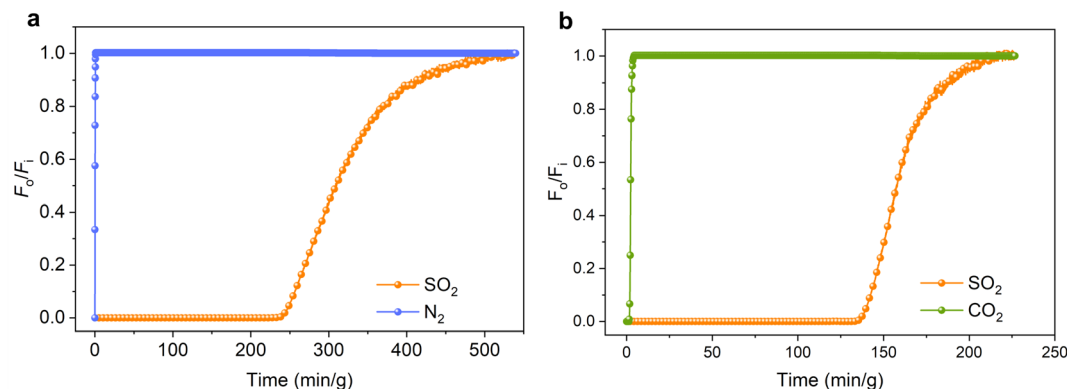


Fig. 3 Separation of  $\text{SO}_2$ ,  $\text{N}_2$  and  $\text{CO}_2$  by HIAM-330: breakthrough plots for (a) the  $\text{SO}_2/\text{N}_2$  mixture (2500 ppm  $\text{SO}_2$ , 75%  $\text{N}_2$  in He, and total flow rate:  $20 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ ) and (b) the  $\text{SO}_2/\text{CO}_2$  mixture (2500 ppm  $\text{SO}_2$ , 15%  $\text{CO}_2$  in He, and total flow rate:  $20 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ ) in HIAM-330 at 298 K.

desorption cycles, no notable loss of  $\text{SO}_2$  adsorption capacity (<5%) was observed for HIAM-330 (Fig. 2f), further confirming its high stability to  $\text{SO}_2$ .

To further verify the ability of HIAM-330 for selective capture of trace  $\text{SO}_2$ , dynamic breakthrough experiments were conducted using a fixed bed filled with HIAM-330. At 298 K and 1 bar, a mixture of  $\text{SO}_2/\text{N}_2$  (2500 ppm  $\text{SO}_2$ , 75%  $\text{N}_2$  diluted in He) was passed through the column at a flow rate of  $20 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ . The results showed that  $\text{N}_2$  eluted at the beginning of the process, while  $\text{SO}_2$  was retained in the column for more than three hours (Fig. 3a). Additionally, the calculated  $\text{SO}_2/\text{N}_2$  separation factor was 745. Similarly, another column breakthrough measurement was performed with a mixture of  $\text{SO}_2/\text{CO}_2$  (2500 ppm  $\text{SO}_2$ , 15%  $\text{CO}_2$  diluted in He).  $\text{CO}_2$  broke through within less than two minutes, while  $\text{SO}_2$  was retained for 136 minutes (Fig. 3b). The separation factor of  $\text{SO}_2/\text{CO}_2$  was

calculated to be 65.5. These findings validated the capability of HIAM-330 for selective capture of trace  $\text{SO}_2$  from other light gases as a durable adsorbent.

The adsorption domains of  $\text{SO}_2$  in HIAM-330 were determined by Rietveld refinements of the high-resolution synchrotron PXRD pattern of  $\text{SO}_2$ -loaded HIAM-330 (Fig. S22†). The robust framework of HIAM-330 remained highly crystalline, allowing direct visualization of the adsorbed  $\text{SO}_2$  molecules in the pores. It was revealed that there were seven  $\text{SO}_2$  binding sites in the pores, with one in the small tetrahedral cage (Fig. 4a), two in the large octahedral cage (Fig. 4b), and four in the small pocket surrounded by eight trinuclear  $\text{Al}_3$  clusters (Fig. 4c). The total crystallographic uptake of  $\text{SO}_2$  was estimated to be  $7.35 \text{ mmol g}^{-1}$ , corresponding to a crystal structure at a relatively low  $\text{SO}_2$  pressure of  $\sim 0.14 \text{ bar}$ . It is interesting to observe that most of the adsorbed  $\text{SO}_2$  molecules are located

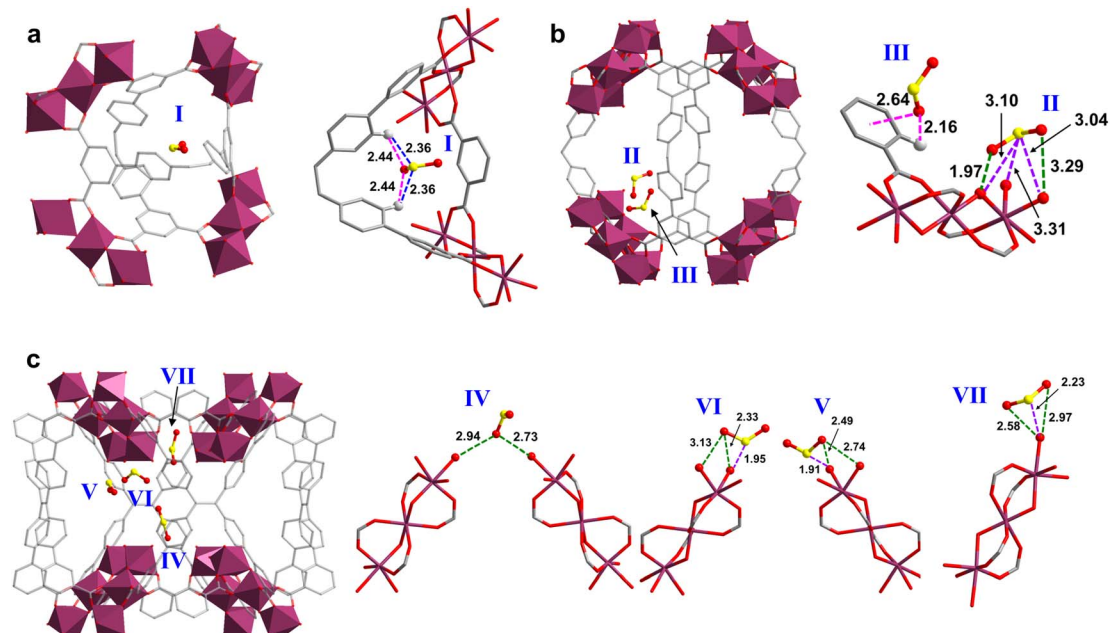


Fig. 4 Adsorption domains of  $\text{SO}_2$  in HIAM-330 determined by Rietveld refinements of high-resolution *in situ* synchrotron powder X-ray diffraction. (a) site I, (b) sites II and III, (c) sites IV–VII.



nearly by the inorganic nodes rather than aggregating in the two main cages. This indicates that the  $\text{Al}_3$  clusters are favorable binding sites for  $\text{SO}_2$  at low pressure. The  $\text{SO}_2$  molecule at site I was stabilized by the organic linker through hydrogen bonds ( $\text{OSO}\cdots\text{H-C} = 2.44 \text{ \AA}$  and  $\text{O}_2\text{S}\cdots\text{H-C} = 2.36 \text{ \AA}$ ). At site III, the adsorbed  $\text{SO}_2$  was immobilized by the phenyl ring ( $\text{OSO}\cdots\text{pi} = 2.64 \text{ \AA}$ , electrostatic interactions) and by one hydrogen bond ( $\text{OSO}\cdots\text{H-C} = 2.16 \text{ \AA}$ ). In the remaining five sites (sites II and IV–VII), the adsorbed  $\text{SO}_2$  molecules were predominantly interacting with the  $\text{Al}_3$  cluster (the bridging oxygen or the terminal  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ) through dipole–dipole interactions with the shortest  $\text{OSO}\cdots\text{O}$  and  $\text{O}_2\text{S}\cdots\text{O}$  distances of 1.97 and 1.91  $\text{\AA}$ , respectively. The above results offer molecular insights into the guest–host interaction of  $\text{SO}_2$  adsorption in HIAM-330 and highlight the important role of the trinuclear  $\text{Al}_3$  cluster in  $\text{SO}_2$  capture.

## Conclusions

The design and synthesis of highly porous and stable MOFs with multi-topic ligands and high valence metals is important for enriching MOF structure diversity, adsorption, and capture of corrosive gases such as  $\text{SO}_2$ . We present the construction of an intriguing 4,8-c **scu**-type Al-MOF using a rigid octacarboxylate linker. The resulting MOF, HIAM-330, exhibits high porosity, excellent stability, high  $\text{SO}_2$  uptake ( $12.08 \text{ mmol g}^{-1}$  at 298 K and 1 bar), and high IAST  $\text{SO}_2/\text{CO}_2$  selectivity (60,  $\text{SO}_2/\text{CO}_2 = 50/50$ ). Mixed-gas column breakthrough experiments further confirmed the effective removal of trace  $\text{SO}_2$  by HIAM-330 in the presence of  $\text{CO}_2$  and  $\text{N}_2$ . The excellent chemical and thermal stability of HIAM-330 endows it with good recyclability. Further, Rietveld refinement of high-resolution PXRD patterns of  $\text{SO}_2$ -loaded HIAM-330 provides valuable information regarding  $\text{SO}_2$  adsorption sites and possible guest–host interactions, which is important for understanding the adsorption mechanism. Overall, our findings contribute to rational design strategies for making stable MOFs that hold strong promise for effective capture of target molecules.

## Data availability

Data associated to the article are available in the ESI.†

## Author contributions

Liang Yu: investigation, methodology, and writing – original draft. Meng He: investigation and methodology. Jinze Yao: investigation and validation. Qibin Xia: conceptualization, supervision, project administration, and writing – review & editing. Sihai Yang: conceptualization, project administration, supervision, and writing – review & editing. Jing Li: conceptualization, supervision, project administration, and writing – review & editing. Hao Wang: conceptualization, supervision, and writing – review & editing.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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