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Control of emission colour with N-heterocyclic carbene (NHC) ligands in phosphorescent three-coordinate Cu(I) complexes

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A series of three phosphorescent mononuclear (NHC)-Cu(I) complexes were prepared and characterized. Photophysical properties were found to be largely controlled by the NHC ligand chromophore. Variation of the NHC ligand leads to emission colour tuning over 200 nm range from blue to red, and emission efficiencies of 0.16-0.80 in the solid state.

Phosphorescent Cu(I) complexes are an emerging class of luminescent materials based on an inexpensive and abundant metal.1 The ability to tune chemical and photophysical properties in a desirable and predictable way is highly important when considering potential applications of Cu(I)-based phosphors. The typical strategy to modulate the excited state properties of these and related luminescent materials is usually achieved through variation of the coordinating ligand(s).2 To date the types of ligands most commonly used to prepare phosphorescent Cu(I) complexes are diimines or organophosphines and their derivatives.3 Alternatively, N-heterocyclic carbenes (NHC) are an attractive class of ligands as they are electronically and sterically tunable and form strong bonds with transition metals giving robust complexes.4 However, while NHCs have been employed as either chromophoric or ancillary ligands in luminescent Ir and Pt complexes they have been rarely used as chromophoric ligands in Cu(I) complexes.5

We have recently used NHC ligands to prepare phosphorescent 3-coordinate Cu(I) complexes (NHC)Cu(N^N), where N^N denotes a neutral diimine or monoanionic pyridyl-azolate ligand.7 The monodentate NHC ligand, 1,3-bis(2,6-diisopropylphenyl)imidazol-2-ylidene (IPr), employed in these complexes has both a large π-π* energy gap and high triplet energy, therefore the emission energy in these derivatives is controlled by variations in the N^N ligand. Herein, we report a series of luminescent (NHC)Cu(N^N) complexes 1–3 (Figure 1), where the NHC ligand is principally involved in the excited state and demonstrate a wide range emission colour tunability through modification of carbene moiety. In particular, we systematically lowered the energy gap of 1 by benzannulation of imidazolylidene ring to make 2 and further introduced nitrogen atoms to form the pyrazinyl moiety in 3. In addition, we utilize an anionic non-conjugated N^N ligand, i.e. di(2-pyridyl)dimethylborate (py2BMe2) that possesses high triplet energy to serve as an ancillary ligand.8 To the best of our knowledge the py2BMe2 ligand, unlike the isoelectronic di(1-pyrazolyl)borates (pz2BR2, R = H, alkyl, aryl), has never been used to prepare luminescent transition metal complexes. We have found that (NHC)Cu complexes with the py2BMe2 ligand are more robust and luminescent than the pyrazolylborate cogeners.

Figure 1. Molecular structures (top) and perspective view at 50% probability (bottom) of complexes 1–3. Only one of the unique structures for 2 found in the unit cell is shown. Hydrogen atoms are omitted for clarity.
The (NHC)Cu(py2BMe2) complexes were obtained from their respective (NHC)CuCl precursors upon addition of a stoichiometric amount of sodium di(2-pyridyl)dimethylborate in tetrahydrofuran at RT. Complexes 1–3 are stable in solid state and in solution under anaerobic conditions. Complex 1 can be sublimed and is stable for hours in solution, while 2 and 3 decompose slowly under aerobic conditions in solution and blacken in the solid state after 24 hr exposure to air. Evidently, the isopropyl groups at ortho positions of phenyl groups of the NHC ligand in 1 impart greater stability of the (NHC)Cu(py2BMe2) complexes than in 2 and 3. We also prepared complexes analogous to 1 and 2 using the py2BHZ ligand instead of py2BMe2. While the analog to 1, (IPr)Cu(py2BHZ), can be isolated and fully characterized (see ESI), the cogener to 2 decomposed rapidly upon exposure to air and was not examined further.

X-ray diffraction analyses confirmed monomeric three-coordinate structures for complexes 1–3. Complex 2 has two unique structures in the unit cell that have similar geometric parameters. The coordination geometry in complexes 1–3 can be described as Y-shaped with the sum of bond angles around copper close to 360° (359.98° in 1, 359.72° in 2 and 358.64° in 3). The Cu–N–C–B–C–N ring formed upon chelation of the py2BMe2 ligand adopts a boat-shaped conformation similar to that reported in metal complexes bearing related di(2-pyridyl)borate ligands. The relative orientations of NHC and py2BMe2 ligands in crystals differ within the series. In complex 1 the ligands are arranged with the pyridyl rings situated opposite the aryl rings of the NHC ligand across a crystallographic mirror plane that bisects the CuNHC, Cu and B atoms. In contrast, the py2BMe2 ligand in 2 and 3 is oriented about C(NHC–Cu) bond so that the two pyridyl rings are situated above and below a plane defined by the NHC, NHC and Cu atoms. The Cu–Npy bond lengths in 1 are 2.0288(15) Å and slightly shorter in 2 (1.9997(16) Å and 1.9997(16) Å) and 3 (2.0109(9) Å and 2.0149(9) Å). The C(NHC–Cu–Npy angles are 132.78(4)° in 1 and vary from 134.32(7)° and 129.27(7)° in 2 to 135.06(6)° and 128.16(6)° in 3. The C(NHC–Cu distances in 1–3 (1.8678(19–1.895(2) Å) are within the range for reported NHC-Cu(1) complexes.

In solution 1H NMR data indicates rapid boat-to-boat interconversion of the py2BMe2 ligand as resonances of methyl groups attached to boron atom appear as one broad singlet both at room temperature and at -40 °C in acetone-d6. Although the 1H NMR data do not allow us to assess if there is free rotation about the C(NHC–Cu bonds in solution, the chemical shift for the protons ortho to the pyridyl nitrogens gives insight into the preferred molecular conformation. This resonance appears at δ = 8.36 ppm in the protonated py2BMe2 ligand, whereas upon coordination to copper in 1 it is shifted markedly upfield to δ = 7.3 ppm due to shielding by the diamagnetic ring current from the adjacent aryl rings of the NHC ligand. In contrast, the same resonance undergoes a much smaller shift upon coordination in 2 and 3, appearing at δ = 7.97 ppm and δ = 8.05 ppm, respectively. Thus, the 1H NMR data in solution correlate with the relative ligand orientation found in crystalline state; co-planar for 1, perpendicular for 2 and 3.

Photophysical data for complexes 1–3 are summarized in Table 1. The UV-visible absorption spectra for complexes 1–3 in dichloromethane are shown in Figure 2. High energy bands at 290 nm in 1 (ε ~ 7000–14200 M⁻¹ cm⁻¹), 310 nm in 2 (ε ~ 6500–19000 M⁻¹ cm⁻¹) and 340 nm in 3 (ε ~ 4000–13400 M⁻¹ cm⁻¹) are assigned to spin-allowed ligand centered (LC) transitions on both the NHC and py2BMe2 ligands. Lower energy bands, not observed in absorption spectra of precursors (see ESI), are assigned to charge transfer (CT) transitions. In complex 1 the CT bands appear at 315 nm (ε ~ 6100 M⁻¹ cm⁻¹) with a shoulder at 360 nm (ε ~ 1300 M⁻¹ cm⁻¹). A comparison between the absorption spectrum of 1 to that of (IPr)Cu(py2BHZ) (see ESI) shows the LC band is unchanged in energy in both derivatives, whereas the CT bands shift to higher energy and lower intensity (λmax = 305 nm, ε = 2000 M⁻¹ cm⁻¹ and λmax = 330 nm, ε = 1000 M⁻¹ cm⁻¹) in the latter complex. The bathochromic shift for the low energy bands in 1 indicates that the py2BMe2 ligand participates in these transitions, although some CT character involving the IPr ligand may contribute as well. Upon expansion of π-system of the NHC ligand in 2 the CT band becomes more distinct and intense (λmax = 346 nm, ε = 9100 M⁻¹ cm⁻¹). Substitution of the two CH-groups with nitrogens in 3 leads to a marked red shift and increase in molar absorptivity (λmax = 423 nm, ε ~ 10300 M⁻¹ cm⁻¹). Thus, these bands in 2 and 3 are unambiguously assigned to CT transitions involving NHC ligands.
processes typically associated with TADF and suggests instead that emission measured both at room temperature and 77 K is from a state that is principally triplet in character. The behavior also implies that the radiative rate constant for the lowest triplet state is significantly enhanced in 1–3. This unusual temperature dependence on the emission lifetime is being currently investigated in greater detail at lower temperatures.

The observed bathochromic shift of emission energy in 1–3 upon expanding the size of the π-system of a ligand chroomophore and N-substitution is consistent with a decrease in separation between the highest occupied molecular orbital (HOMO) and the lowest unoccupied molecular orbital (LUMO). Computational analyses of the ground and excited state properties performed using density functional theory (DFT) and time-dependent DFT (TD-DFT) calculations compare favorably with the experimental observations. The calculated wavelength and oscillator strength of the lowest singlet transitions progressively increase for 1 (λ = 381 nm, f = 0.0028), 2 (λ = 400 nm, f = 0.1440) and 3 (λ = 522 nm, f = 0.1645). This result follows the trend observed in absorption spectra, i.e. a decrease in energy and increase of molar absorption for the CT bands when going from 1 to 2 to 3. The frontier molecular orbitals for 1–3 are shown in Figure 3A. For all three complexes the calculated HOMOs have essentially identical spatial contours, consisting predominantly of d orbitals on copper (39–48%) mixed with orbitals on di(2-pyridyl)dimethylborate ligand (41–45%). The LUMO in 1–3 is localized on the NHC ligand (85–94%) with minimal metal character (4–6%). A small contribution (8%) from the py2BMe2 orbitals appears in the LUMO of complex 1; however, there is less (4% and 2%) in both 2 and 3. Noteworthy is a substantial contribution (8–23%) from the carbene carbon 2p orbital in the LUMO of all three complexes. Congruent with the orbital composition, variations of the carbene ligand have pronounced effect on LUMO energies. Complex 1 has the highest LUMO energy in the series (E_{LUMO} = -0.58 eV) followed by 2 (E_{LUMO} = -0.98 eV) and 3 (E_{LUMO} = -2.05 eV). The HOMO energies show a similar trend in stabilization, albeit to a lesser degree (E_{HOMO} = -4.85 eV, -4.96 eV, -5.20 eV, for 1–3, respectively). The HOMO–LUMO gap is thus progressively smaller for 1 (∆E_{H-L} = 4.27 eV), 2 (∆E_{H-L} = 3.98 eV) and 3 (∆E_{H-L} = 3.15 eV).

The lowest vertical singlet and triplet excitations obtained from TD-DFT calculations are mainly HOMO→LUMO transitions (see ESI). On the basis of the MO description given above the lowest lying transition for complex 1 can be ascribed as (M+L)πCT admixed with intraligand π–π* (py2BMe2) (ILCT) character, whereas for complexes 2 and 3 the transition is principally metal-ligand to NHC-ligand charge transfer ((M+L)πILCT). The calculated spin density surfaces for the triplet electronic configuration further support this assignment (Figure 3B). For complexes 1–3 the spin contours are localized along the C_{NHC–Cu} bond axis. Both ligands also contribute to the triplet spin density; however, while complex 1 has a significant contribution from the borate ligand (31% NHC, 31% py2BMe2), the spin distribution is shifted toward NHC ligand for complexes 2 (52% NHC, 16% py2BMe2) and 3 (54% NHC, 16% py2BMe2).

Table 1. Photophysical data for complexes 1–3.

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<th>k_r (s^(-1))</th>
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<td>3 271 (13.3), 305 (7.4), 422 (10.3)</td>
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In dichloromethane. In solid state.

Figure 3. (A) HOMO and LUMO plots and energies for 1–3. (B) Optimized triplet geometries and triplet spin density contour plots (isovalue: 0.004 e a_0^(-3)). Hydrogen atoms are omitted for clarity.

To emphasize the importance of proper ligand design to achieve efficient room temperature phosphorescence from this family of Cu(I) compounds, we prepared complex 4 where the π-system of the NHC ligand was expanded by annulation of imidazolyldiene with a peri-naphthyl moiety (Figure 4, full characterization is given in ESI). For this derivative, the intensity of the lowest lying CT absorption

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band centered at 450 nm is low ($\epsilon = 450 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$) and the complex is nonemissive in the solid state at room temperature and at 77 K. Very weak, structured emission ($\Phi < 0.01$, $< 10^{-3}$ s$^{-1}$) is observed from a dilute solution of 4 in frozen 2-methyltetrahydrofuran (2-MeTHF) glass at 77 K (Figure 4). This emission is tentatively assigned as phosphorescence since the radiative rate constant ($k_r < 10^8 \text{ s}^{-1}$) and presence of vibronic features are inconsistent with fluorescence from the CT state. The HOMO for 4 calculated using DFT is essentially identical to that of complexes 1–3. The LUMO, localized primarily on the aromatic π-system of NHC ligand, has no electron density on the 2p orbital of C$_{\text{NHC}}$ atom in strong contrast to what is found in complexes 1–3. Such an electronic distribution leads to poor overlap between frontier orbitals and thus a low oscillator strength for the lowest lying CT transitions ($\lambda = 597 \text{ nm}$, $f = 0.0044$). The triplet spin density of 4 is localized on theacenaphthyl moiety and, unlike that of complexes 1–3, has a node along C$_{\text{NHC}}$–Cu bond axis (Figure 4). The spin distribution, together with structured emission spectrum, suggests that the luminescence is ligand centered in character. Thus, extension of the π-system in this manner, while shrinking the HOMO–LUMO gap ($\Delta E_{31} = 2.55 \text{ eV}$), decreases the energy of the LC state on the NHC ligand and allows electronic coupling to such a degree that it can no longer effectively interact with the MLCT states responsible for promoting fast radiative decay.\textsuperscript{3b}

In conclusion, we report a series of (NHC)-Cu(I) complexes that show phosphorescence associated primarily with NHC ligand chromophore. Judicious modification of the NHC ligand allows the emission colour to be tuned over 200 nm from blue to orange-red while retaining high emission efficiencies. The estimated triplet radiative rate constants are comparable with those of third row transition metal complexes. Taking into account electronic and steric tunability of the NHC ligands, these findings introduce a new versatile method to control the photophysical properties of luminescent Cu(I) complexes.

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### Notes and references