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1. Introduction

In most electrochemical devices, electrolytes are a kind of ubiquitous and indispensable materials. Due to their outstanding dissolvability to inorganic and organic compounds, large dielectric coefficients to dissociate inorganic salts and feasible permeability across the electrodes, electrolytes have been supposed as highly promising mediums facilitating the transfer of charges (e.g. H\(^+\), Li\(^+\) and I\(^-\)) for renewable energy devices.\(^1\)\(^-\)\(^3\) However, organic liquid/gel electrolytes containing organic solvent often suffer from serious drawbacks caused by volatilization, leakage, flammability and electrode corrosion,\(^7\)\(^,\)\(^8\) restraining the long-term stability and practical security of their devices. In this regard, solid-state electrolytes have attracted great attention for an extended research interest. For example, Bruce’ group developed a series of polymer electrolytes by dissolving LiXF\(_6\) (X=P, As, Sb) in polyethylene oxide (PEO).\(^5\)\(^,\)\(^6\) These new polymer electrolytes could remain around 10\(^{-5}\) \(\text{S cm}^{-1}\) at room temperature, displaying their potential use in rechargeable lithium batteries. Bouchet and coworkers\(^2\) designed a multifunctional single-ion polymer electrolyte based on polyionic block copolymers comprising polystyrene segments. Ionic conductivity ~1.3\(\times\)10\(^{-5}\) \(\text{S cm}^{-1}\) at 60 \(^\circ\)C, high Li\(^+\) transport number (>0.85) and improved mechanical strength rendered the electrolyte to be a new class of macromolecular material for lithium-metal battery. In dye-sensitized solar cells, overall photoelectric conversion efficiency over 13% has been achieved by embedding cobalt redox shuttles into an organic liquid electrolyte.\(^8\) However, dye degradation, leakage and evaporation of organic solvent, and electrode corrosion restrain the long-term performance for their practical applications.\(^5\) Therefore, several methods, including p-type semiconductors\(^9\) and hole conductors,\(^10\)\(^,\)\(^11\) especially polymer electrolytes, have been proposed to overcome these drawbacks.\(^12\)\(^-\)\(^15\) Unfortunately, because of lower conductivity and imperfect soaking of porous electrodes for polymer electrolytes, it is still a big challenge to improve the ion dynamics and permeability.\(^3\)\(^,\)\(^4\)\(^,\)\(^16\)\(^,\)\(^17\) Impressively, small molecular based solid-state ionic conductors provide higher ion conductivity, better solution-processable property and more satisfactory contact between the electrolytes and electrodes, highlighting their widespread application in fuel cells,\(^20\) lithium batteries\(^18\)\(^-\)\(^19\) and dye-sensitized solar cells.\(^21\)-\(^24\) Therefore, new solid-state electrolytes offer more opportunities to demonstrate their basic research interest and extensively promising applications in energy storage and conversion fields.

Here, we design and synthesize a simple solid-state electrolyte based on crown ether lithium salt complex ([Li12-C-4][I]) by mixing liquid-state 12-crown-4 with lithium iodide. The chemical structure and thermal properties are confirmed and characterized using a range of technologies including Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectra, nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) measurement, X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns and differential scanning calorimetry (DSC) analysis. The thermal properties, ion conductivity, surface morphology of [Li12-C-4][I] based solid-state electrolytes are also
investigated. As an application, the solid-state electrolytes are further used to fabricate dye-sensitized solar cells (DSSCs).

2. Experimental

Materials

12-Crown-4, lithium iodide (LiI) and iodine (I₂) were purchased from Alfa Aesar and used as received. PMII was purchased from Merck. H₂PtCl₆ and organic dye Z-907 were purchased from Aldrich. All the chemical reagents were used without further treatment. Fluorine-doped tin oxide (FTO) glass electrodes (8 Ω/Sq), and slurries containing 20 nm-sized mesoporous and 200 nm-diameter light-scattering TiO₂ colloidal were purchased from Dalian Hepatu Chroma Solar Tech. Co., Ltd (China).

Synthesis of [Li₃12-C₄][I]

[Li₃12-C₄][I] was synthesized as follows: briefly, a mixture of 12-crown-4 (31 mmol, 5.46 g) and LiI (30 mmol, 4.02 g) in 20 mL ethanol was stirred at 50 °C for 12 h under a nitrogen atmosphere. After the evaporation of solvent, the excessive 12-crown-4 was further removed by vacuum distillation at 80 °C. The product was dried under vacuum at 80 °C for 24 h to produce [Li₃12-C₄][I] with a yield of 98%.

Preparation of [Li₃12-C₄][I] based solid-state electrolytes

The components of the solid-state electrolytes employed in this work are listed in Table 1. All the electrolytes were dried under vacuum at room temperature for 48 h before the characterization and fabrication for DSSCs. The thermal stability of Sample A (12-crown-4) and Electrolyte B ([Li₃12-C₄][I]) is tested by TGA. For DSC analysis, Sample A and Electrolyte B-G containing different contents of PMII are also measured. Since I₂ is needed to form I₃⁻ ions for electron relay at the counter electrode, addition of 20 wt% I₂ to Electrolyte B can obtain Electrolyte I for the fabrication of DSSCs. Moreover, containing Electrolyte I and 200 wt% PMII, Electrolyte J is also prepared. For comparison, a typical organic liquid electrolyte for Reference Device contains 0.6 M DMPII, 0.1 M LiI, 0.5 M TBP, 0.1 M I₂ in MPN. 13 34

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample/ Electrolyte</th>
<th>12-crown-4</th>
<th>LiI</th>
<th>PMII (wt%)</th>
<th>I₂ (wt%)</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Mp (°C)</th>
<th>Conductivity (10⁻³ S cm⁻¹)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sample A (12-crown-4)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Liquid</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample B</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Solid</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample C</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Solid</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>4.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample D</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Solid</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>5.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample E</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Solid</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>6.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample F</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Solid</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>11.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample G</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Solid</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>15.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample H</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Solid</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>12.53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample I</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Solid</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>39.64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The state of electrolytes is present at 25 °C. a Melting point tested by DSC. b Tested by EIS at 25 °C. [—] No addition or no measurement.

Device Fabrication

The fabrication of DSSCs was assembled as documented in the previous literature. 21 The cleaned FTO glass was covered at two parallel edges with an adhesive tape to control the thickness of mesoporous TiO₂ film. Two layers of TiO₂ particles were deposited onto cleaned FTO glass and used as photoelectrodes. A 10 μm thick film of 20 nm sized TiO₂ particles was deposited onto the FTO glass electrode by the doctor-blade technique. The film was dried at 125 °C for 5 min. Then, a second 5 μm thick layer of 200 nm light-scattering anatase particles were coated on the top of the first TiO₂ layer. The resulting TiO₂ films were annealed at 500 °C for 15 min. After cooling to 80 °C, the obtained TiO₂ electrode was immersed in 0.3 mM solution of MK-2 in anhydrous toluene at room temperature for 12 h. The dyed TiO₂ electrode was washed with anhydrous ethanol and dried with nitrogen stream. To prepare the Pt counter electrode, two drops of 5 mM H₂PtCl₆ in ethanol was placed onto the cleaned FTO glass substrate, followed by drying and annealing at 400 °C for 15 min.

DSSCs were fabricated by sandwiching the methanol solution of an electrolyte between a dye-sensitized TiO₂ electrode and a pre-drilled Pt counter electrode by 40 μm hot melt ring (Surlyn, DuPont). The resulting cells were placed in vacuum at 50 °C for overnight to remove air to guarantee optimal filling and fine electrical contact. The produced devices were sealed with a Surlyn sheet and a thin glass cover by heating.

Characterization and Measurement

¹H NMR spectra were recorded on a Varian 400 MHz spectrometer. Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectra of the synthesized compounds were recorded on a Varian CP-3800 spectrometer in the range of 4000-400 cm⁻¹. Thermal analysis was carried out on Universal Analysis 2000 thermogravimetric analyzer (TGA). Samples were heated from 50 to 500 °C at a heating rate of 10 °C min⁻¹ under a nitrogen flow. Differential scanning calorimetry (DSC) measurements were performed under a nitrogen atmosphere with a heating rate of 10 °C min⁻¹ in a temperature range of -50 to 200 °C on DSC-Q200.

The XRD patterns of the films were performed by Rigaku D/MAX-2000PC diffraction system to evaluate the crystal structure and lattice constants, with a diffraction angle 2θ ranging from 5° to 80°. According to equation (1), the interlayer distances between planes in the atomic lattice can be calculated.

\[
2d \sin \theta = n \lambda
\]

where \( \lambda \) is the wavelength (= 0.154 nm) of the incident beam, \( \theta \) is the angle between the incident ray and the scattering plane, and \( n \) is an integer.

The conductivity of electrolytes was characterized between two identical platinum sheets (diameter of 1 cm) on a CH1660c electrochemical workstation, using the AC impedance method over the frequency range 0.01 Hz to 10⁶ Hz and the amplitude is 10 mV. The conductivity was calculated using equation (2). 17, 21-23
The conductivity in S cm\(^{-1}\), \(R\) is the ohmic resistance of the electrolyte, \(I\) is the distance between two electrodes, and \(S\) is the area of the electrolyte.

All the samples were equilibrated for at least 20 min at a given temperature. The photocurrent density-voltage (J-V) curves of the assembled DSSCs shielded by an aluminum foil mask with an aperture area of ~0.25 cm\(^2\) were measured with a digital source meter (Keithley, model 2612) under simulated air mass (AM) 1.5 solar spectrum illumination at 100 mW cm\(^{-2}\). Incident photo-to-current conversion efficiency (IPCE) was recorded as a function of excitation wavelength on a Xenon lamp with a monochromater (Oriel Cornerstone\(^{TM}\) 260 1/4). The photoelectrochemical parameters, such as short-circuit current density \(J_{sc}\), open-circuit voltage \(V_{oc}\), fill factor (FF) and power conversion efficiency (PCE) were calculated according to the previous reports.\(^{34,36,37}\)

**3. Results and discussion**

Crown ethers are a class of heterocycles with cyclic oligomers of essential repeating ethyleneoxy (-CH\(_2\)-O-).\(^{25}\) The unique structure of cyclic dioxanes renders crown ethers as complexing agents to effectively bind alkali-metal cations\(^{26}\) and reduce the interaction strength of their ion pairing.\(^{27}\) Up to now, crown ethers have been widely used in size-selective ions sensors,\(^{27,28}\) phase-transfer catalysts,\(^{29}\) membrane transports\(^{30}\) and disposals of nuclear waste.\(^{31}\) As one of simple crown ethers, 12-crown-4 repeats twice in dioxane and four times in its structure. The cavity radius of 12-crown-4 is between 0.060 and 0.075 nm, while the ionic radius of Li\(^+\) is 0.060 nm.\(^{32,35}\) The excellent trapping and dissociating ability of 12-crown-4 to Li\(^+\) from its counterions triggers our interest in further exploring the possibility to fabricate a solid-state electrolyte based on [Li\(_{12}\)-C-4][I], which could free out I\(^-\) ions and facilitate their effective transfer of charges.

Fig. 1a shows the synthetic route and chemical structures of [Li\(_{12}\)-C-4][I]. The purity and chemical structures are confirmed by \(^1\)HNMR (Fig. S1-S2, ESI\(^+\)). Compared with the single peak at 3.71 ppm for 12-crown-4 in CDCl\(_3\) (Fig. S1, ESI\(^+\)), introducing LiI will lead to three split peaks at 3.86, 3.83 and 1.25 ppm (Fig. S2, ESI\(^+\)), probably because of non-planar/asymmetric structure of [Li\(_{12}\)-C-4][I]. In addition, as shown in Fig. S3, XRD measurements can provide insight into the molecular packing arrangement. The Bragg peaks of 20 are clearly observed at 20.88 and 18.18° for LiI and [Li\(_{12}\)-C-4][I], respectively. According to the equation (1), the interlayer distances between planes in the atomic lattice can be calculated to be 4.25 and 4.87 Å for LiI and [Li\(_{12}\)-C-4][I], respectively. It means that synthesized [Li\(_{12}\)-C-4][I] exhibits a larger interlayer distance than LiI. The dissociating and partition ability of 12-crown-4 ring to LiI should be probably responsible for this analysis. Furthermore, representative images of electrolytes are also shown in Fig. 1b. Impressively, introducing LiI into clearly liquid 12-crown-4 (Sample A) results in pale-yellow power (Electrolyte B), indicating effective interaction between oxygen atoms and lithium ion to form [Li\(_{12}\)-C-4][I]. Further addition of I\(_2\) could obtain Electrolyte I containing small crystals with a purple color. It is notable that adding PMII into Electrolytes B and I could effectively suppress the crystallization of the complex to form Electrolytes G and J, which will be further discussed by DSC and SEM.

![Fig. 1](image) **Fig. 1** (a) Synthetic procedures for the preparation of [Li\(_{12}\)-C-4][I]. (b) Typical photographs of Sample A, Electrolytes B, G, I and J at 25 °C, respectively.

![Fig. 2](image) **Fig. 2** TGA curves of 12-crown-4 and [Li\(_{12}\)-C-4][I].
In order to further investigate the thermal property of Sample A and Electrolytes B-G, DSC curves are shown in Fig. 3. The state and melting points are also summarized in Table 1. It can be found that the melting point of Sample A is 19.8 °C, whereas, it exhibits a colorless liquid at room temperature (Fig. 1b). Notably, Electrolyte B containing [Li\textsubscript{12-C-4}]I\textsubscript{2} represents pale-yellow powder (Fig. 1b) with a Mp of 64 °C, indicating strong interaction between 12-crown-4 and LiI. The influence of adding I\textsubscript{2} on the melting point of Electrolyte I is also shown in Fig. S4. The value of 64.6 °C indicates that adding I\textsubscript{2} can lead to slightly higher Mp than that of Electrolyte B, due to enhanced van der Waals interactions of polyiodide.\textsuperscript{16} Compared with Electrolyte B, adding 20 to 40 wt% of PMII for Electrolytes C-E will result in slightly reduced intensity of the melting point. Further addition of PMII from 100 to 200 wt% can obviously decrease its intensity. These results demonstrate that liquid state PMII can effectively restrain the crystallization of [Li\textsubscript{12-C-4}]I\textsubscript{2} and thus introduce the appearance of defected/amorphous regions (Fig. 5b).\textsuperscript{36-38} which is favorable for better ion conductivity from 3.93\times10\textsuperscript{-5} to 1.58\times10\textsuperscript{-3} S cm\textsuperscript{-1} shown in Table 1. However, various addition of PMII has little effect on the Mp values of prepared solid-state electrolytes. The solid-state property of crown ether lithium salt complex is also in accordance with the range of application interest for solid-state electrolytes.

![Fig. 3 The DSC curves for Sample A and Electrolytes B-G, respectively.](image)

As shown in Fig. 4, the AC impedance spectra and ionic conductivity tests as a function of temperature are carried out to study the influence of temperature (25-80 °C) on the electrochemical performance of synthesized [Li\textsubscript{12-C-4}]I\textsubscript{2}. The conductivity is 3.93\times10\textsuperscript{-5} S cm\textsuperscript{-1} at 25 °C. It can be seen that temperature increment would gradually reduce the impedance values and hence enhance the ionic conductivity of [Li\textsubscript{12-C-4}]I\textsubscript{2}. Because of its melting point at 64 °C, higher temperature will exhibit a liquid state of [Li\textsubscript{12-C-4}]I\textsubscript{2}, resulting in obvious enhancement of ionic conductivity. Therefore, the solid-state electrolyte shows an ionic conductivity ~1.53\times10\textsuperscript{-5} S cm\textsuperscript{-1} at 80 °C, displaying potential application as a novel ionic conductor.

![Fig. 4 AC impedance spectra (a) and ionic conductivity (b) as a function of temperature for synthesized [Li\textsubscript{12-C-4}]I\textsubscript{2}.](image)

As shown in Fig. 5, the surface morphologies of synthesized [Li\textsubscript{12-C-4}]I\textsubscript{2} and PMII doped [Li\textsubscript{12-C-4}]I\textsubscript{2} are further investigated. It can be found that [Li\textsubscript{12-C-4}]I\textsubscript{2} is prone to crystallize and form voids at ambient condition (Fig. 5a). The sizes of formed crystals are about 5-10 µm. However, crystallization and voids can greatly prevent the filling of solid-state electrolytes into porous TiO\textsubscript{2} films, which will increase internal resistance between electrodes and electrolytes, and hence destroy dye regeneration and photocurrent generation (e.g. DSSCs).\textsuperscript{39-41} Therefore, liquid state PMII as an crystal growth inhibitor can effectively restrain the crystal growth of [Li\textsubscript{12-C-4}]I\textsubscript{2}, leading to relatively smooth surface morphology and improved interfacial wetting property (Fig. 5b). For these reasons, electrolytes with smooth surface morphology will be probably favorable for the fabrication of solid-state DSSCs in this work.

![Fig. 5 SEM images of [Li\textsubscript{12-C-4}]I\textsubscript{2} (a, Electrolyte B) and 200 wt% PMII doped [Li\textsubscript{12-C-4}]I\textsubscript{2} (b, Electrolyte G) coated on dyed TiO\textsubscript{2} photoanodes.](image)

Based on the abovementioned analysis, Electrolytes B, G, I and J are chosen for the fabrication of solid-state DSSCs (Device I-IV). The J-V curves of Device I and II with I\textsubscript{2} are shown in Fig. 6a. Meanwhile, The J-V curves of Device I and II without I\textsubscript{2} are also shown in Fig. S5 in ESI. Device III without I\textsubscript{2} exhibits a PCE of 1.04 % (J\textsubscript{sc} = 3.74 mA cm\textsuperscript{-2}, V\textsubscript{oc} = 0.525 and FF = 0.502). For Device I, because of the function of I\textsubscript{2} to form I\textsubscript{3} ions for effective dye regeneration, the values of J\textsubscript{sc}, V\textsubscript{oc} and FF are 5.02 mA cm\textsuperscript{-2}, 0.567 V and 0.669, yielding a PCE of 1.90 %. Due to special structure and relatively higher ionic conductivity of [Li\textsubscript{12-C-4}]I\textsubscript{2}, the PCE is better than those of solid-state electrolytes in previous reports.\textsuperscript{39,41,42} However, as shown in Fig. 5a, large crystallization and formed voids can greatly prevent the filling of solid-state electrolyte into the TiO\textsubscript{2} pores.
Meanwhile, poor interfacial contact between photoanode and electrolyte also hinder the dye regeneration and ion transport, and hence reduced photocurrent generation. With the assistance of the crystal growth inhibitor PMII to [Liϵ12-C-4][I], as shown in Fig. 6a and Fig. S5, the PCEs of Device IV without I2 and Device II with I2 can be remarkably improved to 2.77% (Joc = 9.12 mA cm−2, Voc = 0.604 and FF = 0.502) and 5.05% (Joc = 11.57 mA cm−2, Voc = 0.627 and FF = 0.696), respectively. This can be ascribed to much more smooth surface morphology, better interfacial contact, higher ionic conductivity and more effective dye generation. Although the efficiency is slightly lower than that of Reference Device with a PCE of 5.72%, it also indicate comparative performance of [Liϵ12-C-4][I] based device. These results are further demonstrated by IPCE testing shown in Fig. 6b. The maximum IPCE values are 42.51, 78.72 and 81.4% at 530 nm, indicating high light harvesting efficiency, effective dye regeneration and charge collection for photoelectron conversion efficiencies.

**Fig. 6** (a) J-V curves and (b) IPCE vs. wavelength profiles for solid-state DSSC based on Electrolytes I and J, respectively. A typical organic liquid electrolyte also hinder the dye regeneration and ion transport, because of the crystallization and voids of [Liϵ12-C-4][I]. However, as expected, Device II remains almost over 85% of its initial conversion efficiency, indicating much better excellent stability than Device I. Employing PMII to overcome the disadvantages of [Liϵ12-C-4][I] crystallization for Electrolyte J should be responsible for the stability enhancement. For comparison, the Reference Device with an organic liquid electrolyte maintains only about 20% of its initial conversion efficiency. These results also offer us a feasible method to design novel solid-state electrolytes for high performance DSSCs for future practical applications.

**4. Conclusions**

In summary, a simple and novel crown ether lithium salt complex [Liϵ12-C-4][I] has been designed, synthesized and characterized with high purity and yield. The thermal behaviors of [Liϵ12-C-4][I] based solid-state electrolytes are also investigated in detail. It reveals that molecule interaction between crown ether and lithium iodide can effectively transform liquid state 12-crown-4 to form solid-state complex [Liϵ12-C-4][I] with a melting point at 64 °C, which is in the range of interest for solid-state electrolytes. Particularly, the trapping ability of 12-crown-4 to Li+ can obviously reduce the cation-anion (Li+–I-) interaction and hence facilitate favorable electrical properties of the solid-state electrolytes. Therefore, [Liϵ12-C-4][I] represents ionic conductivity of 3.93×10−2 and 1.53×10−1 S cm−1 at 25 and 80 °C, respectively. Further addition of PMII could effectively suppress the crystallization of the complex for more amorphous and smoother regions, which are much more facile for higher ion conductivity by the segmental motion of molecule chains. Therefore, the resulting device shows a PCE ~5% and displays excellent long-term stability. These results offer us more opportunities to explore simple and novel solid-state electrolytes for electrochemical devices.

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**Notes and references**

ARTICLE

A novel solid-state electrolyte based on crown ether lithium salt complex

Minda Gao, Yun Wang, Qinghua Yi, Ying Su, Pengfei Sun, Xiangguo Wang, Jie Zhao* and Guifu Zou*

A novel solid-state electrolyte based on crown ether lithium salt complex $[\text{Li}_{12}\text{-C-4}]\text{[I]}$ has been designed, synthesized and characterized.