

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# A highly stable Zn<sub>9</sub>-pyrazolate metal–organic framework with metallosalen ligands as a carbon dioxide cycloaddition catalyst†

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A three-dimensional (3D) metal–organic framework constructed from unprecedented Zn<sub>9</sub>O<sub>2</sub>(OH)<sub>2</sub>(pyz)<sub>12</sub> (pyz = pyrazolate) clusters and Ni(salen)-derived linkers was reported. The MOF exhibits high catalytic activity for CO<sub>2</sub> cycloaddition reactions with excellent stability. The MOF catalyst can be recycled at least 15 times without loss of activity and the turnover number (TON) per Ni site can reach as high as 2887.

As emerging materials, porous metal–organic frameworks (MOFs) have attracted much attention for applications in gas storage and separation,<sup>1</sup> chemical sensing,<sup>2,3</sup> catalysis,<sup>4</sup> and many other fields over the past two decades.<sup>5</sup> MOFs are constructed from organic linkers, usually polycarboxylates<sup>6,7</sup> or polyazolates,<sup>8,9</sup> and metal/metal cluster nodes, and thus are of rich structural and functional diversity that allows their fine-tuning and modification to meet different requirements of the mentioned applications. However, challenges remain. Chemical stability is one of the major concerns for further applications of MOFs.<sup>10–12</sup> Several strategies have been developed to design more stable MOFs: (i) increasing the metal–ligand interaction strength with high p*K*<sub>a</sub> ligands (*e.g.* azoles) and/or high-valent metal ions (*e.g.* Zr<sup>4+</sup>, Cr<sup>3+</sup>);<sup>13,14</sup> (ii) reducing the contact between water or aqueous attacking reagents and the coordination bonds of host frameworks;<sup>15</sup> (iii) increasing the rigidity of ligands to enhance the stability.<sup>16</sup> MOFs based on azolate donors usually show better stability than those of carboxylate donors because the sp<sup>2</sup> N atoms tend to adopt saturated coordination and thus become locally hydrophobic and unavailable for interaction with attacking reagents.<sup>17,18</sup> Meanwhile, interpenetrated motifs also significantly enhance the framework stability.<sup>19</sup> It is not only because interpenetrated networks could reduce the pore size and increase the

wall thickness, but also due to the higher strength of non-covalent interactions in interpenetrated structures which lock the linkers in place and prevent their displacement.<sup>15</sup>

Metallosalen complexes are one of the earliest developed and most widely explored categories of asymmetric transition metal catalysts.<sup>20–22</sup> Since the early 1990s, metallosalen complexes have found catalytic applications for olefin epoxidation,<sup>23</sup> aldehyde cyanation,<sup>24</sup> epoxide ring-opening<sup>25</sup> and CO<sub>2</sub> cycloaddition reactions.<sup>26,27</sup> Heterogenized metallosalen catalysts have been constructed as surface-grafted silica or resins,<sup>28</sup> MOFs,<sup>29–31</sup> covalent organic frameworks (COFs),<sup>32,33</sup> and porous organic polymers (POPs)<sup>34</sup> for better catalyst separation and recyclability. However, it is still challenging to balance the catalytic activity/selectivity with material stability. MOF catalysts based on metallosalen-derived polycarboxylate linkers have shown exceptional catalytic performance compared to other heterogeneous metallosalen catalysts,<sup>35–38</sup> but the stability of those materials is not yet satisfactory.<sup>17</sup>

Herein, we report the synthesis and catalytic applications of a zinc-pyrazolate MOF constructed from Ni(salen) bispyrazolate ligands and unprecedented Zn<sub>9</sub> clusters. The zinc-pyrazolate connection allows the MOF to withstand acid and base treatments as well as boiling water. The MOF also exhibits high catalytic activity and exceptional recyclability for CO<sub>2</sub>-epoxide cycloaddition reactions.

The Zn<sub>9</sub>-pyrazolate MOF Zn<sub>9</sub>O<sub>2</sub>(OH)<sub>2</sub>(L)<sub>6</sub> was obtained by a solvothermal reaction between Zn(OAc)<sub>2</sub>·6H<sub>2</sub>O and the Ni(salen)-derived ligand H<sub>2</sub>L (Fig. 1b and Scheme S1†) in a DMF/H<sub>2</sub>O/trifluoroacetic acid mixture solution. As shown in the scanning electron microscopy (SEM) image, the crystalline MOF particles are of oblique dodecahedron shape with a uniform size of 20 μm (Fig. 1d). The exact formula and structure of the MOF were determined by single-crystal X-ray diffraction (SCXRD) studies. Preliminary reflection data reduction

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**Fig. 1** Construction of the  $\text{Zn}_9\text{O}_2(\text{OH})_2(\text{L})_6$  MOF (Zn: turquoise; Ni: lime; N: blue; O: red.): (a) the  $\text{Zn}_9\text{O}_2(\text{OH})_2(\text{pyrazolate})_{12}$  node; (b) the Ni(salen)-derived bis(pyrazolate) ligand; (c) two-fold interpenetration structure of the  $\text{Zn}_9\text{O}_2(\text{OH})_2(\text{L})_6$  MOF; (d) SEM image of  $\text{Zn}_9\text{O}_2(\text{OH})_2(\text{L})_6$ ; (e) simulated and experimental PXRD patterns of  $\text{Zn}_9\text{O}_2(\text{OH})_2(\text{L})_6$ ; (f)  $\text{N}_2$  sorption isotherms of the  $\text{Zn}_9\text{O}_2(\text{OH})_2(\text{L})_6$  MOF (inset: pore size distribution by the NLDFT method).

indicates that the MOF crystallizes in the cubic  $Fd\bar{3}m$  space group. Further structure refinement revealed that the  $\text{L}^{2-}$  linker exhibits symmetry-related, two-fold disorder. To better describe the structure, the apparent symmetry of the framework was arbitrarily lowered to the chiral  $F4_132$  space group with a racemic twinning parameter accounting for the disorder. The MOF has a formula of  $\text{Zn}_9\text{O}_2(\text{OH})_2(\text{L})_6$  and contains an unprecedented  $[\text{Zn}_9\text{O}_2(\text{OH})_2(\text{pyz})_{12}]$  cluster secondary building unit (SBU) (Fig. 1a). In the SBU, eight Zn atoms are located at the eight vertexes of a cuboid with an additional Zn atom at the center. The central Zn(II) atom adopts a distorted tetrahedral  $\text{ZnO}_4$  coordination sphere, while the four O atoms connect to eight vertical Zn(II) atoms in a  $\mu_3\text{-O}$  fashion (Fig. 1a). The twelve pyrazolate groups coordinate to the  $\text{Zn}_9$  cuboid cluster from the directions of twelve edges; therefore, each vertical Zn(II) ion is tetracoordinated in a  $\text{ZnN}_3\text{O}$  fashion. The Zn–Zn distances between vertical and central Zn(II) ions are 3.06 Å and 3.14 Å, respectively, and the distances between vertical Zn(II) ions are 3.58 Å, showing no intermetallic bonding. Previous studies on zinc-pyrazolate coordination chemistry have found  $[\text{Zn}_4\text{O}(\text{pyz})_6]$  and  $[\text{Zn}_3\text{O}(\text{pyz})_3]$  clusters, and  $\text{ZnN}_4$  tetrahedron SBUs,<sup>18,39–41</sup> yet to the best of our knowledge, the  $[\text{Zn}_9\text{O}_2(\text{OH})_2(\text{pyz})_{12}]$  cluster has never been

reported. The  $\text{Zn}_9\text{O}_2(\text{OH})_2$  cluster SBU is connected to twelve adjacent SBUs through Ni(salen)-based bis(pyrazolate) linkers to form a 3D network with face-centered cubic unit (fcu) topology, the same as that constructed from  $\text{Ni}_8$  clusters and linear bis(pyrazolate) linkers.<sup>42</sup> The MOF adopts a two-fold interpenetration structure, which is unprecedented in previous  $\text{Ni}_8(\text{pyrazolate})$  MOFs.<sup>42–45</sup> The  $\text{Zn}_9$  cluster of one network is located in the tetrahedral cavity formed by another network with 50% occupancy (Fig.S4†). The two interpenetrating networks are symmetrically related by the  $4_1$  screw axis and pseudo  $d$  glide plane. Because of the interpenetration, the pore size of the  $\text{Zn}_9\text{O}_2(\text{OH})_2(\text{L})_6$  MOF is only 10 Å as measured from the single crystal structure, a relatively small value compared to the ligand length. The powder X-ray diffraction (PXRD) pattern of the bulk MOF sample matches well with that from single-crystal structure simulation, confirming the phase purity (Fig. 1e). X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) shows that both Zn and Ni are in the +2 oxidation state (Fig. S5†).

The  $\text{N}_2$  sorption isotherms (Fig. 1f) of  $\text{Zn}_9\text{O}_2(\text{OH})_2(\text{L})_6$  revealed a typical type I behavior with a Brunauer–Emmett–Teller (BET) surface area of  $934 \text{ m}^2\text{g}^{-1}$ . Non-local density functional theory (NLDFT) pore size distribution analysis gave a

total pore volume of  $0.215 \text{ cm}^3 \text{ g}^{-1}$  with a pore size of  $12.7 \text{ \AA}$  (Fig. 1f), which is in good agreement with the two-fold interpenetration structure. The  $\text{CO}_2$  sorption isotherm (Fig. S7a†) gave a maximum  $\text{CO}_2$  uptake of  $168 \text{ cm}^3 \text{ g}^{-1}$ . The  $\text{Zn}_9\text{O}_2(\text{OH})_2(\text{L})_6$  MOF retained its crystallinity even after sorption tests as shown by the unchanged diffraction peaks (Fig. S7b†).

To explore the chemical stability of  $\text{Zn}_9\text{O}_2(\text{OH})_2(\text{L})_6$ , the MOF samples were treated with HCl, NaOH and ammonia aqueous solutions at room temperature, and  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  and HCl upon heating. In pH 2 HCl, 2.5% ammonia, and 2 M NaOH solutions, the MOF samples were stable for at least 210 days at room temperature as indicated by the PXRD patterns (Fig. 2). In pH 3 HCl and  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ , the MOF samples were stable for at least 21 days at  $100 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  (Fig. 2 and S8†). Therefore,  $\text{Zn}_9\text{O}_2(\text{OH})_2(\text{L})_6$  exhibits better chemical stability compared with most pyrazolate-based MOFs (Table S3†).<sup>46,47</sup> Such good stability could be attributed to a combination of several effects. First, the Zn-pyrazole saturated coordination protects the metal centre from being attacked by a base.<sup>10,48</sup> Second, the two-fold interpenetrated structure reduces the MOF porosity and inhibits guest diffusion through MOF channels, making the MOF more stable.<sup>15,49</sup> Third, the pyrazolate ligand with hydrophobic *t*-butyl group modification results in a hydrophobic MOF with a water contact angle of  $114^\circ$  (Fig. S9†), further reducing the contact of the MOF with aqueous attacking reagents.<sup>42</sup> All these effects taken together lead to the high chemical stability of  $\text{Zn}_9\text{O}_2(\text{OH})_2(\text{L})_6$ .

Great interest has been shown in converting  $\text{CO}_2$  into value-added chemicals and reducing the greenhouse gas concentration in the atmosphere. The cycloaddition of  $\text{CO}_2$  with epoxides (Scheme 1) has been widely proposed as an effective

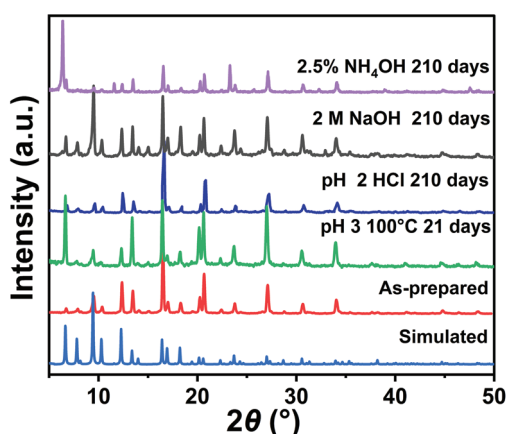


Fig. 2 PXRD patterns of the as-prepared  $\text{Zn}_9\text{O}_2(\text{OH})_2(\text{L})_6$  and those after acid, base and heating treatments.



Scheme 1  $\text{CO}_2$  cycloaddition reaction catalyzed by the MOF and TBAB.

approach for that purpose due to its near-100% atomic efficiency.<sup>50,51</sup> Different types of catalysts, including organo-catalysts,<sup>52</sup> ionic liquids,<sup>53</sup> metallosalen complexes,<sup>26</sup> single atom catalysts<sup>54</sup> and other coordination compounds,<sup>55,56</sup> have been reported as effective catalysts for  $\text{CO}_2$  cycloaddition reactions. POPs<sup>34</sup> and MOFs<sup>38,57–60</sup> have been reported as the heterogeneous version of those molecular catalysts to facilitate the separation and recycling processes. Given the high stability of the Ni(salen)-derived  $\text{Zn}_9\text{O}_2(\text{OH})_2(\text{L})_6$  MOF, we expected that it could be a good candidate as a heterogeneous  $\text{CO}_2$  cycloaddition catalyst. We first investigated its catalytic activity with styrene oxide as a model substrate. The reaction was almost complete in 24 hours at  $80 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  in the presence of 1.5% MOF catalyst and 1.5% tetrabutylammonium bromide (TBAB) co-catalyst and under 7 bar  $\text{CO}_2$  atmosphere. When the MOF and TBAB loading was decreased from 1.5% to 0.5%, the yield of the carbonate product only decreased from 99% to 95% (entries 1 and 2, Table 1), indicating the high catalytic activity of the MOF/TBAB catalyst. When either the MOF or TBAB was absent, the product yield was much lower under the same pressure and temperature conditions (Fig. 3a and entries 3 and 4, Table 1), showing that both the components are necessary for the catalysis. Using the Ni(salen)-derived ligand  $\text{H}_2\text{L}$  instead of the MOF gave a similar yield for styrene carbonate, showing that the ligand is the catalytically active component (entry 5, Table 1). Reducing the reaction temperature or pressure led to lower yields, yet such an effect can be compensated for by increasing the catalyst loading to 1% (entries 6–8, Table 1).

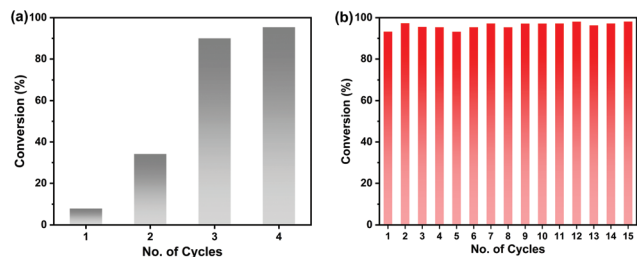
The high chemical stability of the  $\text{Zn}_9\text{O}_2(\text{OH})_2(\text{L})_6$  MOF allows easy recycling of the catalysts. After the reaction, the MOF catalyst was simply filtered off and washed to remove product residues in the pores, and then it was added to another batch of reactants. In this way, the MOF catalyst can be recycled at least 15 times without any loss in its catalytic activity (Fig. 3b). A total turnover number (TON) of more than 2887 was achieved after 15 cycles. SEM, PXRD and  $\text{N}_2$  sorption experiments showed that the MOF maintains the original morphology, structure and porosity after catalysis (Fig. S11†).

The catalytic activity of the  $\text{Zn}_9\text{O}_2(\text{OH})_2(\text{L})_6$  MOF for substrates with different sizes was also investigated. With the increasing molecular sizes of the substrates, the isolated yields

Table 1 Optimization of reaction conditions for the cycloaddition of  $\text{CO}_2$  with styrene oxide

Entry	Catalyst (%)	TBAB (%)	<i>P</i> (atm)	<i>T</i> ( $^\circ\text{C}$ )	Conversion (%)
1	1.5	1.5	7	80	99
2	0.5	0.5	7	80	95
3	0.5	0	7	80	8
4	0	0.5	7	80	34
5 <sup>a</sup>	0.5	0.5	7	80	90
6	0.5	0.5	4	80	68
7	0.5	0.5	7	60	67
8	1	1	4	80	95

<sup>a</sup> The ligand  $\text{H}_2\text{L}$  was used instead of the MOF.



**Fig. 3** (a) Styrene oxide conversions with different catalysts; (b) styrene oxide conversions at different runs in the reuse experiments for CO<sub>2</sub> cycloaddition. Reaction conditions: 80 °C, 7 atm CO<sub>2</sub>, 0.5% MOF catalyst and 0.5% TBAB co-catalyst.

for the corresponding carbonate products showed a descending trend of 89%, 30%, and 9% for epichlorohydrin, styrene oxide, and stilbene oxide, respectively (Table S4<sup>†</sup>). The size-dependent conversion, therefore, demonstrates that the catalysis takes place in the MOF channels and not only on the external surface.

We next explored the catalytic activity of the MOF/TBAB system with different epoxide substrates. As shown in Table 2, the MOF/TBAB catalyst showed good conversion for epichlorohydrin (99%), phenyl glycidyl ether (98%) and cyclopentene oxide (82%) substrates, and moderate conversion for cyclohexene oxide (24%). It is worth noting that cyclohexene oxide is one of the very inactive substrates owing to its steric hindrance originating from the bicyclic structure.<sup>61</sup> However, the yield of cyclohexene carbonate can be optimized to 82% by increasing the catalyst loading to 1.5%. This yield outperformed many previously reported heterogeneous catalysts under similar loading, temperature, and pressure conditions (Table S5<sup>†</sup>). The results fully demonstrate that the MOF has excellent catalytic activity and provides a convincing experimental basis for industrial applications.

In summary, we reported the synthesis of a Zn-pyrazolate MOF with an unprecedented Zn<sub>9</sub>O<sub>2</sub>(OH)<sub>2</sub>(pyz)<sub>12</sub> cluster and a two-fold interpenetration network structure. This MOF exhibits excellent chemical and stability in pH 2–14 aqueous solutions as well as in boiling water or weak acids. The MOF efficiently catalyzes CO<sub>2</sub> cycloaddition reactions with various epoxide

substrates, showing its high activity and exceptional recyclability. Consequently, this work will offer significant guidance in the design and synthesis of highly stable metal-pyrazolate MOFs, thereby promoting the discovery of their structures as well as potential applications.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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**Table 2** Cycloaddition reactions of CO<sub>2</sub> with different epoxide substrates

Entry	Substrate	Catalyst (%)	TBAB (%)	Conversion (%)	Yield (%)
1		0.5	0.5	99	96
2		0.5	0.5	98	97
3		0.5	0.5	82	78
4		0.5	0.5	24	19
5		1.5	1.5	82	79

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