Inorganic Chemistry

Real Active Site Identification of Co/Co₃O₄ Anchoring Ni-MOF Nanosheets with Fast OER Kinetics for Overall Water Splitting

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Cite This: Inorg. Chem. 2024, 63, 7045–7052



ABSTRACT: Doping metals and constructing heterostructures are pivotal strategies to enhance the electrocatalytic activity of metal–organic frameworks (MOFs). Nevertheless, effectively designing MOF-based catalysts that incorporate both doping and multiphase interfaces poses a significant challenge. In this study, a one-step Co-doped and Co_3O_4 -modified Ni-MOF catalyst (named Ni NDC-Co/CP) with a thickness of approximately 5.0 nm was synthesized by a solvothermal-assisted etching growth strategy. Studies indicate that the formation of the Co–O–Ni–O-Co bond in Ni NDC-Co/CP was found to facilitate charge density redistribution more effectively than the Co–O–Ni bimetallic synergistic effect in NiCo NDC/CP. The designating Ni NDC-Co/CP achieved superior oxygen evolution reaction (OER) activity (245 mV @ 10 mA cm⁻²) and robust long stability (100 h @ 100 mA cm⁻²) in 1.0 M KOH. Furthermore, the Ni NDC-Co/CP⁽⁺⁾||Pt/C/CP⁽⁻⁾ displays pregnant overall water splitting performance, achieving a current density of 10 mA cm⁻²



at an ultralow voltage of 1.52 V, which is significantly lower than that of commercial electrolyzer using Pt/C and IrO_2 electrode materials. In situ Raman spectroscopy elucidated the transformation of Ni NDC-Co to Ni(Co)OOH under an electric field. This study introduces a novel approach for the rational design of MOF-based OER electrocatalysts.

INTRODUCTION

Green hydrogen, considered the most promising future energy, is currently produced mainly by electrolyzing water. However, the efficiency of electrocatalytic water splitting faces challenges due to the anodic oxygen evolution reaction (OER), involving a complex four-electron transfer process with sluggish reaction kinetics.^{3,4} Typically, noble metal catalysts like Ru/Ir are widely employed for OER, but their high cost and scarcity hinder widespread application.^{5,6} Therefore, the pursuit of alternative electrocatalysts with comparable OER activities yet lower cost and higher abundance has become a compelling research focus. Over recent decades, transitionmetal materials have emerged as promising candidates due to their flexible oxidation states, variable d-orbital electronic structures, cost-effectiveness, and diversity. This has led to the development of numerous transition-metal-based electrocatalysts, including transition-metal oxides, phosphides, sulfides, and others.

Among the above-mentioned electrocatalysts, metal–organic frameworks (MOFs), recognized as typical porous coordination polymers, have garnered considerable attention due to their distinctive coordination environment, expansive surface area, and tunability.^{10,11} However, pristine MOFs encounter challenges such as poor electrical conductivity and restricted active metal centers, limiting their application as efficient OER electrocatalysts.^{12–14} To address these limitations, researchers have undertaken extensive efforts to enhance the electrocatalytic activity of MOFs through methods such as element doping, defects construction, and morphology engineering.^{15–17} Notably, doping with foreign elements stands out as an effective approach, capitalizing on electronic interactions and cooperative effects between metal centers.^{18,19} For instance, Zhao et al. demonstrated the high OER performance (250 mV@10 mA cm⁻²) of a NiCo MOF, attributing it to the electronic interaction between Ni and Co, which optimized their OER performance.²⁰ Moreover, the combination of MOFs with other active metals or metal oxides has proven to exhibit superior electrocatalytic activity compared to individual components.²¹⁻²³ Zheng et al. synthesized a Co₃O₄@Co MOF, showcasing a synergistic effect that enhanced OER ability (277 mV@10 mA cm⁻²).²⁴ Importantly, while doping with other metals modulates the electronic structure of the initial MOF, hybridization with metallic materials creates interfaces to optimize electron transfer.²⁵⁻²⁷ As of now, formulating a viable strategy to

Received:February 19, 2024Revised:March 20, 2024Accepted:March 20, 2024Published:April 3, 2024





combine doping and compositing for maximal MOF modification remains a significant challenge.

Motivated by these considerations, Co₃O₄-modified and Codoping Ni MOF (Ni NDC-Co/CP) was prepared through a solvothermal-assisted etching growth strategy. In comparison to NiCo NDC/CP, Ni NDC-Co/CP demonstrates superior OER activity of 245 and 308 mV at 10 and 100 mA cm^{-2} , respectively, while maintaining stability for 100 h at 100 mA cm^{-2} . When Ni NDC-Co/CP⁽⁺⁾||Pt/C/CP⁽⁻⁾ cells were assembled, low voltages of 1.52 and 1.63 V were attained at 10 and 100 mA cm⁻², respectively, with stability sustained for over 70 h at 100 mA cm⁻². Comprehensive characterizations confirmed that the outstanding electrocatalytic performance of Ni NDC-Co/CP originates from the Co-O-Ni-O-Co bond, resulting from the cooperative effects of Co doping and Co₃O₄ modification. In situ Raman results further corroborate the transformation of Ni NDC-Co into Ni(Co)-OOH as the real active component in the electrochemical reaction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The preparation process of Ni NDC-Co/CP is shown in Figure 1. Initially, the pristine 2D Ni NDC with a MO_6



Figure 1. Schematic illustration of the synthesis of Ni NDC-Co/CP.

coordination environment was synthesized using a straightforward one-step solvothermal strategy, employing NiCl₂·6H₂O and H₂NDC as the metal source and organic ligand, respectively. In the subsequent ion etching growth process, Co^{2+} was effectively introduced into the second building units of Ni NDC, facilitated by the presence of the same six Co/Ni coordination centers.^{28,29} Concurrently, a portion of the Co²⁺ ions underwent oxidation, forming Co₃O₄, which intricately decorated the surface of Ni NDC nanosheets, leading to the self-regulated formation of the Ni NDC-Co/CP heterostructure.

X-ray diffraction (XRD) was employed to scrutinize the crystal structures of the catalysts. In Figure 2a, all samples displayed the characteristic peaks at 26.6 and 54.8°, assignable to the background CP (PDF# 26–1077).³⁰ Notably, Ni NDC/CP, NiCo NDC/CP, and Ni NDC-Co/CP displayed two similar peaks at 7.5 and 14.8°, aligning well with the (001) and (002) facets of the Ni MOF simulation, affirming the successful construction of NDC-based MOF composites.^{28,31} Intriguingly, the XRD pattern of the Ni NDC-Co/CP catalyst did not reveal any Co₃O₄ diffraction peaks, in contrast to clear peaks observed in samples collected at the bottom of the solvent thermal reactor (Figure S1), indicating the low-loading Co₃O₄ modification in the target catalyst.^{32,33} Raman spectroscopy was performed to further explore the characteristic

peaks of Ni NDC/CP, NiCo NDC/CP, and Ni NDC-Co/CP (Figure 2b). Obviously, the peaks in the range of 1300 to 1800 cm⁻¹ correspond to the characteristics of H₂NDC organic ligands, and the peak at 668 cm⁻¹ is attributed to the characteristic peak of M–O bonds, once again verifying the sufficient coordination of metal ions and organic ligands.^{34–36} Compared to Ni NDC/CP and NiCo NDC/CP, Ni NDC-Co/CP exhibited new peaks at around 470, 680, and 1180 cm⁻¹, indicating the presence of Co₃O₄ species.³⁷

The morphology and structure of the samples were characterized by scanning electron microscopy (SEM). Remarkably, Ni NDC/CP presents cross-linked nanosheets with smooth surfaces (Figure 2c). For NiCo NDC/CP, the nanosheets were slightly overlapped and thicker than those of Ni NDC (Figure S2). In the case of Ni NDC-Co/CP, the apparent surface roughness of the nanosheets can be explained by the decoration of Co₃O₄, which validates the previously explained ion etching growth mechanism (Figure 2d). Atomic force microscopy (AFM) test results show that Ni NDC-Co retained its ultrathin properties with a thickness of about 5.0 nm (Figure 2e). Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) images in Figure 2f also validated the nanosheet structure, with clear lattice fringes and plane spacing of 0.24 and 0.58 nm observed in the high-resolution TEM (HR-TEM) image, attributed to the (311) and (002) planes of Co₃O₄ and Ni NDC, respectively (Figure 2g). Additionally, the selective area electron diffraction (SAED) pattern in Figure 2h revealed diffraction rings corresponding to the (311) plane of Co_3O_4 and the (002) plane of Ni NDC, consistent with the lattice fringes in Figure 2g. The corresponding EDX spectra showcased a homogeneous distribution of O, Ni, and Co, while ICP-MS further clarified the elemental content of Ni (8.87 wt %) and Co (6.18 wt %) (Figure 2i, Table S1).

The elemental valences of Ni NDC/CP, NiCo NDC/CP, and Ni NDC-Co/CP were scrutinized using X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS). Specifically, the C 1s binding energy in the original data was standardized to 284.8 eV, and subsequently, the high-resolution Ni 2p and Fe 2p XPS spectra were analyzed by using peak splitting rules. The XPS survey spectra of various catalysts exhibit the presence of O, Ni, and Co elements concurrently (see Figure S4), consistent with the findings of EDS mapping. In the Ni 2*p* spectra (Figure 3a), the peak at 858.25 eV corresponds to the typical Ni³⁺ species, while the peak at 856 eV belongs to the Ni²⁺ state.³⁸⁻⁴⁰ For Co 2p spectra (Figure 3b), the peaks of Co²⁺ can be observed with the binding energy of 781.3 ($Co^{2+} 2p_{3/2}$), and the peaks at 780.1 eV can be ascribed to the $Co^{3+} 2p_{3/2}$.^{41,42} The relative ratio of $\mathrm{Ni}^{3+}/\mathrm{Ni}^{2+}$ is higher in Ni NDC-Co/CP compared to NiCo NDC/CP, suggesting a greater proportion of highvalence Ni³⁺ in Ni NDC-Co/CP. This phenomenon is advantageous for the OER process.43,44 Additionally, the binding energy of Ni²⁺ in Ni NDC-Co/CP and NiCo NDC/ CP is more positively shifted than in Ni NDC/CP, implying a localized alteration in the electronic environment of Ni²⁺. Considering the dual effect of Co doping and Co₃O₄ modification in Ni NDC-Co/CP and the XPS results, a Co-O-Ni-O-Co bond is proposed based on the crystal field theory to describe the electron-transfer mechanism present in Ni NDC-Co/CP (Figure 3c). In Ni NDC/CP, the π -symmetry *d*-orbitals (t_{2g}) of the Ni²⁺ are fully occupied, resulting in the e^--e^- repulsion as the main interplay of the bridging O^{2-} and Ni^{2+.46} The symmetrically filled electronic degenerate orbitals $(e_{\sigma} \text{ and } t_{2\sigma})$ of Ni²⁺ prevent Jahn–Teller (JT) distortion,



Figure 2. (a) XRD patterns of Ni NDC/CP, simulated Ni NDC, NiCo NDC/CP, and Ni NDC-Co/CP. (b) Raman patterns of Ni NDC/CP, NiCo NDC/CP, and Ni NDC-Co/CP. (c) SEM image of the Ni NDC/CP. (d) SEM image, (e) AFM image, (f) TEM image, (g) HR-TEM image, (h) SAED image, and (i) EDS mapping of Ni NDC-Co/CP.



Figure 3. (a) High-resolution Ni 2*p* XPS spectra of Ni NDC/CP, NiCo NDC/CP, and Ni NDC-Co/CP; (b) Fe 2*p* XPS spectra of NiCo NDC/CP and Ni NDC-Co/CP; and (c) schematics of the electronic interplay among Ni NDC-Co/CP.

requiring a high input energy for the OER to proceed.⁴⁷ In contrast, the electronic valence configuration of Co^{2+} is $3d^7$ with the high-spin state, leading to unpaired electrons in the π -symmetric (t_{2g}) d-orbitals that interact with the bridging O^{2-} through π -donation.⁴⁸ Through dual modification of Ni²⁺ from two Co^{2+} molecules at both sides via Co-O-Ni-O-Co,

stronger electron transfer occurs, transforming Ni²⁺ $(t_{2g}{}^6e_g{}^2)$ to Ni³⁺ $(t_{2g}{}^6e_g{}^1)$. Notably, Ni³⁺ exhibits JT distortion due to the asymmetric filling of electronic degenerate orbitals, favoring the OER.⁴⁹ Overall, Co, as an electron acceptor, extracts electrons from the Ni site through the Co–O–Ni–O–Co electronic coupling effect, converting Ni²⁺ to Ni³⁺, resulting in JT distortion, shortening of Ni–O bonds, and improved OER activity.^{50,51}

The OER activity of the variously prepared catalysts was assessed by a three-electrode measurement system in 1.0 M KOH, and all linear sweep voltammetry (LSV) curves were calibrated with 95% iR compensation. Given that the CoCl₃. 6H₂O content significantly influences catalytic performance, Ni NDC-Co/CP obtained by adding different mmol of CoCl₃. 6H₂O was initially evaluated for the OER activity. The results indicated that the optimal amount of CoCl₃·6H₂O was 1.5 mmol (Figure S3). In Figure 4a, Ni NDC-Co/CP exhibits an overpotential of 245/308 mV at a current density of 10/100 mA cm⁻², surpassing those of other samples. Overpotentials at current densities of 10, 50, and 100 mA cm⁻² were used as comparative variables, with the relative results presented in Figure 4b. The kinetics of the OER process were further evaluated by Tafel slopes.⁵² Notably, the Tafel slope of Ni NDC-Co/CP (49.1 mV dec⁻¹) is significantly lower than that of Ni NDC/CP (105.5 mV dec⁻¹), NiCo NDC/CP (53.2 mV dec⁻¹), and RuO₂/CP (186.3 mV dec⁻¹), indicating faster OER dynamics for Ni NDC-Co/CP (Figure 4d). Importantly, Ni NDC-Co/CP competes favorably with recently reported OER catalysts (Figure 4c, Table S2). The electrochemical active surface area (ECSA) value is a crucial factor reflecting

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Figure 4. (a) Linear sweep voltammetry (LSV) curves of Ni NDC-Co/CP, NiCo NDC/CP, Ni NDC/CP, and RuO₂/CP in the OER. (b) Overpotentials for different samples at 10, 50, and 100 mA cm⁻². (c) Comparison of the overpotential at 10 mA cm⁻² and Tafel slope with previously reported catalysts. (d) Corresponding Tafel slope. (e) C_{dl} values, (f) Nyquist diagrams, and (g) TOF values of Ni NDC-Co/CP, NiCo NDC/CP, and Ni NDC/CP. (h) Chronopotentiometry curve of Ni NDC-Co/CP at 100 mA cm⁻².

the OER performance, where a larger ECSA implies more available active sites during the OER process. ECSA was identified by measuring the C_{dl} value in the CV curve of the nonfaradaic potential region with different scan rates (Figure S4). In Figure 4e, Ni NDC-Co/CP exhibits a larger C_{dl} (5.8 mF cm⁻²) compared to Ni NDC/CP (0.58 mF cm⁻²) and NiCo NDC/CP (5.3 mF cm⁻²), suggesting that Co doping and Co₃O₄ modification improved the intrinsic activity of Ni NDC. To further mitigate the influence of ECSA on the OER performance, ECSA-normalized LSV curves were conducted and depicted in Figure S7. The results indicated that Ni NDC-Co/CP exhibited the most favorable intrinsic OER performance among the samples. Ionic resistance and transport resistance are critical factors influencing the electrocatalytic activity of OER. Therefore, the charge-transfer kinetics of the catalyst were further evaluated by measuring electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS). The Nyquist plot of the electrode and the associated equivalent circuit model are shown in Figure 4f. Here, R_s represents the solution resistance of the electrolyte, R_{ct} denotes the charge-transfer resistance, and the constant-phase element (CPE) is related to the intrinsic activity and geometry of the catalyst.⁵³ In comparison to Ni NDC/CP (R_{ct} = 2.86 Ω) and NiCo NDC/CP (R_{ct} = 1.98 Ω), Ni NDC-Co/CP demonstrates a lower chargetransfer resistance ($R_{ct} = 1.74 \Omega$), indicating the fastest chargetransfer kinetics. Additionally, turnover frequency (TOF), reflecting the number of O2 molecules delivered per second per active site, is considered one of the most meaningful parameters for judging the intrinsic activity of catalysts.⁵⁴ The calculated TOF for the prepared catalysts follows the order: Ni NDC-Co/CP > NiCo NDC/CP > Ni NDC/CP (Figure 4g).

Based on these results, the enhanced OER performance exhibited by Ni NDC-Co/CP can be attributed to two key factors. First, Co doping contributes to the improved catalytic performance.⁵⁵ Second, the presence of Co_3O_4 modification on the Ni NDC surface facilitates the creation of more accessible active sites, thereby accelerating electron-transfer kinetics and enhancing its intrinsic activity. Long-term stability is also an essential criterion for evaluating catalysts. As shown in Figure 4h, Ni NDC-Co/CP exhibits remarkable stability, maintaining a voltage retention rate of over 98% in a current density over 100 h at 100 mA cm⁻², thus confirming its exceptional stability.

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Leveraging the exceptional OER performance of Ni NDC-Co/CP, a water-splitting device was prepared to evaluate its electrocatalytic performance, utilized by Ni NDC-Co/CP as the anode and Pt/C/CP as the cathode (Figure 5a). At high current densities, the polarization curves exhibit slight instability, primarily due to the rapid formation of hydrogen bubbles at the electrode surface. As depicted in Figure 5b, the Ni NDC-Co/CP⁽⁺⁾||Pt/C/CP⁽⁻⁾ configuration exhibits a cell voltage of 1.52 and 1.63 V at 10 and 100 mA cm^{-2} , respectively, slightly lower than that of commercial RuO₂/ $CP^{(+)}||Pt/C/CP^{(-)}$ and other previously published catalysts (Figure 5c, Table S3). Furthermore, the chronopotentiometry curve of Ni NDC-Co/CP⁽⁺⁾||Pt/C/CP⁽⁻⁾ at 100 mA cm⁻² was maintained for more than 70 h without significant recession (Figure 5d), attesting to its high durability for overall water splitting. Notably, during the stability test, O₂ and H₂ bubbles were observed on the anode and cathode surfaces, respectively, further confirming the successful electrochemical water splitting (inset in Figure 5d).



Figure 5. (a) Schematic diagram of the overall water splitting electrolyzer, (b) comparison of the polarization curves of Ni NDC-Co/CP⁽⁺⁾||Pt/C/CP⁽⁻⁾ and the $RuO_2/CP^{(+)}||Pt/C/CP^{(-)}$ at high currents in 1.0 M KOH, (c) comparing cell voltages with the recently reported electrolyzers at 10 mA cm⁻² in 1.0 M KOH, and (d) long-term stability test of Ni NDC-Co/CP⁽⁺⁾||Pt/C/CP⁽⁻⁾ at 100 mA cm⁻² in 1.0 M KOH.

Examining the microstructure and surface species evolution after the OER reaction is crucial for elucidating the catalytic mechanism. The XRD pattern indicates the disappearance of characteristic MOF peaks (Figure 6a), while newly emerged peaks can be attributed to NiOOH (PDF# 06–0075) and CoOOH (PDF# 07–0169).²⁸ Following the stability test, the catalyst retained its nanosheet morphology, as evidenced by the corresponding HR-TEM images revealing distinct lattice stripes with spacings of 0.21 and 0.43 nm, consistent with the crystal planes of NiOOH (105) and CoOOH (003), respectively (Figures 6b,c and S8). EDX mapping demonstrates a uniform distribution of O, Ni, and Co elements after the OER stability testing (Figure S9).

Post OER stabilization, the surface XPS of the Ni NDC-Co/ CP catalyst reveals a change in the area ratio of Ni³⁺/Ni²⁺ in the Ni 2*p* spectrum from 0.29 to 0.35, indicating the generation of more Ni³⁺ species (Figure 6d). Similarly, for the Co 2*p* spectra, the area ratio of Co³⁺/Co²⁺ increases to 0.99, illustrating the formation of Co oxide/hydroxides during the OER process (Figure 6e).^{56,57} Prior studies suggest that the high-valence Ni/Co not only promotes the occurrence of active phases in metal oxyhydroxides but also optimizes the electronic structure of the oxyhydroxides, accelerating OER kinetics.^{58,59}

In situ Raman was employed to verify the transformation mechanism of Ni NDC-Co/CP during the OER process in the potential range from 1.1 to 1.6 V with an interval of 0.1 V (Figure 6f). In the potential range 1.1–1.3 V (vs. RHE, 1.0 M KOH), the peak at around 680 cm⁻¹ corresponds to Co₃O₄, while the other peaks at around 494 and 520 cm⁻¹ represent $Ni(OH)_{2}$.⁶⁰ When the potential increased from 1.4 to 1.6 V, the characteristic peaks of $Ni(OH)_2$ and Co_3O_4 gradually disappeared, and two distinct signal peaks were detected at around 474 and 549 cm⁻¹, corresponding to the Ni/Co-O bond in Ni(Co)OOH, respectively.^{61,62} It is noteworthy that the peak at 1200 to 1800 cm⁻¹ can be attributed to the H2NDC organic ligand. The gradual decomposition of H₂NDC can be observed from 1.1 to 1.6 V, further confirming the transformation of the Ni NDC-Co/CP surface into Ni(Co)OOH during the OER process, consistent with the XRD results.



Figure 6. (a) XRD image, (b) TEM image, (c) HR-TEM image, (d) XPS of Ni 2*p*, and (e) XPS of Co 2*p* of Ni NDC-Co/CP after the OER stability test. (f) Electrochemical in situ Raman spectra of Ni NDC-Co/CP in the potential range of 1.1–1.6 V (vs RHE). (g) OER mechanistic illustration of Ni NDC-Co/CP.

The proposed catalytic mechanism is explained as follows (Figure 6g): Initially, OH⁻ is absorbed at the Ni/Co sites to form the Ni/Co–OH group (Step I). This is followed by the first deprotonation of the Ni/Co–OH group to form the Ni/Co–O group (Step II). As the reaction proceeds, the Ni/Co–O group combines with OH⁻ to form the superoxide species Ni/Co-OOH (Step III). Finally, the Ni/Co-OOH reacts with the OH⁻ and underwent deprotonation to produce O₂ and H₂O (Step IV).⁶³

Based on the above results, the excellent OER performance of Ni NDC-Co/CP can be attributed to several factors: (1) The presence of rough nanosheets facilitated by Co_3O_4 , which are modified to enhance the contact area with the electrolyte, thereby expediting electron transfer under an electric field.⁶⁴ (2) The introduction of Co^{2+} leads to the generation of Co-O-Ni-O-Co units in Ni NDC-Co, optimizing the d-orbitals of Ni²⁺ and promoting the formation of Ni³⁺, thereby reducing the reaction energy barrier in the OER process.^{45,65} (3) In situ growth avoids the use of binders and preserves the catalytic capacity of the catalyst as much as possible.⁶⁶

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, we have prepared Ni NDC-Co/CP by using a solvothermal-assisted etching growth strategy. The unique nanosheet morphology, Co ion doping and Co₃O₄ modification on the surface of Ni NDC nanosheets identified as key contributors to its exceptional OER performance. As a result, the Ni NDC-Co/CP exhibits a low overpotential of 245 and 308 mV at 10 and 100 mA cm⁻², respectively, a Tafel slope of 49.1 mV dec⁻¹ and a long-term stability for 100 h at 100 mA cm^{-2} . In a water-splitting device, Ni NDC-Co/CP as the anode and Pt/C/CP as the cathode yielded cell voltages of 1.52 and 1.63 V at 10 and 100 mA cm^{-2} , respectively. Microstructural analyses confirmed the transformation of Ni NDC-Co/CP into Ni(Co)OOH during the OER process. Ni NDC-Co/CP emerges as a promising candidate for efficient electrochemical water splitting and provides an innovative approach to the design of high-performance MOF-based electrocatalysts.

ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.inorgchem.4c00712.

Details on the experimental method, characterization, electrochemical measurements, EIS study, true content of metal elements in different catalysts obtained by ICP-MS measurements, comparison of the OER activities of recently reported electrocatalysts, and summary of various catalytic electrodes for overall water splitting (PDF)

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The manuscript was written through contributions of all authors. All authors have given approval to the final version of the manuscript.

Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was financially supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (No. 22068008, 21965005, and 52363028) and the Guangxi Province Natural Science Foundation (No. 2020GXNSFAA159104 and 2021GXNSFAA076001).

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