

Insight into the mechanisms of CO₂ reduction to CHO over Zr-doped Cu nanoparticle

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Abstract

Zr-doped icosahedral Cu nanoparticle (NP) with 54 Cu atoms and one Zr atom is studied by Density functional theory (DFT) calculation for CO₂ reduction to CHO which is intermediate converting into methanol. A Cu atom being at the vertex ('v') and edge ('e') site of Cu NP's surface is respectively substituted by a Zr atom, and this doping of Zr atom makes Cu NP becoming one of the potential catalysts for CO₂ reduction to methanol. Especially, Cu₅₄Zr_e NP shows its superior activity and selectivity for CO₂ reduction to CHO, where Zr atom stays at 'e' site. This can be well confirmed not only from its adsorption behavior for several important intermediates, but also from the lowered reaction barrier of CO₂ converting into CHO. Moreover, Cu₅₄Zr_v NP also shows its relatively good performance in CO₂ converting into CHO, where Zr atom is doped at 'v' site, if compared with pure Cu NP and even bulk Cu with Zr doping. That is to say, the introduction of Zr atom can effectively improve the catalytic properties of Cu NPs for CO₂ reduction to methanol, and the fact of Zr atom doping site and its relation with catalytic property, to some extent provides the guidance in designing catalysts that capture and convert CO₂ to fuels or chemicals.

1. Introduction

Fossil fuel combustion has significantly led to elevated levels of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere and global warming through the greenhouse effect.¹ Under this situation, the reduction reaction of carbon dioxide (CO₂RR) is widely considered to be a promising process to realize CO₂ converting into useful chemical feedstocks.² However, the kinetic sluggishness in CO₂RR, where the multiple electron transfer steps and high energy barriers are involved, is one of the important hinder to resolve this problem.³ So, an effective catalyst used in CO₂RR is greatly required, not only effectively reducing the reaction barriers, but also facilitating the kinetics to accomplish commercially significant rates.⁴

As reported in the previous works,⁵⁻⁹ many transition metals have shown their remarkable catalytic activity in CO₂RR. For instance, Au and Ag catalysts display their good selectivity and Faraday efficiency in converting CO₂ to CO,^{6,7} while Cu catalysts present their particularity in converting CO₂ into hydrocarbons and alcohols.^{8,9} It should be noted, considering the price and over potential, Cu catalysts have attracted much attention. However, the weak selectivity of Cu catalysts in CO₂RR is really existing,¹⁰ where the multiple pathways and a range of products concurrently produced are observed. Besides, the activation of CO₂ on Cu catalysts' surface needs enhancing since their usually weak adsorption to CO₂ molecular.¹¹ All this shows the difficulty in realizing pure Cu catalysts' high catalytic efficiency. To overcome this problem, some previous works mentioned that the doping of second transition metals on the surface or into Cu catalysts becomes a potential method to improve their catalytic properties.¹²⁻¹⁴

As reported, bimetallic Cu-based alloys with Cu rich composition have been extensively tested in the experiments for CO₂RR.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ For example, a series of heteroatoms such as Au, Ni, Zn and Zr are doped in Cu-based NPs. It is worth mentioning, Dean et al. found that the introduction of Zr atoms into Cu NPs

can well activate CO₂ molecular, and CO₂ molecular can be strongly adsorbed on these Cu NPs' surface.¹⁸ Other researchers also proposed that Zr doping can well enhance the selectivity and stability of Cu catalysts in CO₂RR.^{19,20} It has been reported that in Cu/ZnO system, a higher CO₂ conversion and better selectivity to methanol products is realized in the system with Zr doping, while it does not in the system without Zr doping.²¹ The similar situation is also observed in Cu/TiO₂ system.²² Actually, if compared with bulk Cu-Zr alloys, their smaller size systems will have the higher catalytic activation.^{18,23} Austin et al. selected a Cu NP with icosahedral structure and 55 Cu atoms as the matrix, and they found Zr atom doping at the vertex of Cu nanoparticle's surface shows a better ability for CO₂ activation.²⁴ Moreover, they found that CO₂ activation becomes barrierless and exothermic when Zr is doped at the surface of Cu NPs.²⁴ Obviously, Zr atom is one of the valid element in enhancing the catalytic efficiency of Cu-based catalysts.

Therefore, the Zr doped Cu NP with icosahedral structure is also adopted in this work, to further explore the influences of Zr doping on both the CO₂ activation and hydrogenation, especially considering the role of Zr doping site. By using density functional theory (DFT), the adsorption energies for some key intermediates, such as CO₂, CO and CHO, and the activation barriers for the both crucial reaction steps in CO₂ reduction to methanol,^{24,25} i.e., CO₂ - CO + O and CO + H - CHO are calculated. It is found that Cu NP with Zr doping on it's surface has a stronger adsorption for CO₂, CO and CHO, and lower energetic barrier from CO₂ to CHO, implying their better catalytic activation than pure Cu NP and even than bulk Cu(111) surface with Zr doping. Moreover, the better catalytic property of Cu NP is found when Zr is doped at surface edge site.

2. Computational details

The spin-polarized DFT in DMol³ code was performed,^{26,27} the exchange-correlation interactions were treated with the Perdew-Burke-Ernzerhof (PBE) functional²⁸ within a generalized gradient approximation (GGA) and the empirical correction in the Grimme scheme²⁹ was applied. The DFT Semi-core Pseudopotentials (DSPP)³⁰ were used to replace the core electrons and double numerical plus polarization (DNP) basis sets were chosen. During the geometry structural optimization, the convergence tolerances of energy, maximum force, and displacement were set to 1.0×10^{-5} Ha, $0.002 \text{ Ha } \text{\AA}^{-1}$, and 0.005 \AA^{-1} , respectively. The electronic self-consistent field tolerance was set to 1.0×10^{-6} Ha, and a basis set orbital cutoff of 5.5 Å and a smearing value of 0.005 Ha were applied to orbital occupations. Hirshfeld population analysis was performed to compute the charge transfer.³¹ The minimum energy path (MEP) to search for the involved transition state was obtained by LST/QST tools in DMol³ code.³²

The icosahedral Cu NPs with Zr doping respectively at vertex (Cu₅₄Zr_v), edge (Cu₅₄Zr_e) and core (Cu₅₄Zr_c) and pure Cu NP were constructed, and their optimized structures are shown in Figure 1. Bulk Cu(111) surface with Zr doing (Cu(111)/Zr) was modeled by a four-layer slabs with (4 x 4) unit cell, where the bottom two atom layers were fixed while the top two layers were allowed to fully relax. The adjacent slabs are separated by 15 Å of vacuum in the normal direction of the surface and the Brillouin zone integration was performed with 3 x 3 x 1k -points.

The preference site of one Zr atom in Cu NP's surface is determined by the segregation energy (SE), that is, $SE = E(\text{Cu}_{54}\text{Zr}_{(\text{surface})}) - E(\text{Cu}_{54}\text{Zr}_{(\text{core})})$, defined as the energy difference when Zr atom stays at core and surface, where Zr atom at core site in Cu NP is taken as a reference. Adsorption energy (E_{ad}) is used to evaluate the binding strength of surface adsorbate: $E_{\text{ad}} = E[*] + E[\text{adsorbate}] - E[*\text{adsorbate}]$, where $E[*]$ and $E[\text{adsorbate}]$ are the total energies of the catalyst itself and the adsorbate in the gas phase. $E[*\text{adsorbate}]$ shows the total energy of the system containing the adsorbed species which are adsorbed at the most stable site. More positive E_{ad} means stronger binding.

3. Results and discussion

From Figure 1, the SE values are always negative as long as Zr atom is located on the surface, meaning the preferential site for Zr atom in this Cu NP is surface. In fact, the atomic radius of Zr atom is larger than that of Cu atom,³³ that is to say, Zr atom prefers to reside on the surface, which can well minimize the strain energy in this NP. Moreover, one can find that there is only a small difference of 0.01 eV in SE

values between $\text{Cu}_{54}\text{Zr}_v$ and $\text{Cu}_{54}\text{Zr}_e$ NPs. So, the doping of Zr atom in this Cu NP is always advantageous as long as Zr stay at the surface site of the Cu NP, and both the vertex and edge site are acceptable.

Firstly, the influence of Zr doping in Cu NPs is well reflected by their capturing for CO_2 . Upon the optimized structures for the adsorption of CO_2 on the Cu NPs with and without Zr doping, a larger difference in the adsorption energies E_{ad} is found. As displayed in Figure 2, $E_{\text{ad}} = 0.19$ eV is obtained when CO_2 is adsorbed on the pure Cu_{55} NP, and one can say this is physisorption state. However, E_{ad} is respectively 1.51 eV and 1.80 eV with a stronger adsorption behavior for CO_2 when it is adsorbed on $\text{Cu}_{54}\text{Zr}_v$ and $\text{Cu}_{54}\text{Zr}_e$ NPs. The similar case is also observed on bulk Cu(111) surface, where E_{ad} is 1.27 eV for CO_2 adsorption under the precondition of Zr doping. In a word, the introduction of Zr atom is of great importance whatever in Cu NPs or in bulk Cu catalyst.

Moreover, CO_2 molecular would rather stay near Zr atom, which can be seen from the configuration of the adsorbed CO_2 on these Cu catalysts in Figure 2. Actually, the transferred charge from these Cu catalysts to CO_2 molecular is closely related with E_{ad} . From Table 1, the more transferred charge means the stronger adsorption to CO_2 . This will inevitably lead to the change in both the bond length and bond angle of CO_2 molecular. One can see the elongation of the average length of C=O bond ($d_{\text{C=O}}$), and the shrinkage of the bond angle ($\angle \text{OCO}$) with the strength in E_{ad} or with the increased transferred charge. In addition, the above observance means that Zr atom doping at edge site is better than vertex site on this Cu NP, and this site is usual the preferential site of other metals doping in this Cu NP for CO_2 adsorption.¹⁸

In CO_2 RR, CO_2 dissociation is the initial reaction step and has large impact on the overall reaction rate.³⁴ For this step, there usually have three paths in CuZr systems.^{35,36} One is the direct decomposition of CO_2 into CO and O,²⁴ the other two ways are CO_2 hydrogenation to form carboxyl (COOH) and formate (HCOO), respectively.²² To pick up the reasonable path for CO_2 dissociation, these three paths are performed on the Zr doped Cu(111) surface, and the concerned potential energies are shown in Figure 3. It is expected that the direct dissociation of CO_2 to CO and O, is the preferred path. This is because one hand, it is exothermic process for the step of $\text{CO}_2 \rightarrow \text{CO} + \text{O}$, while it is endothermic process if CO_2 is hydrogenated to COOH. On the other hand, the energy barrier is 0.47 eV for the step of $\text{CO}_2 \rightarrow \text{CO} + \text{O}$, while it is respectively 1.02 eV and 0.79 eV for CO_2 hydrogenation to COOH and HCOO. Although the hydrogenation of CO_2 to HCOO is also an exothermic reaction, the stronger adsorption for HCOO ($E_{\text{ad}} = 4.35$ eV) may prevent its further hydrogenation and then cause surface poisoning.²² Thus, the dissociation of CO_2 to CO and O is selected in this work, following by the next step of $\text{CO} + \text{H} \rightarrow \text{CHO}$. Actually, they are two important steps in CO_2 reduction to methanol.

For the key intermediates from CO_2 to CHO on these catalysts, including CO, CHO, O and H, Figure 4 presents their adsorption energies E_{ad} . It is interesting that their strongest adsorptions happen on $\text{Cu}_{54}\text{Zr}_e$ NP, and then on CuZr_v NP. Their smallest adsorption energies are obtained on Zr doped Cu(111) surface. This sequence is similar with the case of CO_2 adsorption on these catalysts. Their stable adsorption configurations and E_{ad} values have been presented in Table 2. From their configurations, one can find that Zr doped Cu NPs show their stronger adsorption for O atom, which is mainly due to the high oxygen affinity of metal Zr atom. And so a nearly linear relationship between $E_{\text{ad}}(\text{CO}_2)$ and the summation of $E_{\text{ad}}(\text{CO})$ and $E_{\text{ad}}(\text{O})$ exists on these catalysts can be expected, as shown in Figure 5(a), and similarly the linear relationship between $E_{\text{ad}}(\text{CHO})$ and $[E_{\text{ad}}(\text{CO}) + E_{\text{ad}}(\text{O})]$ is seen in Figure 5(b). All this means the C and O atoms are the mainly element to form the adsorption with the Zr doped Cu catalysts. The similar cases are also observed in other researches.³⁷⁻⁴⁰ Anyway, the adsorption behaviors for these intermediates again prove that Zr doped Cu NPs are the potential catalysts for CO_2 converting into methanol, especially $\text{Cu}_{54}\text{Zr}_e$ NP.

Furthermore, the potential energy diagram from CO_2 to CHO is presented in Figure 6. One can see the energy barrier is 1.01 eV on pure Cu_{55} NP when CO_2 dissociation to CO, while it is greatly reduced as long as Zr atom is doped. Importantly, they are respectively 0.34 eV and 0.32 eV on $\text{Cu}_{55}\text{Zr}_v$ and $\text{Cu}_{55}\text{Zr}_e$ NPs. Even in bulk Cu surface, this energy barrier is also reduced to 0.47 eV when Zr atom is introduced. In this process, a C=O bond in the adsorbed CO_2 molecule is firstly cleaved, and then the single O atom always moves near the Zr atom to form the transition state. It is worth mentioning that the dissociation of CO_2

on the pure Cu₅₅ NP is an endothermic one ($\Delta E = +0.43$ eV), while it is an exothermic reaction on both Cu₅₅Zr_v and Cu₅₅Zr_e NPs ($\Delta E_{v'} = -0.67$ eV, $\Delta E_{e'} = -0.54$ eV).

In the next process of CO hydrogenation to form CHO, one finds that the energy barrier is 1.34 eV on the pure Cu₅₅ NPs. However, this energy barrier is still obviously lowered in the Zr doped Cu NPs, especially in Cu₅₄Zr_e NP, and it is just 0.58 eV. Besides, this energy barrier in Cu₅₄Zr_v NP being 1.05 eV is still smaller than that in Cu₅₅ NP, while there has a little larger than that in Cu₅₄Zr_e NP. All this means Zr atom doping in Cu NPs, greatly enhances their catalytic ability in the CO₂ reduction to methanol, and Zr atom serves as the active site to a large extent whatever it is doped at vertex or edge site. Moreover, the exothermic process is still observed for CO hydrogenation to CHO on both Cu₅₄Zr_v and Cu₅₄Zr_e NPs, while it is endothermic process in pure Cu₅₅ NP. In addition, in the Zr doped Cu(111) surface, the energy barrier in the step of CO hydrogenation to CHO is 1.43 eV, which is higher than any of Cu NPs. So, Zr doping in Cu NPs with icosahedral structure makes them having the great potential as the effective catalysts for CO₂ reduction to methanol, not only from the adsorption for CO₂, CO and CHO, but also form the energy barriers of first two important steps. Especially, Cu₅₄Zr_e NP shows its superior catalytic ability.

4. Conclusions

In summary, we investigated the effect of Zr doping in Cu NPs with icosahedral structure on the CO₂ reduction to methanol by using DFT. Segregation energy analysis suggests that Zr atom prefers to reside on the surface of the Cu NPs. Moreover, Zr doping in Cu NPs actually enhances the adsorption capacity of CO₂ molecular and stabilizes the two important intermediates, i.e., CO and CHO. The fact of the energy barriers in this process from CO₂ to CHO are greatly reduced when Zr doping in Cu NPs, further means Cu₅₄Zr NPs shows its good potential as the effective catalyst for CO₂ reduction to methanol, especially when Zr doping at edge site.

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Captions:

Figure 1. The optimized structures of Zr doping in Cu NPs with 55 atom, respectively when Zr atom stays at vertex, edge and core site. The Cu atoms are colored brown and the Zr atoms are in light blue. SE is defined as the energy difference when Zr atom stays at core and surface.

Figure 2. The most stable adsorption configurations of CO_2 respectively adsorbed on Cu_{55} NP, $\text{Cu}_{54}\text{Zr}_v$ NP, $\text{Cu}_{54}\text{Zr}_e$ NP and $\text{Cu}(111)/\text{Zr}$.

Figure 3. The three possible reaction mechanisms and transition state (TS) for CO_2 dissociation on $\text{Cu}(111)/\text{Zr}$, respectively converted to $\text{CO}+\text{O}$, COOH and HCOO .

Figure 4. The adsorption energies E_{ad} of CO , CHO , O and H respectively on $\text{Cu}_{54}\text{Zr}_v$ NP, $\text{Cu}_{54}\text{Zr}_e$ NP, and $\text{Cu}(111)/\text{Zr}$.

Figure 5. The scaling relations of the adsorption energies ($E_{\text{ad}}\text{CO}+E_{\text{ad}}\text{O}$) for both CO and O , respectively with (a) that $E_{\text{ad}}\text{CO}_2$ for CO_2 , and (b) with that $E_{\text{ad}}\text{CHO}$ for CHO on the different catalysts.

Figure 6. Potential energy diagrams for the reduction of CO_2 to CHO on Cu_{55} NP, $\text{Cu}_{54}\text{Zr}_v$ NP, $\text{Cu}_{54}\text{Zr}_e$ NP and $\text{Cu}(111)/\text{Zr}$.

Figure 1

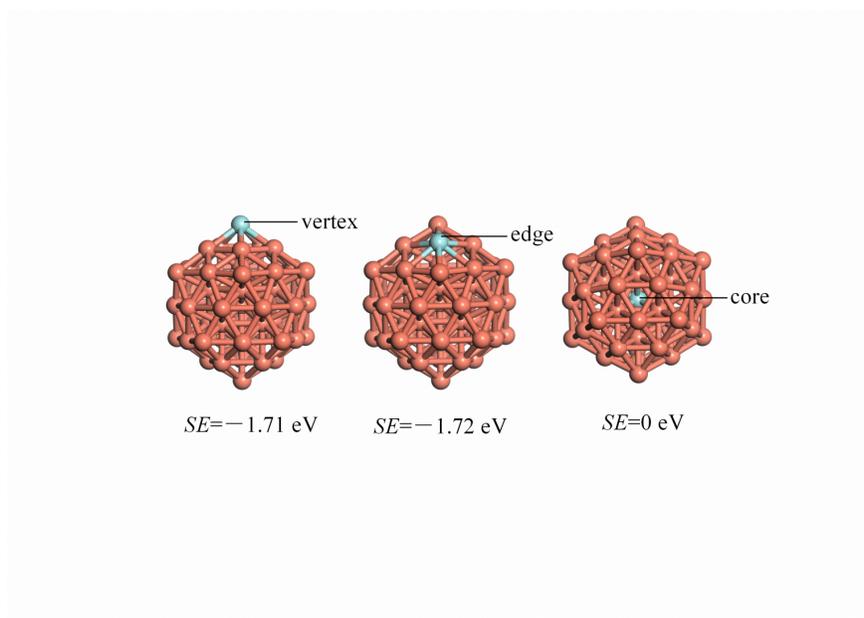


Figure 2

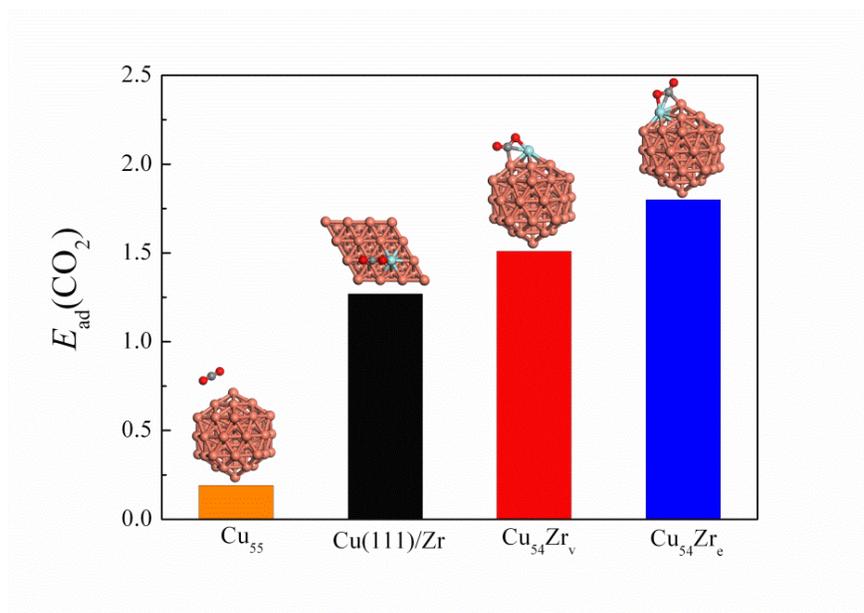


Figure 3

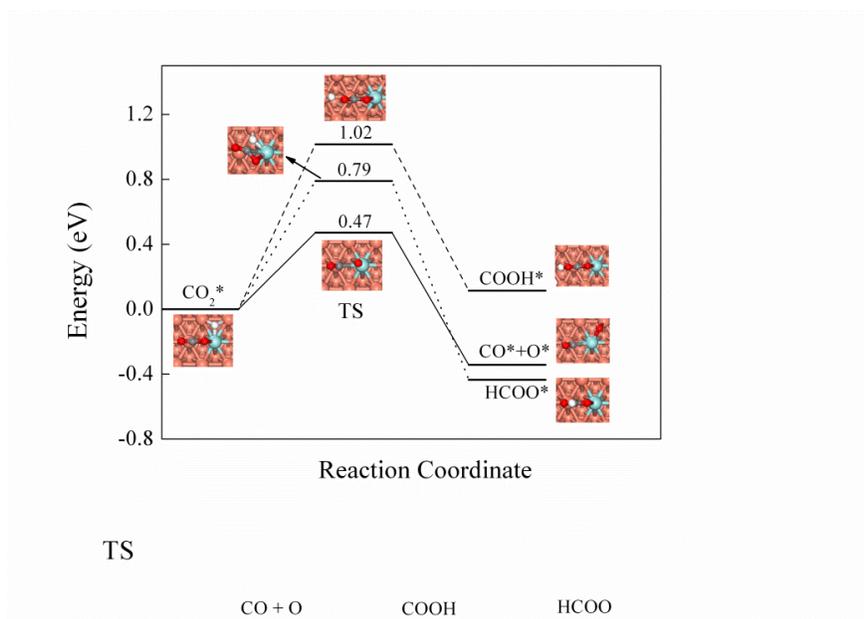


Figure 4

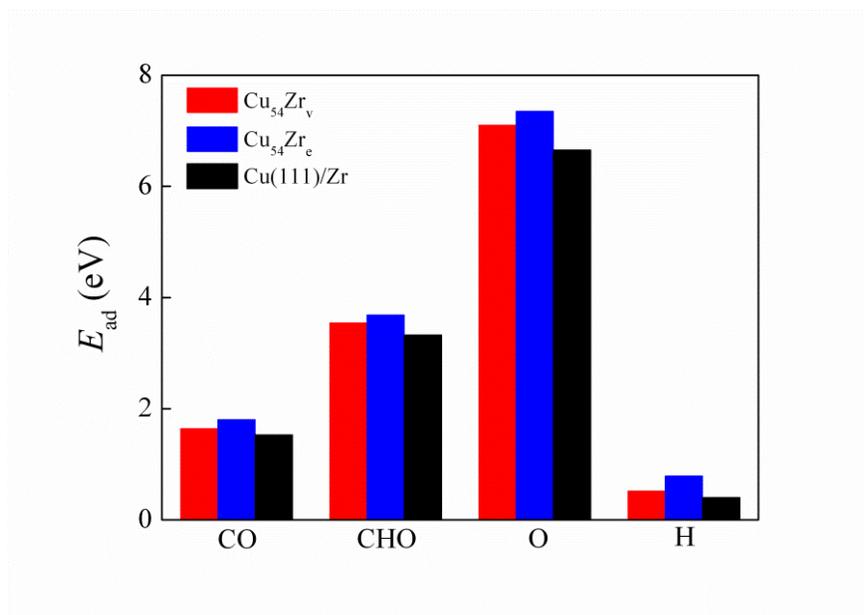


Figure 5

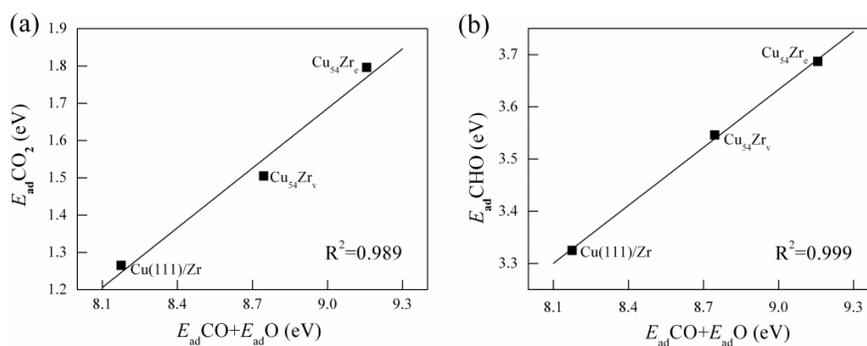


Figure 6

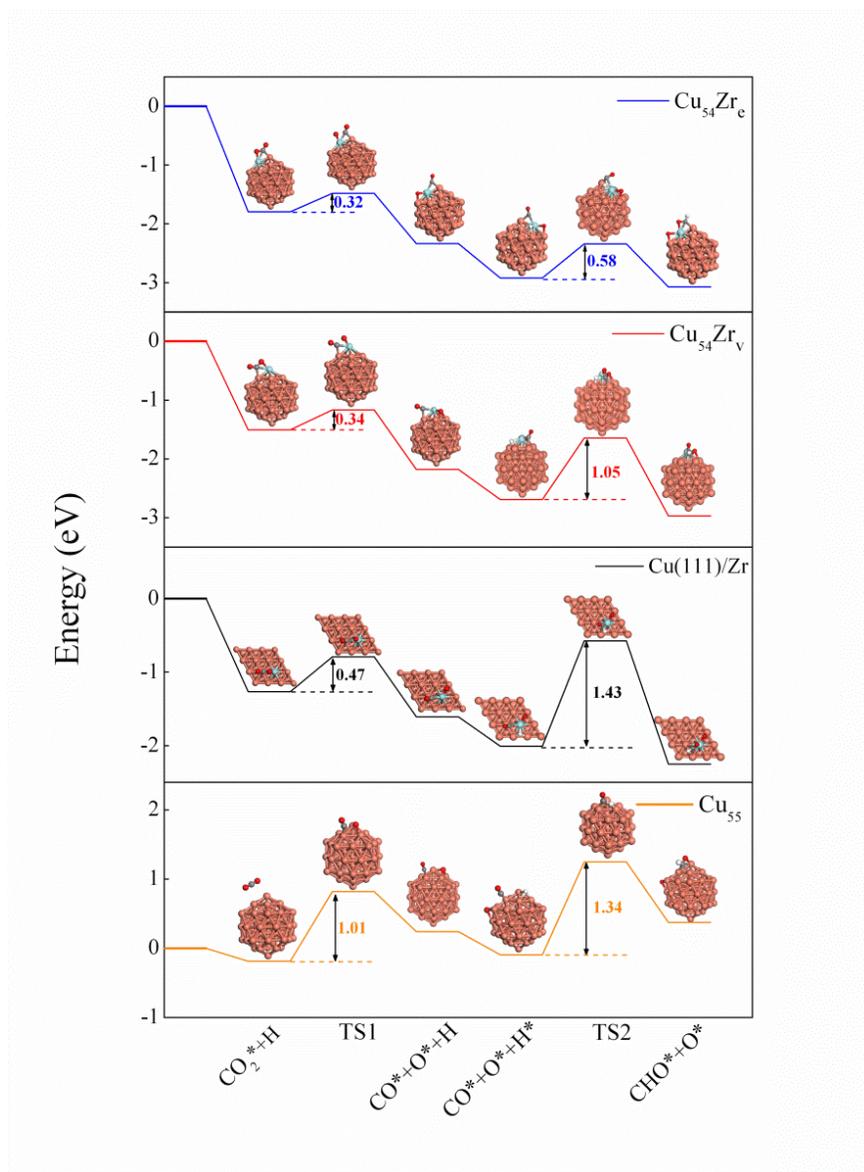


Table 1. The adsorption energy and related parameters of CO_2 on different catalysts

Species	CO	CHO	O	H
$\text{Cu}_{54}\text{Zr}_e$				
$E_{\text{ad}}(\text{eV})$	1.81	3.69	7.35	0.79
$\text{Cu}_{54}\text{Zr}_v$				
$E_{\text{ad}}(\text{eV})$	1.65	3.55	7.10	0.52
$\text{Cu}(111)/\text{Zr}$				
$E_{\text{ad}}(\text{eV})$	1.53	3.33	6.65	0.40

Table 2. The most stable adsorption configuration and adsorption energy of intermediates from CO_2 to CHO

Species	CO	CHO	O	H
$\text{Cu}_{54}\text{Zr}_e$				
$E_{\text{ad}}(\text{eV})$	1.81	3.69	7.35	0.79
$\text{Cu}_{54}\text{Zr}_v$				
$E_{\text{ad}}(\text{eV})$	1.65	3.55	7.10	0.52
$\text{Cu}(111)/\text{Zr}$				
$E_{\text{ad}}(\text{eV})$	1.53	3.33	6.65	0.40