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|---|---|
| Journal: | *Analytical Chemistry* |
| Manuscript ID | ac-2021-021836 |
| Manuscript Type: | Technical Note |
| Date Submitted by the Author: | 24-May-2021 |
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# Modulation of Crystalline Metal-organic Framework Precursor towards Carbon-based $Cu_xO$ Electro-catalyst for Boosting Sensitive Hydrogen Peroxide Detection: Synthesis, Catalysis and Sensing Application

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## Abstract:

Metal-organic frameworks (MOFs) act as versatile coordinators for the subsequent synthesis of high-performance electrochemical catalysts by providing dispersed metal-ion distribution, initial coordination condition, and modular dopant atom ratios, etc. In this work, a copper-based crystalline MOF *trans*-[$Cu(NO_3)_2(Him)_4$] was synthesized as a novel precursor of a carbon-based electrochemical valence-alternating NC@$Cu_xO$ catalyst. Through simple temperature modulation of the pyrolysis procedure, the gradual transformation towards highly-active catalytic nanocomposite was characterized and investigated to ascertain the signal enhancing mechanism during $H_2O_2$ detection. Owing to its proprietary structure and ensuing electrochemical reduction activity, a proof-of-principle sensor using NC@$Cu_xO$ as transducer was able to provide an amplified sensitivity of 2330 $\mu A\ mM^{-1}\ cm^{-2}$. In addition, its facile one-vessel preparation and the intrinsic non-enzymatic nature suggests a wide range of potential applications in medical settings.



## Keywords:

Metal-organic framework derivate, Non-enzyme catalyst, Electrochemical biosensor, Fenton-like signal amplification, One-pot synthesis

The electrochemically active material, or rather the transducer, plays an imperative role in the construction of an electrochemical biosensor [1]. Its intrinsic properties, such as active center density, electron transfer ability, as well as, internal structure and external morphology, set the fundamental performance of the derived sensing systems or devices [2-4]. Use of metal-organic frameworks (MOFs) as self-sacrificed precursors [5, 6] provides invaluable properties, such as: 1) tunable initial coordination environment and heteroatom doping, that can be easily achieved through the selection of multitudinous ligand molecules; 2) atomic migration process can be accessed and manually paused to obtain a series of products with diverse composite configurations, including metal centers at different valence states or more precisely the nuanced electronic regulation states, or carbon substrates with various interconnecting degrees or doping ratios, and active catalysis clusters with distinguished diameters; 3) porous characteristics can be inherited, thus allowing high-throughput mass diffusion and interfacial contact [7, 8]. Already, some state-of-the-art single atom catalysts (SACs) with satisfactory performance have been synthesized using MOFs as starting templates [9, 10].

Copper-based MOFs or derived nanomaterials have drawn conspicuous attention due to their specific enzyme-like activities, reasonable cost efficiency and robust stability [11-13]. According to the aforementioned advantages, these copper-based enzyme mimics have been well accepted as signal transducers to construct sensitive biosensor systems [14]. Copper species, no matter in

forms of elementary clusters [15, 16], compound nanoparticles [17] or even secondary coordination units [18], show prominent redox activity, with or without, extra potential energy from the external circuit. In some latest articles, more complex copper-based transducer materials with excellent and versatile capabilities were synthesized from MOFs-contained composite precursors, e.g. with several 2D materials like graphene, $C_3N_4$ or MXene [19]. All these treasures figure out an efficient clue of massively converting homogeneous structural units inside the MOF crystal into highly disperse nano-catalysts decorated upon a simultaneously generated substrate, and meanwhile investigate the transiting procedure of some certain catalysis activity to the other [20].

In the present communication, we designed the synthesis of a crystalline MOF-derived $Cu_xO$ composite catalyst, serving as an electrochemical peroxidase mimic. Inspired by the coordination structure of copper catalysts, both the ligand atoms and the central metal valence state of the catalysis unit were modulated simply using a short period of differential thermal treatment. Thanks to the uniform texture of the crystalline precursor, the generation process of a well-tuned transducer material was monitored and sought. An electrochemical Fenton-like signal enhancing mechanism was herein discussed, in view of the derived prototype biosensor and its corresponding interfacial reactions (Fig. 1A). We expect that this novel and concise transducer material will provide proprietary engineering insights in providing

improved biosensor devices suitable for commercialization [21, 22].

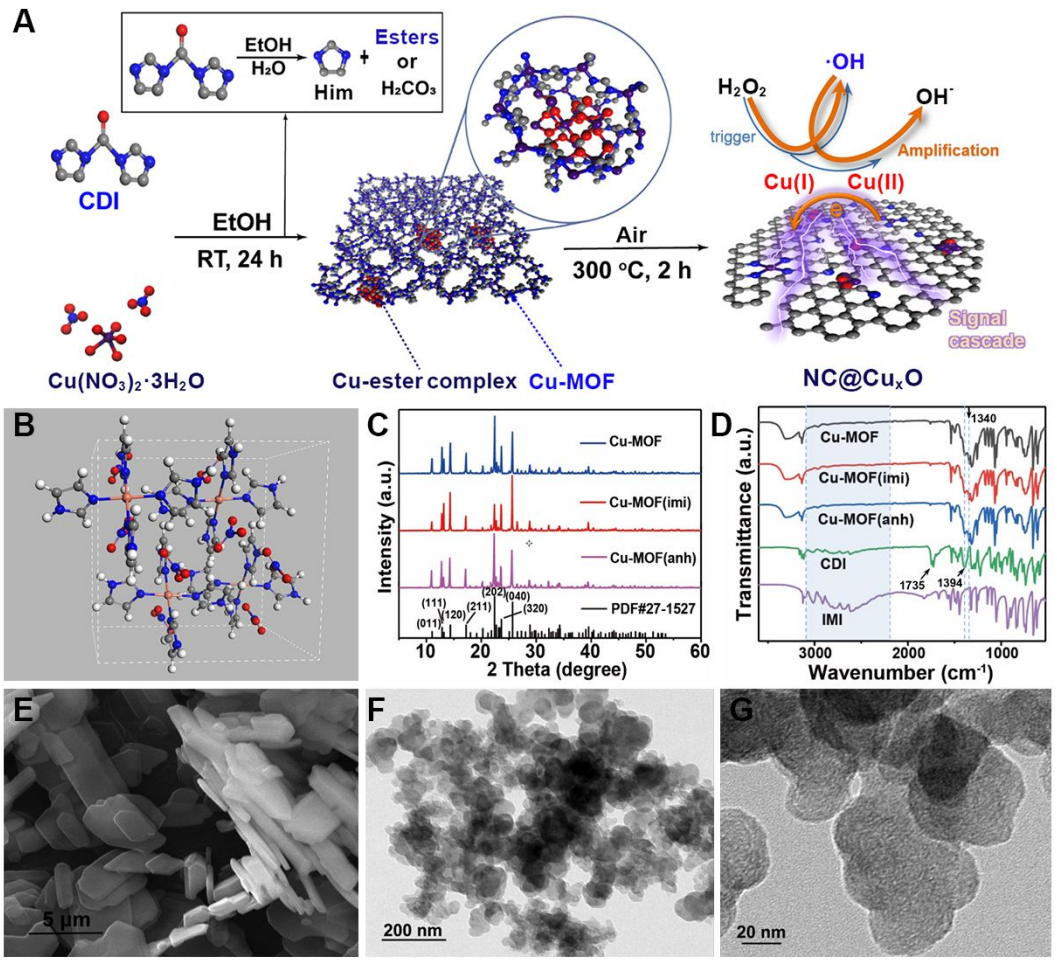
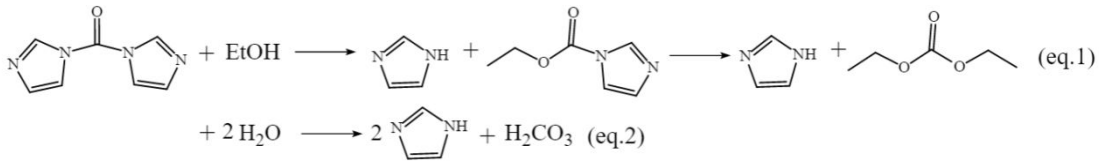



**Fig. 1**. Stepwise modulation from crystalline MOF precursor to active electrochemical transducer. **(A)** Schematic overview of the preparation and signal amplification mechanism of the composite transducer material NC@$Cu_xO$. **(B)** Crystal structure diagram of the MOF precursor *trans*-[$Cu(NO_3)_2(Him)_4$]. **(C)** Three comparative routes to prepare MOF precursors with distinguished preferential crystallographic orientation and lattice shrinkage or bulge. **(D)** FT-IR spectra of the obtained crystalline precursors with arrows and blue dashed lines or region indicating critical changes of the transmittance peak. **(E)** SEM image of the board-like precursor cystals. **(F** and **G)** TEM images of the layered transducer material NC@$Cu_xO$ after a short period of pyrolysis under air atmosphere.

To ascertain that copper atoms were highly dispersed at the initial precursor stage, powder X-ray diffraction (PXRD) was performed immediately after lyophilization (Supplementary methods). All of the main peaks have been indexed as a well-defined orthorhombic phase of *trans*-[$Cu(NO_3)_2(Him)_4$]

crystal (PDF 27-1527) [23], indicating that the copper ions were strictly hexa-coordinated by four nitrogen atoms (from imidazole) and two oxygen atoms (belonging to the nitrate ions) (Fig. 1B). The specific crystal herein was obtained according to the following procedures: N,N'-carbonyldiimidazole (CDI) underwent decomposition in some polar solvents like ethanol, thus, releasing free imidazole (Him) molecules as well as di-esters of carbonic acid or imidazole-N-carboxylic esters, as shown in *eq.1*. Whereas, in the presence of lattice water, CDI was possible to be hydrolyzed into carbonate ions (*eq.2*) which would further react with copper ions and generate stable basic modalities [24].




In order to know the priority of the aforementioned possible reaction routes, two contrast synthesis strategies were introduced. In detail, anhydrous copper nitrate with CDI and $CuNO_3 \cdot 3H_2O$ with imidazole were each examined under the same ethanol-solvent condition and compared in terms of their respective diffraction peaks which almost kept the same with a slight peak shift of about $10^{-2}$ degrees, implying lattice shrinkage and bulge of these copper-imidazole frameworks due to the differences in accessory products (Fig. 1C and Fig. S1) [25]. Interestingly, the preferential crystallographic orientations echoed by the diffraction peak intensities, however, were significantly different between the

two groups. From the Fourier transform infrared spectrometer (FT-IR) spectra, it is clear that these Cu-MOFs acquired through different formulas maintained perfectly identical chemical bonds. The transmittance peak variations from the ligand monomers suggested probable reaction routes and the inner connections of MOFs, detailed as follows: 1) the vanishing of carbonyl stretching vibration at ~1735 $cm^{-1}$, as well as the strong broad band from 2200 to 3100 $cm^{-1}$, respectively indicated the decomposition of CDI, and the following coordination reaction of derived imidazole with copper ion which accompanied the collapse of N–H···N hydrogen bonds; and 2) the strong vibration peak at 1394 $cm^{-1}$ that can be assigned to the amide C–N of CDI red-shifted to 1340 $cm^{-1}$ as a result of the formation of ester C–O bonds in all MOF samples (Fig. 1D and Fig. S2) [26]. These results imply that regardless of the presence of lattice water, CDI reacts with ethanol thereby generating ester species.

The bluish violet Cu-MOF powder exhibited tabular hexagon-like morphology with a thickness of hundreds of nanometers in scanning electron microscope (SEM) images (Fig. 1E). After the pyrolysis process under air atmosphere, the resulting NC@$Cu_xO$ catalyst, showed an obviously decreased plane size down to 10-nm scale, according to the transmission electron microscope (TEM) results (Fig. 1F and 1G). Furthermore, the absence of aggregated nanoparticles suggested highly dispersed catalytic sites. To further understand the transformation from a Cu-MOF precursor to a

copper-based catalyst and its accompanying $H_2O_2$ reduction properties, thermogravimetric-differential scanning calorimetry (TG-DSC) analysis was conducted at a 5 ℃ $min^{-1}$ heating rate (Fig. 2B). A sharp weight loss was noticed from 200 to 240 ℃, accompanied with a clear exothermic peak at 226 ℃. Thereafter, three representative temperature points (200, 300 and 400 ℃) were set with their corresponding products named NC@$Cu_xO$-L, NC@$Cu_xO$ and NC@$Cu_xO$-H respectively.

When the Cu-MOF precursor was heated at 200 ℃ for 2 hours, the obtained NC@$Cu_xO$-L still preserved the typical lattice characteristics of *trans*-[$Cu(NO_3)_2(Him)_4$], and its weight loss can be attributed to the desorption of solvent molecules and the decomposition of thermolabile esters. With a further rise in temperature, broad peaks of graphite and copper oxide appeared in the NC@$Cu_xO$ PXRD spectrum (Fig. 2A). By substituting the measured value of full width at half maximum (FWHM) into the Scherrer equation, the crystallite size of the newly formed copper oxide was calculated to be several nanometers, which was in accordance with the lack of gathered clusters in the TEM image [27]. *Via* calcination at 400 ℃, the derived NC@$Cu_xO$-H showed striking peaks identical to that of CuO, owing to the deep substitution of oxygen for the initial coordinated nitrogen through atomic transfer.

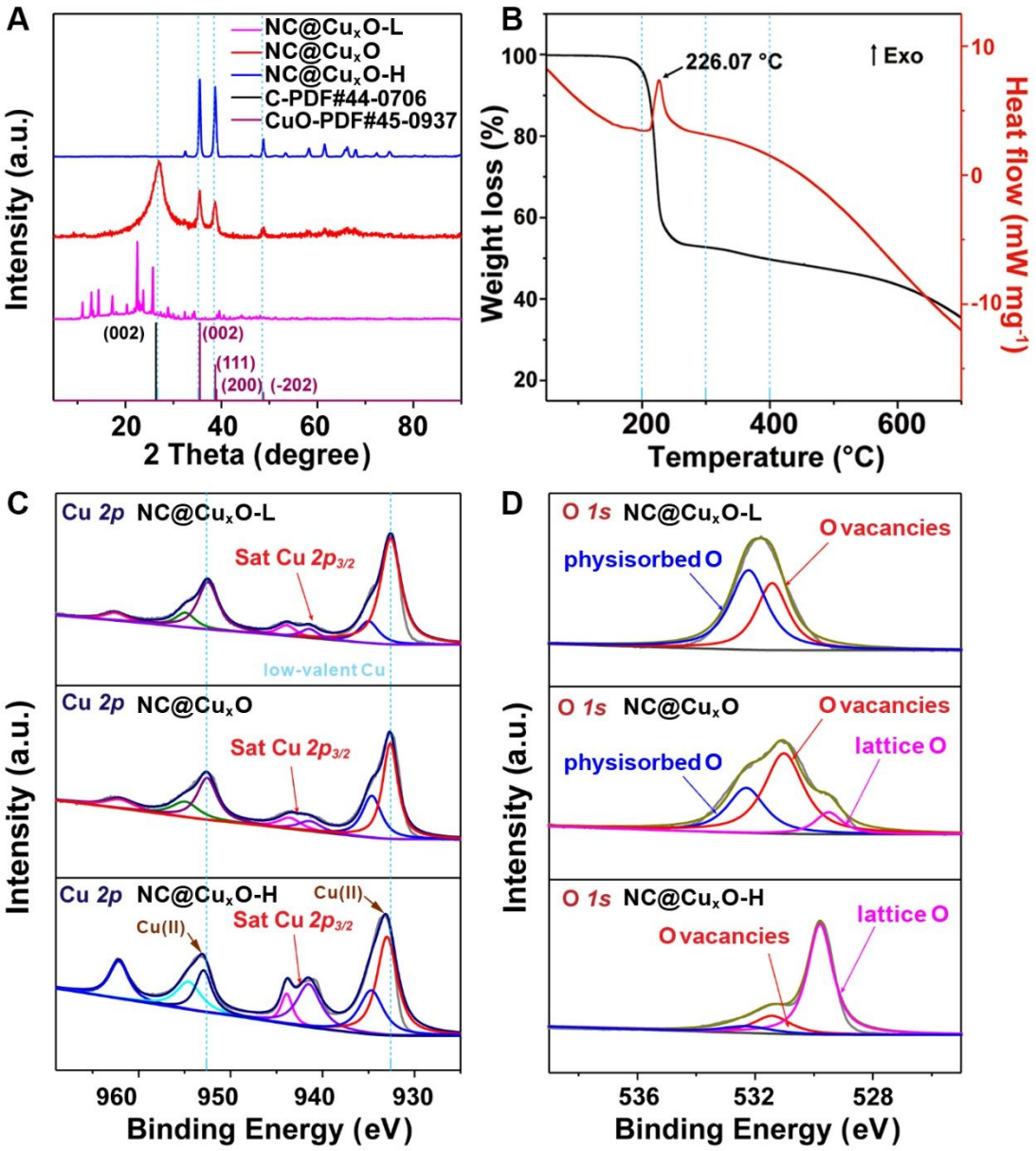



**Fig. 2**. Temperature modulation of the valence state of the central metal as well as the neighboring ligand atoms and vacancies. **(A)** XRD spectra of the pyrolyzed samples under different heat-treatment temperature. **(B)** TG-DSC curves of the self-sacrifice MOF precursor in air atmosphere with the heating rate of 5 ℃ $min^{-1}$. High-resolution XPS spectra of Cu 2p **(C)** and O 1s **(D)** orbitals of the under-heated NC@$Cu_xO$-L, experimental NC@$Cu_xO$ and over-heated NC@$Cu_xO$-H samples.

A mutually corroborating result was obtained by investigating the chemical state alternations of atoms. In both NC@$Cu_xO$-L and NC@$Cu_xO$ samples, the high-resolution X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) spectra of Cu 2p orbitals displayed relatively weaker satellite peaks and slightly lower binding

energies of both the $2p_{1/2}$ and $2p_{3/2}$ orbitals than that of NC@$Cu_xO$-H (Fig. 2C). Due to the existence of CuO nanocrystalline in NC@$Cu_xO$, we surmised that these features ought to be attributed to the abundant intermediate low-valent Cu(I) rather than Cu(II) of coordinated state or compound state [28]. Taking O 1s spectra into consideration, on the other dimension, the gradual shift of the predominant sub-peaks from 532.2 to 529.7 eV can help determine the exact components of the aforementioned NC@$Cu_xO$ catalysts. In detail, NC@$Cu_xO$-L displayed Cu-MOF-like characteristics with respect to crystal structure, and the chemical state of organic oxygen assigned as incompletely decomposed esters. NC@$Cu_xO$-H, at the other extreme, exhibited canonical CuO properties with a standard XRD pattern and typical XPS spectrum features, such as the intensive satellite peaks of Cu 2p and the nearly complete conversion to lattice oxygen which belongs to the metal-oxide compounds (Fig. 2D).

The aforementioned under- or over- heating treatments exhibit variance in the resulting functional ingredient of the composite catalyst NC@$Cu_xO$. On one hand, the crystalline framework collapsed and recombined as a N-doped carbon substrate. The copper atoms, on the other hand, were gradually aggregated and oxidized into nanoscale CuO nanoparticles, while preserving an overall amorphous state with abundant oxygen vacancies (Fig. 2D) [29]. Therefore, the uniformly dispersed catalytic centers of reductive copper oxide in NC@$Cu_xO$ determined their high reaction activity towards oxidizing

substances. Simultaneously, the internal structural porosity is substantially retained which guarantees sufficient mass transfer during the catalyzing procedures (Fig. S3 and S4). The Cu-MOF precursor's periodic atom distributions and definite melting point enable the investigation of some critical catalyst-evolving processes, such as metal migration and oxygen transfer, by simply modulating temperature.

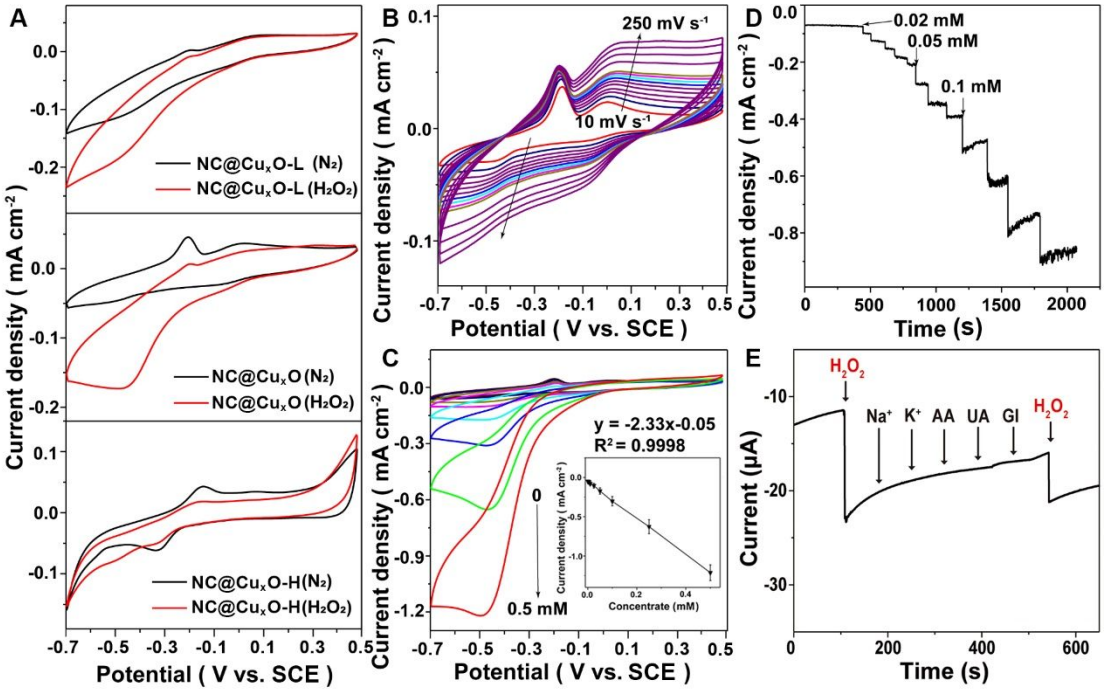



**Fig. 3**. Electrochemical catalysis behavior investigation of the transducer material to support sensitive sensing of $H_2O_2$ concentration. **(A)** Electrochemical redox characteristics of the MOF-residual dominant (NC@$Cu_xO$-L, top), O-vacancy abundant (NC@$Cu_xO$, middle) and deeply oxidized (NC@$Cu_xO$-H, bottom) samples as transducers in the absence and presence of 0.05 mM $H_2O_2$. **(B)** Cyclic voltammograms of NC@$Cu_xO$ electrode at different scan rates from 10 to 250 mV $s^{-1}$ in condition of saturated nitrogen without $H_2O_2$. **(C)** Cyclic voltammogram of NC@$Cu_xO$ electrode in response to $H_2O_2$ concentrations of 0 to 0.5 mM with an insert exhibiting the linear fitting of the reductive peak-current density values. **(D)** Chronoamperometric responses of NC@$Cu_xO$ to stepwise addition of $H_2O_2$ at -0.5 V (vs. SCE). **(E)** Selectivity test of the biosensor against some common interferences in body fluid, including 1 mM $Na^+$, $K^+$, ascorbic acid, uric acid and glucose.

Based on the characteristics of the NC@$Cu_xO$ catalyst species, their respective electrochemical behaviors were further examined using cyclic

voltammetry (CV) (Fig. 3A). In the absence of $H_2O_2$, the lower-heated sample showed inconspicuous redox peaks, implying an inert electron transfer ability of the Cu-N coordinate-bond dominated MOF material. In contrast, the 400 ℃ pyrolyzed product exhibited both obvious redox peaks ($Cu^{I}/Cu^{II}$, $E_p$= -0.34 and -0.15 V) due to the formation of conductive carbon substrates. In regard to the NC@$Cu_xO$, its undiscovered reduction peak at this particular potential window indicated that copper existed in a low valence state in $Cu_xO$ and the electrochemically oxidized copper ions would then be released into the liquid phase, resulting in an irreversible procedure. When the solution contained 0.05 mM $H_2O_2$, a strong reduction peak appeared around -0.45 V, significantly deviating from the CV curve without adding $H_2O_2$. It is worth noting that the oxidization peak, in the meanwhile, became quite indistinct especially when the $H_2O_2$ concentration increased. This result implied that reductive copper in NC@$Cu_xO$ preferred to react with the oxidizing substances derived from $H_2O_2$ decomposition, prior to being electrochemically oxidized at the anode (*eq.3*).

The emphasis in sensitive $H_2O_2$ detection lays on enhanced signal transduction or an amplified feedback. Therefore, the catalysis mechanism and its signal conversion process was studied first. The NC@$Cu_xO$ modified glassy carbon electrode (GCE) was tested by cyclic voltammetry at different scan rates in 0.1 M PBS and 0.3 M KCl solution (Fig. 3B). With increasing scan rate from 10 to 250 mV $s^{-1}$, both of the anodic and cathodic peak currents were measured as linear with the square root of the scan rate (Fig.

S5), indicating characteristic diffusion-controlled electrochemical redox behaviors [30] from which we inferred a Fenton-induced enhancing mechanism:

Trigger: $NC@Cu_xO_{red,Cu(I)} + H_2O_2 \rightarrow NC@Cu_xO_{ox,Cu(II)} + \cdot OH + OH^-$ (eq.3)

Amplification: $NC@Cu_xO_{red,Cu(I)} + \cdot OH \rightarrow NC@Cu_xO_{ox,Cu(II)} + OH^-$ (eq.4)

Transduction and Reset: $NC@Cu_xO_{ox,Cu(II)} + e^- \rightarrow NC@Cu_xO_{red,Cu(I)}$ (eq.5)

The highly dispersed Cu(I) catalysis centers of $Cu_xO$ efficiently accelerated the decomposition of $H_2O_2$, while releasing an equivalent amount of ·OH radicals. Thereafter, increased reductive copper sites would be oxidized through rapid radical reactions. At the reduction potential, the newly generated Cu(II) would then get reduced by capturing the electrons from the outer circuit. More importantly, the electrochemical procedures at the electrodes were shown to be rapid, which meant this redox cycle (*eq.3-5*) would continuously proceed until the diffusion limit and simultaneously provide amplified current response [31]. In addition, this catalytic process relied on not only the valence state of copper centers, but also the structural configuration of ligand atoms and defects, which can be supposed from the poor activity of both the $NC@Cu_xO$-L and $NC@Cu_xO$-H samples.

By adding $H_2O_2$ solutions of differing concentrations (Fig. 3C), the current intensity of the reduction peak at -0.45 V was identified as a linear coefficient of the concentration, with a corresponding linear equation: $j$ (mA $cm^{-2}$) =

-2.33$C$ (mM) - 0.05 ($R^2$=0.9998), ranging from 10 μM to 0.5 mM. The limit of detection for the NC@$Cu_xO$ sensor, (LOD= $3\sigma/S_d$, where σ represents the standard deviation of the current density value measured in blank solution, and $S_d$ stands for the slope of linear regression calibration line), reached 6.67 nM. Fig. 3D shows the amperometric response towards concentrated $H_2O_2$ solutions. The cathodic current rapidly achieved steady states and increased in pace with the addition of $H_2O_2$. The selectivity and stability of this proof-of-principle biosensor were also evaluated as these two important parameters could reflect whether an artificial catalyst could mimic or even surpass natural enzymes in practical use. From Fig. 3E, we can conclude that NC@$Cu_xO$ has good selectivity towards $H_2O_2$. The i-t curve in Fig. S6 exhibited the stability of this electrochemical sensor for long-term continuous detection. After dropping in 1 mM $H_2O_2$ solution, the output current could keep steady for more than 1 h, indicating that the NC@$Cu_xO$ nanocomposite did not leach out from the electrode during multiple cycles of electrochemical redox process, while maintaining high catalytic activity. By simply modulating the thermal redox condition of a well-characterized crystalline MOF precursor, both the chemical valence and coordination environment of the central metal were adjusted to render a transducer enhanced signal feedback. In comparison with previous studies which introduced other functional materials or not, this NC@$Cu_xO$ electrode offers a highly competitive sensitivity, as well as other decent performances (Table 1).

**Table 1**. Comparison of copper-based electrochemical $H_2O_2$ transducer materials on catalysis mechanism and sensitivity performance.

| Transducer material | Active-center type | Redox potential (V) | Additional materials | Sensitivity ($\mu A\ mM^{-1}\ cm^{-2}$) | LOD ($\mu M$) | References |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| CuO nanoflowers | monoclinic CuO | -0.4 (vs. Ag/AgCl) | n.a. | 956.69 | 0.85 | [32] |
| $Cu_2O$ nanopaticles | ~100 nm size with (111) facets | -0.42 (vs. Ag/AgCl) | n.a. | 28.0 | 0.2 | [33] |
| 3DIO Au/NiO@CuO | $Ni^{3+}$ species | 0.5 (vs. Ag/AgCl) | CuO skeleton & AuNPs | 650.2 | 0.0037 | [34] |
| CuNPs@Y-1,4-NDC-MOF/ERGO | CuNPs supported by ERGO | -0.2 (vs. SCE) | Y-1,4-NDC-MOF & ERGO | 8.8 | 0.43 | [35] |
| $Cu_2O$-rGO-P | cubic $Cu_2O$ | -0.4 (vs. Ag/AgCl) | rGO paper | 77* | 3.78 | [36] |
| NCNT MOF CoCu | Co(0) & Cu(0) | 0.5 (vs. Ag/AgCl) | Co(0) | 639.5 | 0.206 | [37] |
| Cu-$Mo_2C$/C | Synergic $Mo_2C$ with Cu(0) | -0.4 (vs. SCE) | hexagonal $\beta$-$Mo_2C$ | 392.7 | 0.04 | [38] |
| **NC@$Cu_xO$** | **Amorphous $Cu_xO$ with oxygen vacancies** | **-0.45 (vs. SCE)** | **n.a.** | **2330** | **0.00667** | **This work** |

* estimated from the offered linear regression curve.

We presented, herein, a sensitive $H_2O_2$ sensor constructed with a tailored amorphous $Cu_xO$ composite catalyst. The corresponding mechanism of enhanced signal transduction were stepwise investigated from the precursor conformation, to its catalytic evolution, up to a final amplified electron cascades. With the initial copper-nitrogen square domains converting into low-valent amorphous copper oxide catalytic centers, the resulting current remarkably increased due to its synergistic enhancement, contributed by both rapid radical and electrochemical reactions. Moreover, the structural property of specific neighboring ligand-atom configuration was proven to be a factor as predominant as the valence state of central metals. From the perspective of material, catalysis and the final sensing application, the way to design and

modulate a proper copper-based transducer was comprehensively explored. We envision that our work would hold the prospect for accurate bio-analyte quantitation and promote the mainstreaming of precision diagnosis and medicine.

## Acknowledgements

The authors greatly acknowledge the financial support from National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grant No. 62001224), Natural Science Foundation of Jiangsu Province (Grant No. BK20190457), "Overseas Academic Partnership Program" of Nanjing University of Technology (2019), and Sino-French international research network "New nanostructured materials and biomaterials for renewable electrical energy sources"

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