



## Full Length Article

Theory-guided design of Pd/C nanocomposite for H<sub>2</sub> sensing at room-temperatureYang Gao<sup>a</sup>, Qiao Lu<sup>a</sup>, Peijian Yan<sup>a</sup>, Pengfei Tian<sup>a,\*</sup>, Minghui Zhu<sup>b</sup>, Biao Xiao<sup>c</sup>, Fuzhen Xuan<sup>a,\*</sup><sup>a</sup> Key Laboratory of Pressure Systems and Safety, Ministry of Education, School of Mechanical and Power Engineering, East China University of Science and Technology, Shanghai 200237, China<sup>b</sup> State Key Laboratory of Chemical Engineering, School of Chemical Engineering, East China University of Science and Technology, Shanghai 200237, China<sup>c</sup> Shanghai Institute of Special Equipment Inspection and Technical Research, Shanghai 200062, China

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## ABSTRACT

Palladium (Pd) has attracted widespread attention in the application of hydrogen gas (H<sub>2</sub>) sensors. Understanding the effect of surface structure on H<sub>2</sub> activation is central to controlling H<sub>2</sub> sensing performance. Here we use density functional theory (DFT) to investigate the adsorption and activation of H<sub>2</sub> on Pd surfaces including (100), (110) and (111). The most stable adsorption configuration of H<sub>2</sub> with the lowest dissociative adsorption energy of  $-0.960$  eV and the charge transfer of  $-0.126$  e from Pd to H was found on the hexagonal close-packed (hcp) site of Pd(111), suggesting that Pd(111) is most favorable for hydrogen sensing. Consistent with theoretical predication, the designed Pd nano-octahedrons enclosed by Pd(111) facets, which was synthesized by solution reduction method and characterized by multi-techniques including field emission scanning electron microscope (FESEM) and transmission electron microscope (TEM), manifested a high sensitivity of 0.1%, a short response/recover time of 35.5/40.2 s to 4000 ppm H<sub>2</sub> and great stability (15 cycles towards 4000 ppm H<sub>2</sub>). Accordingly, we propose that the facile dissociative adsorption of H<sub>2</sub> on Pd(111) contributes to the readily formation of PdH<sub>x</sub> and the rapid resistance change, thus leading to the superior performance for H<sub>2</sub> sensing.

## 1. Introduction

With the trend of reducing the utilization of fossil energy and achieving carbon neutrality, the market demand of hydrogen fuel cell vehicles (HFCV) is increasing, since hydrogen (H<sub>2</sub>) is considered to be the most effective and environmental-friendly renewable energy due to its low ignition energy (0.017 mJ), high combustion heat (142 kJ/g), no carbon emissions and abundant raw materials [1–3]. However, H<sub>2</sub> is intrinsically flammable and explosive within a wide explosion range (4–75%), and leaks easily because of the vibration, collision and fatigue of HFCV during service [4–7]. Therefore, the development of high-sensitivity and fast-response room-temperature hydrogen gas sensors is critical and essential for the accurate and rapid detection of hydrogen leakage during the usage of H<sub>2</sub> in hydrogen vehicles.

Various gas-sensing materials have been explored for the detection of hydrogen, including noble metals, alloys, metal oxide semiconductors and noble metal decorated composites [8–12]. Among them, Pd is considered to be the most potential room-temperature sensing material for H<sub>2</sub> sensors due to its superior capacity for the adsorption and

activation of H<sub>2</sub> on its surfaces, and consequently Pd-based hydrogen gas sensors have been widely investigated and applied in many fields such as hydrogen production, hydrogen storage and hydrogen vehicles [13–15]. Pd nanowires (NWs) [16,17] and nanoparticles (NPs) loading on various supports including WO<sub>3</sub> [18], ZnO [19], carbon nanotube [20] and reduced graphene oxide [21] have proved to be effective for H<sub>2</sub> sensing. Especially, carbon black is extensively used as a conductive support due to its high surface area, great electrical conductivity and low cost, which can provide abundant loading sites for Pd NPs and has great potential for gas-sensing applications [22]. In addition to monometallic Pd, Pd-based alloys such as PdAg [23] and PdAuCu [24] have also shown superior sensing performance. Although Pd-based nanomaterials have been extensively studied, few Pd-based H<sub>2</sub> sensors reported have achieved the performance metrics announced by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) [25]. It is still challenging to obtain H<sub>2</sub> sensors with high selectivity, short response time, great stability and wide concentration range for H<sub>2</sub> detecting at room temperature [26]. Poor understanding in the structure-performance relationship of Pd active sites and the mechanism for H<sub>2</sub> sensing restrains the rational design of high-performance H<sub>2</sub>

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sensors, raising the need for theoretical studies at molecular level.

A thorough understanding of the interaction mechanism between Pd and H<sub>2</sub> is of vital importance to the development of high-performance Pd-based hydrogen gas sensors. First-principles calculations have been found to be effective approaches to probe sensing mechanism of sensor materials [27]. To date, theoretical studies of Pd-based H<sub>2</sub> sensors focused on the supported Pd nanomaterials such as Pd-doped MoS<sub>2</sub> [28], Pd decorated graphene [29] and Pd doped ZnO [30], which revealed the critical role of Pd in the nanocomposites for H<sub>2</sub> sensing. According to previous studies, the sensing process of resistive Pd-based H<sub>2</sub> sensors could be proposed as follows: H<sub>2</sub> molecules are dissociative adsorbed on the Pd surfaces, then diffuse into to the palladium crystal to form PdH<sub>x</sub>, which leads to a change in resistance of sensors [31–33]. Hence, the understanding of the role of the surface structure in H<sub>2</sub> sensing is crucial for the rational design of H<sub>2</sub> sensors. Although plenty theoretical studies on Pd-based sensors have been reported, there is still a lack of profound research and understanding of the structure-activity relationship between Pd surface structure and hydrogen sensing performance, hindering the development of high-performance hydrogen gas sensors.

In this study, we aim to investigate the structure-performance correlation of typical Pd surfaces and thus realize the theory-guided rational design of Pd-based H<sub>2</sub> sensors. The adsorption and dissociative activation of H<sub>2</sub> on Pd surfaces including (100), (110) and (111) were theoretically investigated using density functional theory (DFT) calculations. Pd(111) was proved to have the most potential for H<sub>2</sub> sensing. Guided by theoretical results, carbon black supported Pd nano-octahedrons enclosed by Pd(111) facets was successfully synthesized by solution reduction method and dripped on the Cu interdigital electrode to fabricate H<sub>2</sub> sensors. The gas-sensing performance was measured at room temperature towards various H<sub>2</sub> concentrations. The mechanism of the hydrogen gas sensor was discussed according to the theoretical and experimental results.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Computational details

All theoretical calculations were performed by the Vienna ab initio simulation package (VASP) [34], which is based on DFT using projector augmented wave (PAW) [35] pseudopotentials. The exchange correlation functional was described by the generalized gradient approximation (GGA) method with the Perdew – Burke – Ernzerhof (PBE) version [36]. The plane-wave energy cutoff and the energy convergence criterion were set to 500 eV and  $1 \times 10^{-5}$ , respectively. A  $2 \times 2$  unit cell with a slab of five layers was employed for the three Pd surfaces including (100), (110) and (111). The thickness of the vacuum layer perpendicular to these surfaces is larger than 20 Å to avoid the interaction between layers. A  $5 \times 5 \times 1$  Monkhorst – Pack k-point grid in Brillouin zone was used for the relaxation calculations, while a  $15 \times 15 \times 1$  Monkhorst – Pack k-point grid was used for the self-consistent procedures [37]. To evaluate the interaction between H<sub>2</sub> and different Pd surfaces, the adsorption energy ( $E_{ads}$ ) is defined as:

$$E_{ads} = E_{Pd_{surface}+H_2} - E_{Pd_{surface}} - E_{H_2} \quad (1)$$

where  $E_{Pd_{surface}+H_2}$  is the total energy of the Pd surface with an adsorbed H<sub>2</sub> molecule, and  $E_{Pd_{surface}}$  and  $E_{H_2}$  are the total energies of the Pd surface and a single H<sub>2</sub> molecule, respectively.

Charge density difference (CDD) after H<sub>2</sub> adsorption is defined as:

$$\Delta\rho = \rho_{Pd_{surface}+H_2} - \rho_{Pd_{surface}} - \rho_{H_2} \quad (2)$$

where  $\rho_{Pd_{surface}+H_2}$  is the total charge density of the Pd surface with an adsorbed H<sub>2</sub> molecule, and  $\rho_{Pd_{surface}}$  and  $\rho_{H_2}$  are the total charge densities of the Pd surface and a single H<sub>2</sub> molecule, respectively.

To further analyze the interaction, we calculated the density of states

(DOS) and the Bader charge [38] which is used to evaluate the charge transfer during the adsorption process.

### 2.2. Materials

Palladium chloride (PdCl<sub>2</sub>), 1-octadecene (greater than 90%), oleylamine (80–90%), n-butyllithium solution (2.2 M in cyclohexane), cyclohexane and carbon black were obtained from Macklin. Ferric chloride (FeCl<sub>3</sub>) was purchased from Sinopharm Chemical Reagent Shanghai Co., Ltd. Flexible copper clad PI films with thickness of 50 μm were purchased from Kunshan Spring Rhyme Optical Materials Co. Ltd. All the chemicals were used without further purification.

### 2.3. Synthesis of Pd/C nanocomposite

The Pd nano-octahedrons were prepared according to the following procedure [39,40]. Butyllithium and oleylamine were used as reducing and stabilizing agents, respectively. The precursor solution was acquired by adding 0.1 mmol Pd chloride to the mixture of 15 mL 1-octadecene, 1 mL butyllithium and 2 mL oleylamine. The mixed solution was stirred at 80 °C for 20 min. Then, the mixture was further aged at 150 °C for 2 h. The obtained mixture was cooled down to room temperature and centrifuged with methanol and acetone several times to collect mono-metallic Pd nano-octahedrons.

The obtained black monometallic Pd nano-octahedrons were further re-dispersed in cyclohexane to get the colloid of Pd nano-octahedrons, and a calculated amount of commercial carbon black powder was added into the above colloid to achieve a metallic Pd loading of 1.0 wt%. The obtained mixture was then heated to 60 °C and purged with N<sub>2</sub> to remove cyclohexane to obtain the black Pd/C products, which was further washed by acetone and methanol several times to completely remove the residues of surfactant impurities. The obtained products were finally washed with acetone and air-dried for further gas-sensing applications.

### 2.4. Fabrication of H<sub>2</sub> sensor

The Cu interdigital electrode on a flexible PI film were fabricated by the inkjet printing method, where the ink serving as a mask was printed on Cu-clad PI film to gain an interdigital pattern and dried for 10 min, then the unmasked parts of Cu-clad PI films were etched by FeCl<sub>3</sub> solution in deionized water (1 mM). To obtain homogeneous dispersion, 1 g as-synthesized Pd/C nanocomposite was dispersing in 1 mL alcohol with ultrasonic treatment for 1 h. The dispersion was then dripped between the interdigital electrodes, and dried in the air to fabricate hydrogen gas sensors.

### 2.5. Material characterization

The microstructure and morphology of Pd/C nanocomposite were observed by field emission scanning electron microscope (FESEM, GeminiSEM500) and transmission electron microscope (TEM, JEM 2100F). The elemental compositions and elemental mappings were obtained on an energy dispersive spectrometer (EDS, Falion 60S). To characterize the chemical compositions and chemical state of Pd/C nanocomposite, X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) was carried out on a Thermo Fisher Scientific K-Alpha.

### 2.6. Gas-sensing performance test

The H<sub>2</sub> gas-sensing measurement of the Pd/C nanocomposite based gas sensors was carried out at room temperature towards 2000–12000 ppm H<sub>2</sub>. The components of the measurement system are PTFE chamber, gas distribution instrument, gas transmission line and electrochemical workstation. To obtain gas-sensing performance accurately, the different volume of 2% H<sub>2</sub> and pure N<sub>2</sub> are mixed in gas distribution

instrument to obtain the required H<sub>2</sub> concentration and transmitted to the chamber. Simultaneously, the real-time gas response is detected by electrochemical workstation.

The gas sensor sensitivity (*S*) is defined as:

$$S(\%) = (R_g - R_a)/R_g \times 100 \quad (3)$$

where *R<sub>g</sub>* and *R<sub>a</sub>* are the resistances of the gas sensor in target gas and dry air, respectively. The response time (*τ<sub>res</sub>*) is defined as the time from initial resistance to 90% of the saturation resistance, while the recovery time (*τ<sub>rec</sub>*) is defined as the time from saturation resistance to 10% of the initial resistance for the gas sensors. The stability of the gas sensors was characterized by several response-recovery cycles at the same gas concentration.

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1. Chemical dissociative adsorption of H<sub>2</sub> on the Pd surfaces

To understand the effect of surface structure on the performance of H<sub>2</sub> sensing, theoretical calculations were carried out to investigate the adsorption and activation behaviors of H<sub>2</sub> on Pd surfaces and their potentialities for the application in H<sub>2</sub> sensors. Three typical low Miller index Pd surfaces including (100), (110) and (111) were studied thoroughly. Based on the vibrational analysis [41], the frequency of Pd (100), Pd(110) and Pd(111) ranges from 17.26 to 213.91, 35.31 to 219.69 and 18.76 to 221.40 cm<sup>-1</sup>, respectively, demonstrating great chemical stability of three pristine Pd surfaces. All possible adsorption sites of H<sub>2</sub> on Pd surfaces were considered, as shown in Fig. 1a-c marked in yellow, including the top (T) site over the first layer of Pd atoms, the bridge (B) site and the hollow (H) site. Moreover, due to the different

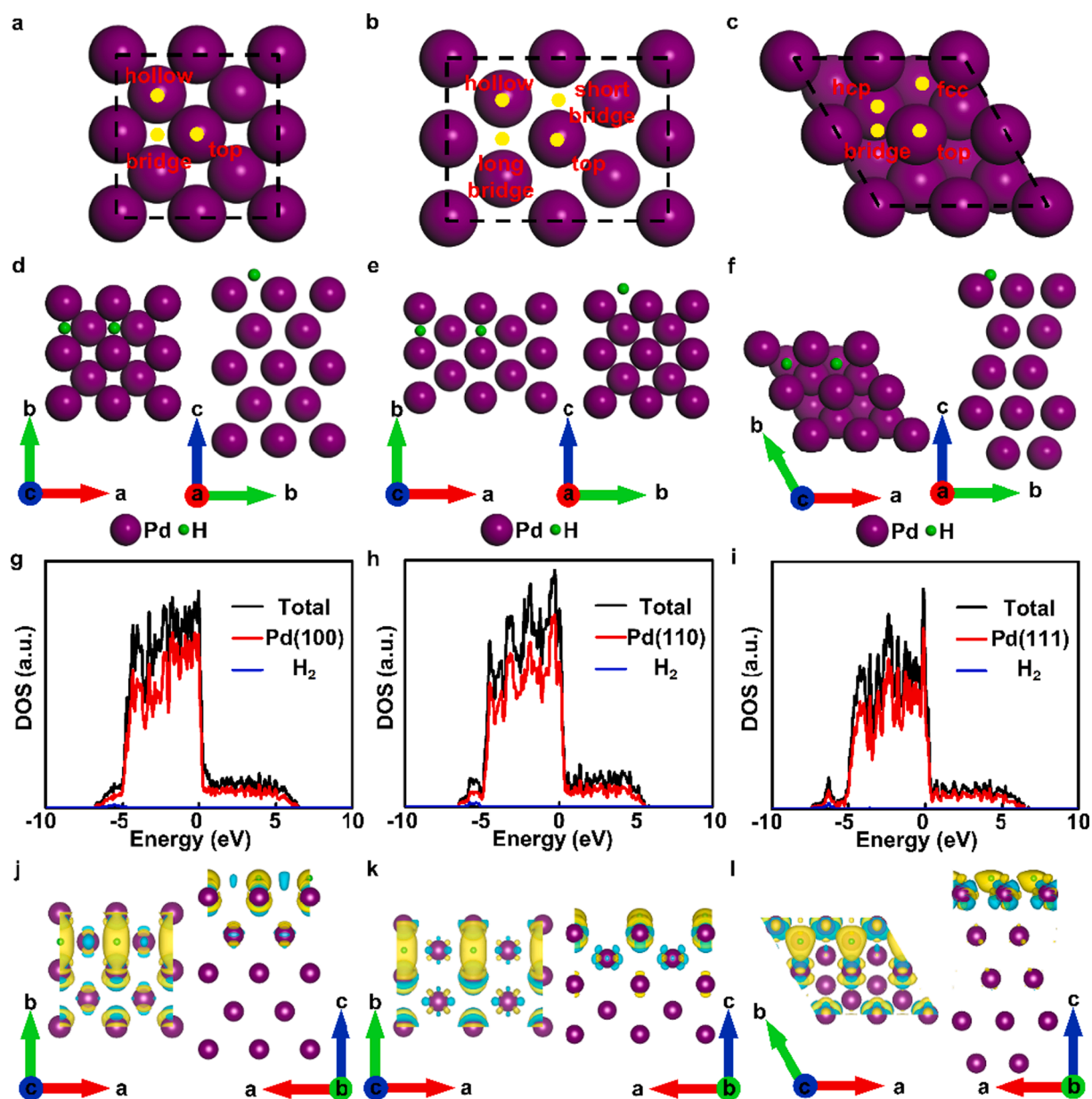


Fig. 1. Schematic diagram of typical adsorption sites for a single H<sub>2</sub> molecule on the (a) Pd(100), (b) Pd(110) and (c) Pd(111) from the top view. The most stable adsorption configuration of H<sub>2</sub> on the (a) Pd(100), (b) Pd(110) and (c) Pd(111) from the top view and side view. PDOS spectra of the adsorbed H<sub>2</sub> molecule on the (g) Pd(100), (h) Pd(110) and (i) Pd(111). Fermi level corresponds to zero. The Charge density difference (CDD) of adsorbed H<sub>2</sub> molecule on the (j) Pd(100), (k) Pd(110) and (l) Pd(111) from the top view and side view. The yellow region represents electron gain, while the blue region represents electron loss.

structure of three Pd surfaces, the short bridge (SB) site and the long bridge (LB) site of Pd(1 1 0) as well as the hexagonal close-packed (hcp) site and the face-centered cubic (fcc) site of Pd(1 1 1) were involved. The corresponding adsorption energies are displayed in Table 1.

The most stable configurations with the lowest  $E_{\text{ads}}$  value are presented in Fig. 1d-f from the top view and the side view, corresponding to the H site of Pd(1 0 0), H site of Pd(1 1 0) and hcp site of Pd(1 1 1). The distance between the two H atoms of  $\text{H}_2$  on Pd(1 0 0), Pd(1 1 0) and Pd(1 1 1) increases to 2.702, 3.730 and 2.744 Å, respectively, from the initial distance of 0.750 Å in gas phase, and the shortest distance between H and Pd surfaces is 1.024, 0.987 and 0.873 Å, respectively (Table 1), which indicates the fracture of H-H bond and the formation of Pd-H bonds. In case of the typical chemisorption process, the  $\text{H}_2$  molecule dissociated into two H atoms, and are bonded to two adjacent Pd atoms, which is the critical step for the formation of  $\text{PdH}_x$ . Among the three Pd surfaces, the lowest  $E_{\text{ads}}$  of  $-0.960$  eV was found in hcp site of Pd(1 1 1) attributed to the lowest  $d_{\text{H-S}}$  of 0.873 Å and the largest atomic density.

To clarify electronic interaction between  $\text{H}_2$  and Pd surfaces, we calculated the DOS of the most stable configurations. As depicted in Fig. 1g-i, the total DOS near the Fermi level, which is set to 0 eV, was dominated by Pd. The overlapping part of partial density of states (PDOS) near 5 eV of H atoms and Pd surfaces indicates that the hydrogen atom and the Pd atom are hybridized, which would affect the conductivity of metallic Pd. To qualitatively and quantitatively investigate the charge transfer during the process of  $\text{H}_2$  adsorption on Pd surfaces, the CDD and Bader charge transfer ( $C_T$ ) were calculated. As shown in Fig. 1j-l, the yellow region representing electron gain surrounds the H atoms, revealing that the charge is transferred from the Pd surface to the H atoms, corresponding to a negative  $C_T$  value for H (Table 1). The charge transfer between Pd and H depends on whether  $\text{H}_2$  molecules dissociate and the distance between H and Pd surfaces, which would determine the change of the conductivity of metallic Pd. The Bader charge transfer from Pd to H for the most stable adsorption of  $\text{H}_2$  on Pd(1 0 0), Pd(1 1 0) and Pd(1 1 1) is  $-0.132$ ,  $-0.153$  and  $-0.126$  e respectively (Table 1), which would decrease the conductivity of metallic Pd.

Accordingly, among the three low-Miller-index surfaces, Pd(111) with the largest capacity for  $\text{H}_2$  adsorption is most favorable for  $\text{H}_2$  sensing. The charge transfer from Pd to H during the dissociative adsorption and activation of  $\text{H}_2$  plays a critical role in decreasing the conductivity of metallic Pd, thus leading to the increase in resistance of the Pd-based resistive gas sensor when exposed to hydrogen.

### 3.2. Structural characterization of Pd/C nanocomposite

Guided by theoretical results, Pd/C nanocomposite was synthesized by solution reduction method to obtain the Pd particles with (111) facets, and multi-techniques were utilized to characterize the structure. The FESEM images of as-prepared Pd/C nanocomposite using SE signal

**Table 1**

The distance between the two H atoms ( $d_{\text{H-H}}$ ), the shortest distance between H atom to Pd surface ( $d_{\text{H-S}}$ ), the adsorption energy ( $E_{\text{ads}}$ ) and the Bader charge transfer ( $C_T$ ) of  $\text{H}_2$  adsorbed on different sites of three Pd surfaces. A negative  $C_T$  value signifies electrons transfer from the Pd surface to  $\text{H}_2$  molecule.

Surfaces	Sites	$d_{\text{H-H}}$ (Å)	$d_{\text{H-S}}$ (Å)	$E_{\text{ads}}$ (eV)	$C_T$ (e)
Pd (1 0 0)	T	0.869	1.667	-0.299	0.049
	B	0.967	1.212	-0.314	0.032
	H	2.702	1.024	-0.806	-0.132
Pd (1 1 0)	T	0.848	1.700	-0.328	0.033
	LB	0.850	1.516	-0.325	0.031
	SB	0.913	1.320	-0.350	0.009
	H	3.730	0.987	-0.726	-0.153
Pd (1 1 1)	T	0.856	1.693	-0.185	0.045
	B	2.742	0.873	-0.960	-0.125
	hcp	2.744	0.873	-0.960	-0.126
	fcc	2.744	0.822	-0.871	-0.109

and BSE signal are shown in Fig. 2a-b. Distinguished according to the lightness of SEM image using BSE signal, there are plentiful irregular spheroids with ca. 50 nm in size and several little bright spots circled in white, which represent the carbon black particles and Pd nanoparticles, respectively. The primary elements of the Pd/C nanocomposite are C, O and Pd (0.73%, Wt), according to the EDS spectrum shown in Fig. 2c.

The microstructure of Pd/C nanocomposite was further investigated by TEM shown in Fig. 2d-e. The high-resolution TEM image (Fig. 2d) and the EDS mapping (Fig. 2f) clearly illustrate that the nanosized Pd nanoparticles are evenly dispersed on the carbon black surface. The HRTEM image shows the existence of Pd octahedrons with an average size of ca. 10 nm. The lower-left inset of Fig. 2e present that the interplanar distance of a typical Pd octahedron with a great crystalline structure is 0.22 nm, corresponding to the (1 1 1) plane of face-centered-cubic (fcc) Pd crystal, proving that Pd nanoparticles enclosed by Pd(1 1 1) facets was successfully achieved.

In addition, the XPS spectra was used to confirm the chemical composition and electronic states of Pd/C nanocomposite. The XPS spectra in Fig. 2g reveals that Pd/C nanocomposite contains O, N, Pd and C elements. As can be seen from the XPS spectra of Pd 3d in Fig. 2h, Pd 3d was fitted into two peaks with the binding energies at 335.4 and 340.8 eV, corresponding to the two chemically different spin-orbit pairs (Pd  $3d_{5/2}$  and  $3d_{3/2}$ ) [40,42]. Both peaks are characteristic peaks for electron emission from metallic palladium, which reveals the reduction of  $\text{Pd}^{2+}$  to  $\text{Pd}^0$ . The C 1s XPS spectra can be divided into 5 peaks located at 284.8, 285.4, 286.6, 288.2 and 290.1 eV, corresponding to the  $sp^2$  C = C,  $sp^3$  C - C, C - O, C = O species and  $\pi - \pi^*$  transition loss [43,44].

### 3.3. $\text{H}_2$ gas-sensing performance and mechanism

A typical as-fabricated  $\text{H}_2$  sensor (Fig. 3c) is mainly composed of PI substrate, Pd/C nanocomposite and Cu interdigital electrode. Cu interdigital electrode patched on PI substrate with interdigital spacing of ca. 300  $\mu\text{m}$  and width of ca. 200  $\mu\text{m}$  is shown in Fig. 3b. Fig. 4a shows the real-time gas response towards 2000–12000 ppm  $\text{H}_2$  in  $\text{N}_2$  at room temperature. Consistent with the theoretical predication, the designed Pd nano-octahedrons enclosed by Pd(1 1 1) facets, manifested superior performance for  $\text{H}_2$  sensing. The resistance of the gas sensor based on Pd/C nanocomposite increases when exposed to hydrogen and is positively correlated with hydrogen concentration. The basically linear relationship between sensitivity and hydrogen concentration was fitted in Fig. 4b, in which the sensitivity of the  $\text{H}_2$  sensor increases from 0.05% to 0.2% with the hydrogen concentration increasing from 2000 to 12000 ppm.

Fig. 4c illustrates a typical gas sensing process towards 4000 ppm  $\text{H}_2$ , in which the resistance of the Pd/C nanocomposite sensor increases when exposed to  $\text{H}_2$  and decreases when departed from  $\text{H}_2$ . The average response time of 35.5 s is shorter than the average recovery time of 40.2 s, which indicates the hydrogen desorption process is more difficult than its adsorption process. As the hydrogen concentration increases from 2000 to 12000 ppm, both the response time and recover time increase, but gradually tend to be stable (Fig. 4f), which demonstrates the  $\text{H}_2$  adsorption sites on Pd/C nanocomposite are limited. To study the stability of the hydrogen gas sensors, a cycle test towards 4000 ppm  $\text{H}_2$  was carried out (Fig. 4d). The sensitivity of each cycle is stable at 0.10% towards 4000 ppm  $\text{H}_2$  (Fig. 4e), which reveals the  $\text{H}_2$  sensor based on Pd/C nanocomposite has extraordinary stability.

Based on the above discussion, we propose that the charge transfer from Pd to H during the dissociative adsorption process of  $\text{H}_2$  (Fig. 3a), which could lead to the resistance change of  $\text{H}_2$  sensor, plays a critical role in  $\text{H}_2$  sensing. According to the theoretical results, when the Pd surfaces are exposed to  $\text{H}_2$ , the  $\text{H}_2$  molecule cleaves to two H atoms and bind to Pd atoms, and the  $\text{PdH}_x$  is formed eventually with the diffusion of H atoms in Pd lattice. The electrons are transferred from Pd atoms to H atoms during adsorption process, and consequently the resistance of metallic Pd increases. Thus, the readily dissociative adsorption of  $\text{H}_2$  on

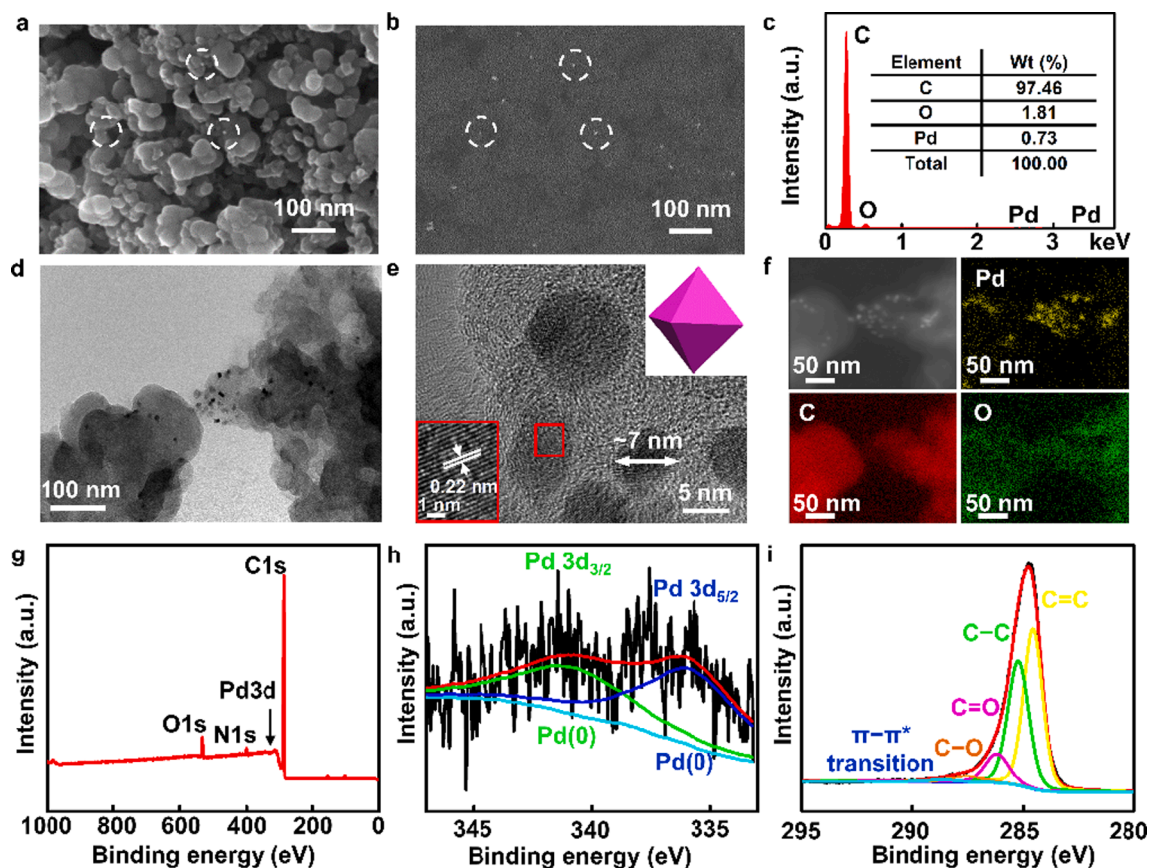


Fig. 2. Microstructure of Pd/C nanocomposite. FESEM image of Pd/C nano-composite using (a) SE signal and (b) BSE signal. (c) EDS spectrum of Pd/C nanocomposite. (d) TEM and (e) HRTEM images of Pd/C nanocomposite and (f) the corresponding elemental distribution. (g) XPS spectra of Pd/C nanocomposite. High-resolution XPS spectra of (h) Pd 3d and (i) C 1 s.

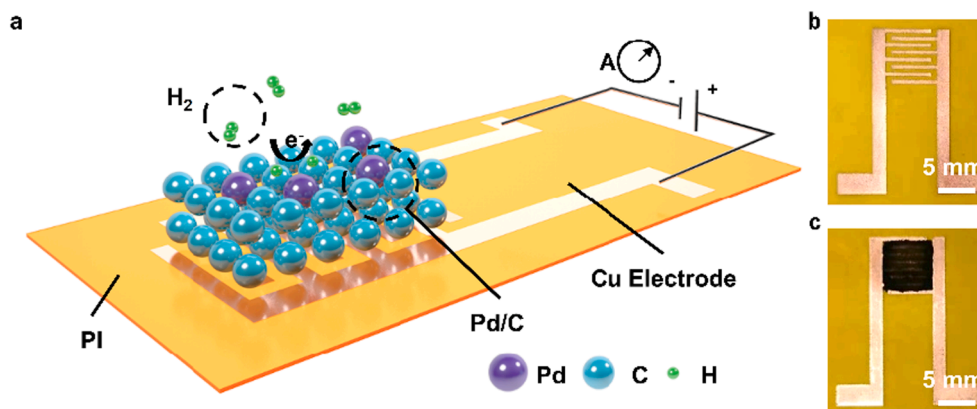


Fig. 3. (a) Schematic diagram of the mechanism of H<sub>2</sub> Sensor. (b) Photograph of as-prepared Cu interdigital electrode on PI film. (c) Photograph of as-fabricated flexible hydrogen gas sensor.

Pd(111) makes it a superior surface for H<sub>2</sub> sensing. Moreover, the electron transfer between palladium hydride and carbon black also plays an important role in H<sub>2</sub> sensing, as depicted in Fig. 4g, in which the work function of Pd, PdH<sub>x</sub> and C were calculated using DFT method [45]. With exposing the sensing material to H<sub>2</sub>, due to the facile formation of PdH<sub>x</sub>, of which the work function ( $W_{\text{PdH}_x} = 4.3 \text{ eV}$ ) [46,47] is much lower than that of carbon black ( $W_{\text{carbon black}} = 5.1 \text{ eV}$ ), the electrons are transferred from Pd to carbon black [48,49], leading to the reduction in the concentration of free electrons in metallic Pd and the increase in the resistance of the Pd/C sensors, consistent with our test results. On the other hand, with the release of H<sub>2</sub>, the H atoms escape from Pd lattice

and bonds with each other to reform H<sub>2</sub> molecules. Meanwhile, the electrons are transferred back to Pd ( $W_{\text{Pd}} = 5.3 \text{ eV}$ ) [50,51] from carbon black, resulting in the recovery of the resistance of the Pd/C based H<sub>2</sub> sensor.

#### 4. Conclusions

In this work, we present the theory-guided design of Pd/C nanocomposite for H<sub>2</sub> sensing at room-temperature. DFT calculations indicate that Pd(111) surface possess the largest capacity for the dissociative adsorption of H<sub>2</sub> with the lowest adsorption energy ( $E_{\text{ads}}$ ) of

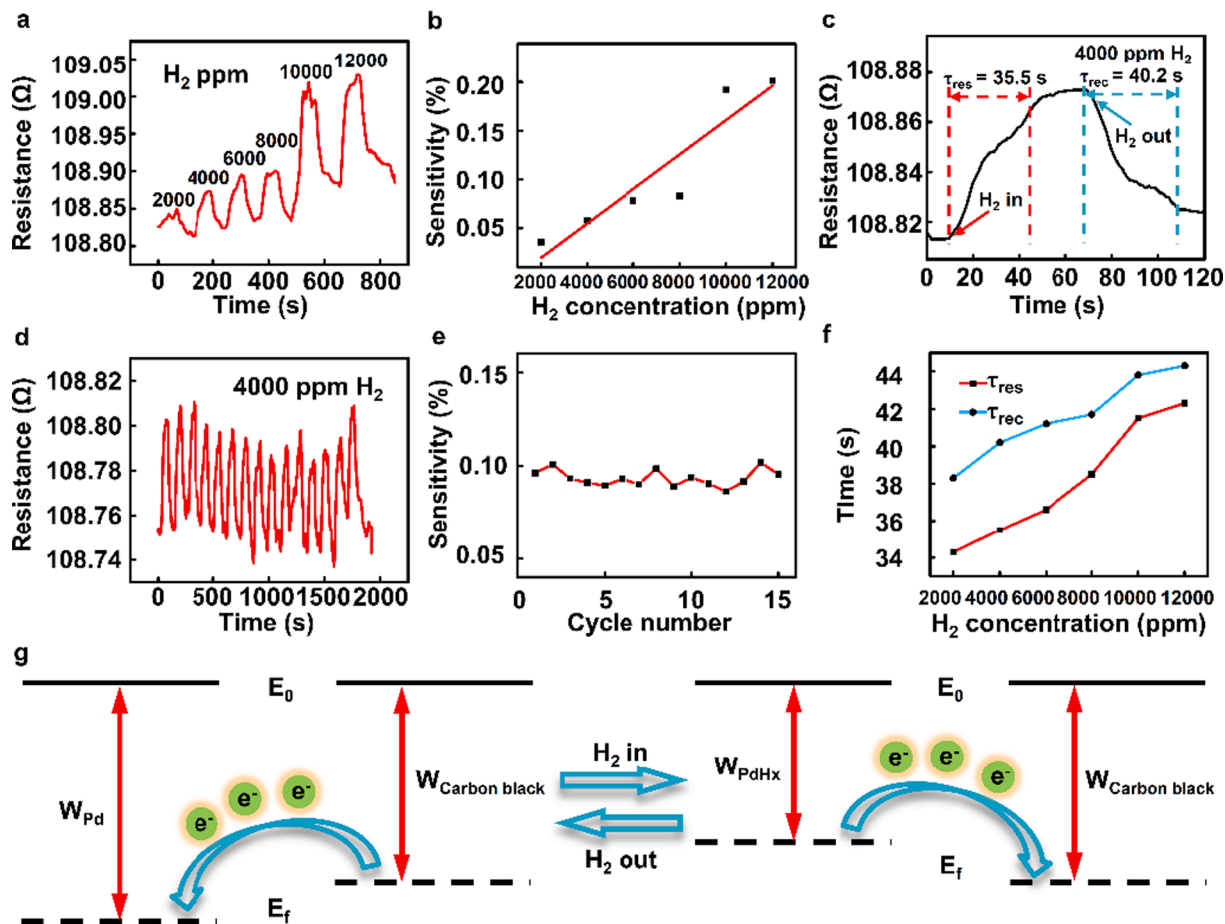


Fig. 4. (a) The gas response curves towards 2000–12000 ppm H<sub>2</sub> in N<sub>2</sub> at room temperature. (b) The sensitivity of the H<sub>2</sub> sensor exposing to different concentrations from 2000 to 12000 ppm. (c) The response/recovery curve towards 4000 ppm H<sub>2</sub>. (d) The response/recovery cycle curves towards 4000 ppm H<sub>2</sub>. (e) The sensitivity of the H<sub>2</sub> sensor exposing to 4000 ppm H<sub>2</sub>. (f) The response/recovery times of the H<sub>2</sub> sensor towards 2000–12000 ppm H<sub>2</sub>. (g) The Energy band diagrams of Pd, carbon black and PdH<sub>x</sub> before and after H<sub>2</sub> exposure with electron transfer.

−0.960 eV and the charge transfer ( $C_T$ ) of −0.126 e attributed to the largest atomic density. Suggestively, the Pd(111) was the most suitable surface for the H<sub>2</sub> gas sensing. The H<sub>2</sub> sensor based on Pd/C nanocomposite consisting of Pd octahedron enclosed by (111) was successfully fabricated by the inkjet printing method, and it demonstrated a high sensitivity of 0.1%, a short response/recovery time of 35.5/40.2 s to 4000 ppm H<sub>2</sub> and a great stability (15 cycles) at room temperature. According to the theoretical and experimental results, we propose that the charge transfer from Pd to H resulted from the dissociative adsorption of H<sub>2</sub> on the Pd surfaces, the formation of PdH<sub>x</sub> and the interaction between Pd nanoparticles and carbon black lead to the rapid resistance change and make Pd(111) a superior surface for H<sub>2</sub> sensing. As a fundamental study, this finding achieves deep understanding on the structure-performance correlation of Pd surface structure for H<sub>2</sub> sensing, and it provides a new approach to rationally develop high-performance H<sub>2</sub> sensors.

#### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Yang Gao:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft. **Qiao Lu:** Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft. **Peijian Yan:** Resources. **Pengfei Tian:** Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Minghui Zhu:** Resources. **Biao Xiao:** Resources. **Fuzhen Xuan:** Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

#### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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