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Visualizing H₂O molecules reacting at TiO₂ active sites with transmission electron microscopy

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Abstract: Imaging a reaction taking place at the molecular level could provide the most direct information for understanding catalytic reaction mechanism. We used nanocrystalline anatase TiO₂ (1×4)-(001) surface as a catalyst, which provided highly ordered Ti₄⁺ “active rows” to realize real-time monitoring of H₂O molecules dissociating and reacting on the catalyst surface with in-situ environmental transmission electron microscopy. The twin-protrusion configuration of adsorbed H₂O was observed. During the water-gas-shift reaction, dynamic changes in these structures were visualized on these active rows at the molecular level.

One Sentence Summary: Visualization of H₂O molecules reacting at active sites of TiO₂ surface at the molecular level was realized via ETEM.
Imaging at the atomic scale with transmission electron microscopy (TEM) has benefited from the developments of aberration corrector and in situ equipment (1-8). For studies of heterogeneous catalysts, these developments, along with approaches that allow gases and even liquids to contact samples (environmental TEM or ETEM) have enabled imaging of single molecules and atoms adsorbed on catalyst surface (9-14). However, the direct visualization of gas molecules reacting at catalytic sites is generally challenging for TEM. Normally, the molecules that adsorb and react dynamically do not offer sufficient contrast for TEM identification. We now show that this obstacle could be overcome by taking advantage of the highly ordered four-coordinated Ti (Ti₄c) rows (“active rows”, because of the lower coordination) on the anatase TiO₂ (1×4)-(001) surface, which ensured enhanced contrast of adsorbing molecules along the row direction to allow real-time monitoring of H₂O species dissociating and reacting on the catalyst surface.

The atomic structure of TiO₂ (1×4)-(001) surface has been characterized by both aberration-corrected ETEM and scanning transmission electron microscopy (STEM) images. The bulk-truncated (1×1)-(001) surface usually reconstructs to a (1×4)-(001) surface (Fig. 1, A to C) by periodically replacing the surface oxygen rows (along [010] direction) with TiO₃ ridges every four-unit cell along TiO₂ [100] direction (15-17). As a result, protruded Ti₄c rows are periodically exposed on the surface and show distinct contrast, so the subtle changes occurring in reactions could be detected in ETEM observation without contrast overlap. The ordered Ti₄c “active rows” could provide sufficient contrast for direct ETEM visualization of water if it adsorbed in ordered arrays.
**Figure 1.** The dynamic atomic structural evolution of (1×4) reconstructed TiO$_2$ (001) surface under water vapor environment. (A) HAADF-STEM image of (1×4)-(001) surface, viewed from [010] direction. The image was acquired at 700 °C in vacuum (TEM column pressure: ~10$^{-7}$ mbar). (B) Ad-molecule (ADM) reconstruction models of the (1×4)-(001) surface. (Ti, gray; O, red) (C) atomic model of Ti$_4$c row. (D-G) Aberration-corrected in situ ETEM images show the same area of TiO$_2$ (001) surface at 700 °C under oxygen (D, 0.001 mbar) and water vapor conditions (E, 0.01 mbar; F, 1 mbar; G, 2.5 mbar). The scale bar indicates 1 nm. (H-J) another case shows the reversible structural change induced by the changing of gas environment at 700 °C, from oxygen (H, 0.001 mbar) to water vapor (I, 3 mbar), and revert to oxygen (J, 0.001 mbar). The scale bar indicates 2 nm.

We synthesized TiO$_2$ nanocrystals with exposed {001} facets by a hydrothermal route (see supplementary materials) (18, 19). The nanocrystals were heated in oxygen in situ (~10$^{-3}$ mbar) at 500 to 700 °C to trigger the reconstruction. The reconstructed structures remained stable in this temperature range, in accord with recent studies in ETEM (15, 16, 20). During the ETEM experiments, we used a constant electron beam dose with a small value (< 1 A/cm$^2$), and no
appreciable irradiation damage was observed on TiO₂ surface (21). After heating at 700 °C for ~10 mins, the reconstructed TiO₂ (1×4)-(001) surface of an ad-molecule (ADM) configuration was obtained, as confirmed by the ETEM image (Fig. 1D) where the protruding black dots represent the Ti₄c rows. The ADM structure did not show appreciable change after ~16 mins of intermittent TEM observation.

The O₂ gas was then evacuated and H₂O vapor (Fig. S1) was introduced at the same temperature. When the H₂O pressure was raised to 1 mbar, two additional small protrusions were observed at the top of the Ti₄c rows (Fig. 1F). This twin-protrusion structure became more resolved for a H₂O pressure to 2.5 mbar due to a higher water coverage (Fig. 1G and Movie S1). At both pressures, the twin-protrusion structure kept visible during the TEM observation. When the background environment was changed from H₂O to O₂ or vacuum, the twin-protrusion structure disappeared (Fig. 1, H and J; Fig. S2). If we kept the electron beam off after acquiring Fig. 1H and then introduced H₂O, a snapshot (Fig. 1I) obtained ~5 mins later still showed twin-protrusion structure, which excludes the effect of electron beam in its formation. We also excluded the defocus effect of TEM imaging in different gas environments (Figs. S3-S5). Because there was no other structural change of the TiO₂ surface, we attributed the twin protrusions to an adsorbed water species.

We performed in situ Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR) to characterize the surface adsorption species. We heated the TiO₂ crystals to 500 °C in vacuum to obtain the (1×4)-(001) surface. Under these conditions, no obvious valley was observed in the hydroxyl region (blue line in Fig. 2A). Water vapor (5 mbar) was introduced into the in situ FTIR reactor to mimic the in situ TEM experimental condition. ~20 minutes later, we started to acquire spectrum and observed two valleys at hydroxyl region at 3717 and 3663 cm⁻¹. We assigned both features to the adsorbed species on the Ti₄c rows (22, 23) because previous studies show that the water molecules only
chemically adsorb at the Ti$_{4c}$ ridges on the (1×4)-(001) surface (24). It indicates that the twin-protrusion structure observed in the ETEM experiments (also at 500 °C, refer to Fig. S6) was composed of two different hydroxyl species.

**Figure 2.** (A) In situ FTIR spectra of hydroxyl region are shown for TiO$_2$ in the presence of water vapor (5 mbar; 500 °C) and vacuum (10$^{-6}$ mbar; 500 °C). (B to D) Atomic structure of the adsorbed H$_2$O species on the TiO$_3$ rows verified by theoretical calculations, viewed from [010] direction (B), [100] direction (C), and [00-1] direction (D) (gray, Ti; red, O; cyan, H).

We used density functional theory (DFT) to examine the different adsorbed water structures on the (1×4)-(001) surface (Fig. S7, Fig. S8 and Appendix S1). At low coverage, one dissociative H$_2$O adsorbs stably at the Ti$_{4c}$ site by transforming the H atom to the adjacent O$_{2c}$ atom and cleaving the Ti$_{4c}$-O$_{2c}$ bond. With increasing coverage, the stability of dissociatively adsorbed H$_2$O structure decreases because of the increased stress in the reconstructed substrate, which agrees recently reported results (25). Instead, the relative stability of the structure with two symmetric
protrusions (each is an OH-H$_2$O group (Figs. 2, B to D) increases because it does not induce additional stress at higher coverages (Fig. S9). It has comparable adsorption energy per H$_2$O with the dissociatively adsorbed H$_2$O at 1/2 coverage. The stability of this twin-protrusion structure becomes compelling when the coverage reaches 1, which corresponds to the experimental condition as calculated by combining the adsorption energy with the thermodynamic adsorption isotherm (26, 27). Based on this atomic structure, a simulated HRTEM image (Fig. S10B) was generated that agreed with the ETEM image (Fig. S10A), and the calculated vibration frequencies of the twin-protrusion at 3695 and 3652 cm$^{-1}$, respectively, were in good consistence with the in situ FTIR results.

**Figure 3.** (A) Sequential ETEM images show the dynamic structural evolution of (1×4)-(001) surface under the mixed gas environment (CO and H$_2$O vapor; 1:1; gas pressure: 5 mbar; temperature 700 °C), viewed from [010] direction. The scale bar indicates 2 nm. (B) The enlarged ETEM images show the dynamic structural evolution of the Ti row marked by the dotted rectangle of (A). The scale bar indicates 0.5 nm. (C) Intensity profiles along the lines crossed the Ti rows of (B). The blue arrows point to the intensity valleys corresponding to the “twin-protrusions.”
Because TiO₂ can catalyze the water-gas-shift (WGS) reaction (H₂O + CO → H₂ + CO₂) at elevated temperatures (28, 29), we studied this reaction by introducing CO into the ETEM column. The gas environment was changed from the pure water vapor (2.5 mbar) to a mixed gas environment (CO and H₂O vapor; 1:1; pressure: 5 mbar). Under these conditions, the twin-protrusion structure became unstable (Fig. 3A, Movie S2). Its contrast changed dynamically. Most of the time it was blurred but would occasionally clear (Fig. 3B), with no substantial contrast change observed in TiO₂ bulk and in other surface areas. For example in one case, initially the twin-protrusion was clearly seen [Fig. 3B(1)], almost disappeared after 2.2 s [Fig. 3B(2)], and then reappeared at 4 s [Fig. 3B(3)]. The disappearance and reappearances occurred again at 5.8 s [Fig. 3B(4)] and 7.8 s [Fig. 3B(5)], respectively. The contrast change of the twin-protrusions was also evidenced by the intensity profiles across the protruding row (Fig. 3C). Similar cases are shown in Fig. S11 and Movie S3. In a pure water vapor environment, the twin-protrusions did not show such contrast changes (Fig. S12 and Movie S1), which excludes electron beam effects for the disappearance and reappearances.

Thus, the dynamic change of twin-protrusions under mixture gas environments suggests the adsorbed hydroxyls were reacting with CO molecules, which directly shows that the Ti₄c sites are the reaction sites. In addition, because the net free energy change of this reaction is negative (-3.76 kJ mol⁻¹ under the experimental condition) and the known conversion temperatures are generally lower than 700 °C (28, 29), it is reasonable to conclude that the observed reaction was not induced by the electron-beam. The reaction pathway of the twin-protrusion adsorbed H₂O species with CO molecules was calculated by DFT (Fig. S13). During the reaction, the H₂O species of the twin-protrusion are consumed by CO gas and supplemented by H₂O vapor repeatedly, which relates to
the dynamic contrast change observed in experiments. In the reaction cycle (Fig. S13), the two largest energy barriers come from H$_2$O dissociation of the twin-protrusion (0.48 eV) and single-OH-H$_2$O (0.57 eV) structures, which makes them two relatively stable structures in the reaction with relatively long lifetimes. Thus, a changing mixture of single-OH-H$_2$O and twin-protrusion structures were imaged in TEM. The contrast of the twin-protrusions would occasionally clear when they were the majority on one of the active rows [Figs. 3B(2) and 3B(4)]. Most of the time, the contrast is blurred because of the interference between the two structures [Figs. 3B(1), 3B(3) and 3B(5)]. The single-OH-H$_2$O structure was not obvious in TEM, as shown by the simulated image (Fig. S14).

By visualizing and monitoring the adsorbed water species on the ridge of the (1×4)-(001) TiO$_2$ surface, we confirmed directly the Ti$_{4c}$ atoms on the ridge are active sites for H$_2$O dissociation and reaction. The direct TEM visualization revealed an adsorbed water structure on the TiO$_2$ surface with a twin-protrusion feature. This work demonstrates that the in situ ETEM can be used to monitor a catalytic process taking place at highly ordered active sites.

REFERENCES AND NOTES


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**Author Contributions:** Y.W. initiated the work. Y.W., Y. G., J. W. and Z. Z. supervised the work. W. Y., Y. O. and K. F. synthesized the samples. W.Y. and T. H. conducted the ETEM experiments. Y. O. and H. Y. carried out the in-situ FTIR experiments. B. Z. and X. L. performed the calculations. All authors participated in the analysis and discussion. W.Y., B. Z. and X. L. contributed equally to this work.

**Competing interests:** The authors declare no competing financial interests.

**Data and materials availability:** All (other) data needed to evaluate the conclusions in the paper are present in the paper, the Supplementary Materials, the Appendix or the Cambridge Crystallographic Data Centre (Deposition Number: CSD 1970465-1970473).

**SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS:**

Materials and Methods

Supplementary Text

Figures S1-S14

References (30-42)

Movies S1-S3

Appendix S1
Databases S1-S9