

# First-principles calculation of adsorption of shale gas on $\text{CaCO}_3$ (100) surfaces

Qiang Luo<sup>1,2</sup>, Yikun Pan<sup>2</sup>, Ping Guo<sup>2</sup>, Zhouhua Wang<sup>2</sup>, Na Wei<sup>2</sup>, Pengfei Sun<sup>1</sup>, Yuxiao Liu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Science, Southwest Petroleum University, Chengdu - PR China

<sup>2</sup> State Key Laboratory of Oil and Gas Reservoir Geology and Exploitation, Southwest Petroleum University, Chengdu - PR China

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** To demonstrate the adsorption strength of shale gas to calcium carbonate in shale matrix, the adsorption of shale gas on  $\text{CaCO}_3$  (100) surfaces was studied using the first-principles method, which is based on the density functional theory (DFT).

**Methods:** The structures and electronic properties of  $\text{CH}_4$ ,  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_6$ ,  $\text{CO}_2$  and  $\text{N}_2$  molecules were calculated by the generalized gradient approximation (GGA), for a coverage of 1 monolayer (ML). Under the same conditions, the density of states (DOS) of  $\text{CaCO}_3$  (100) surfaces before and after the adsorption of shale gas molecules at high-symmetry adsorption sites were compared.

**Results:** The results showed that the adsorption energies of  $\text{CH}_4$ ,  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_6$ ,  $\text{CO}_2$  and  $\text{N}_2$  on  $\text{CaCO}_3$  (100) surfaces were between 0.2683 eV and -0.7388 eV. When a  $\text{CH}_4$  molecule was adsorbed at a hollow site and its 2 hydrogen atoms were parallel to the long diagonal (H3) on the  $\text{CaCO}_3$  (100) surface, it had the most stable adsorption, and the adsorption energy was only -0.4160 eV. The change of adsorption energy of  $\text{CH}_4$  was no more than 0.0535 eV. Compared with the DOS distribution of  $\text{CH}_4$  before adsorption, it shifted to the left overall after adsorption. At the same time, the partial density of states (PDOS) curves of  $\text{CaCO}_3$  (100) surfaces before and after adsorption basically overlapped.

**Conclusions:** This work showed that the adsorption effect of shale gas on calcium carbonate is very weak, and the adsorption is physisorption at the molecular level.

**Keywords:** Adsorption energy,  $\text{CaCO}_3$  (100) surface, First-principles, Shale gas

## Introduction

Shale gas, as one of the global unconventional natural gases, has received extensive attention around the world. The United States and Canada have achieved commercial exploitation of shale gas with good results. China has done a lot of work with respect to shale gas research status, reservoiring mechanisms and favorable-area evaluation, but the study of the adsorption of shale gas was only just initiated in recent years (1, 2). The development from conventional oil and gas fields to shale gas fields actually reflects the scale transition from

micron to nanometer, and macroscopic breakthroughs have become increasingly dependent on microscopic studies. Therefore, it becomes particularly important to improve our microscopic understanding by using new theories and methods (3). Moreover, the study of shale gas molecule adsorption on shale substrate surfaces helps to understand the occurrence of shale gas, to assess the gas adsorption capacity quantitatively, to explore the correlation of adsorption properties and mineral composition and to evaluate the quantity of shale gas as a natural resource.

Shale gas is generally dry and mainly consists of  $\text{CH}_4$ ,  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_6$ ,  $\text{CO}_2$ ,  $\text{N}_2$  and other components, with the content of  $\text{CH}_4$  up to more than 95% (4, 5). The adsorption of shale gas and shale has been investigated through a large number of experimental and theoretical studies (6-12). Most of the theoretical studies show that shale gas is mainly adsorbed on the surface of the kerogen and clay minerals, and is almost not adsorbed at all on the surface of calcium carbonate (13-16). Ji et al (5) studied methane adsorption on clay minerals of different sources and origins by isothermal adsorption experiment. The results showed that different types of clay minerals had evidently different gas adsorption capacities. However, there is no direct evidence of very weak gas adsorption on the surface of calcium carbonate.

Accepted: March 17, 2017

Published online: May 29, 2017

### Corresponding author:

Prof. Ping Guo  
State Key Laboratory of Oil and Gas  
Reservoir Geology and Exploitation  
Southwest Petroleum University  
No. 8 Xindu Avenue  
Xindu District, Chengdu, PR China  
guopingswpi@vip.sina.com

At the same time, the first-principles method is used to study the adsorption of gas molecules on material surface (17-26), but there are few reports about the adsorption of gas molecules on the surface of calcium carbonate. Based on density functional theory with solid-state nuclear magnetic resonance (SS-NMR) calculations, Bevilaqua et al (27) simulated the adsorption of hydrocarbon molecules on calcite surface ( $\text{CaCO}_3(10\bar{1}4)$ ), but the adsorption of shale gas was not studied. In this paper, we adopted the first-principles method based on density functional theory (DFT) to study the adsorption stability of shale gas and its components at different high-symmetry positions on  $\text{CaCO}_3(100)$  surfaces. By analyzing the adsorption results, such as the adsorption energy of gas molecules and the structure and electronic properties of  $\text{CaCO}_3(100)$  surfaces, we uncovered the microscopic mechanisms of shale gas adsorption on  $\text{CaCO}_3$  surfaces.

## Methods

### Computational methods

Based on the first-principle method of DFT (28, 29), the ground state geometries and electronic properties of  $\text{CH}_4$ ,  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_6$ ,  $\text{CO}_2$  and  $\text{N}_2$  molecules adsorbed on  $\text{CaCO}_3(100)$  were calculated using the Cambridge Sequential Total Energy Package (CASTEP) module in Materials Studio. Within the generalized gradient approximation (GGA), Perdew-Burke-Ernzerhof (PBE) (30) exchange correlation functionals combined with ultrasoft pseudopotentials were used in the calculations. The value of plane wave cutoff energy was 300 eV. The K point grid (31) size was  $3 \times 1 \times 1$ . Self-consistent field calculations were performed with a convergence criterion of  $2.0 \times 10^{-6}$  eV on single atom energy. The convergence of parameters was tested for each supercell. The Broyden-Fletcher-Goldfarb-Shanno (BFGS) optimization algorithm proposed by Broyden, was used in the structure optimization (32-35).

### Structural models

In this paper, the P ( $1 \times 1$ ) periodic supercell is used as the initial surface. Under the coverage of 1 monolayer (ML), the adsorption of  $\text{CH}_4$ ,  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_6$ ,  $\text{CO}_2$  and  $\text{N}_2$  on the surface was theoretically studied for each. First, an optimized  $\text{CaCO}_3$  unit cell (Fig. 1) was cleaved for a (100) surface. Then a vacuum layer of 2-nm thickness was constructed to simulate the  $\text{CaCO}_3(100)$  surface (Fig. 2). Finally, the  $\text{CaCO}_3(100)$  structure was optimized. We focused on shale gas molecule adsorption on  $\text{CaCO}_3(100)$  surfaces. Therefore, in the structural optimization computation, the position of oxygen atoms was kept on the surface layer, and the number of adsorbed shale gas molecules was variable, whereas the atoms of the non-surface layer were immobilized. We adopted such a setting to simulate the adsorption of  $\text{CaCO}_3$  on shale gas molecules in order to reduce the number of calculations and to exclude the effect of substrate thickness. The initial lattice constant of calcium carbonate was an experimental value for,  $a = 0.499$  nm,  $c = 1.7061$  nm (36). After optimization, the lattice constant was  $a = 0.499$  nm,  $c = 1.7060$  nm. The gas molecules were added on the  $\text{CaCO}_3(100)$  surface to a height of 0.5 nm.

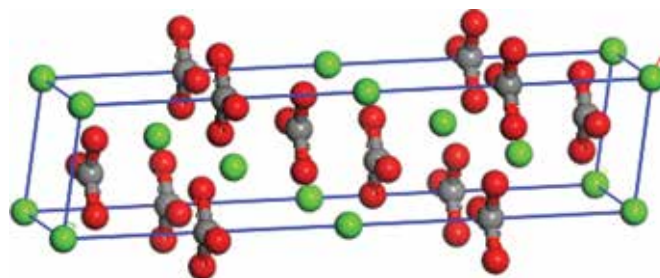


Fig. 1 - Structural model of an optimized  $\text{CaCO}_3$  cell with oxygen atoms (red), calcium atoms (green) and carbon atoms (gray).

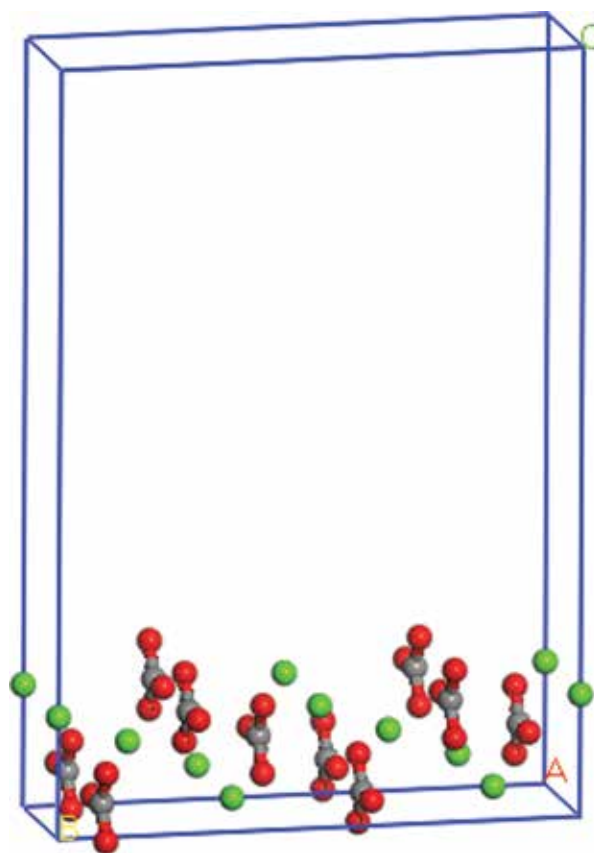
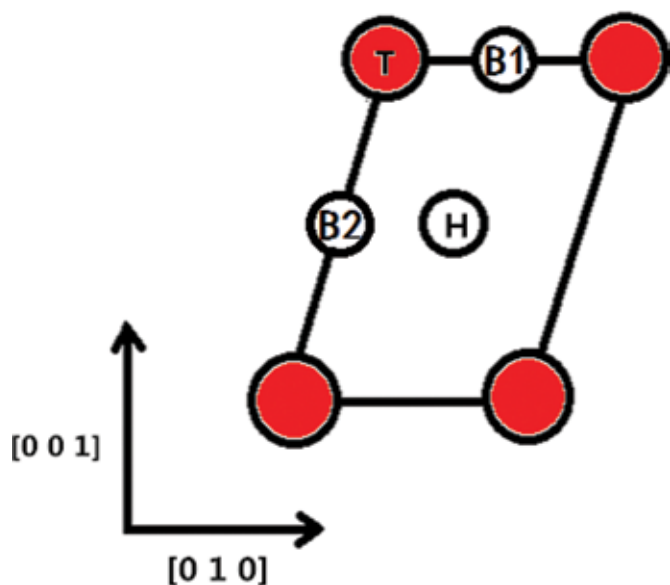


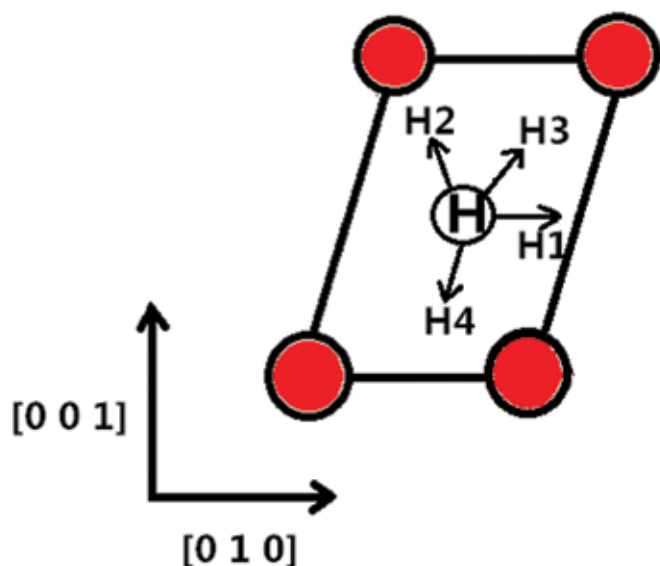
Fig. 2 - Structural model of a  $\text{CaCO}_3(100)$  surface supercell with vacuum layer.

In the structural model of  $\text{CaCO}_3(100)$  surface supercell, there were 3 possible high-symmetry adsorption sites, the top (T), the bridge (B) and the hollow (H) part, in a parallelogram consisting of 4 oxygen atoms of surface (Fig. 3). The bridges included the short-side bridge (B1) and the long-side bridge (B2).

Due to the nature of parallelogram geometry, each gas molecule had 4 types of adsorption forms in the  $\text{CaCO}_3(100)$  surface H site. As shown in Figure 4, H1 was parallel to the short edge of the parallelogram, H2 was parallel to the short diagonal, H3 was parallel to the long diagonal and H4 was parallel to the long edge. Similarly, T-type sites were denoted



**Fig. 3** - High-symmetry adsorption site on p (1 × 1) CaCO<sub>3</sub> (100) surface: top (T), short-side bridge (B1), long-side bridge (B2) and hollow (H).



**Fig. 4** - Adsorption directions of H site.

by T1, T2, T3 and T4, and B-type sites were mainly related to the situation in which the adsorption of gas molecules was parallel to the short edge or long edge, and were designated as B11, B14, B21 and B24. Therefore, taking all of the possibilities into account, each gas species of CH<sub>4</sub>, C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub>, CO<sub>2</sub> and N<sub>2</sub> had 12 adsorption modes on the CaCO<sub>3</sub> (100) surface.

To analyze the adsorption stability of shale gas molecules on CaCO<sub>3</sub> (100) surfaces, the adsorption energy of gas molecules on CaCO<sub>3</sub> (100) surfaces was calculated. The total energy

of the system before adsorption was obtained by calculating the energy of CaCO<sub>3</sub> (100) surfaces and gas molecules. Then in the same way, the total energy of the system was calculated after adsorption. The equation to calculate the adsorption energy is given by

$$\Delta E_{\text{ad}} = E_{\text{gas+CaCO}_3} - (E_{\text{CaCO}_3} + E_{\text{gas}}) \quad \text{Eq. [1]}$$

where  $E_{\text{gas+CaCO}_3}$  is the total energy of the system after gas adsorption,  $E_{\text{CaCO}_3}$  is the energy of pure CaCO<sub>3</sub> without the gas molecule, and  $E_{\text{gas}}$  is the energy of the isolated shale gas molecule. The value of  $\Delta E_{\text{ad}}$  reflects the stability of the adsorption system.  $\Delta E_{\text{ad}} < 0$  means that the energy of the system decreases after adsorption, and the gas molecules are adsorbed. The adsorption process is exothermic.  $\Delta E_{\text{ad}} > 0$  means that the energy of the system increases, and the gas molecules cannot be adsorbed (37). A smaller value of  $\Delta E_{\text{ad}}$  indicates better stability of the adsorption system.

## Results and discussion

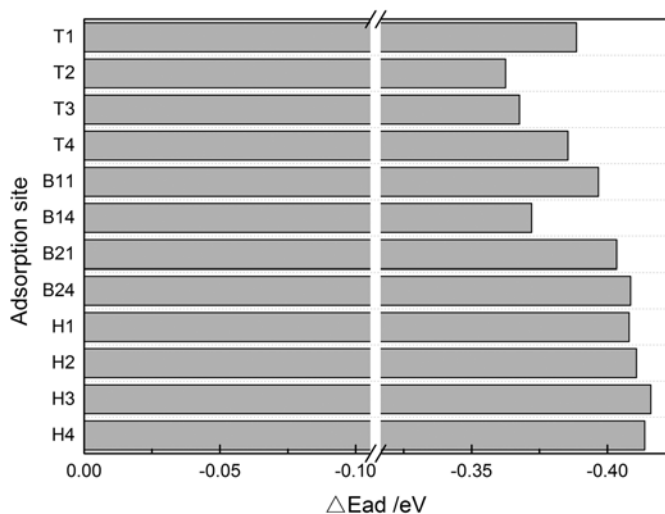
### Analysis of adsorption energy

Table I lists the adsorption energy of CH<sub>4</sub>, C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub>, CO<sub>2</sub> and N<sub>2</sub> molecules on CaCO<sub>3</sub> (100) surfaces in the 12 adsorption modes. CH<sub>4</sub>, C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub> and N<sub>2</sub> molecules had negative  $\Delta E_{\text{ad}}$ , and the lowest adsorption energy was -0.4160 eV, -0.7388 eV and -0.1567 eV, respectively. The adsorption capacity of 3 kinds of

**TABLE I** - Adsorption energy of CH<sub>4</sub>, C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub>, CO<sub>2</sub> and N<sub>2</sub> molecules on 12 types of adsorption sites on CaCO<sub>3</sub> (100) surfaces

High-symmetry sites	Adsorption energy (eV)			
	CH <sub>4</sub>	C <sub>2</sub> H <sub>6</sub>	CO <sub>2</sub>	N <sub>2</sub>
T1	-0.3886	-0.7087	0.1872	-0.0855
T2	-0.3625	-0.6933	0.1463	-0.1567
T3	-0.3676	-0.7260	0.1619	-0.1505
T4	-0.3855	-0.7022	0.1871	-0.1032
B11	-0.3967	-0.7382	0.1672	-0.0903
B14	-0.3721	-0.7388	0.2044	-0.1279
B21	-0.4034	-0.6370	0.1679	-0.0805
B24	-0.4085	-0.6211	0.2683	-0.1243
H1	-0.4080	-0.6214	0.1361	-0.0971
H2	-0.4107	-0.6849	0.1521	-0.1363
H3	-0.4160	-0.6592	0.1127	-0.1312
H4	-0.4137	-0.6286	0.2033	-0.1195

T1 = on the top site and parallel to the short edge of the parallelogram; T2 = on the top site and parallel to the short diagonal; T3 = on the top site and parallel to the long diagonal; T4 = on the top site and parallel to the long edge; B11 = on the short side bridge site and parallel to the short edge; B14 = on the short-side bridge site and parallel to the long edge; B21 = on the long-side bridge site and parallel to the short edge; B24 = on the long-side bridge site and parallel to the long edge; H1 = on the hollow site and parallel to the short edge of the parallelogram; H2 = on the hollow site and parallel to the short diagonal; H3 = on the hollow site and parallel to the long diagonal; H4 = on the hollow site and parallel to the long edge.



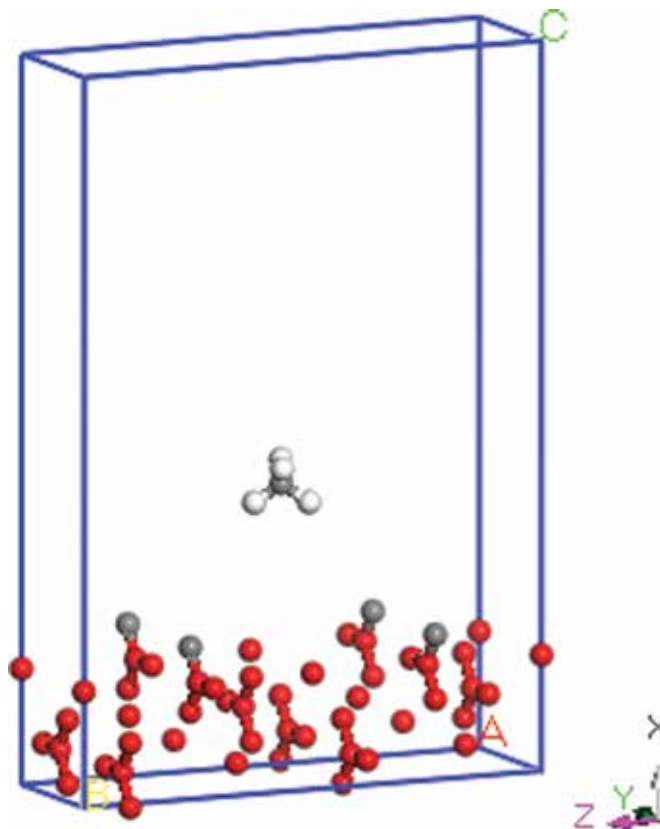
**Fig. 5** - Bar chart of adsorption energy of  $\text{CH}_4$  at various adsorption sites on the  $\text{CaCO}_3$  (100) surface.

gases on the surface of calcium carbonate follows the order of  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_6 > \text{CH}_4 > \text{N}_2$ . However, the  $\Delta E_{\text{ad}}$  of  $\text{CO}_2$  was positive, which means that  $\text{CO}_2$  molecule cannot be adsorbed on the surface of calcium carbonate. Therefore, the adsorption of  $\text{CO}_2$  is not discussed in the following.

Since the percentage of  $\text{CH}_4$  is dominant in shale gas, the adsorption energy of  $\text{CH}_4$  molecular was compared for different adsorption sites to analyze the stability of shale gas molecules adsorbed on  $\text{CaCO}_3$  (100) surfaces, as shown in Figure 5. It can be seen that  $\text{CH}_4$  molecules had the lowest  $\Delta E_{\text{ad}}$  at the H3 site.

From the point of view of the quantity of adsorption energy,  $\text{CH}_4$  molecules had a minimum adsorption energy of  $-0.4160$  eV on H3, which was the most stable adsorption structure among the 12 high-symmetry sites (Fig. 6). Therefore, it is relatively easier for  $\text{CH}_4$  molecules to be adsorbed on H3. When adsorbed on T2,  $\text{CH}_4$  molecules had a maximum energy of  $-0.3625$  eV, which means that it was most difficult for T2 to adsorb  $\text{CH}_4$  molecules. Similarly,  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_6$  molecules had their minimum adsorption energy and most stable adsorption structure at B14, which was the position for easiest adsorption. B24 had the maximum energy and the most unstable adsorption structure. At T2,  $\text{N}_2$  molecules had their minimum adsorption energy, and could be easily adsorbed at T2. B21 was the most difficult position to adsorb  $\text{N}_2$  molecules. The small absolute values of adsorption energy indicate very weak adsorption of  $\text{CH}_4$ ,  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_6$  and  $\text{N}_2$  molecules on  $\text{CaCO}_3$  (100) surfaces.

In terms of the range of adsorption energies, the adsorption energy of  $\text{CH}_4$  at different sites ranged from  $-0.3625$  eV to  $-0.4160$  eV, with the largest difference being only  $0.0535$  eV. Besides, the largest differences of the adsorption energy ranges for  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_6$  and  $\text{N}_2$  molecules were only  $0.1177$  eV and  $0.0762$  eV, respectively. The range of adsorption energies was very small, which indicates that the adsorption of each gas molecule at the high-symmetry sites on  $\text{CaCO}_3$  (100) surfaces was very similar, and the gas molecules tended to move on the calcium carbonate surfaces. By comparison, it is known that the mobility of  $\text{CH}_4$  is the strongest.



**Fig. 6** - Structural model of  $\text{CH}_4$  molecule adsorbed at H3 site on  $\text{CaCO}_3$  (100) surface.

### Analysis of physical structure

In Table II, we can see that after  $\text{CH}_4$  molecules were adsorbed at H3 sites, the C-H bond length became  $0.1097$  nm, which is in good agreement with the experimentally spectroscopic data of  $0.1086 \pm 0.0001$  nm (38). Compared with the value before adsorption, the bond length changed by  $0.091\%$ , and bond angle changed by  $0.779\%$ .

Similarly, the physical structure was analyzed for  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_6$  and  $\text{N}_2$  before and after adsorption. The relative changes were  $1.422\%$  and  $1.400\%$  for C=C bond length and H-C-H bond angle of  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_6$ , respectively. The  $\text{N}\equiv\text{N}$  bond length increased by  $1.396\%$  after  $\text{N}_2$  was adsorbed. It was found that the structures of  $\text{CH}_4$ ,  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_6$  and  $\text{N}_2$  molecules showed negligible changes, so the adsorption effect was weak on the  $\text{CaCO}_3$  (100) surface.

### Analysis of density of states

The CASTEP module can analyze the band structure, electronic density of states (DOS), optical properties, phonon dispersion relations, phonon DOS and stress before and after the optimization of the physical model. Here we mainly discuss the electronic DOS changes and their effect on adsorption. According to the analysis of the DOS changes for  $\text{CH}_4$ ,  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_6$ ,  $\text{N}_2$  and  $\text{CaCO}_3$  (100) surfaces before and after adsorption, the interactions between shale gas molecules and  $\text{CaCO}_3$  (100) surface can be further understood.

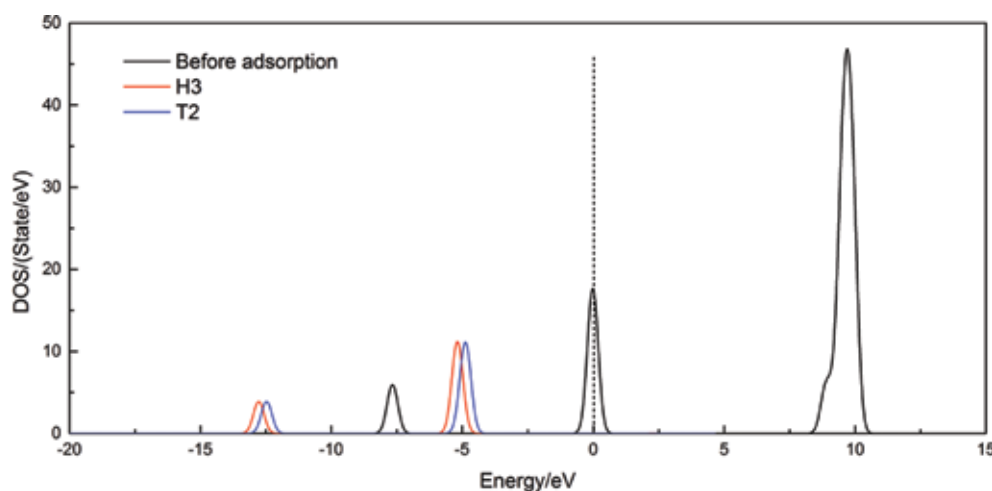
**TABLE II** - Changes of bond length and bond angle of CH<sub>4</sub>, C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub> and N<sub>2</sub> molecules on CaCO<sub>3</sub> (100) surfaces after adsorption

Gas type	Before adsorption		After adsorption*		Relative change	
	Bond length <sup>†</sup> (nm)	Bond angle <sup>†</sup> (°)	Bond length (nm)	Bond angle (°)	Bond length	Bond angle
CH <sub>4</sub>	0.1098	109.483	0.1097	110.336	0.091%	0.779%
C <sub>2</sub> H <sub>6</sub>	0.1547	109.471	0.1525	107.938	1.422%	1.400%
N <sub>2</sub>	0.1146	180	0.1162	180	1.396%	0

\* Situation for the most stable adsorption position.

<sup>†</sup> The bond lengths were C-H for CH<sub>4</sub>, C = C for C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub>, N ≡ N for N<sub>2</sub>.

<sup>†</sup> The bond angles were C-H for CH<sub>4</sub> and C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub>, N ≡ N for N<sub>2</sub>.



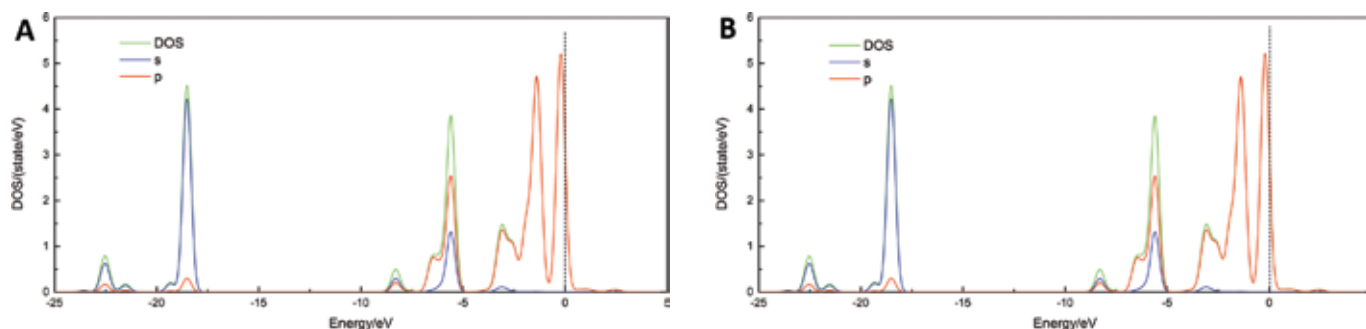
**Fig. 7** - Density of states (DOS) of CH<sub>4</sub> molecules before and after adsorption at H3 site and T2 site. The black dotted line indicates the Fermi level.

In Figure 7, the DOS of CH<sub>4</sub> before and after adsorption at H3 and T2 is compared. The black curve represents the electronic DOS before adsorption, the red curve represents the electronic DOS after adsorption at H3, and the blue curve represents the electronic DOS after adsorption at T2. The vertical dashed line at 0 eV indicates the Fermi level. It can be seen that whether adsorbed at H3 or T2, the electron DOS curves of CH<sub>4</sub> molecules shifted to the left overall after adsorption. The adsorption energy decreased, and the electronic structure became more stable, which shows that the adsorption had a significant influence on the distribution of electron DOS of CH<sub>4</sub> molecules. Besides, the DOS curve of H3 has 2 peaks, at -12.77 eV and -5.18 eV, which move to the left about 0.3 eV compared with those of T2 at -12.47 eV and -4.88 eV. It is thus proven that the adsorption of CH<sub>4</sub> molecules on CaCO<sub>3</sub> (100) surface high-symmetry sites is basically from the point of view of electronic structure, and has better mobility on the surface of the calcium carbonate.

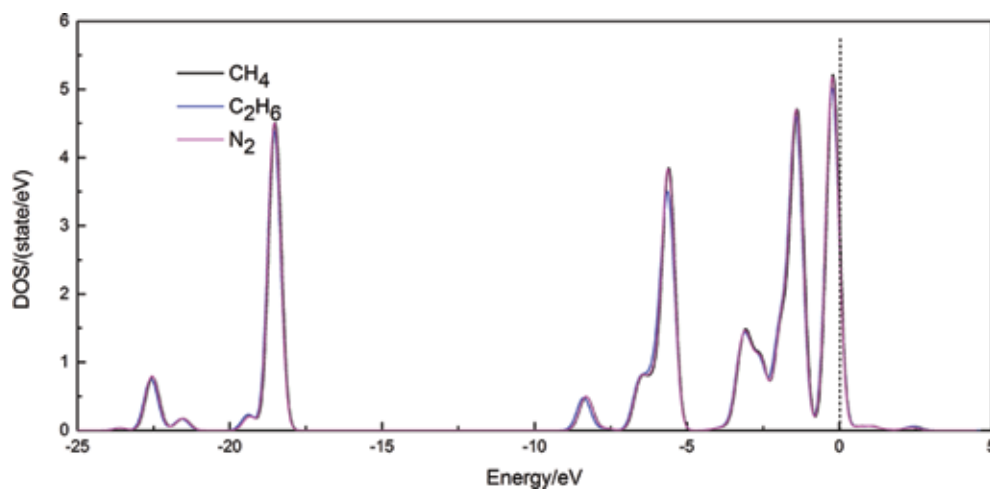
Figure 8 shows the partial density of states (PDOS) of oxygen atoms in CaCO<sub>3</sub> (100) surface before and after the adsorption of CH<sub>4</sub> molecules at H3 under the coverage of 1 ML. The contribution of *s* electronic states and *p* electronic states to the total density of states in energy regions is different. When the energy is greater than -10 eV, the *p* electronic states (red curve) play a major role in the total electron density. When the energy is less than -10 eV, the *s* electronic states (blue curve) play a major role in the total

electron density. Before adsorption, the *s* electronic states energy is mainly continuously distributed in the ranges of 0 eV to -9 eV and -17 eV to -24 eV, and there are 7 peaks in the 2 intervals. While *p* electronic states energy is mainly continuously distributed in the ranges of 2 eV to -9 eV and -17 eV to -24 eV, and there are 9 peaks in the 2 intervals. After adsorption, the PDOS of *s* electronic state of oxygen atoms basically coincides with that of the state before adsorption, as does that of the *p* Electronic State. This suggests that there is no chemical bond formed between CH<sub>4</sub> molecules and the oxygen atoms on CaCO<sub>3</sub> (100) surfaces. This indicates that the adsorption of CH<sub>4</sub> on calcium carbonate surfaces is mainly affected by the Van Der Waals force, and it is physical adsorption. To better illustrate this point, we compared the DOS of CaCO<sub>3</sub> (100) surfaces with the different shale gas molecules adsorbed, as shown in Figure 9.

Figure 9 presents the DOS of CH<sub>4</sub>, C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub> and N<sub>2</sub> adsorbed on a CaCO<sub>3</sub> (100) surface. We can see that the adsorption of different gas molecules on the CaCO<sub>3</sub> (100) surface has similar effects on the electronic structure of the oxygen atom on the CaCO<sub>3</sub> (100) surface. After adsorption, the 3 DOS curves almost overlap, indicating that C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub> and N<sub>2</sub> molecules have similar adsorption effects on oxygen atoms on the CaCO<sub>3</sub> (100) surface to those of the CH<sub>4</sub> molecule, and the adsorption of the 3 kinds of gas molecules on the CaCO<sub>3</sub> (100) surface are physical.



**Fig. 8** - Partial density of states (PDOS) and density of states (DOS) of oxygen atoms in  $\text{CaCO}_3$  (100) surface before and after the adsorption of  $\text{CH}_4$  molecules on the H3 site. (A) Before adsorption and (B) after adsorption.



**Fig. 9** - Density of states (DOS) of oxygen atoms on  $\text{CaCO}_3$  (100) surface after the adsorption of  $\text{CH}_4$ ,  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_6$  and  $\text{N}_2$  molecules at the most stable adsorption sites.

## Conclusions

Using the first-principle method based on DFT, we established adsorption models for  $\text{CH}_4$ ,  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_6$ ,  $\text{CO}_2$  and  $\text{N}_2$  on  $\text{CaCO}_3$  (100) surfaces, and calculated the corresponding adsorption energies. The adsorption abilities of  $\text{CH}_4$ ,  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_6$  and  $\text{N}_2$  molecules on the  $\text{CaCO}_3$  (100) surface were weak.  $\text{CO}_2$  molecules could not be adsorbed. The adsorption abilities of the different molecules were different. The adsorption ability of hydrocarbon gas was stronger than that of nonhydrocarbon gas, and the adsorption ability of  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_6$  was stronger than that of  $\text{CH}_4$ . In addition, the adsorption energy of different gas molecules varied over the range of sites and followed the order of  $\text{CH}_4 < \text{N}_2 < \text{C}_2\text{H}_6$ . The change of  $\text{CH}_4$  was the smallest, indicating the best mobility of  $\text{CH}_4$  molecules on the surface of calcium carbonate. This may be due to the fact that the methane molecule has the smallest relative molecular mass.

We also analyzed the electronic structures of the adsorption systems. After adsorption, the changes of geometric structures of the molecules were small and the electron DOS of atoms in the  $\text{CaCO}_3$  (100) surface was basically unchanged. The findings above show that the adsorption of shale gas molecules on the surface of calcium carbonate is physical.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the assistance of A.P. Li P. Chen for English correction.

## Disclosures

Financial support: This work was supported by the Young Scientists Fund of the National Natural Science Foundation of China (grant no. 51204141), the Major Program of the National Natural Science Foundation of China (grant no. 51374179), the Southwest Petroleum University Foundation (grant no. 2014QHS009, 2015JXYJ-07) and the Open Research Fund of the Computational Physics Key Laboratory of Sichuan Province (grant no. JSWL2014KF03).

Conflict of interest: The authors declare they have no conflicts of interest.

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