

# Hydration/Dehydration Induced Reversible Transformation between a Porous Hydrogen-Bonded Organic Framework and a Nonporous Molecular Crystal for Highly Efficient Gas Dehydration

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Yao Wang, Xiyu Song, Guanglai Mo, Xiangyu Gao, Enyu Wu, Bin Li, Yunbo Bi,\* and Peng Li\*



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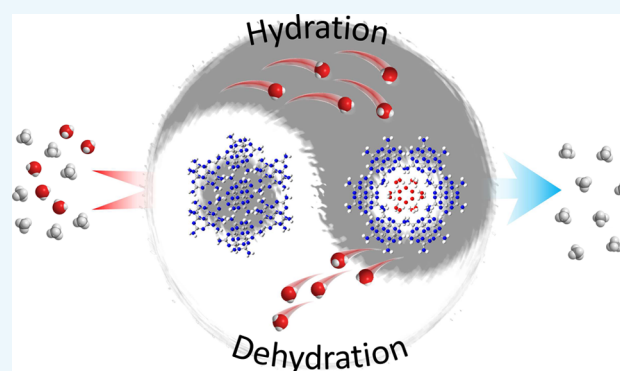
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**ABSTRACT:** Gas dehydration is a critical process in gas transportation and chemical reactions, yet traditional drying agents require an energy-intensive dehydration and regeneration step. Here, we present a nonporous molecular crystal called Melem that can be synthesized and scaled up through solid-state synthesis methods. Melem exhibits exceptional water selectivity in gas dehydration and can be reactivated under moderate conditions. According to the single-crystal structure and powder X-ray diffraction studies, a reversible structural transformation between Melem and its hydrated form, Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O, induced by hydration/dehydration processes has been observed. Melem displays water adsorption properties with a maximum uptake of 11 mmol·g<sup>-1</sup> at  $p/p_0 = 0.92$  and 298 K. Additionally, Melem retained consistent water capture capacities after 5 adsorption–desorption cycles. The remarkable gas dehydration performance of Melem was confirmed by column breakthrough experiments, which achieved a separation factor of up to 654.



Water vapor is one of the main causes for pipeline corrosion and blockage during gas transportation.<sup>1,2</sup> The presence of water can significantly reduce the efficiency of chemical reactions, such as in methane dry reforming.<sup>3</sup> Gases are typically dried using solid desiccants such as zeolites 3A, 4A, and 13X.<sup>4</sup> These solid desiccants require heating to approximately 200 °C for activation. This process demands substantial energy and involves the risk of adsorbent pore collapse. In addition, commercial solid desiccants also exhibit a high affinity for CO<sub>2</sub>, which makes them less efficient in drying gas streams containing CO<sub>2</sub>. It is of utmost importance to discover a viable solution that effectively addresses all these challenges.

In recent years, porous materials such as metal–organic frameworks have gained extensive attention for separation applications, including gas drying.<sup>5–10</sup> Normally, factors such as the rigid pore environment, limited adsorption site density, and dynamic competition among various guest species hinder the potential of porous materials to enhance selectivity.<sup>11–13</sup> Hydrogen-bonded organic frameworks (HOFs), a class of porous materials constructed by weak noncovalent intermolecular interactions (hydrogen bonding and  $\pi\cdots\pi$  stacking), have emerged rapidly as multifunctional materials for gas

storage,<sup>14,15</sup> separation,<sup>16–18</sup> proton conduction,<sup>19,20</sup> sensing,<sup>21–24</sup> enzyme encapsulation,<sup>25–27</sup> antibacterial activity,<sup>28,29</sup> and applications over the past decade.<sup>30–32</sup> Due to the flexible and weak nature of hydrogen bonds, the original intermolecular interactions in HOFs may be disrupted or reorganized under specific driving forces, causing changes in the pore environments, adsorption sites, and pore size.<sup>33,34</sup> By taking advantage of the characteristics of hydrogen bonding, designing nonporous hydrogen-bonded molecular crystals that display pore-opening responses to particular guest molecules can markedly enhance their utility in molecular recognition and separations. Rahmani et al. found that nonporous TPBD allows for highly selective capture of *p*-xylene, undergoing a structure transformation from TPBD to TPBD-PX.<sup>35</sup> Molecular crystals with hydrophilic functional groups, such as amino

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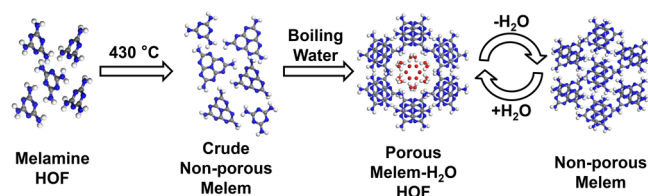


and 2,4-diamino triazine (DAT) groups might be promising adsorbent materials for selective recognition and separation of water.<sup>36–39</sup>

In this study, we observed a reversible structural transformation process featuring pore opening/closing, induced by hydration/dehydration, which could be utilized for the specific recognition and adsorption of water during gas dehydration. We found that Melem, a nonporous molecular crystal composed of 1,3,3a<sup>1</sup>,4,6,7,9-heptaazaphenylene-2,5,8-triamine, exhibited a unique pore-opening effect toward the water. The reversible structural framework transformation between the nonporous Melem and porous Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O can be observed by single-crystal X-ray structures and powder X-ray diffraction (PXRD). The nonporous nature of Melem could avoid the influence of gases on H<sub>2</sub>O adsorption properties. Melem exhibits a maximum adsorption capacity of approximately 11.0 mmol·g<sup>-1</sup> for water, and its adsorption capacity remains unchanged after at least 5 consecutive adsorption–desorption cycles. Column breakthrough experiments have further established its gas dehydration performance. Additionally, Melem demonstrated good thermal stability and can be readily regenerated without compromising its performance, showcasing its promising practical applications in the field of gas dehydration.

The crude nonporous Melem was obtained using melamine as the precursor under 430 °C (Scheme 1).<sup>39–41</sup> After

#### Scheme 1. Schematic of the Synthesis of Melem and the Hydration/Dehydration-Induced Reversible Transformation Process<sup>a</sup>



<sup>a</sup>The red, white, gray, and blue balls represent O, H, C, and N atoms, respectively.

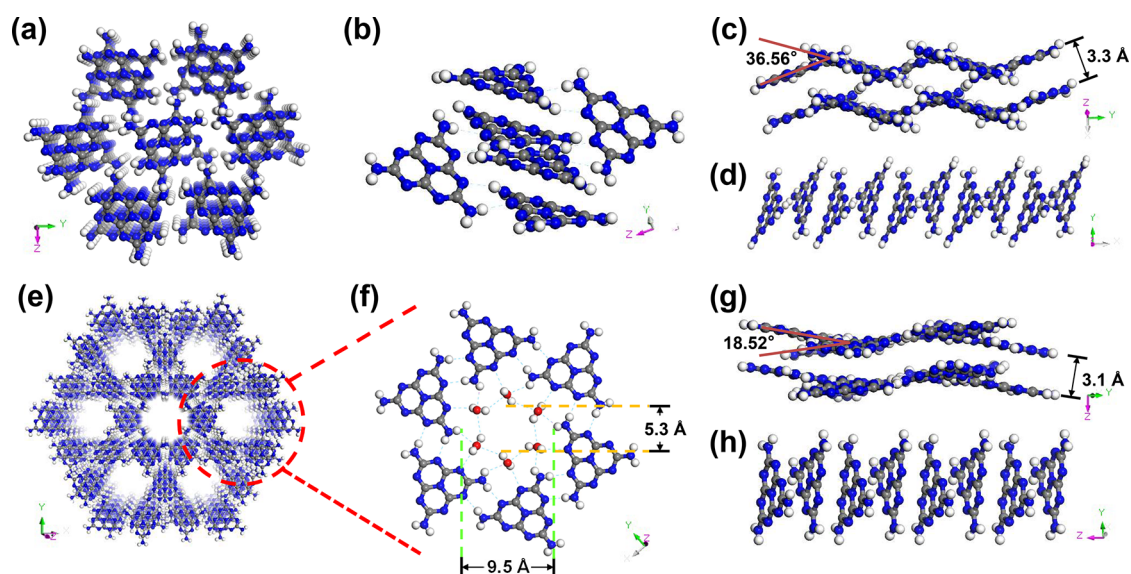
removing the melamine by boiling water, the nonporous Melem rebuilds into Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O by a hydrogen bond.<sup>42,43</sup> The Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O could be returned to nonporous Melem by heating to remove the H<sub>2</sub>O from the frameworks. The Melem was crystallized in a monoclinic system with the *P*2<sub>1</sub>/*c* space group, while the Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O was crystallized in a trigonal system with the *R*3̄*c* space group. Melem was assembled by intermolecular hydrogen bonds and  $\pi$ – $\pi$  stacking between the inversion CN heterocyclic rings (Figure 1a–d). With the introduction of H<sub>2</sub>O, the original intermolecular hydrogen bonds were broken, forming 1D channels with a diameter of 9.5 Å (Figure 1e,f). The O-positions obtained from the structure are shown schematically in Figure 1f and consist of a hexamer. Each water molecule establishes hydrogen bonds with two other water molecules and two Melem molecules, with one Melem molecule contributing an amino group and the other supplying nitrogen of the hexagonal nitrogen ring. The distance of the adjacent water oxygen atom was 3.3 Å in the range of characteristic H-bonding distance. The hexagonal channels with a diameter of 5.3 Å formed by water hexamer allowed further filling by H<sub>2</sub>O molecules. The layer distance

between Melem molecules decreased from 3.3 to 3.1 Å while maintaining the form of inverted stacking (Figure 1g,h).

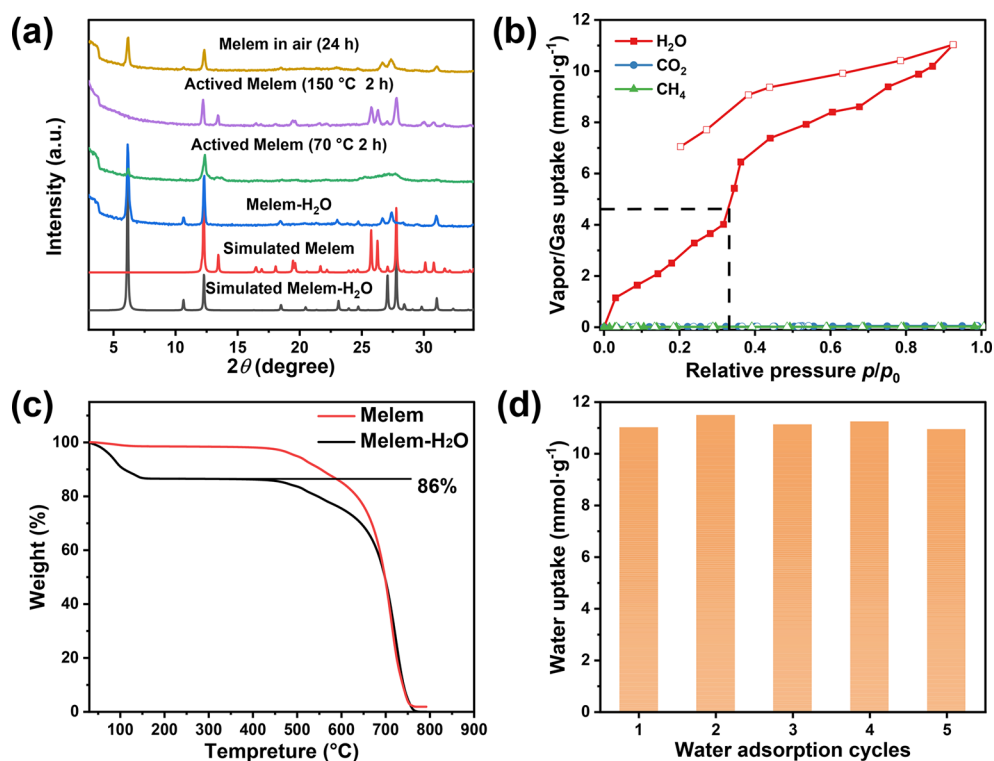
The PXRD results demonstrated the phase change after water adsorption and desorption (Figure 2a). After heating and dehydration, the disappearance of the diffraction peaks at  $2\theta = 6.1$  and  $10.6^\circ$  indicated that the frame of Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O began to collapse. In addition, the diffraction peaks at  $2\theta = 24$ – $28^\circ$  become cluttered, suggesting a layer-to-layer rearrangement. The formation of new diffraction peaks at  $2\theta = 13.4$ ,  $25.8$ , and  $26.2^\circ$  demonstrated the formation of nonporous Melem. The diffraction peaks belonging to Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O at  $2\theta = 6.1$  and  $10.6^\circ$  would reappear after absorbing water or leaving them in moist air for a few days. The scanning electron microscopy (SEM) photographs revealed the topography changes of Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O and Melem (Figure S1). Microcrystals of Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O were observed to adopt a hexagonal prismatic shape, whereas Melem microcrystals maintained a rod-like morphology.

To assess the H<sub>2</sub>O adsorption performance of Melem, we measured the water adsorption isotherms. Due to the Melem being in a nonporous phase at lower relative humidity (RH), its adsorption capacity for H<sub>2</sub>O is relatively weak (Figure 2b). As the amount of H<sub>2</sub>O adsorption increases, the pore channel gradually opens and the rate of H<sub>2</sub>O adsorption increases rapidly. The inflection point occurred around 33% RH (4.58 mmol·g<sup>-1</sup>), which corresponded to the state of one H<sub>2</sub>O molecule per Melem (Figure 1f). It implies that the pore channel is fully open. The following adsorbed H<sub>2</sub>O molecules further form intermolecular hydrogen bonds with H<sub>2</sub>O in the pore space. The maximum H<sub>2</sub>O capacity reached 11.0 mmol·g<sup>-1</sup> at a partial pressure ratio ( $p/p_0$ ) of 0.92 and a temperature of 298 K, which is comparable to that of zeolite desiccants such as zeolite 4A (11.6 mmol·g<sup>-1</sup>),<sup>44</sup> zeolite 4A (14.4 mmol·g<sup>-1</sup>),<sup>44</sup> and other types of zeolites.<sup>45,46</sup> And we found that the saturated water vapor adsorption capacity of Melem slightly decreased at 308 K (Figure S2). Thermogravimetric–differential scanning calorimetry was employed to quantify the heat of adsorption ( $Q_{st}$ ). The calculated H<sub>2</sub>O  $Q_{st}$  values for Melem was 62.43 kJ·mol<sup>-1</sup> (Figure S3), suggesting that the interaction between Melem and water was much higher than that of silica gel desiccants (43–50 kJ·mol<sup>-1</sup>).<sup>47</sup> The thermal weight loss curves of Melem and Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O were depicted in Figure 2c. Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O lost 14% of its weight before reaching 150 °C, mostly due to water loss from its pores (environmental RH about 45%). In addition, we examined the impact of dehydration temperature on the dehydration efficiency of Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O (Figure S4). Melem only lost 12% and 13% of its weight in 2 h at 70 and 90 °C, respectively. At 110 and 130 °C, Melem took 12 and 20 min, respectively, to lose all the water in the pores. Adsorption–desorption cycles of Melem revealed a full and rapid dehydration, which can be achieved after simple heating at 110 °C under vacuum. Additionally, Melem has demonstrated a strong recycling ability. After the 5-cycle water adsorption, there was no decline in H<sub>2</sub>O uptake, and the structural integrity of reactivated HOF was still reserved (Figure 2d and Figure S5).

After achieving satisfactory H<sub>2</sub>O adsorption and exhibiting excellent thermal stability, we tested the CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub> adsorption and desorption isotherms for Melem to explore further the interaction between gases and the Melem structures. Melem can adsorb a small amount of CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub> (Figure 2b). As for CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption, the observed CO<sub>2</sub> uptake at 1 atm reaches 1.07 cm<sup>3</sup>·g<sup>-1</sup> at 298 K, which increases



**Figure 1.** (a) The structure of Melem. (b) The hydrogen bonds in Melem. (c) The layer distance in Melem. (d) The stacked inversion CN heterocyclic rings in Melem. (e) The 1D channels of the Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O (water molecule are omitted). (f) The water hexamers in Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O. (g) The layer distance in Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O. (h) The stacked inversion CN heterocyclic rings in Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O. The red, white, gray, and blue balls represent O, H, C, and N atoms, respectively.



**Figure 2.** (a) The PXRD patterns of Melem and Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O after treating with different conditions. (b) The adsorption isotherms of Melem for H<sub>2</sub>O, CO<sub>2</sub>, and CH<sub>4</sub> at 298 K. The solid symbols represent adsorption, while open symbols represent desorption. (c) The thermogravimetric analysis (TGA) curves of Melem and Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O. (d) Adsorption cycles for Melem, adsorption at 298 K and desorption at 383 K.

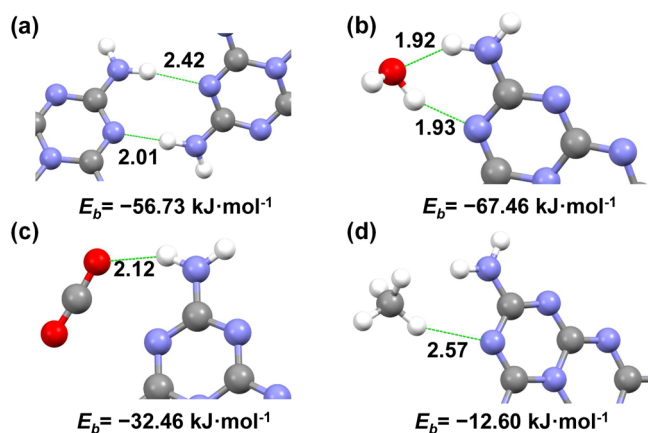
to 1.75 cm<sup>3</sup>·g<sup>−1</sup> at 273 K (Figure S6). According to the PXRD patterns of Melem before and after CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption, it is evident that Melem did not undergo a phase transition due to CO<sub>2</sub> (Figure S7). Solid desiccants often show highly competitive adsorption of H<sub>2</sub>O and CO<sub>2</sub>. To investigate the effect of water in pores on CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption performance, we tested the CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption curve of Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O (Figure S8). The CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption capacities of Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O are slightly

higher than the uptakes of nonporous Melem. The H<sub>2</sub>O molecules in the 1D pores do not increase the adsorption capacity of CO<sub>2</sub>. As for CH<sub>4</sub> adsorption, the observed CH<sub>4</sub> uptake at 1 atm reaches 0.52 cm<sup>3</sup>·g<sup>−1</sup> at 298 K, which increases to 0.57 cm<sup>3</sup>·g<sup>−1</sup> at 273 K (Figure S9).

To elucidate the mechanism of H<sub>2</sub>O selective adsorption in Melem and the structural transformation during H<sub>2</sub>O adsorption, density functional theory (DFT) calculations



were carried out. As shown in Figure 3a, the Melem molecule in Melem hydrogen-bonded to adjacent Melem molecules



**Figure 3.** DFT-calculated binding energies and distances between (a) Melem molecules in Melem, (b) the Melem molecule and H<sub>2</sub>O, (c) the Melem molecule and CO<sub>2</sub>, and (d) the Melem molecule and CH<sub>4</sub>. The unit for bond distance is Å. The red, white, gray, and blue balls represent O, H, C, and N atoms, respectively.

through the N atom and amino group, with a binding energy of  $-59.73 \text{ kJ}\cdot\text{mol}^{-1}$ . When the H<sub>2</sub>O molecule was introduced into the system, the O atom of H<sub>2</sub>O prioritized hydrogen-bonding with the amino group, while the H atom of H<sub>2</sub>O hydrogen-bonded with the N atom, with a binding energy of  $-67.46 \text{ kJ}\cdot\text{mol}^{-1}$  (Figure 3b), sufficient to disrupt the hydrogen-bonded structure of Melem. The static H<sub>2</sub>O binding energy derived from the DFT calculations was in good agreement with the value obtained from the vapor adsorption isotherms. Upon transformation into Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O, the dihedral angle of the Melem molecules decreased to  $18.52^\circ$ , concurrent with an increase in binding energy to  $-87.23 \text{ kJ}\cdot\text{mol}^{-1}$  (Figure S10). This implies that the adsorbed water would not disrupt the hydrogen bonding network structure of Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O. In contrast, the binding energies for CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub> were significantly weaker, at  $-32.46 \text{ kJ}\cdot\text{mol}^{-1}$  and  $-12.60 \text{ kJ}\cdot\text{mol}^{-1}$ , respectively (Figure 3c,d), and were not adequate to break the original structure of the nonporous Melem and open up its pores.

The adsorption selectivity of Melem for H<sub>2</sub>O indicates its potential as a gas desiccant. We evaluated adsorption

competition between water in CH<sub>4</sub>- and CO<sub>2</sub>-containing gas streams, as would occur for separation involving natural gas and syngas of methane dry reforming. We performed breakthrough adsorption column experiments on H<sub>2</sub>O vapor (single component) and in the presence of CH<sub>4</sub> and CO<sub>2</sub> using a similar total flow of  $40 \text{ cm}^3\cdot\text{min}^{-1}$ . The data were analyzed by mass spectrometry, and the H<sub>2</sub>O retention times in the column reached  $95\text{--}105 \text{ min}\cdot\text{g}^{-1}$  at 20% RH (Figure S11). The retention time of H<sub>2</sub>O in the column decreased as the RH increased (Figure S12). The presence of CH<sub>4</sub> or gas mixture (CO<sub>2</sub>/CH<sub>4</sub>: 50/50) did not affect the retention time of H<sub>2</sub>O (Figure 4a,b). The separation factor was calculated to be about 654 according to the column breakthrough experiments. Melem could maintain stable retention time and obtain dried CH<sub>4</sub> for three consecutive breakthrough cycles (Figure S13). H<sub>2</sub>O can be fully separated from gases, which confirms that Melem is a potential adsorbent capable of full discrimination of the water molecules in the gas by hydration/dehydration-induced reversible transformation mechanism.

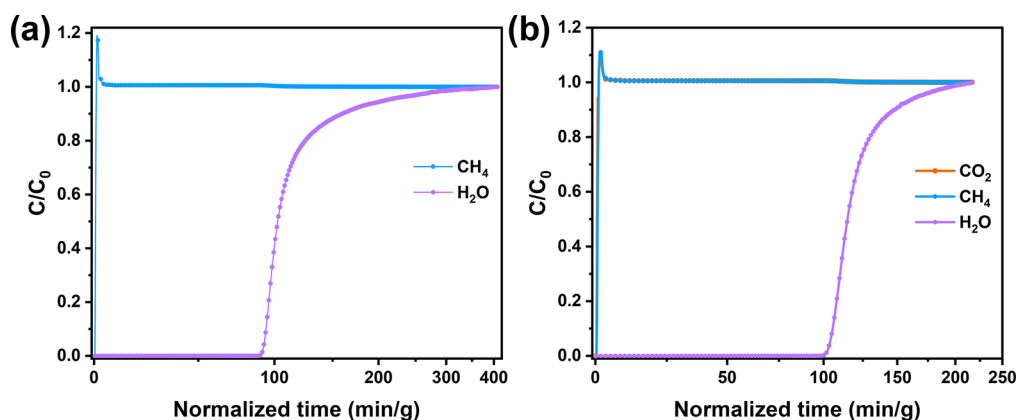
In conclusion, we introduced a hydration/dehydration-induced reversible transformation approach and employed flexible Melem for targeted recognition and uptake of H<sub>2</sub>O in gas dehydration. Structural transitions between Melem and Melem–H<sub>2</sub>O can be observed during the water adsorption and desorption processes. Significantly, the nonporous structure confers upon Melem a minimal adsorption capacity for gases, thereby preventing the adsorption of gases by the dehydrant during the dehydration process. Melem has an adsorption capacity of  $11.0 \text{ mmol}\cdot\text{g}^{-1}$  for water at  $25^\circ\text{C}$  and can be regenerated to its original adsorption capacity at only  $110^\circ\text{C}$ . Column breakthrough experiments demonstrated its effectiveness in drying gases. The separation factor was calculated to be about 654. Consequently, Melem has exhibited high selectivity and affinity for H<sub>2</sub>O, rendering it an up-and-coming candidate for the effective dehydration of industrial gases.

## ■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

### Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/cbe.3c00114>.

Additional experimental details, chemicals, instrumentation, and materials characterization; crystal data; SEM images, gas/vapor adsorption analysis, TGA curves,



**Figure 4.** Column breakthrough experiments for (a) CH<sub>4</sub> (20% RH) and (b) CO<sub>2</sub>/CH<sub>4</sub> mixture (50/50, 20% RH) with He as a carrier gas at  $25^\circ\text{C}$ .

PXRD, binding energies and distances, column breakthrough experiments, NMR and FTIR spectra (PDF)

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

### Corresponding Authors

**Yunbo Bi** – Shanghai Key Laboratory of Molecular Catalysis and Innovative Materials, Department of Chemistry, Fudan University, Shanghai 200438, P. R. China; Email: [peiqimof2019@163.com](mailto:peiqimof2019@163.com)

**Peng Li** – Shanghai Key Laboratory of Molecular Catalysis and Innovative Materials, Department of Chemistry, Fudan University, Shanghai 200438, P. R. China; [orcid.org/0000-0002-4273-4577](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4273-4577); Email: [penglichem@fudan.edu.cn](mailto:penglichem@fudan.edu.cn)

### Authors

**Yao Wang** – Shanghai Key Laboratory of Molecular Catalysis and Innovative Materials, Department of Chemistry, Fudan University, Shanghai 200438, P. R. China; [orcid.org/0000-0002-0378-1805](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0378-1805)

**Xiyu Song** – Shanghai Key Laboratory of Molecular Catalysis and Innovative Materials, Department of Chemistry, Fudan University, Shanghai 200438, P. R. China; [orcid.org/0000-0002-0208-8259](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0208-8259)

**Guanglai Mo** – Shanghai Key Laboratory of Molecular Catalysis and Innovative Materials, Department of Chemistry, Fudan University, Shanghai 200438, P. R. China

**Xiangyu Gao** – Shanghai Key Laboratory of Molecular Catalysis and Innovative Materials, Department of Chemistry, Fudan University, Shanghai 200438, P. R. China

**Enyu Wu** – State Key Laboratory of Silicon Materials, School of Materials Science and Engineering, Zhejiang University, Hang-zhou 310027, China

**Bin Li** – State Key Laboratory of Silicon Materials, School of Materials Science and Engineering, Zhejiang University, Hang-zhou 310027, China; [orcid.org/0000-0002-7774-5452](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7774-5452)

Complete contact information is available at:

<https://pubs.acs.org/10.1021/cbe.3c00114>

### Author Contributions

Y.W., X.S., G.M., X.G., and E.W. conducted most of the experiments and collected the data; Y.W. and X.S. analyzed the data; Y.W. and P.L. conceived and designed the experiments; Y.W. wrote the manuscript; P.L., Y.B., and B.L. provided project administration, resources, and supervision.

### Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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