

Engineering the Electronic Structure of Submonolayer Pt on Intermetallic Pd₃Pb via Charge Transfer Boosts the Hydrogen Evolution Reaction

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Supporting Information

ABSTRACT: The efficient electrochemical hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) plays a key role in accelerating sustainable H₂ production from water electrolysis, but its large-scale applications are hindered by the high cost of the state-of-the-art Pt catalyst. In this work, submonolayer Pt was controllably deposited on an intermetallic Pd₃Pb nanoplate (AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb). The atomic efficiency and electronic structure of the active surface Pt layer were largely optimized, greatly enhancing the acidic HER. AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb exhibits an outstanding HER activity with an overpotential of only 13.8 mV at 10 mA/cm² and a high mass activity of 7834 A/g_{Pd+Pt} at -0.05 V, both largely surpassing those of commercial Pt/C (30 mV, 1486 A/g_{Pt}). In addition, AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb shows excellent stability and robustness. Theoretical calculations show that the improved activity is mainly derived from the charge transfer from Pd₃Pb to Pt, resulting in a strong electrostatic interaction that can stabilize the transition state and lower the barrier.

Hydrogen as a clean energy carrier in fuel cells is industrially produced from carbon feedstocks via various processes,^{1–4} which are environmentally unfriendly because of the release of CO₂. The electrochemical hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) in water electrolysis is an alternative way to produce H₂.^{5–7} The HER involving the reduction of H⁺ and desorption of H₂ plays a key role in the water splitting process.^{8–10} The design of highly active and stable electrocatalysts is a prerequisite for the HER process. Currently, this

process is still largely limited to the use of precious metals such as Pt, especially for industrial requirements.^{11,12} This largely increases the cost of electrolyzers and prevents their large-scale applications.

Numerous efforts to lower the cost of these metals via tuning the compositions and morphologies by increasing their atomic efficiency and intrinsic activity have been reported.^{13–16} Since the surface atoms always play a dominant role in the catalytic process, deposition of a precious metal monolayer or submonolayer on a nonprecious substrate is an ideal strategy to extremely enhance the mass activity.^{17,18} However, it is worth noting that stability problems of catalyst would apparently emerge when the as-grown layer is reduced to the atomic scale.^{19,20} To solve this problem, choosing a chemically stable substrate that can resist acid etching and finding an effective surface engineering tool to greatly enhance the interaction between substrate and as-grown atomic overlayer are crucial to the catalyst design.^{21,22}

In this work, an intermetallic Pd₃Pb nanoplate was selected as the substrate because of its excellent chemical resistance to acidic corrosion, which results from its stable and strictly ordered atomic arrangement.^{23,24} First, the Pd₃Pb nanoplates were successfully prepared, and the X-ray diffraction (XRD) pattern (Figure S1) indicated that the intermetallic phase was obtained. Low-magnification high-angle annular dark-field scanning transmission electron microscopy (HAADF-STEM) (Figures 1A) and TEM (Figure S2) images showed that the Pd₃Pb nanoplates presented a square morphology enclosed by

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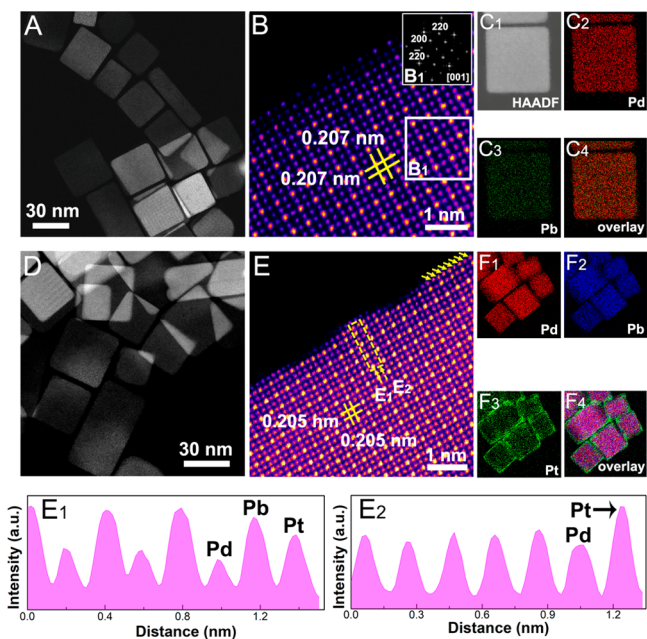


Figure 1. (A) HAADF-STEM image, (B) atomic-resolution HAADF-STEM image and FFT pattern, and (C) EDS mapping of Pd₃Pb. (D) HAADF-STEM and (E) atomic-resolution HAADF-STEM images of AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb. (E₁, E₂) Line intensity profiles taken along the yellow dashed arrow direction in (E). (F) EDS mapping of AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb.

{100} facets, which was further confirmed by the electron diffraction pattern (Figure S3) and fast Fourier transform (FFT) pattern (Figure 1B₁). According to the atomic force microscopy (AFM) image (Figure S4), the thickness of the Pd₃Pb nanoplates was estimated to be 7 nm and the height to width ratio was about 0.17. The atomic resolution HAADF-STEM image (Figure 1B) shows a characteristic lattice spacing of 0.207 nm, which was assigned to the {200} facets of Pd₃Pb. EDS mapping (Figure 1C) revealed that Pd and Pb were distributed uniformly, further demonstrating the intermetallic structure.

Subsequently, submonolayer Pt was controllably deposited on Pd₃Pb to obtain atomic-layer Pt/Pd₃Pb (AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb) (Figure 1D). It is reasonable that there were no new peaks assigned to Pt observed in the XRD pattern of AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb (Figure S1) compared with Pd₃Pb because the small proportion of Pt was below the detection limit of XRD. Despite the successful deposition of a submonolayer of Pt (Figure S5), the lattice spacing of 0.205 nm (Figure 1E) was still assigned to Pd₃Pb {200} facets because the substrate contributed the vast majority of the contrast degree. Since the brightness of an atom column in a HAADF-STEM image is dependent on the atomic number,^{25,26} the brightness level of atoms should be Pb (82) > Pt (78) > Pd (46). As shown in Figures 1B and S6, the outermost surface of Pd₃Pb was terminated by Pd₁Pb₁ with a PdPbPdPb alignment, and a periodic light and dark contrast arrangement was observed. After the deposition of Pt, an obvious lighter layer covering the surface of Pd₃Pb was observed, and the periodic light and dark arrangement disappeared (Figure 1E). Hence, it is reasonable to conclude that the outermost layer of AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb was the atomic Pt layer. To further confirm the distribution, line intensity profiles along the yellow dashed arrow direction in Figure 1E were measured. As shown, the brightness of the outermost Pt atoms was clearly between those of Pb and Pd

(Figure 1E₁,E₂). EDS mapping (Figure 1F) clearly displayed the Pd₃Pb core and the thin Pt shell, also confirming the outermost distribution of the Pt layer.

Since X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) is an effective tool to reveal the electronic structure at the surface of catalysts,²⁷ XPS measurements were performed (Figure S7). Notably, the main peaks of Pb 4f in AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb shifted to higher binding energy compared with Pb in Pd₃Pb, along with a 0.2 eV left shift (Figure 2A). A similar peak shift to higher

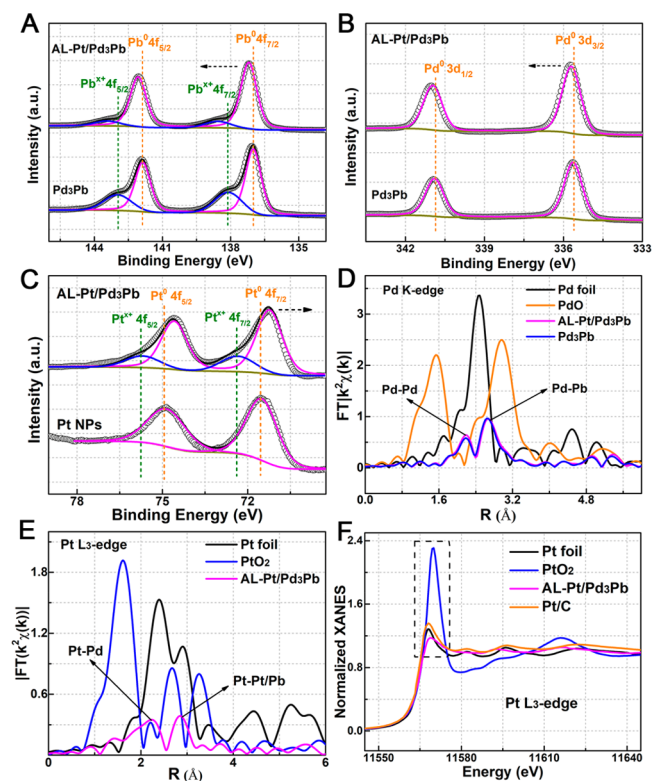


Figure 2. (A–C) XPS spectra of (A) Pb 4f, (B) Pd 3d, and (C) Pt 4f. (D, E) FT-EXAFS of (D) the Pd K-edge and (E) the Pt L₃-edge. (F) XANES of the Pt L₃-edge.

binding energy (0.15 eV left shift) was also observed for Pd 3d of AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb in comparison with Pd in Pd₃Pb (Figure 2B). As a contrast, the Pt 4f XPS spectrum of AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb (Figure 2C) shifted to lower binding energy (0.3 eV right shift) in comparison with Pt nanoparticles prepared using similar conditions as for Pd₃Pb (Figure S8). These results underlined the electron transfer from the Pd₃Pb substrate to the Pt layer.

Next, to further explore the local structure of AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb, the X-ray absorption fine structure (XAFS) was measured. The Fourier transform (FT) of the extended XAFS (EXAFS) of the Pd K-edge was almost coincident for AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb and Pd₃Pb (Figure 2D), indicating the similar coordination environments of Pd, and the strong peak at 2.65 Å was attributed to Pd–Pb coordination. The similarity of the Pb coordination environments in Pd₃Pb and AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb was also evidenced by the almost identical curves for the Pb L₂-edge (Figure S9). In the EXAFS spectrum of AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb, the Pt L₃-edge exhibited a peak at 2.17 Å belonging to the scattering of Pt–Pd and a peak at 2.64 Å corresponding to Pt–Pt/Pb coordination (Figure 2E). On the basis of the least-squares EXAFS fitting (Figures S10 and S11), the Pt coordination number was just 8.1 (Tables S1 and S2), which is far less than the saturated coordination

number of 12 in Pt foil. This result reinforced the existence of submonolayer Pt at the surface of Pd₃Pb. The X-ray absorption near-edge structure (XANES) shows that the white line intensity of Pt for AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb was below the intensity of Pt foil and commercial Pt/C (Figure 2F). This indicates that Pt exhibited partially negative valence, which resulted from the electron donation from the Pd₃Pb substrate to Pt. For Pb and Pd, the XANES analysis is shown in Figures S12 and S13.

Before electrocatalysis measurements, the catalysts underwent an annealing process at 400 °C for 12 h in an argon atmosphere to remove their covering surfactants (Figure S14).²⁸ To evaluate the HER activity of AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb, linear sweep voltammetry (LSV) was performed. As shown in Figures 3A and S15, AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb possessed a smaller onset potential

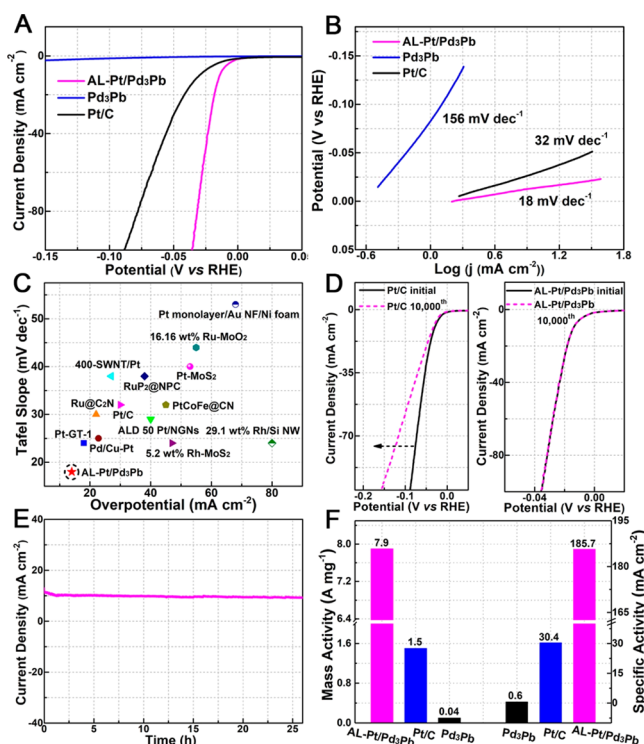


Figure 3. (A) Polarization curves. (B) Tafel slopes. (C) Comparison with different representative catalysts. (D) Durability test. (E) Chronoamperometry curve for AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb. (F) Specific activity and mass activity.

than Pt/C, Pd₃Pb, and Pt/Pd₃Pb alloy. In addition, we synthesized Pd₃Pb with different numbers of Pt layers and compared their acidic HER performance (Figure S16 and Table S3). Interestingly, AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb showed superior HER activity relative to Pd₃Pb with two Pt layers or three to four Pt layers. Besides the onset potential, only 13.8 mV (with *i*R correction based on Figure S17) was needed to reach 10 mA/cm² for AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb, which was much lower than for Pt/C (30 mV) and Pd₃Pb (296 mV). Next, we used the Tafel slope to evaluate the kinetics of samples during the HER (Figure 3B). Remarkably, the Tafel slope for AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb was just 18 mV/dec, which was much lower than that of Pt/C (30 mV/dec), suggesting faster kinetics of the reaction process. For comparison with reported precious metal HER catalysts in acidic media (using the overpotential at 10 mA/cm² and the Tafel slope for comparison), AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb presented almost the smallest overpotential and Tafel slope (Figure 3C and

Table S4). Besides the activities, the stabilities of catalysts should also be taken into full consideration. After a 10 000 cycle electrochemical accelerated durability test (ADT), Pt/C exhibited 46% decay at 50 mA/cm², while AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb showed negligible activity decay (Figures 3D and S18). In addition, during a continuous 25 h chronoamperometry test at a potential of −14 mV, AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb also showed excellent stability (Figure 3E). At −0.05 V, the mass activity of AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb could reach to 7834 A/g (normalized to Pt and Pd), which was 5.3 times higher than that of Pt/C (1486 A/g) (Figure 3F). When normalized only to Pt, the mass activity of AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb actually reached 22 750 A/g, which is 15-fold higher than that of Pt/C. This was attributed to the maximized utilization of submonolayer Pt atoms on the surface of Pd₃Pb. The atomic-resolution HAADF-STEM image of the recycled sample (Figure S19) verified that the submonolayer Pt was still maintained after the durability test. In addition, the excellent stability of the Pd₃Pb substrate was also confirmed by the XRD spectra, EDS mapping, and HAADF-STEM image after the durability test (Figure S20).

DFT calculations were performed to explore the origin of the high HER activity of AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb. Figure 4A shows a clear

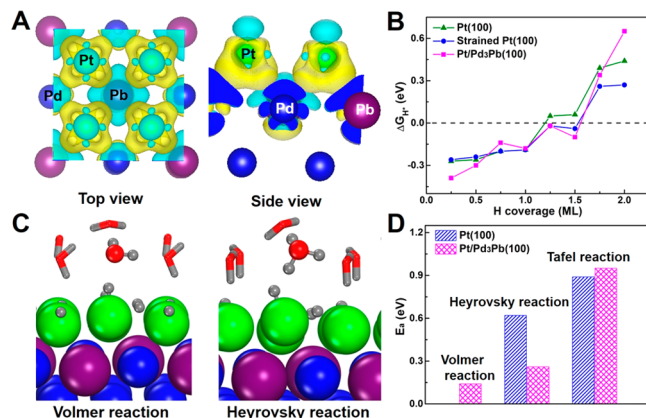


Figure 4. (A) Charge density difference ($0.003 \text{ e}/\text{\AA}^3$) of Pt and Pd₃Pb in Pt/Pd₃Pb(100). (B) Calculated differential free energy change of H*. (C) Optimized transition states for the Volmer and Heyrovsky reactions on Pt/Pd₃Pb. (D) Calculated barriers.

charge transfer from Pd and Pb to Pt, as evidenced by the electron accumulation (yellow areas) of Pt and the electron depletion (cyan areas) of Pd and Pb. The charge transfer caused an upshift of the Pt d-band center ($\sim 0.58 \text{ eV}$), resulting in stronger binding of H* on Pt/Pd₃Pb than on Pt(100) (Figure S21). We note that the electronic structure change of Pt can also be induced by the tensile strain of Pt ($\sim 3.6\%$) on Pd₃Pb due to the lattice misfit between Pt and Pd₃Pb. We found that the improved H* binding on Pt was mainly from the ligand effect of Pd₃Pb (Figure S21).

To understand how the electronic structure change of Pt affects the HER activity, the Gibbs free energy change of H* (ΔG_{H^*}) was calculated (Figure 4B). We found that ΔG_{H^*} was highly dependent on the coverage of H*, making the use solely of thermodynamics to evaluate the HER activity challenging. Thus, the kinetics of the elementary steps involved in the acidic HER was studied. Figure 4B suggests that the HER will start at a H* coverage of ~ 1.25 – 1.50 monolayer (ML) on both Pt(100) and Pt/Pd₃Pb. Thus, the surface covered by 1.50 ML of H* was used as an example to calculate the barriers. We

found that the Volmer reaction via proton transfer from H_3O^+ to the surface was a barrierless process on Pt(100) and was only required to pass a low barrier of 0.14 eV on Pt/Pd₃Pb (Figures 4C and S22). At the transition state of the Heyrovsky reaction, H^*/Pt was pulled out ~ 0.05 Å on Pt/Pd₃Pb, which is much smaller than the value of ~ 0.60 Å on Pt(100), since H^*/Pt on Pt/Pd₃Pb was stabilized by the electrostatic interaction between the negatively charged Pt and positively charged Pd and Pb. This resulted in a lower barrier of 0.26 eV on Pt/Pd₃Pb compared with 0.62 eV on Pt(100). The barriers for the Heyrovsky reaction were much lower than that for Tafel reaction on these two surfaces (Figure 4D), suggesting that the HER was prone to proceed via the Volmer–Heyrovsky mechanism, consistent with the reported experimental results.²⁹ On the other hand, it was reported that the acidic HER on a Pt catalyst was less structure-sensitive,^{30,31} and therefore, the lower barrier of the rate-limiting Heyrovsky reaction on Pt/Pd₃Pb compared with Pt(100) indicated that Pt/Pd₃Pb exhibited a higher HER activity than Pt, in line with our experiments (Figure 3A).

In summary, submonolayer Pt was successfully deposited on intermetallic Pd₃Pb nanoplates. The intermetallic substrate can stabilize the atomic structure of the active Pt layer and guarantee its long-term operation in the acidic HER process. The modulation of the electronic structure by the electron transfer from Pd₃Pb to Pt also results in superior HER activity of AL-Pt/Pd₃Pb. Our findings highlight the ability of surface engineering at the atomic scale to enable extreme utilization of precious metals for energy conversion.

■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/jacs.9b09391>.

Detailed experimental procedures, TEM images, electron diffraction pattern, AFM image, XRD patterns, EDS spectra, XPS spectra, XANES spectra, EIS curves, specific activity data, and EXAFS fitting results (PDF)

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Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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