

Strikingly distinctive NH₃-SCR behavior over Cu-SSZ-13 in the presence of NO₂

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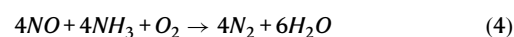
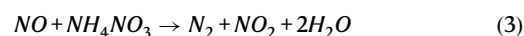
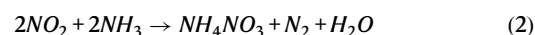
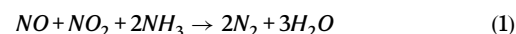
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Commercial Cu-exchanged small-pore SSZ-13 (Cu-SSZ-13) zeolite catalysts are highly active for the standard selective catalytic reduction (SCR) of NO with NH₃. However, their activity is unexpectedly inhibited in the presence of NO₂ at low temperatures. This is strikingly distinct from the NO₂-accelerated NO_x conversion over other typical SCR catalyst systems. Here, we combine kinetic experiments, in situ X-ray absorption spectroscopy, and density functional theory (DFT) calculations to obtain direct evidence that under reaction conditions, strong oxidation by NO₂ forces Cu ions to exist mainly as Cu^{II} species (fw-Cu²⁺ and NH₃-solvated Cu^{II} with high CNs), which impedes the mobility of Cu species. The SCR reaction occurring at these Cu^{II} sites with weak mobility shows a higher energy barrier than that of the standard SCR reaction on dynamic binuclear sites. Moreover, the NO₂-involved SCR reaction tends to occur at the Brønsted acid sites (BASs) rather than the Cu^{II} sites. This work clearly explains the strikingly distinctive selective catalytic behavior in this zeolite system.

Increasingly stringent mobile source emission regulations have been pursued around the world to tackle environmental pollution. Nitrogen oxides (NO_x) are inevitable gaseous pollutants emitted from internal combustion engines. Selective catalytic reduction of NO_x with NH₃ (NH₃-SCR) is the most widely adopted technology for the removal of NO_x from diesel engines^{1,2}. The successful commercialization of Cu-SSZ-13 as an NH₃-SCR catalyst is a significant achievement for diesel engine exhaust post treatment³. In the past decade, numerous studies have endeavored to uncover the standard SCR (SSCR) reaction mechanism^{4–7}, hydrothermal deactivation mechanism^{8–11}, and SO₂ poisoning deactivation mechanism^{12–14}, and to develop economic and sustainable synthesis methods for Cu-SSZ-13^{15–18}, bringing about continuous optimization of Cu-SSZ-13 for commercial SCR catalysts.

In actual application, a diesel oxidation catalyst (DOC) is utilized to oxidize carbon monoxide (CO) and hydrocarbons (HCs), accompanied by partial oxidation of NO to NO₂. The formed NO₂ can

participate in the NH₃-SCR process through the so-called “fast SCR” reaction (FSCR, reaction 1, consisting of reactions 2 and 3). It is generally believed that the deNO_x efficiency of the FSCR reaction should be higher than that of SSCR (reaction 4) due to bypassing the oxidation of NO, which is usually the rate-limiting step in the SSCR reaction on V-based and Fe-zeolite catalysts^{19,20}.



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However, there have been few studies reporting that NO_2 measurably promotes the NH_3 -SCR efficiency over Cu-SSZ-13 catalytic systems. On the contrary, inhibition of NO conversion by NO_2 was found over Al-rich Cu-SSZ-13 catalysts due to NH_4NO_3 formation, which is the so-called “abnormal fast NH_3 -SCR reaction”²¹. In our recent study, we found that the inhibiting effect of NO_2 was closely related to Brønsted acid sites (BASs) and can be alleviated by hydrothermal aging due to the decrease in the number of BASs in Cu-SSZ-13²². Therefore, we speculated that NO_2 reduction probably occurs at BASs. Also, we previously observed the reaction between NO and NH_4NO_3 occurring at BASs over the H-SSZ-13 catalyst²³. Furthermore, Kubota et al. found that NO reacts with NH_4NO_3 more rapidly than NH_4NO_3 decomposition over H-AFX and H-CHA zeolites^{24,25}. However, the situation in Cu-containing zeolites is more complicated. McEwen et al. found that four-fold-coordinated Cu(II) species dominate the Cu-SSZ-13 catalyst under FSCR conditions, which differs from the composition under SSCR conditions, where Cu(I) and Cu(II) species both exist²⁶. Paolucci et al. investigated the oxidation process of Cu(I)(NH_3)₂ species by O_2 and NO_2 . It was found that oxidation by NO_2 occurred at isolated Cu sites, rather than at the Cu dimer sites required for O_2 activation⁵. More recently, Liu et al. investigated the FSCR mechanism over the Cu-OH site on Cu-CHA zeolite and showed the important role of BASs in the FSCR reaction²⁷. Therefore, it can be concluded that the FSCR reaction pathway over Cu-SSZ-13 is unique and different from other catalytic systems where NO_2 accelerates SCR rates. The active sites as well as redox pathways may change over Cu-SSZ-13 in the presence of NO_2 . Compared to the relatively few studies on the FSCR reaction mechanism, researchers have conducted numerous experimental and theoretical studies to explore the SSCR reaction mechanism in the past decade. Thus, the SSCR mechanism has been relatively clear, in which dynamic binuclear Cu^+ species are the primary active sites^{4,5,28}. However, the influence of NO_2 on the active Cu sites and the mechanism of the NO_2 -involved SCR reaction are barely discussed, and are worth exploring since NO and NO_2 always coexist in actual applications.

In this study, the SCR reaction over the Cu-SSZ-13 catalyst in the presence of both NO and NO_2 was studied by kinetic measurements. In situ X-ray absorption fine structure (XAFS) measurements were applied to reveal the state of copper species under SSCR (with only NO as NO_x), FSCR (equal mixture of NO and NO_2 as NO_x) and NO_2 -SCR (only NO_2 as NO_x) reaction conditions. Density functional theory (DFT) calculations were conducted to identify the NO_2 -involved SCR reaction

pathways. These results provide new insights into the role of NO_2 in the NH_3 -SCR reaction and shed light on the actual application of Cu-SSZ-13 catalysts in the presence of both NO and NO_2 .

Results and discussion

Kinetic studies of NO_x conversion under SSCR, FSCR and NO_2 -SCR conditions

We first carried out kinetic studies on the SSCR reaction, with the results shown in Fig. 1 and Supplementary Fig. 1. The SSCR rate increases linearly with the square of Cu loading when the Cu loading is below 1.7 wt.% (magnified in Fig. 1b), indicating the participation of Cu pairs in the standard NH_3 -SCR reaction. Previous studies have reported that Cu^{I} dimers are formed with O_2 activation in the oxidation half-cycle ($\text{Cu}^{\text{I}} \rightarrow \text{Cu}^{\text{II}}$)^{4,5}. Recently, Hu et al. also proposed a Cu^{II} -pair-mediated low-temperature reduction half-cycle ($\text{Cu}^{\text{II}} \rightarrow \text{Cu}^{\text{I}}$)⁶. Chen et al. also indicated the participation of Cu pairs in the reduction half-cycle²⁹. Therefore, the formation of a Cu pair in the same cage is significantly important for the overall standard NH_3 -SCR reaction process. The increase trend slows down with further rise in the Cu loading. The turnover frequency (TOF) shows a volcano-type tendency, with a maximum at Cu loading of 1.7 wt.% (Fig. 1c). The increase in TOF at low Cu loading is attributed to the quadratic increase in the SSCR rate. At high Cu loading, however, the decline of TOF is probably due to the underutilization of the active Cu sites. According to the calculation method reported by Jones et al.³⁰, every 2.4 and 3.5 CHA cages contain one Cu ion for $\text{Cu}_{3.8}$ -SSZ-13 and $\text{Cu}_{2.6}$ -SSZ-13 samples, respectively. The formed Cu- NH_3 complex or dimer Cu species under SSCR conditions probably impede the access of reactants to the Cu ions deep inside the pores, causing inefficiency in the use of Cu ions³¹. The activation energy (E_a) and pre-exponential factor (A) both increase with the increase in Cu loading, which was also observed by Gao et al.³¹. Recently, Krishna et al. reported that the E_a of Cu^{I} oxidation increased monotonically with Cu density in a fixed kinetic regime due to the non-linear behavior of Cu-SSZ-13 in the NH_3 -SCR reaction and that the E_a of Cu^{II} reduction was unchanged when the Cu load was higher than 0.69 wt.%³². On the other hand, the kinetic relevance of Cu^{II} reduction increased with increasing Cu ion density, the E_a of which was higher than that of Cu^{I} oxidation^{30,32}. Therefore, the increase of the E_a in Cu^{I} oxidation and kinetic relevance of Cu^{II} reduction both contributed to the increase in the E_a of the SSCR reaction.

Then, the FSCR reaction over Cu-SSZ-13 was carried out as shown in Supplementary Figs. 2a and 3a. Compared to the SSCR reaction, the

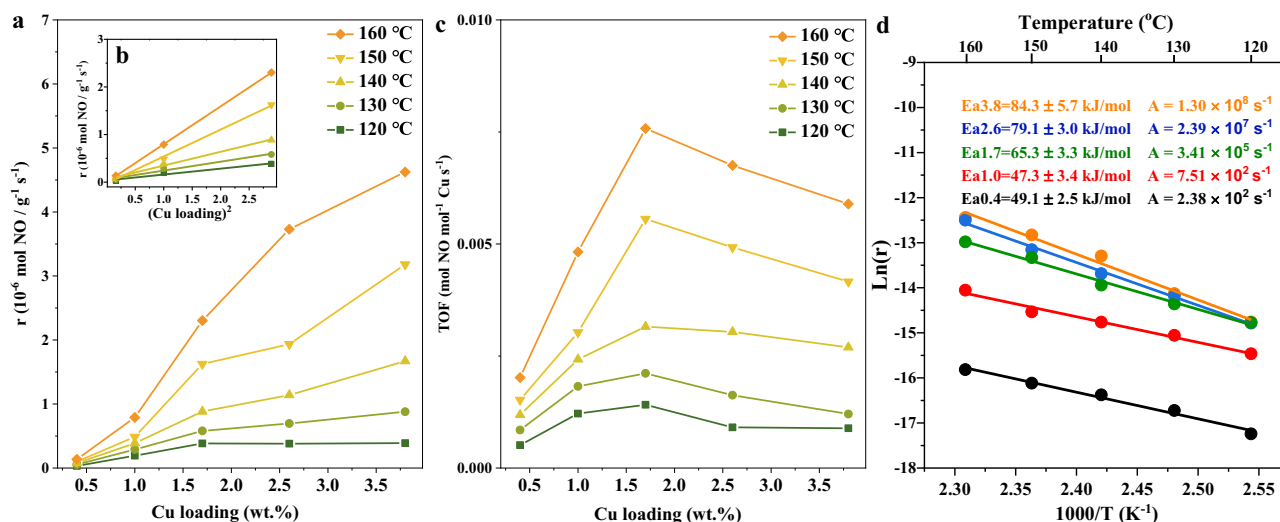


Fig. 1 | Kinetic analysis of standard SCR reaction. **a** SSCR reaction rates as a function of Cu loading. **b** SSCR reaction rates as a function of the square of Cu

loading. **c** SSCR turnover frequencies (TOF) as a function of Cu loading. **d** Activation energies (E_a) and pre-exponential factors (A) with different Cu loadings.

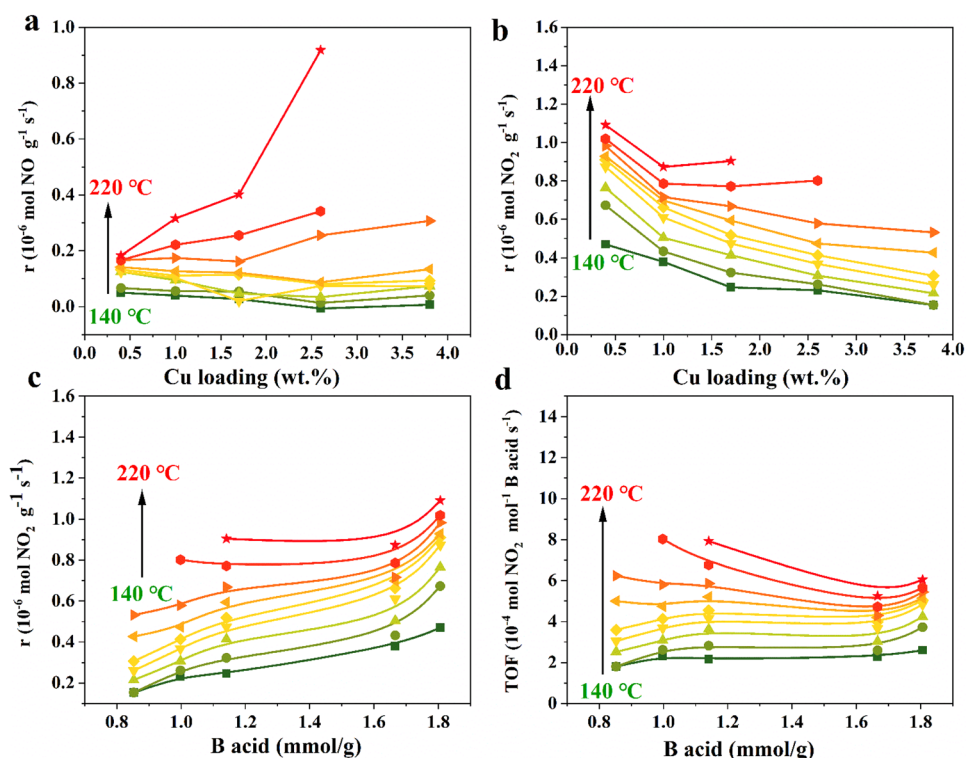


Fig. 2 | Kinetic analysis of fast SCR reaction. **a** NO reaction rates as a function of Cu loading over Cu-SSZ-13 catalysts in NO and NO₂ gas mixtures. **b** NO₂ reaction rates as a function of Cu loading over Cu-SSZ-13 in NO and NO₂ gas mixtures. **c** NO₂

reaction rates as a function of BASs over Cu-SSZ-13 in NO and NO₂ gas mixtures. **d** NO₂ turnover frequencies (TOFs) as a function of BASs in NO and NO₂ gas mixtures.

NO_x conversion over Cu_{3.8}-SSZ-13 was significantly inhibited in the presence of NO₂, which was strikingly distinct from the NO₂-accelerated NO_x conversion over Fe-based zeolite and oxide catalysts (Supplementary Fig. 3). Supplementary Fig. 2 shows the NO_x, NO and NO₂ conversion levels over Cu-SSZ-13 with different Cu loadings under steady-state FSCR conditions. We normalized the NO and NO₂ reaction rates by the catalyst weight as a function of Cu loading, with the results shown in Fig. 2a, b, respectively. The NO consumption rates under FSCR and SSCR condition were compared (Supplementary Fig. 4) and the result showed that NO reduction was severely suppressed at low temperatures under FSCR conditions. The extremely low NO conversion at low temperatures was previously thought to be resulted from zeolite pore blocking by the formation of stable NH₄NO₃^{21,23}. The NH₄NO₃ formation was verified by the observation of N₂O in an FSCR-TPD experiment (Supplementary Fig. 5), since the N₂O mainly originated from NH₄NO₃ decomposition. Interestingly, the NO₂ reduction markedly decreased with the increase in Cu loading, while it increased as the number of BASs rose at low temperatures (Fig. 2b, c and Supplementary Fig. 6). This demonstrated that the block of active sites by NH₄NO₃ was not the only reason for the NO₂-inhibition effects, otherwise both NO and NO₂ reduction were inhibited. The BASs primarily participated in the reduction of NO₂, which was also observed in the NO₂-SCR reaction (Supplementary Fig. 7). Moreover, the turnover frequency (TOF) of NO₂ on BASs hardly changed as the number of BAS varied. Supplementary Fig. 8 presents the NO₂ reaction rate as a function of Cu loading and BASs under NO₂-SCR conditions, which showed the same trend as that in the co-existence of NO and NO₂. Moreover, we carried out the NO₂-SCR reaction over H-SSZ-13 and Cu_{2.6}-SSZ-13 with different Si/Al ratios and found that the zeolites with low Si/Al exhibited high NO_x conversion due to their high numbers of BASs at low temperatures (Supplementary Fig. 9). The above results indicated that NO₂ primarily reacted at BASs while NO was difficult to be reduced in the presence of NO₂. NO₂ disproportionation occurs

on the BASs to form nitrates and adsorbed NO⁺, which then react with NH₃ to form NH₄NO₃ and NH₂NO, respectively^{33–35}. It is generally known that NO can be effectively reduced at Cu sites. However, the formation of NH₄NO₃ impedes NO access to the active Cu sites. Instead, NO reacts with NH₄NO₃ at BASs to form N₂ and NO₂ through reaction (3) (TPSR shown in Supplementary Fig. 10). Furthermore, the NO and NO₂ conversion levels over Cu_{2.6}-SSZ-13 and Cu_{0.4}-SSZ-13 under SSCR, FSCR and NO₂-SCR conditions are separately depicted in Supplementary Fig. 11. For Cu_{2.6}-SSZ-13 sample, the NO conversion under SSCR conditions was remarkably higher than that under FSCR conditions, which indicated that the SSCR reaction pathway was significantly inhibited under FSCR conditions. We ascribed the low NO conversion to the reaction with NH₄NO₃ (i.e., FSCR reaction) and the extra NO₂ conversion to the reaction between NO₂ and NH₃. For Cu_{0.4}-SSZ-13 sample, the NO conversion under FSCR conditions was likewise inhibited compared to that under SSCR conditions. Differently, the NO₂ conversion under FSCR and NO₂-SCR conditions were relatively higher than the NO conversion under SSCR conditions due to the insufficient Cu active sites for SSCR reaction. As a result, the FSCR rates of NO_x can also be higher than SSCR rates of NO_x especially when the Cu-zeolite behaves low NO conversion (low Cu loadings, hydrothermal aging state, etc.), which was observed in previous studies^{23,27,36,37}. In another word, the NO conversion was inhibited in the presence of NO₂, while the effect of NO₂ on NO_x conversion was uncertain and relates to NO₂ conversion under FSCR conditions as well as NO_x conversion under SSCR conditions.

Wavelet transform analysis of in situ EXAFS measurements

Further, we conducted in situ XAFS measurements on Cu-SSZ-13 samples to uncover the valence state and coordination of copper species under different conditions. Wavelet transform (WT) analysis of extended X-ray absorption fine structure (EXAFS) spectra is a powerful technique to resolve overlapping contributions from different

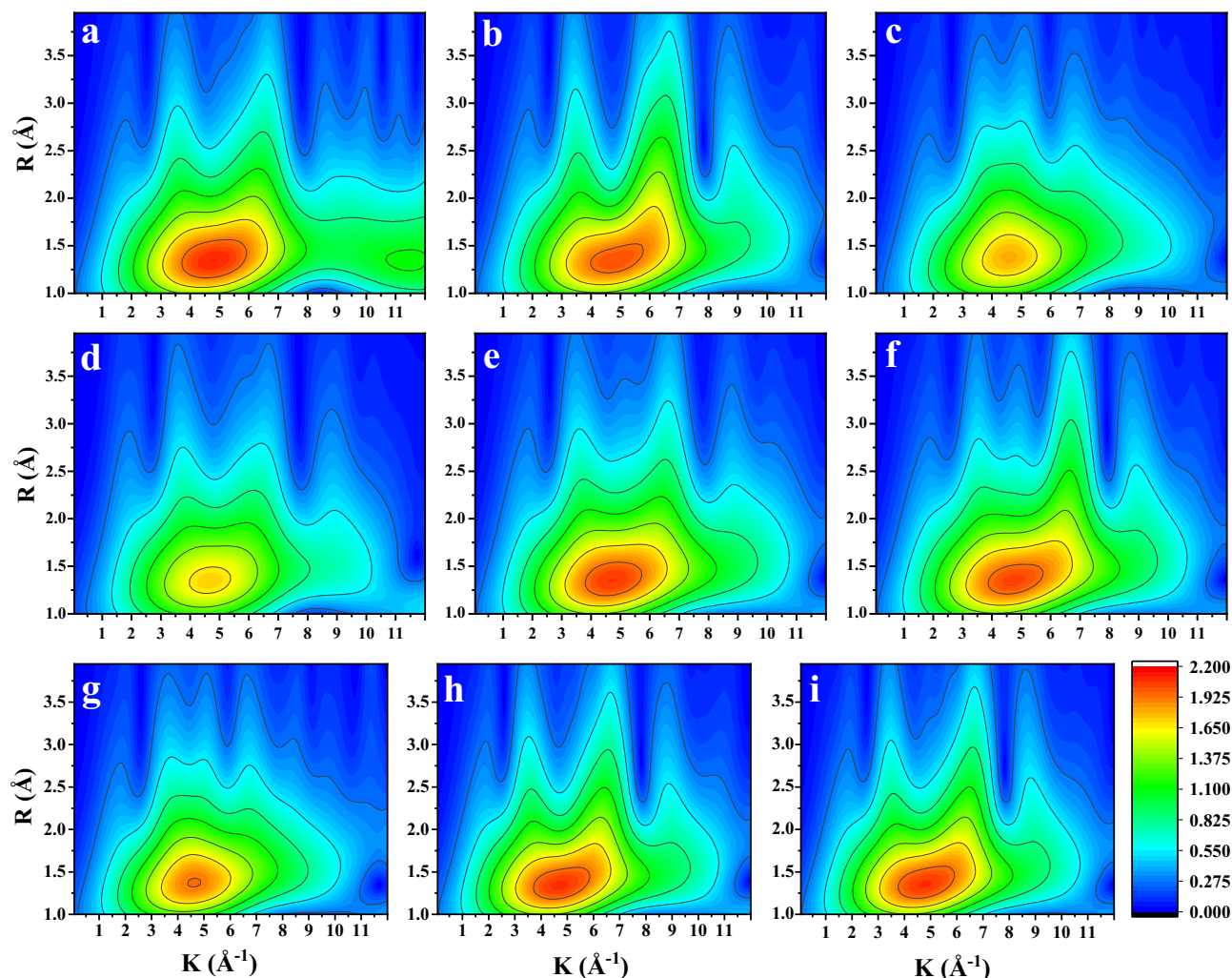


Fig. 3 | WT plots for EXAFS spectra of Cu-SSZ-13 treated under different conditions at 200 °C. a Cu-SSZ-13 pretreated in O₂/He. **b** NO adsorption. **c** NH₃ adsorption. **d** NO + NH₃ adsorption. **e** NO + NH₃ co-adsorption followed by reaction

with O₂. **f** NO + NH₃ co-adsorption followed by reaction with NO₂. **g** SSCR conditions. **h** FSCR conditions. **i** NO₂-SCR conditions.

neighbor atoms at close distances around the absorber. As shown in Fig. 3a, the pretreated sample shows a distinct first shell peak at (4.5 Å⁻¹, 1.3 Å), which is associated with contributions from framework oxygen atoms. This result suggested that the copper species mainly exist as fw-Cu²⁺ species, which have high coordination numbers²⁸. For the second shell sphere ($R(\text{Å}) > 2 \text{ Å}$), two lobes, at (3.5 Å⁻¹, 2.8 Å) and (6.5 Å⁻¹, 3.3 Å), are well-resolved due to the different backscattering properties of various atoms, which strongly depend on the atomic number. The first lobe is assigned to the second-shell oxygen atom due to the low k value of oxygen atoms. The latter one is attributed to the signals from the Si or Al atoms of the framework. Although some studies attributed the latter lobe to the Cu-Cu contributions in oxygen-bridged Cu dimers^{38,39}, we scarcely observed CuO_x species in X-ray absorption near edge structure (XANES) and EXAFS profiles (Supplementary Fig. 12) and did not carry out the procedure of introducing O₂ to NH₃-treated Cu-SSZ-13 to form oxygen-bridged Cu dimers with four NH₃ ligands. Therefore, we deduced that the lobe at 6.5 Å⁻¹ is primarily derived from the framework Si or Al atoms in the second shell in this work. In fact, the copper species in Cu-SSZ-13 are initially in the solvated state as [Cu(H₂O)_{*n*}]²⁺ under ambient conditions, which weakens the interaction between copper species and the zeolite framework^{28,40}. High-temperature treatment in O₂/N₂ removes the coordinated water molecules and oxidizes copper species to Cu²⁺. As a result, the copper

species are in a high valence state and strongly interact with the zeolite framework through electrostatic forces.

After NO adsorption, Cu²⁺ ions are partially reduced, resulting in a slight decrease in the coordination numbers (CNs) of the first shell, denoted by the decrease and weakening of the colored area (Fig. 3b). The lobes resulting from the contributions of the second shell stretched to (3.5 Å⁻¹, 3.1 Å) and (6.5 Å⁻¹, 3.7 Å), respectively. When the pretreated sample was exposed to an NH₃ or NO + NH₃ atmosphere, the signal of the first shell sharply decreased (Fig. 3c, d), suggesting that the CNs of the Cu ions significantly declined due to their reduction. Moreover, the two lobes are not well-resolved in the spectra, indicating a decrease in the scattering from the second shell. This is consistent with the formation of dynamic [Cu(NH₃)₂]⁺ species, which is supported by the appearance of feature B in Supplementary Fig. 13a after NH₃ or NO + NH₃ adsorption. After oxidation by O₂ and NO₂, the CNs of the first shell increased to a level similar to that of the pretreated sample, accompanied by the formation of two well-resolved lobes at the second shell (Fig. 3e, f). This demonstrated that Cu(NH₃)₂⁺ species are oxidized into Cu^{II} ions and that the interaction between the Cu²⁺ ions and the zeolite framework is recovered. Besides the scattering by framework Si (or Al), the second lobe at 6.5 Å⁻¹ probably resulted from the scattering of the second shell Cu species, since oxygen-bridged Cu dimers are formed after Cu^I(NH₃)₂ oxidation by O₂^{5,38}. Compared with

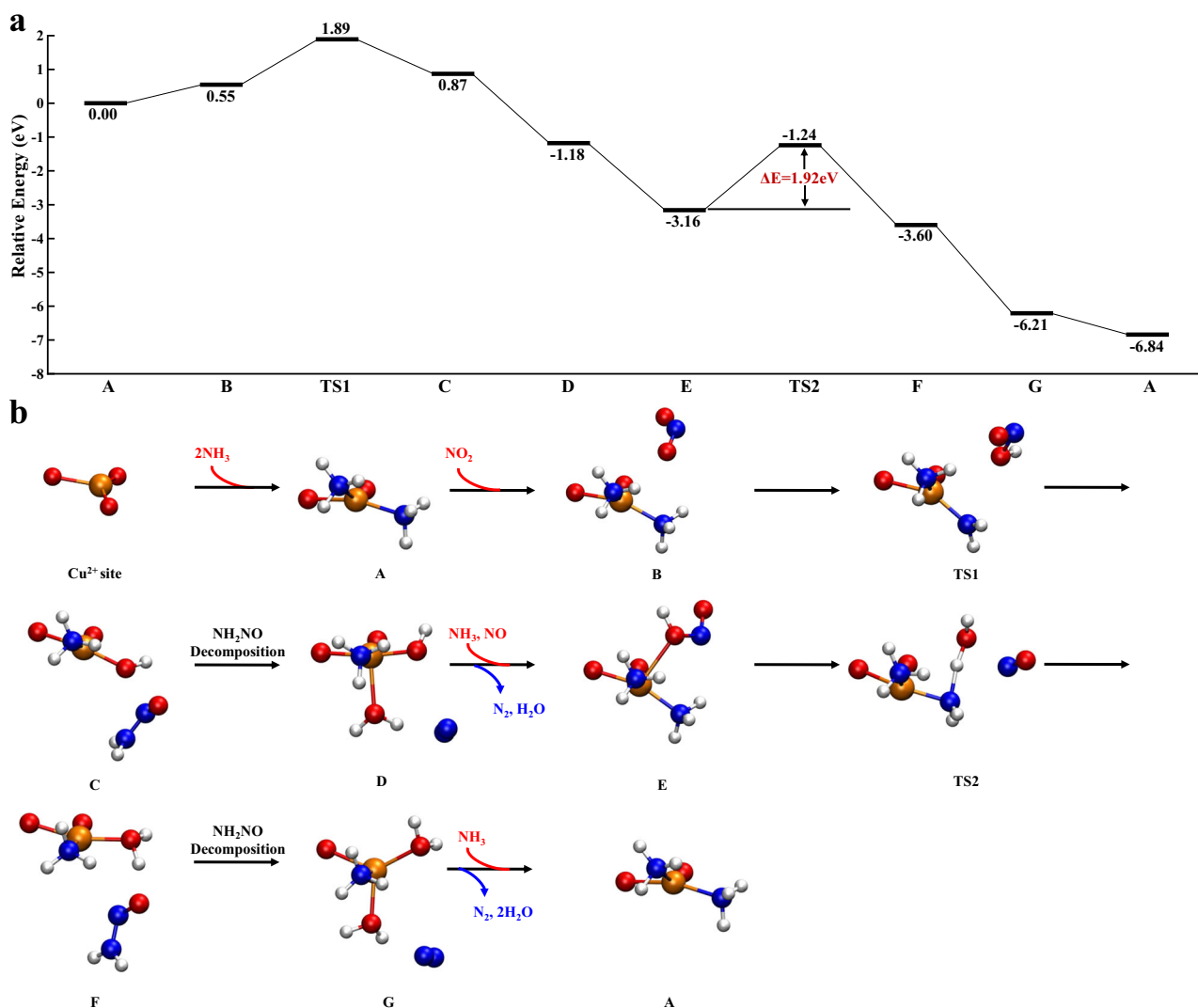


Fig. 4 | Reaction pathway of the fast SCR cycle at Z_2Cu^{II} site. **a** Gibbs free energy profile. **b** Optimized geometries of the reactants, transition states (TSs) and products for all elementary steps are presented in the lower panel. Except for the O

atoms linked to the Cu^{2+} ion, all other atoms of the zeolite framework are omitted for clarity. Orange, red, blue and white circles denote Cu, O, N and H atoms, respectively.

oxidation by O_2 , oxidation by NO_2 resulted in a higher signal for the lobe at -6.5 \AA^{-1} , indicating that more Cu^I species are oxidized into Cu^{II} ions (fw- Cu^{II} or NH_3 -solvated Cu^{II} species with high CNs) during the reaction with NO_2 . This phenomenon is consistent with the result reported by Paolucci et al. showing that NO_2 can oxidize the residual $Cu^I(NH_3)_2$ species that cannot be oxidized by O_2 . As also reported by Paolucci, the transient oxidation of $Cu^I(NH_3)_2$ species by NO_2 is a single-site process without formation of Cu dimers. Therefore, it can be inferred that the presence of NO_2 probably changed the SCR reaction active sites from dimer Cu to isolated Cu species, which further influence the SSCR reaction. This deduction indicated that most Cu species are bonded with the zeolite framework and that the mobility of Cu species is limited during the process of $Cu^I(NH_3)_2$ oxidation by NO_2 . Although the transient reaction can reflect the Cu state and coordination during half-cycles, it was deemed more meaningful to identify the Cu species under FSCR reaction conditions.

Figures 4g–i depicts 2D plots of the WT EXAFS spectra under SSCR, FSCR and NO_2 -SCR conditions. Under SSCR conditions, the WT EXAFS spectra resemble the ones in Fig. 3c, d. The first shell peak weakened under SSCR conditions, indicating a decrease in the CNs of Cu species. The absence of the lobes at the second shell suggests the easy mobility of the copper complex due to the NH_3

solvation effect. In the presence of NO_2 , however, the CNs of the first shell significantly increased, indicating the oxidation of copper species, which was also supported by the results of McEwen et al.²⁶. Moreover, two well-resolved lobes at the second shell are observed, suggesting that oxidation leads to the copper species becoming closely coordinated with the zeolite framework, which limits their mobility during the SCR reaction. The WT EXAFS spectra are consistent with the Fourier-transformed (FT) EXAFS results (Supplementary Fig. 14 and Table 1), which are discussed in detail in the Supporting Information. The above results proved the existence of greater amounts of dynamic $Cu^I(NH_3)_2$ species under SSCR reaction conditions than that under FSCR and NO_2 -SCR reaction conditions. Notably, although we proved the existence of significant framework-bound Cu^{II} species under FSCR conditions, the NH_3 -solvated Cu^{II} species cannot be ruled out by the XAFS experiment. Indeed, the NH_3 -solvated Cu^{II} species existed, as indicated by the observation of NH_3 desorption from Cu sites in FSCR-TPD profiles (Supplementary Fig. 5), which was consistent with the computed phase diagram reported by Paolucci et al.²⁸. Therefore, we next turned to the DFT calculation to investigate the possible FSCR reaction pathways over fw- and NH_3 -solvated Cu^I [Cu^{2+} and $(Cu^{II}OH)^+$] species, BASs and dimer Cu species.

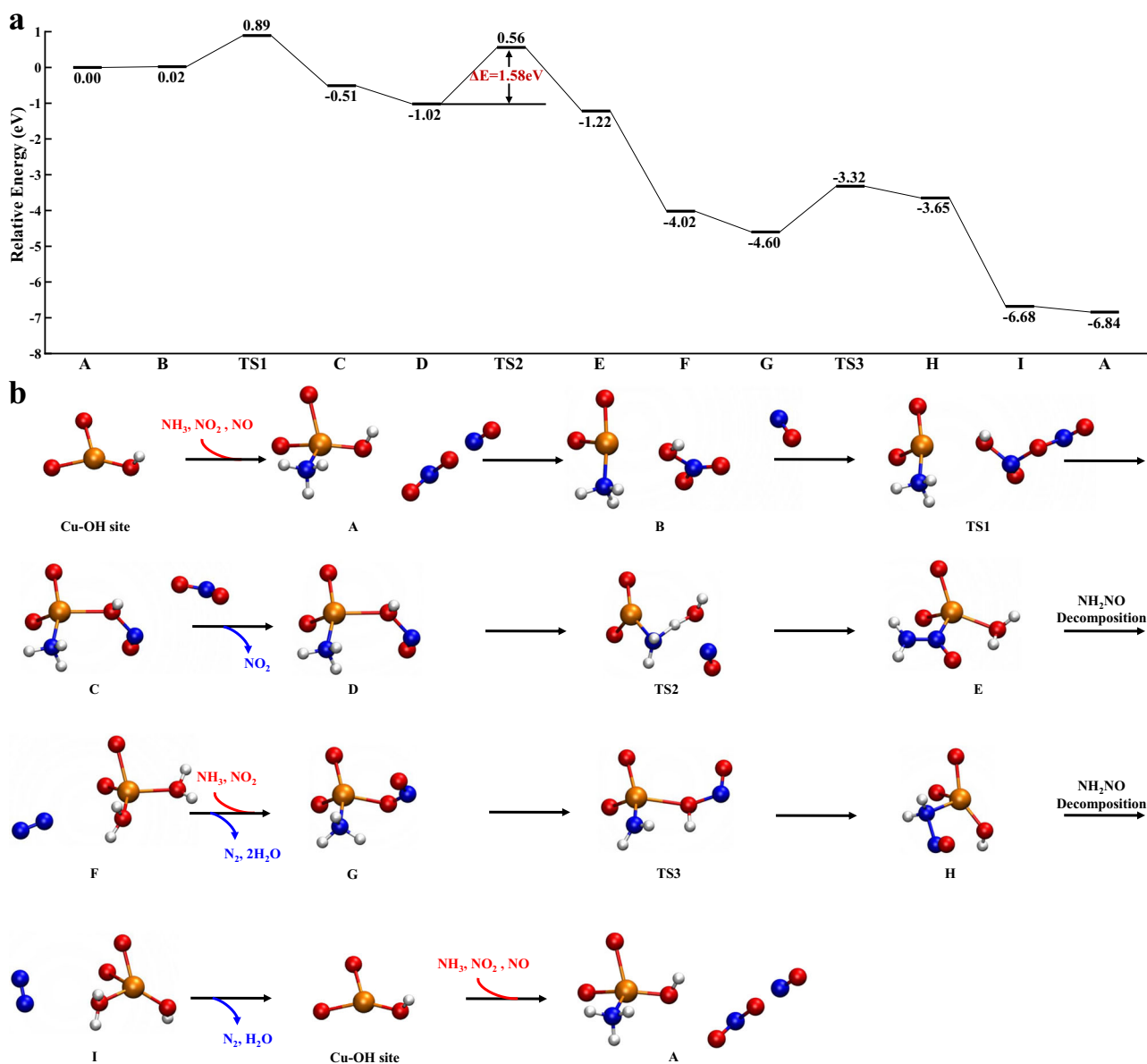


Fig. 5 | Reaction pathway of the fast SCR cycle at ZCu^{II}OH site. **a** Gibbs free energy profile. **b** Optimized geometries of the reactants, TSs and products for all elementary steps are presented in the lower panel. Except for the two O atoms

linked to the Cu-OH group, all other atoms of the zeolite framework are omitted for clarity. All legends are the same as those in Fig. 4.

DFT calculation

We first calculated the FSCR reaction pathway over fw-Cu^{II} species (Fig. 4). The framework-bound Cu^{II} first adsorbs two NH₃ molecules without separation from the framework, which then interacts with NO₂ to form Z₂Cu^{II}NH₃OH and NH₂NO species (B → C). The Z₂Cu^{II}NH₃OH further adsorbs an NH₃ molecule and reacts with NO, resulting in the formation of Z₂Cu^{II}NH₃, NH₂NO and H₂O (E → F), which was predicted to be the rate-determining step of the SCR reaction cycle with a high energy barrier of 1.92 eV. The formed NH₂NO is easily decomposed into N₂ and H₂O through a series of H-migration and isomerization processes (Supplementary Fig. 16)²⁹. Last, the gaseous NH₃ molecules are supplied to regenerate the initial A species.

Next, the FSCR reaction pathway over ZCu^{II}OH was calculated and depicted in Fig. 5. ZCu^{II}OH first adsorbs an NH₃ molecule to reach a coordinatively saturated state, which interacts with NO₂ to form an HNO₃ molecule without any energy barrier. The B species is actually considered to be NH₄NO₃ adsorbed on Cu sites. Next, the adsorbed HNO₃ reacts with NO from the gas phase with an energy barrier of

0.87 eV, resulting in the formation of adsorbed HNO₂ and the release of an NO₂ molecule (C → D). Then, the adsorbed HNO₂ reacts with the NH₃ ligand to generate NH₂NO and H₂O. As the desorption of N₂ and H₂O molecules occurs, NH₃ and NO₂ are adsorbed at the Cu site and react to generate NH₂NO and -OH groups. With the decomposition of NH₂NO into N₂ and H₂O, the ZCu^{II}OH site is regenerated. The rate-determining step of the FSCR cycle over the ZCu^{II}OH site corresponds to the reaction of adsorbed HNO₂ with an NH₃ ligand to produce NH₂NO and H₂O (E → F), with an energy barrier of 1.58 eV.

In addition, the FSCR reaction pathways over NH₃-solvated Cu^{II} species [Cu^{II} and (Cu^{II}OH)⁺] were also calculated and presented in Supplementary Fig. 17, 18. All the energy barriers were found to be relatively high (1.54 and 1.65 eV). Moreover, we consider the possibility that various NH₃-solvated Cu^{II} species diffuse into an adjacent cage to form Cu^{II}-pairs as shown in Supplementary Fig. S15. As expected, the formation of Cu^{II} pairs from Cu^{II}(NH₃)₄ and Cu^{II}NO₂(NH₃)₃ is both thermodynamically and kinetically inhibited due to the steric effect as well as strong interaction with zeolite framework. However, it should

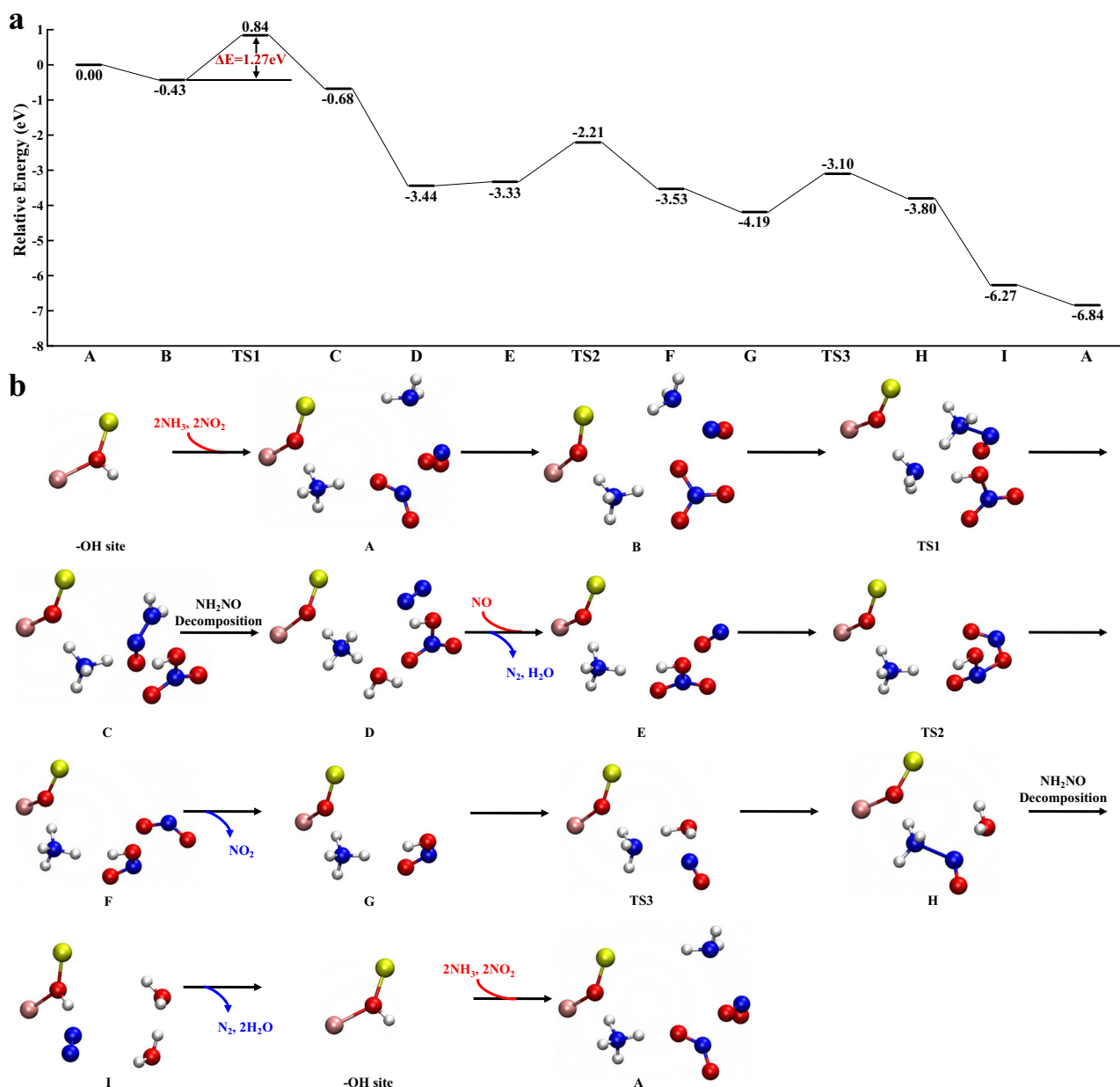


Fig. 6 | Reaction pathway of the fast SCR cycle at BAS. **a** Gibbs free energy profile. **b** Optimized geometries of the reactants, TSs and products for all elementary steps. Except for the Si and Al atoms linked to the OH group, all other atoms of the zeolite

framework are omitted for clarity. Yellow and pink circles denote Si and Al atoms, respectively. All other legends are the same as those in Fig. 4.

be noted that $\text{Cu}^{\text{II}}\text{OH}(\text{NH}_3)_3$ is different from the other forms since binuclear $\text{Cu}^{\text{II}}\text{OH}(\text{NH}_3)_3$ in one cage is thermodynamically more stable than the isolated configuration. Villamaina et al. validated the formation of $\text{Cu}^{\text{II}}(\text{OH})(\text{NH}_3)_x$ dimeric complexes in the oxidation atmosphere through $\text{CO} + \text{NH}_3$ titration experiment⁴¹. Hu et al. proposed that $\text{Cu}^{\text{II}}(\text{OH})(\text{NH}_3)$, which is structurally similar to $\text{Cu}^{\text{I}}(\text{NH}_3)_2^+$ that has one charge and two ligands, acts as inter-cage transportation medium⁶. The $\text{Z}2\text{Cu}^{\text{II}}$ species can transform $\text{ZCu}^{\text{II}}(\text{OH})$ by NH_3 -assisted hydrolysis to achieve the Cu pairing⁴². However, the regeneration of $\text{Cu}^{\text{II}}(\text{OH})$ in dimeric form showed a high energy barrier of 1.58 eV ($\text{A} \rightarrow \text{B}$ in Supplementary Fig. S19), suggesting that the dimeric $\text{Cu}^{\text{II}}(\text{OH})$ species were not highly active in the FSCR reaction.

The FSCR reaction pathway at BASs is displayed in Fig. 6. NH_3 is adsorbed on the BASs to form NH_4^+ species. Two NO_2 molecules interact with the NH_4^+ species to form NH_4NO_3 species and release an NO molecule without any energy barrier ($\text{A} \rightarrow \text{B}$). The release of NO was

also observed in our previous studies during NO_2 adsorption on H-SSZ-13 zeolite⁴³. Then, NO interacts with an NH_3 from the gas phase to form an $\text{NH}_3 \cdots \text{NO}$ complex, which further reacts with NH_4NO_3 to form NH_4^+ , HNO_3 , and NH_2NO via an H-migration process ($\text{B} \rightarrow \text{C}$). NH_2NO is decomposed into N_2 and H_2O . Subsequently, HNO_3 reacts with NO from the gas phase, resulting in the formation of HNO_2 and the release of an NO_2 molecule ($\text{E} \rightarrow \text{F}$). Reaction between HNO_2 and NH_4^+ species leads to the formation of an $\text{NH}_3 \cdots \text{NO}$ complex and an H_2O molecule. The $\text{NH}_3 \cdots \text{NO}$ complex transfers an H atom to regenerate the BAS and changes into NH_2NO , which then decomposes into N_2 and H_2O . The whole catalytic cycle is completed. The overall energy barrier of the FSCR over the Brønsted acid site is 1.27 eV, which corresponds to the reaction between NH_4NO_3 and the $\text{NH}_3 \cdots \text{NO}$ complex, much lower than that over various Cu sites. The DFT-calculated results indicate that the FSCR process in the SSZ-13 zeolite system tends to occur at BASs.

In summary, by combining the analysis of in situ spectroscopic measurements with DFT calculations, we found that NO₂ leads to the deep oxidation of copper species as Cu^{II} species (fw-Cu^{II} and NH₃-solvated Cu^{II} with high CNS), which significantly inhibits the mobility of Cu sites. As a result, the FSCR reaction occurs primarily at the BASs even though it has a higher energy barrier (1.27 eV) than the locally homogeneous SSCr reaction at dynamic sites (about 1.0 eV). This work reveals the origin of the abnormal NH₃-SCR behavior over the commercial Cu-SSZ-13 catalyst in the presence of NO₂.

Methods

Sample preparation

The initial Cu-SSZ-13 zeolite was in situ synthesized by a one-pot method¹⁵. The ratio of Na₂O/Al₂O₃/H₂O/SiO₂/Cu-TEPA was 3.5/1.0/200/25/3 and the crystallization of the zeolite was performed at 120 °C for 5 days. Due to the excess Cu in the initial product, aftertreatments were required to optimize the Cu contents and distribution. In detail, the as-synthesized Cu-SSZ-13 was post-treated with 0.1 mol/L HNO₃ at 80 °C for 12 h to remove CuO_x species. After calcination at 600 °C, the sample was stirred in NH₄NO₃ solution (0.01–0.2 mol/L) at 40 °C for the second post-treatment process, followed by filtration, washing, drying and calcination at 600 °C. The obtained Cu-SSZ-13 catalysts were Al-rich zeolites with Si/Al of ~5 and various Cu loadings from 0.4 to 3.8 wt.% (Supplementary Table 2).

Catalyst evaluation

The standard SCR (SSCR), fast SCR (FSCR) and slow SCR (NO₂-SCR) reactions were carried out in a fixed-bed flow reactor system with an online Nicolet Is50 spectrometer, which was used to detect the concentrations of reactants and products. The SSCr conditions included 500 ppm NO and 500 ppm NH₃; the FSCR conditions included 250 ppm NO, 250 ppm NO₂ and 500 ppm NH₃; the NO₂-SCR conditions included 300 ppm NO₂ and 500 ppm NH₃. All the conditions included 3.5% H₂O, 5% O₂ and N₂ balance. The total flow rate was 500 mL/min. The NO_x (NO and NO₂) conversion was calculated at steady state:

$$NO \text{ conversion} = \left(1 - \frac{[NO]_{out}}{[NO]_{in}}\right) \times 100\% \quad (5)$$

$$NO_2 \text{ conversion} = \left(1 - \frac{[NO_2]_{out}}{[NO_2]_{in}}\right) \times 100\% \quad (6)$$

$$NO_x \text{ conversion} = \left(1 - \frac{[NO]_{out} + [NO_2]_{out}}{[NO]_{in} + [NO_2]_{in}}\right) \times 100\% \quad (7)$$

To conduct the kinetic studies, the gas hourly space velocity (GHSV) was controlled by adjusting the catalyst weight. The GHSV of SSCr, FSCR and NO₂-SCR were about ~800,000 h⁻¹, ~1,000,000 h⁻¹ and ~2,000,000 h⁻¹, respectively. The reaction rates (*r*) in this study were normalized by catalyst weight based on Eq. (8). The activation energies (*E_a*) were calculated by the Arrhenius Eq. (9).

$$r = \frac{F_{NO_x} \cdot X_{NO_x}}{W_{cat}} \quad (8)$$

$$r = [NO_x]_0 A e^{\left(-\frac{E_a}{RT}\right)} \quad (9)$$

where *F_{NO_x}*

 represents the NO_x flow rate (mol/s), *X_{NO_x}* represents the NO_x conversion, *W_{cat}* is the mass of the catalyst (g), and [NO_x]₀ is the inlet concentration of NO_x. NO_x represents NO, NO₂ or a mixture of both.

Characterization

The elemental composition of the catalysts was measured by inductively coupled plasma atomic emission spectroscopy (ICP-AES). N₂ adsorption-desorption analysis of the samples was conducted on a Micromeritics ASAP 2020 instrument. The acid site distribution and contents were measured by NH₃ temperature-programmed desorption (NH₃-TPD) using the NH₃-SCR activity measurement instrument described above. Samples of about 30 mg were used and pretreated in 10% O₂/N₂ at 500 °C for 30 min before cooling down to 120 °C. Then, the gas was changed to 500 ppm NH₃/N₂ for 60 min, followed by N₂ purging for 60 min. Finally, the temperature was raised to 700 °C at a rate of 10 °C/min.

The in situ X-ray absorption fine structure (in situ XAFS) experiments were performed on the 1W1B beamline of Beijing Synchrotron Radiation Facility (BSRF). The absorption data from ~200 eV to 800 eV of the Cu K-edge (8979 eV) were collected. The sample was first pretreated in O₂/He at 500 °C for 30 min before decreasing the temperature to 200 °C, after which the Pre. spectra were collected. Then, the sample was exposed to 500 ppm NH₃/He, 500 ppm NO/He and 500 ppm NH₃/He + 500 ppm NO/He for 60 min, respectively, and spectra were collected. After reduction by (NO+NH₃)/He, the sample was exposed to 5% O₂/N₂ and 500 ppm NO₂/N₂ for 60 min, respectively, to obtain the absorption data for the oxidized sample. Moreover, the in situ absorption data were collected after the pretreated samples were exposed to SSCr, FSCR and NO₂-SCR atmospheres for 60 min. The X-ray absorption near-edge structure (XANES) data were background-corrected and normalized using the Athena module implemented in the IFFEFIT software package⁴⁴. Extended X-ray absorption fine structure (EXAFS) data were analyzed and fitted using Athena and Artemis (3.0 < *k* < 13.0 Å⁻¹). An amplitude reduction factor (*S₀*²) of 0.85 was used for all the fitted data sets. Wavelet transform (WT) analysis of the EXAFS was performed to precisely investigate the local coordination environment of copper species.

Computational details

Spin-polarized periodic DFT calculations were carried out with the Vienna ab initio simulation package (VASP)⁴⁵. The Perdew–Burke–Ernzerhof (PBE) generalized gradient approximation was adopted with the van der Waals correction proposed by Grimme (i.e., DFT-D3 method)⁴⁶. The Kohn-Sham orbitals were expanded with a plane-wave basis set with a cutoff energy of 500 eV, and the plane augmented wave (PAW) method was used to describe the interaction between the valence electrons and the cores⁴⁷. The DFT + U method was applied to Cu 3d states with *U_{eff}* = 6.0 eV to describe the on-site Coulomb interactions^{29,48}. During geometrical optimization, the self-consistent-field electronic energies were converged to 1 × 10⁻⁵ eV and all other atoms were fully relaxed until the maximum force on the atoms was less than 2 × 10⁻² eV/Å. The Brillouin zone was sampled with a Monkhorst-Pack k-point grid of 1 × 2 × 2. The Gaussian smearing method was utilized, with a smearing width of 0.2 eV. The transition states of elementary steps were located using the climbing image nudged elastic band (CI-NEB) method with several intermediate images between initial and final states^{49,50}. Thermodynamic data were processed with the VASPkit code⁵¹ and the Gibbs free energies were calculated at 200 °C. The SSZ-13 zeolite structure was modelled using two rhombohedral unit cells (24 tetrahedrally coordinated atoms) with size of 18.84 Å × 9.42 Å × 9.42 Å (Supplementary Fig. 20). One Si atom was replaced by one Al atom in each double 6-membered ring, resulting in a model with a Si/Al ratio of 11. One H atom was introduced onto one of the O atoms connected with each Al atom to keep the structure charge-neutral. Based on previous studies^{4,29}, the present computational settings and models were reliable for investigating the NH₃-SCR mechanism over Cu-SSZ-13 zeolites.

Data availability

All data generated and analyzed in this study are provided in the Article and Supplementary Information, and are also available from the corresponding authors upon reasonable request.

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Author contributions

H.H. and G.H. designed and supervised the research. Y.L.S. designed and performed the experiments with J.D., Y.S. and Z.L. G.H. and Y.F. conducted the DFT calculations. F.L., X.S. and Y.Y. provided suggestions on the manuscript. Y.L.S., G.H. and H.H. wrote the manuscript. All authors discussed the results and commented on the manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Additional information

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