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**Zhijun Zuo, Pedro J. Ramírez,
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The Low-Temperature Conversion of Methane to Methanol on Ce-O_x/Cu₂O catalysts: Water Controlled Activation of the C-H Bond

Zhijun Zuo,^a Pedro J. Ramírez,^b Sanjaya Senanayake,^c Ping Liu^{c,*} and José A. Rodríguez^{c,*}

^a Key Laboratory of Coal Science and Technology of Ministry of Education and Shanxi Province, Taiyuan University of Technology, Taiyuan 030024, Shanxi, China

^b Facultad de Ciencias, Universidad Central de Venezuela, Caracas 1020-A, Venezuela

^c Chemistry Department, Brookhaven National Laboratory, Upton, NY 11973, USA

Supporting Information Placeholder

ABSTRACT: An inverse CeO₂/Cu₂O/Cu(111) catalyst is able to activate methane at room temperature producing C, CH_x fragments and CO_x species on the oxide surface. The addition of water to the system leads to a drastic change in the selectivity of methane activation yielding only adsorbed CH_x fragments. At a temperature of 450 K, in the presence of water, a CH₄ → CH₃OH catalytic transformation occurs with a high selectivity. OH groups formed by the dissociation of water saturate the catalyst surface, removing sites that could decompose CH_x fragments, and generating centers on which methane can directly interact to yield methanol.

Methane is the main component of natural gas. The high abundance of methane in our planet makes it an attractive fuel and building block for the production of fine commodity chemicals.¹ Development of a method for a direct conversion of methane to methanol can lead to a major commercial breakthrough in the use of methane.¹ The partial oxidation of methane to methanol is challenging because the reaction typically progresses all the way to yield CO and/or CO₂.²

Reactions (1) and (2) are both exothermic, and at temperatures above 600 K reaction (2) becomes the preferred pathway from a thermodynamic viewpoint.² Thus, to trap the methanol as a product or intermediate, it is essential to find materials that can activate methane in an efficient way at low temperatures (< 500 K).^{2,3} This is difficult because the C-H bond in CH₄ has the highest bond energy (104 kcal/mol) amongst organic compounds. The growing need for inexpensive methods to convert methane to methanol has sparked considerable interest in different approaches that catalyze this process.^{3,4,5,6,7,8,9} The enzyme methane monooxygenase produces methanol from methane, but cannot be used for industrial-scale reactions.^{4,7} In the enzyme, the conversion process is probably carried out by a group of three copper ions.⁴ It has been found that copper-exchange zeolites can mimic the nuclearity and reactivity of active sites of the methane monooxygenase.^{3,9} In the structure of the zeolites, methanol can be produced by sequential dosing of O₂ and

methane, and then flushed out with water.³ A direct catalytic transformation of methane to methanol is also possible.⁹ In this study, we show that a CeO₂/Cu₂O/Cu(111) inverse system is able to activate methane at room temperature and then, with the help of water, performs a catalytic cycle, which is highly selective to the production of methanol.

The system under investigation in this study consists of a film of Cu₂O partially covered with ceria nanoparticles.¹⁰⁻¹³ Its morphology has been studied in detail with scanning tunneling microscopy (STM) and low-energy electron microscopy (LEEM).^{10,12,13} On the Cu₂O substrate, ceria grows forming small islands (2-5 nm in size) that appear on the terraces of the surface, and large islands (30-50 nm in size) which are embedded in the substrate step edges.^{10,13} The large ceria islands have a morphology different from that seen for the two most stable surfaces of bulk ceria: CeO₂(111) and CeO₂(110).^{10,13} At small and medium coverages of ceria (< 0.5 ML), the islands are essentially a single layer of ceria {O-Ce-O-Cu staking}.^{10,13} At larger coverages, the appearance of islands with two or three ceria layers is seen.^{10,13} From previous studies, it is known that the CeO₂/Cu₂O/Cu(111) system is quite active for the dissociation of O₂ and H₂O and is an excellent catalyst for the oxidation of CO (O₂ + 2CO → 2CO₂) and the PROX process.^{10,14}

We investigated the dissociation of methane on a series of CeO₂/Cu₂O/Cu(111) surfaces at room temperature. Figure 1 shows C 1s XPS spectra collected after exposing a plain Cu₂O film and a film covered ~ 40% with ceria to 1 Torr of CH₄ at 300 K for 5 minutes. On the plain Cu₂O film, the adsorption of methane is negligible. In contrast, the CeO₂/Cu₂O surface activates methane. Clear peaks are seen in Figure 1 for carbon, CH_x and CO_x species.^{15,16} A fraction of the adsorbed methane undergoes complete decomposition: CH₄ → CH₃ → CH₂ → CH → C. Some of the generated C adatoms react with O atoms from the surface to form CO_x species. Less than a monolayer of methane react with the CeO₂/Cu₂O/Cu(111) surface and the changes in the oxidation state of Cu and Ce are negligible. The deposited CH_x species desorbed when the sample temperature was increased from 300 to 400 K. These species are not seen when the CeO₂/Cu₂O/Cu(111) is exposed to methane at 450 K (see Figure S1 in Supporting Information). At this temperature, a

large amount of carbon is deposited on the surface (Figure S1) and there is a substantial reduction of the CeO_2 and Cu_2O present in the sample. At 450 K, the mixed-metal oxide is extremely efficient for the cleavage of all the C-H bonds of methane and the generated C and H adatoms react with O sites from Cu_2O and CeO_2 to produce CO and H_2O .

Figure 1. C 1s XPS Spectra collected after exposing $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}/\text{Cu}(\text{III})$, $\text{CeO}_2/\text{Cu}_2\text{O}/\text{Cu}(\text{III})$ and $\text{H}_2\text{O}/\text{CeO}_2/\text{Cu}_2\text{O}/\text{Cu}(\text{III})$ to 1 Torr of methane at 300 K for 5 minutes. In the $\text{CeO}_2/\text{Cu}_2\text{O}/\text{Cu}(\text{III})$ system, ~ 40% of the Cu_2O film was covered by ceria. To generate the $\text{H}_2\text{O}/\text{CeO}_2/\text{Cu}_2\text{O}/\text{Cu}(\text{III})$ sample, the $\text{CeO}_2/\text{Cu}_2\text{O}/\text{Cu}(\text{III})$ surface was exposed to 50 Langmuir of water at 300 K.

The ability of $\text{CeO}_2/\text{Cu}_2\text{O}/\text{Cu}(\text{III})$ to dissociate water,¹³ $\text{H}_2\text{O} \rightarrow \text{OH} + \text{H}$, can be used to control the activation of methane. When the C-rich surface obtained by exposing $\text{CeO}_2/\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$ to methane at 450 K was treated with water, there was a very large reduction in the intensity of the C features in the C 1s region (Figure S2). Furthermore, if water is pre-dosed to $\text{CeO}_2/\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$, the selectivity towards the production of CH_x increases to 100 % (top spectrum in Figure 1). Surface sites that are highly active for the full decomposition of methane are probably blocked by OH groups and the signals for C and CO_x species disappear from the C 1s region. As seen below, this phenomenon can greatly facilitate the conversion of methane into methanol.

CH_x and OH groups coadsorbed on $\text{CeO}_2/\text{Cu}_2\text{O}/\text{Cu}(\text{III})$ do not react to yield methanol at room temperature. The system cannot overcome the activation barriers associated with the cleavage of HO-surface and H_xC -surface bonds. However, Figure 2 shows data for the conversion of methane into

methanol at 450 K under a water-rich environment. Plain Cu_2O is inert as a catalyst. As ceria is added to the copper oxide, there is an increase in the catalytic production of methanol and CO/ CO_2 are only secondary products. At the maximum of catalytic activity the ratio of methanol to CO/ CO_2 is close to 3:1. The pressure of water had a strong effect on the selectivity towards the production of methanol. In Figure 3,

Figure 2. Production of methanol and CO/ CO_2 as a function of ceria coverage in a series of $\text{CeO}_2/\text{Cu}_2\text{O}/\text{Cu}(\text{III})$ catalysts. The samples were exposed to 1 Torr of CH_4 , 0.5 Torr of O_2 and 4 Torr of H_2O at 450 K.

we compare the amounts of methanol and CO/ CO_2 formed as a function of the water pressure in the reactant mixture. If water is not present, the amount of methanol formed is minimal. The highly active sites of the surface are not blocked

Figure 3. Production of methanol and CO/ CO_2 as a function of water pressure on a $\text{CeO}_2/\text{Cu}_2\text{O}/\text{Cu}(\text{III})$ catalyst in which ~ 40% of the Cu_2O was covered by ceria. The samples were exposed to 1 Torr of CH_4 , 0.5 Torr of O_2 and 0, 1 or 4 Torr of H_2O at 450 K.

and the reaction $\text{CH}_4 + \text{nO}_2 \rightarrow \text{CO/CO}_2$ takes place instead of methanol formation. In fact both reactions are feasible from a thermodynamic viewpoint,² but most of the methanol formed may be decomposed into CO/CO_2 .³ As water is added the selectivity towards methanol clearly improves. In principle, water could be helping the $\text{CH}_4 \rightarrow \text{CH}_3\text{OH}$ conversion in two ways: Blocking active sites for the dissociation of methanol or by opening a new reaction path for the direct reaction of CH_4 or CH_3 with OH groups. These two possibilities were explored using calculations based on density-functional theory (DFT) (See SI for detail).

The interaction of methane with $\text{Cu}_2\text{O/Cu(111)}$ and $\text{CeO}_2/\text{Cu}_2\text{O/Cu(111)}$ surfaces were studied based on the models developed in previous studies.^{10,17} A top and side view of these models is shown in Figure S3. The calculations indicate that on both surfaces, methane is only physisorbed. The dissociation of methane on a $\text{Cu}_2\text{O/Cu(111)}$ surface is problematic (reaction energy of 0.30 eV and activation barrier of 1.60 eV) in agreement with the XPS data in Figure 1. With the presence of CeO_2 nanoparticles on the Cu_2O film, the interfacial Ce^{4+} sites help methane dissociation to methyl (reaction energy of -1.23 eV and activation energy of 0.51 eV) at the interfacial O sites (Figure 4). Thus, methane can dissociate on $\text{CeO}_2/\text{Cu}_2\text{O/Cu(111)}$ at room temperature. The calculated activation energy is much smaller than typical values found on metals,^{8,18} A key factor is the participation of the O centers of $\text{CeO}_2/\text{Cu}_2\text{O/Cu(111)}$ in C-H bond breaking (Figure 4). The calculated activation energy of 0.51 eV compares well with activation energies found for systems that can activate methane at room temperature like Zn modified H-ZSM-5⁶ and Ni dispersed on ceria.¹⁵

Figure 4. Calculated adsorption geometry for methane adsorption and dissociation on $\text{CeO}_2/\text{Cu}_2\text{O/Cu(111)}$. The blue, brown, red, grey and white balls represent Ce, Cu, O, C and H atoms, respectively.

The deposition of CeO_2 also helps water dissociation. On $\text{Cu}_2\text{O/Cu(111)}$, water dissociation is an activated process (reaction energy of 0.33 eV and activation energy of 0.84 eV). The presence of CeO_2 enables a spontaneous O-H bond cleavage. Although the dissociation of methane on $\text{CeO}_2/\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$ is energetically favorable; yet it cannot compete with water dissociation at the same sites, which. Therefore, the surface hydroxylation is expected, and water should have strong effect in the selectivity of the reaction processes. The calculations indicate that following the Langmuir-Hinshelwood (LH) mechanism the reaction involving dissociated $\text{CH}_3(\text{ads})$ at the interfacial O sites and $\text{OH}(\text{ads})$ at Ce sites to yield methanol is rather difficult (reaction energy of 0.48 eV and activation barrier of 2.80 eV, Figure S4). This is likely hindered by the high stability of $\text{CH}_3(\text{ads})$ at the oxygen sites. The reaction could follow less direct paths in which methyl reacts with O to form CH_3O and then is hydrogenated to form methanol, as proposed in another theoretical

studies.^{6,9} One interesting route found in the DFT calculations involves a direct dissociation of methane on the dissociated OH groups bound to Cu_2O or $\text{CeO}_2/\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$ via the Eley-Rydal (ER) mechanism, see Figure 5. Following this pathway on $\text{HO/CeO}_2/\text{Cu}_2\text{O/Cu(111)}$, the dissociation of methane leads to the direct formation of methanol at the OH anchored at Ce sites and avoids the cleavage of strong O-CH₃ bonds. As a result, the methanol formation is greatly facilitated (reaction energy of -0.75 eV and activation energy of 1.22 eV). The calculations show that without the use of the OH bound to Ce sites, the methyl species from methane dissociation at interfacial Ce sites are too stable to be oxi-

Figure 5. Structures of initial (left), transition (middle) and final (right) states for methanol synthesis involving dissociative adsorption of methane over the $\text{OH}(\text{ads})$ species on $\text{CeO}_2/\text{Cu}_2\text{O/Cu(111)}$. The blue, brown, red, grey and white balls represent Ce, Cu, O, C and H atoms, respectively.

dized, rather preferring further hydrogenation to carbon. However, this is not the case for $\text{Cu}_2\text{O/Cu(111)}$. Although the surface hydroxylation is also likely to occur, the direct methane dissociation on $\text{OH}(\text{ads})$ is highly activated with the barriers of at least 1.93 eV depending on the position of $\text{OH}(\text{ads})$ (Figure S5). The high activity of these $\text{OH}(\text{ads})$ species on $\text{CeO}_2/\text{Cu}_2\text{O/Cu(111)}$ is associated with the hybridization between O 2p orbitals and 4f orbitals of Ce^{4+} . It leads to a unique motif, which allows the easy approaching of methane to the O atom of the OH species. In addition, it also results in an OH species with high-lying O 2p states, which are more active for attracting and dissociating methane than $\text{OH}(\text{ads})$ bound to $\text{Cu}_2\text{O/Cu(111)}$, see Figure 6.

Figure 6. The O 2p PDOS for $\text{OH}(\text{ads})$ at bridge (a) and atop (b) sites of Cu ions on $\text{Cu}_2\text{O/Cu(111)}$, and top of Ce ions on $\text{CeO}_2/\text{Cu}_2\text{O/Cu(111)}$ (c).

In summary, we have found that a CeO₂/Cu₂O interface is able to bind and dissociate methane at room temperature. In this aspect, it mimics the activity of the methane monooxygenase⁴ and a few inorganic systems.^{5,6,19} The products of the adsorption process on CeO₂/Cu₂O are C, CH_x fragments and CO_x species. The addition of water to the system leads to a drastic change in the selectivity of methane activation yielding only adsorbed CH_x fragments. At a temperature of 450 K, in the presence of water, a CH₄ → CH₃OH catalytic transformation occurs with a high selectivity. OH groups formed by the dissociation of water saturate the catalyst surface, removing sites that could decompose CH_x fragments, and generating centers, which have special electronic properties, on which methane can directly interact to yield methanol.

ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

Experimental procedures. C 1s XPS spectra collected after dosing methane and water to a CeO₂/Cu₂O system at 450 K. Details for the DFT calculations. Structures of the models used in DFT calculations to describe bare Cu₂O/Cu(111) and CeO₂/Cu₂O/Cu(111) surfaces systems as well as some of the reaction intermediates and transition states involved.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Corresponding Authors

* pingliu3@bnl.gov; * rodriguez@bnl.gov

Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interests.

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