

Electrocatalysis

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A Strategy to Promote the Electrocatalytic Activity of Spinel for Oxygen Reduction by Structure Reversal

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Abstract: The electrocatalytic performance of a spinel for the oxygen reduction reaction (ORR) can be significantly promoted by reversing its crystalline structure from the normal to the inverse. As the spinel structure reversed, the activation and cleavage of O–O bonds are accelerated owing to a dissimilarity effect of the distinct metal atoms co-occupying octahedral sites. The $\text{Co}^{\text{II}}\text{Fe}^{\text{III}}\text{Co}^{\text{III}}\text{O}_4$ spinel with the Fe and Co co-occupying inverse structure exhibits an excellent ORR activity, which even exceeds that of the state-of-the-art commercial Pt/C by 42 mV in alkaline medium.

The development of high-performance and low-cost catalytic materials for the oxygen reduction reaction (ORR) has been a major challenge for the large-scale application of fuel cells.^[1] So far, the platinum-based materials have been the best ORR electrocatalyst,^[2] but they cannot meet the requirement of widespread commercialization of fuel cells owing to their high price and scarcity. The ultimate way to address this issue is to exploit low-cost non-precious ORR electrocatalysts.^[3] Among noble-metal-free alternatives, spinel materials, such as Co_3O_4 and MnCo_2O_4 , have received much attention because of their high element abundance, low cost, and low environmental impact.^[4] Nevertheless, to replace platinum, the spinel ORR activities are still less competitive. Strategies to enhance spinel activity include doping with cations, coating with metals, integrating conductive nanostructures, and introducing oxygen defects.^[5] Although these approaches have been proven to be effective, further promotion of their ORR activity is still necessary.

Herein, we report that, for the first time, the ORR catalytic activity of spinel can be significantly enhanced by reversing the spinel crystalline structure from normal to inverse. It is well known that the normal spinel structure, with general formula AB_2X_4 , is a cubic close-packed array of X^{2-} ions with the A and B ions occupying the interstices.^[6] The A atoms occupy the tetrahedral sites and the B atoms occupy the octahedral sites. Thus, the normal spinel can be written as $\{\text{A}\}[\text{B}_2]\text{X}_4$, where the braces “{}” represent the tetrahedral site

occupations and the brackets “[]” represent the octahedral site occupations. According to a site preference theory,^[6] if $\{\text{B}\}[\text{A}]$ is more stable than $\{\text{A}\}[\text{B}]$, the $\{\text{A}\}[\text{B}_2]\text{X}_4$ will be changed to its inverse spinel structure, that is, $\{\text{B}\}[\text{A}][\text{B}]\text{X}_4$. It means that all the A atoms and one-half of the B atoms have exchanged places. In Co-Fe spinel oxides, there is a possibility to form an inverse spinel structure, that is, $\{\text{B}\}[\text{A}][\text{B}]\text{X}_4$, as long as Fe and Co atoms co-share the octahedral sites.^[7]

Herein, to reveal the structural effect on spinel electrocatalytic performance, we tuned a Co-Fe based spinel structure from its normal to the inverse and then back to its normal by adjusting the iron content in the synthesis. Figure 1

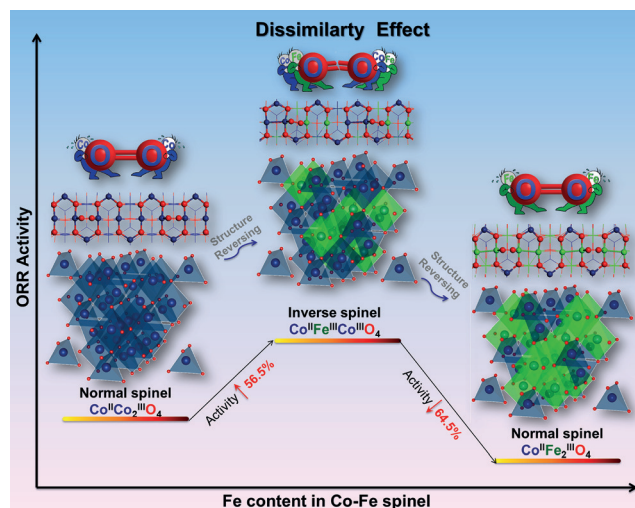


Figure 1. The spinel structures of $\{\text{Co}\}[\text{Co}_2]\text{O}_4$, $\{\text{Co}\}[\text{FeCo}]\text{O}_4$, and $\{\text{Co}\}[\text{Fe}_2]\text{O}_4$ and the corresponding oxygen adsorptions and ORR activities (Fe green, Co blue, adsorbed O magenta, lattice O red).

illustrates the structures of as-prepared Co-Fe based spinel. With iron content increase, the spinel structures vary from the normal spinel structure as $\{\text{Co}\}[\text{Co}_2]\text{O}_4$ to the inverse as $\{\text{Co}\}[\text{FeCo}]\text{O}_4$, and eventually to the normal spinel structure as $\{\text{Co}\}[\text{Fe}_2]\text{O}_4$. After being supported on nitrogen-doped graphene, these spinel materials exhibit different ORR activities in alkaline medium. Among them, the $\{\text{Co}\}[\text{FeCo}]\text{O}_4/\text{NG}$ with an inverse structure shows the highest ORR activity, which is even better than the state-of-the-art commercial Pt/C in the half-wave potential ($E_{1/2}$) by 42 mV. Density functional theory (DFT) calculations show that the higher ORR activity of the inverse spinel $\{\text{Co}\}[\text{FeCo}]\text{O}_4$ originates from the dissimilarity effect of Fe and Co atoms at the octahedral site, which modulates the oxygen

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adsorption energy (E_{ad}) and elongates the adsorbed oxygen bond compared to that on the normal spinel.

The crystal structures of the synthesized Co-Fe based materials were confirmed by using X-ray diffraction analysis (XRD), as shown in Figure 2a. The well-defined diffraction

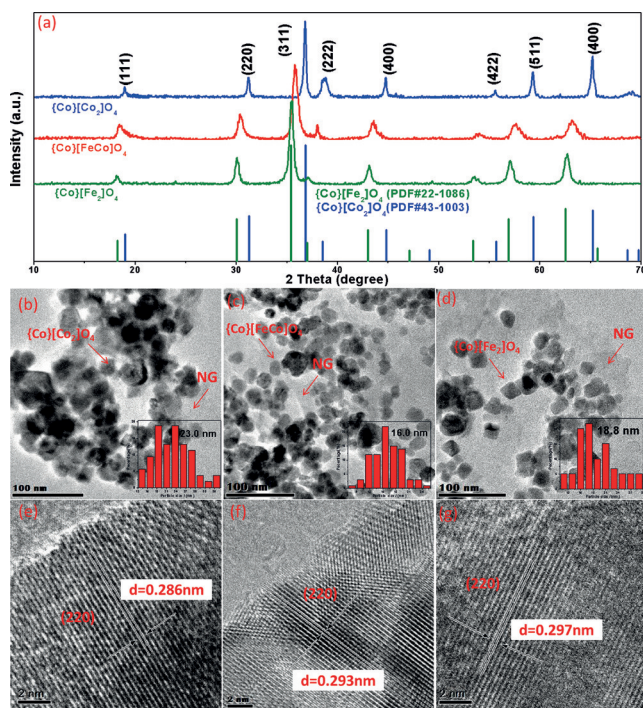


Figure 2. a) X-ray diffraction patterns ($\text{Cu K}\alpha$ radiation) of {Co}[Co₂]O₄, {Co}[FeCo]O₄, and {Co}[Fe₂]O₄ nanoparticles. b) g) TEM and particle-size distribution histograms and HRTEM images of {Co}[Co₂]O₄/NG (b and e), {Co}[FeCo]O₄/NG (c and f), and {Co}[Fe₂]O₄/NG (d and g).

patterns with diffraction peaks corresponding to (111), (220), (311), (222), (400), (422), (511), and (440) crystal planes, respectively, indicate a highly crystalline cubic spinel structure for the synthesized Co-Fe based materials.^[8] The diffraction patterns for as-made {Co}[Co₂]O₄ and {Co}[Fe₂]O₄ match those for the standard Co₃O₄ and CoFe₂O₄, confirming the normal spinel structures of the as-made {Co}[Co₂]O₄ and {Co}[Fe₂]O₄. The shift of diffraction peaks to a smaller 2θ angle position indicates the expansion of crystalline structure with Fe³⁺ ions substituting Co³⁺ ions in octahedral sites. This is because Fe³⁺ ions (0.65 Å) is larger than Co³⁺ ions (0.61 Å).^[9] The average particle size for {Co}[Co₂]O₄, {Co}[FeCo]O₄, and {Co}[Fe₂]O₄ is 22.3, 14.9, and 17.7 nm, respectively (calculated by using the Debye–Scherrer equation from XRD results). This calculated particle size is consistent with the observation based on the transmission electron microscope (TEM) images (Supporting Information, Table S1). The TEM images show the spinel nanoparticles with a diameter of about 20 nm uniformly dispersed on the surface of N-doped graphene (Figure 2b–d; Supporting Information, Figure S1). The high-resolution TEM images in Figure 2e–g show the distinct lattice (220) fringes of 0.286, 0.293, and 0.297 nm for {Co}[Co₂]O₄, {Co}[FeCo]O₄, and {Co}[Fe₂]O₄, respectively, which

further confirms the expansion of crystalline structure with Fe³⁺ ions substituting Co³⁺ ions in octahedral sites.

The Co 2p X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) spectrum (Supporting Information, Figure S2) shifts to lower binding energy and decreases in intensity with the decrease of the Co content in the order of {Co}[Co₂]O₄, {Co}[FeCo]O₄, and {Co}[Fe₂]O₄. The Co 2p XPS spectrum splits into 2p_{1/2} and 2p_{3/2} components at 780.0 eV and 795.5 eV, respectively. To avoid the obstruction of Auger signals from Fe, the analysis of the Co chemical state was based on the Co 2p_{1/2} spectra. In the XPS spectra of {Co}[Co₂]O₄ and {Co}[FeCo]O₄, Co 2p_{1/2} can be fitted as two distinct peaks at the lower binding energy for Co²⁺ state and at higher for Co³⁺ state.^[10] The atomic ratio of Co²⁺ to Co³⁺ is 0.485 and 1.00 for {Co}[Co₂]O₄ and {Co}[FeCo]O₄, respectively, which nearly matches the atomic ratio in {Co^{II}}[Co^{III}]O₄ and {Co^{II}}[Co^{III}Fe^{III}]O₄ spinel. For the {Co}[Fe₂]O₄, the Co 2p_{1/2} spectrum has one peak at the binding energy of 795.5 eV, indicating the absence of Co³⁺. The peak positions of Fe 2p XPS spectra (Supporting Information, Figure S3) in {Co}[Fe₂]O₄ (710.2 eV) and {Co}[FeCo]O₄ (709.9 eV) closely match that of Fe in Fe₂O₃ (710.4 eV).^[11] It confirms that the Fe species exist as Fe^{III} state in both of {Co}[Fe₂]O₄ and {Co}[FeCo]O₄. The bulk Fe/Co atom ratio, analyzed by using energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDX), is 0.503 and 1.93 for {Co}[FeCo]O₄ and {Co}[Fe₂]O₄, respectively (Supporting Information, Figure S4 and Table S2). These results confirm that the as-prepared spinel structures are well agreement with those presented in Figure 1.

The electrocatalytic activities of the as-prepared catalysts toward the ORR were examined by using linear sweep voltammetry (LSV) in an O₂-saturated 0.1 M KOH solution at a rotational rate of 1600 rpm (Figure 3). The electrocatalytic activities, as estimated from $E_{1/2}$, are maximized for {Co}[FeCo]O₄/NG and decrease successively for {Co}[Co₂]O₄/NG, {Co}[Fe₂]O₄/NG and Pt/C, with $E_{1/2}$ values of 866, 846, 824, and 824 mV (versus the reversible hydrogen electrode, RHE), respectively. The same order of the kinetic current densities

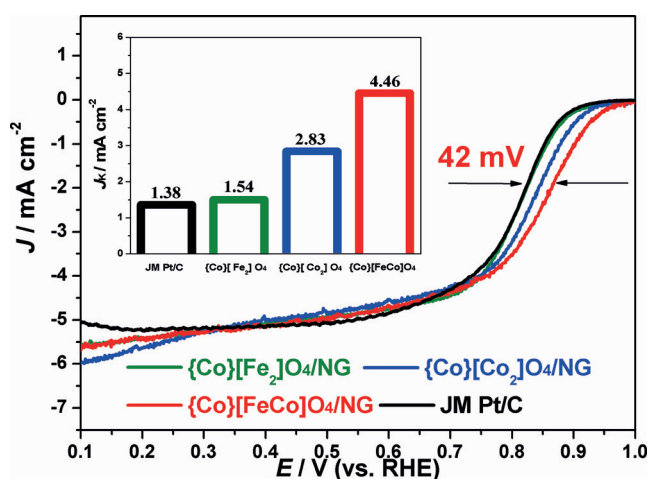


Figure 3. LSVs of {Co}[Fe₂]O₄/NG, {Co}[Co₂]O₄/NG, {Co}[FeCo]O₄/NG, and Pt/C, and corresponding j_k (inset) at 0.85 V vs. RHE in an O₂-saturated 0.1 M KOH solution at 1600 rpm. $\nu = 10 \text{ mV s}^{-1}$. Non-Pt catalyst loading: 0.6 mg cm⁻²; Pt loading: 20 $\mu\text{g Pt cm}^{-2}$.

(J_k) are also observed for these catalysts at 0.85 V vs. RHE according to the Koutecky–Levich (K-L) equation; that is, $\{Co\}[FeCo]O_4/NG$ (4.46 mA cm^{-2}) > $\{Co\}[Co_2]O_4/NG$ (2.83 mA cm^{-2}) > $\{Co\}[Fe_2]O_4/NG$ (1.54 mA cm^{-2}) > Pt/C (1.35 mA cm^{-2}) (Figure 3, inset). The Tafel slopes (Supporting Information, Figure S5) are smallest on $\{Co\}[FeCo]O_4/NG$ -modified electrode, and increased in the order of Pt/C-, $\{Co\}[Co_2]O_4/NG$ -, and $\{Co\}[Fe_2]O_4/NG$ -modified electrode. The transferred electron number, determined from the K-L plots in the Supporting Information, Figure S6, is 3.6, 3.9, and 3.8 for $\{Co\}[Fe_2]O_4/NG$, $\{Co\}[FeCo]O_4/NG$, and $\{Co\}[Co_2]O_4/NG$, respectively, indicating a four-electron pathway for the catalysis of ORR. Among the as-prepared spinel catalysts, the $\{Co\}[FeCo]O_4/NG$ catalyst exhibits the most positive onset potential (980 mV) and $E_{1/2}$ (866 mV) for ORR, which exceed the corresponding potentials of the commercial Pt/C by 65 and 42 mV, respectively. It indicates that $\{Co\}[FeCo]O_4/NG$ catalyst with the inverse spinel structure is a much better catalyst than the Pt/C for the ORR. As being aware of the contribution of NG support to the catalysis of the ORR, we evaluated the ORR activities of NG and as-made spinel materials separately. As shown in the Supporting Information, Figure S7, the highest ORR activity and smallest Tafel plots among the different spinel materials are observed for $\{Co\}[FeCo]O_4$ and the ORR activities decrease in the order $\{Co\}[Co_2]O_4 > \{Co\}[Fe_2]O_4$. These results indicate that the main contribution to the spinel ORR activity enhancement comes from the structural effect of spinel. Furthermore, the outperformance of $\{Co\}[FeCo]O_4/NG$ compared to $\{Co\}[FeCo]O_4$ or NG alone indicates a synergistic catalysis effect between NG support and spinel. Along with demonstrating that the $\{Co\}[FeCo]O_4/NG$ catalysts exhibited relatively high ORR activities, we also evaluated the stability of the $\{Co\}[FeCo]O_4/NG$ catalysts by chronoamperometric at the potential of 0.8 V vs. RHE. As shown in the Supporting Information, Figure S8, the cathodic current density decreases by less than 37% of initial state over 5.5 h of continuous operation on

the $\{Co\}[FeCo]O_4/NG$ catalyst catalyzed electrode, while the cathodic current density decreased by more than 48% on the Pt/C catalyst catalyzed electrode, indicating a better stability of $\{Co\}[FeCo]O_4/NG$. Besides, the $\{Co\}[FeCo]O_4/NG$ exhibits high selectivity toward the ORR with a remarkable tolerance for methanol (Supporting Information, Figure S9).

To gain further insight into the relationships between ORR activity and catalyst structures, we conducted DFT calculations to study the adsorption and dissociation of oxygen at the sites on the spinel (110) surface. The octahedral sites are selected for the theoretical investigation because they are the major difference between the normal and the inverse. As shown in Figure 4, there are two adsorption patterns. One is the duel pattern where O_2 molecule is adsorbed on two octahedral atoms, and another is the triangle pattern where O_2 molecule is adsorbed among one tetrahedral atom and two octahedral atoms. With a replacement of a half or the whole octahedral site Co atoms by Fe atoms, the normal spinel $\{Co\}[Co_2]O_4$ transforms into the inverse spinel $\{Co\}[FeCo]O_4$, or normal spinel $\{Co\}[Fe_2]O_4$, respectively. For both adsorption patterns, the E_{ad} does not change much from the normal spinel $\{Co\}[Co_2]O_4$ to the inverse spinel $\{Co\}[FeCo]O_4$. However, the O–O bonds adsorbed on $\{Co\}[FeCo]O_4$ are lengthened from 1.354 Å to the range of 1.360 to 1.369 Å in comparison with that on $\{Co\}[Co_2]O_4$ in the case of the duel pattern, and from 1.420 Å to the range of 1.438 to 1.436 Å in the case of triangle pattern, respectively. It means the O–O bond of adsorbed O_2 on $\{Co\}[FeCo]O_4$ is more activated than that on $\{Co\}[Co_2]O_4$. What is more, with a full replacement of Co atoms by Fe at octahedral sites, and the inverse spinel $\{Co\}[FeCo]O_4$ turning back to the normal spinel $\{Co\}[Fe_2]O_4$, the adsorption energy of oxygen drops to -0.486 eV in the case of the duel pattern, but keeps the same level as before (3.220 eV) in the case of the triangle pattern. It means that there is a poor adsorption of O_2 on $\{Co\}[Fe_2]O_4$ in the case of the duel pattern; and therefore, it is difficult for the O–O bond of adsorbed O_2 on $\{Co\}[Fe_2]O_4$ to be activated in

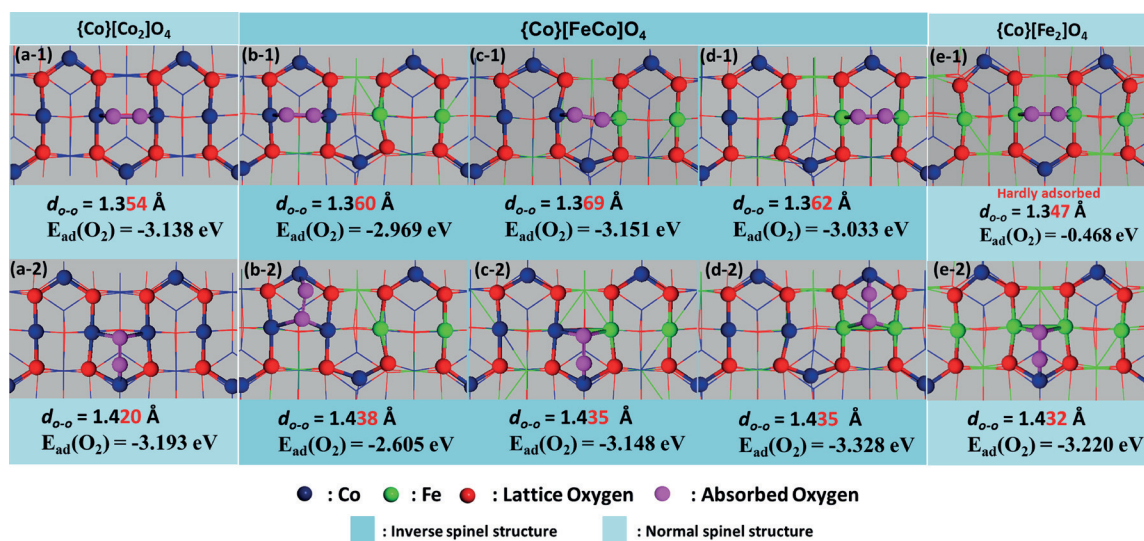


Figure 4. The O–O bond length and adsorption energy of oxygen adsorbed in duel pattern (top) and triangle pattern (bottom) of a) $\{Co\}[Co_2]O_4$, b)–d) $\{Co\}[FeCo]O_4$, and e) $\{Co\}[Fe_2]O_4$.

the case of the duel pattern. As shown in Figure 4, only on the inverse spinel $\{\text{Co}\}[\text{FeCo}]\text{O}_4$ the values of $d_{\text{O-O}}$ is lengthened to 1.36 Å or more. It indicates that the oxygen is easier to be activated on the inverse spinel $\{\text{Co}\}[\text{FeCo}]\text{O}_4$ than on the normal spinel regardless of $\{\text{Co}\}[\text{Co}_2]\text{O}_4$ or $\{\text{Co}\}[\text{Fe}_2]\text{O}_4$, explaining why the best ORR activity was observed on the inverse spinel $\{\text{Co}\}[\text{FeCo}]\text{O}_4$. Furthermore, with the matching adsorption energy, the O–O bond adsorbed on the inverse spinel $\{\text{Co}\}[\text{FeCo}]\text{O}_4$ is always slightly longer than that on the normal spinel $\{\text{Co}\}[\text{Co}_2]\text{O}_4$ or $\{\text{Co}\}[\text{Fe}_2]\text{O}_4$ (Supporting Information, Table S3). This indicates that there certainly has another factor along with the adsorption pattern that influences the O–O bond activation. We propose that the different octahedral metal atoms should be associated with the accelerating effect in the activation and cleavage of O–O bonds.

The different octahedral metal atoms promote charge polarization between them, which further favors the adsorption and dissociation of O_2 . We define these changes caused by different atoms as a dissimilarity effect. As shown in Figure 5, with the normal spinel reversing to inverse spinel,

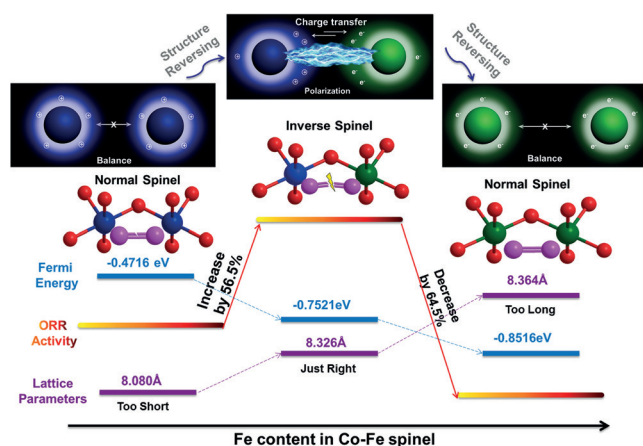


Figure 5. Representation showing the dissimilarity effect and polarization of octahedral atoms and the relationships between ORR activity and Fermi energy or lattice parameters (Fe green, Co blue, absorbed O magenta, lattice O red).

the electronic balance on the octahedral atoms is broken and charge polarization occurs between the octahedral atoms, that is, Co and Fe. At the same time, with the spinel experiencing normal, inverse, and normal structure, subsequently, both the lattice parameter and the Fermi energy reach to a modest level in the case of inverse spinel. As is well-known, the high Fermi energy of the electrocatalysts is conducive for O_2 adsorption but detrimental for the desorption of an adsorbed O atom.^[12] There also is an optimum distance for two active sites in the duel adsorption pattern.^[13] Therefore, holding a modest Fermi energy and lattice parameter is why the inverse spinel $\{\text{Co}\}[\text{FeCo}]\text{O}_4$ shows the best ORR activity in all cases. These results indicate that as long as the electronic or structural polarization occurs, sites that favor O_2 sorption and dissociation are created, and spinels will be a highly active ORR electrocatalysts. We imagine that such a dissimilarity

effect may also occur in the oxygen evolution reaction (OER) because the OER is also associated with the oxygen-containing species adsorption and desorption process. Therefore, the OER activities in alkaline medium were evaluated. As speculated, the OER activities on the inverse/normal spinel catalysts follow the same order as that of their ORR activities, that is, the higher ORR activity, the higher OER activity also (Supporting Information, Figure S10).

In summary, we have demonstrated that the electrocatalytic performance of the Co-Fe based spinel for the catalysis of ORR can be significantly promoted by reversing its structure from the normal to the inverse by adjusting iron content in the spinel. The inverse $\{\text{Co}\}[\text{FeCo}]\text{O}_4$ spinel exhibits the highest ORR activity among all spinel structures, and exceeds that of the state of art commercial Pt/C by 42 mV in alkaline medium. DFT calculations reveal that the enhancement of intrinsic ORR activity on $\{\text{Co}\}[\text{FeCo}]\text{O}_4$ originates from the so-called dissimilarity effect of Fe and Co atoms at the octahedral sites, which modulates the E_{ad} and elongates O–O bonds compared to that of the normal spinel. This work opens a new way for modulating the catalytic activity of spinel for industrial purposes that range from catalysis and sensors to supercapacitors and lithium-ion batteries.

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Keywords: dissimilarity effect · electrocatalysis · inverse spinels · oxygen reduction reaction

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