

# Synthesis and characterization of macroporous $\text{Li}_3\text{V}_2(\text{PO}_4)_3/\text{C}$ composites as cathode materials for Li-ion batteries

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**Abstract** The macroporous  $\text{Li}_3\text{V}_2(\text{PO}_4)_3/\text{C}$  composite was synthesized by oxalic acid-assisted carbon thermal reaction, and the common  $\text{Li}_3\text{V}_2(\text{PO}_4)_3/\text{C}$  composite was also prepared for comparison. These samples were characterized by X-ray diffraction (XRD), scanning electron microscope (SEM), and electrochemical performance tests. Based on XRD and SEM results, the sample has monoclinic structure and macroporous morphology when oxalic acid is introduced. Electrochemical tests show that the macroporous  $\text{Li}_3\text{V}_2(\text{PO}_4)_3/\text{C}$  sample has a high initial discharge capacity (130 mAh  $\text{g}^{-1}$  at 0.1 C) and a reversible discharge capacity of 124.9 mAh  $\text{g}^{-1}$  over 20 cycles. Moreover, the discharge capacity of the sample is still 91.5 mAh  $\text{g}^{-1}$ , even at a high rate of 2 C, which is better than that of the sample with common morphology. The improvement in electrochemical performance should be attributed to its improved lithium ion diffusion coefficient for the macroporous morphology, which was verified by cyclic voltammetry and electrochemical impedance spectroscopy.

**Keywords** Lithium vanadium phosphates · Macroporous · Li-ion batteries · Carbon thermal reaction

## Introduction

Recently, lithiated transition metal phosphates such as  $\text{LiMPO}_4$  (M=Fe, Co, Ni, and Mn) [1–6] and  $\text{Li}_3\text{M}_2(\text{PO}_4)_3$  (M=Fe and V) [7–11] have been extensively investigated as

positive materials for Li-ion battery. Among these materials, the monoclinic  $\text{Li}_3\text{V}_2(\text{PO}_4)_3$  has attracted great interests due to its large theoretical capacity, high reversible capacity, and high operating voltage [12–15]. However, the poor electrical conductivity and slow lithium ion diffusivity hinder large-scale applications of this material.

Generally, to improve the electrical conductivity and lithium ion diffusivity of this kind of cathode material, coating with electrically conductive materials such as carbon [16–18] and metal doping [17, 19] have been extensively applied. Besides the methods mentioned above, optimizing the morphology of cathode materials is considered to be another effective way to improve the electrochemical performance. Doherty et al. [20] prepared porous  $\text{LiFePO}_4/\text{C}$  electrode material with an excellent discharge capacity, especially at high rate. Xiao et al. [21] synthesized  $\text{Li}_2\text{FeSiO}_4/\text{C}$  by a facile one-step technique. They found that both the capacity and cycling performance were greatly improved due to the porous morphology. Following this idea, it is thereby expected that optimizing the morphology of  $\text{Li}_3\text{V}_2(\text{PO}_4)_3/\text{C}$  materials would result in an improvement of its electrochemical performance.

In this study, the macroporous  $\text{Li}_3\text{V}_2(\text{PO}_4)_3/\text{C}$  composite was successfully synthesized by oxalic acid-assisted carbon thermal reaction. The structural properties and morphology of  $\text{Li}_3\text{V}_2(\text{PO}_4)_3/\text{C}$  composite as well as electrochemical properties were investigated.

## Experimental

### Synthesis and characterization

All the starting materials were analytically pure grade. At first, a stoichiometric amount of  $\text{Li}_2\text{CO}_3$ ,  $\text{V}_2\text{O}_5$ , and  $\text{NH}_4\text{H}_2\text{PO}_4$  and the desired amount of oxalic acid were

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mixed. The molar ratio of  $\text{Li}_2\text{CO}_3:\text{V}_2\text{O}_5:\text{NH}_4\text{H}_2\text{PO}_4:\text{H}_2\text{C}_2\text{O}_4$  is 3:2:6:12. Meanwhile, a certain amount of starch was employed here as a carbon source for reduction and coating. The mixture was initially dispersed in ethanol and then mixed intensively by ball-milling for 5 h. After that, the mixture was dried in a blast oven at 80 °C for 4 h. As follows, the precursor was preheated at 350 °C for 4 h and finally calcined at 800 °C for 8 h to obtain macroporous  $\text{Li}_3\text{V}_2(\text{PO}_4)_3/\text{C}$  composite (labeled as LVP-2) under flowing argon. For comparison,  $\text{Li}_3\text{V}_2(\text{PO}_4)_3/\text{C}$  composite (labeled as LVP-1) without oxalic acid as assistant was also prepared by the identical process.

An X-ray diffraction (XRD) of the product was carried on a Rigaku D/max2550VB<sup>+</sup> 18 kW from 10° to 60° using graphite-monochromatized  $\text{CuK}\alpha$  radiation (40 kV, 250 mA). Both the morphologies and energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS) of the as-prepared  $\text{Li}_3\text{V}_2(\text{PO}_4)_3/\text{C}$  particles were observed by a Hitachi S-4800 scanning electron microscope equipment. The surface area for samples was measured by the Brunauer–Emmett–Teller (BET) method using a surface area analyzer (Belsorp, Japan). The samples were assembled in CR2016 coin-type cells. The working electrode consisted of dispersing 85 wt.% as-prepared powder, 10 wt.% carbon black, and 5 wt.% polyvinylidene fluoride binder into the N-methylpyrrolidone solvent to form homogeneous slurry. The slurry was then cast onto an aluminum foil, and the coated electrodes were dried at 120 °C for 12 h in a vacuum. The CR2016 coin cells were assembled in an argon-filled glove box (Mbraun, Uni-lab, Germany) with a lithium foil as the counter electrode. The electrolyte was 1 M  $\text{LiPF}_6$  in a mixture of EC–DMC–DEC (volume ratio of 1:1:1) electrolyte. The cells were galvanostatically charged and discharged between 3.0 and 4.3 V (voltage unit in this paper is versus  $\text{Li}/\text{Li}^+$ ) at room temperature (25 °C) on the electrochemical test instrument (CT2001A, Wuhan Land Electronic Co. Ltd., China). Cyclic voltammetry measurements were performed using an electrochemical workstation (Shanghai Chenhua Instrument Co. Ltd., China) at a scan rate of 0.1  $\text{mV s}^{-1}$  between 3.0 and 4.3 V. Electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) was recorded by the ZAHNER-IM6 electrochemical workstation (Germany) over the frequency range from 100 kHz to 100 mHz with an amplitude of 5 mV. The vanadium ion contents of the electrolytes were analyzed using an inductively coupled plasma (ICP) spectrometer (Thermo Fisher Scientific, 6500).

## Results and discussion

### X-ray diffraction

The XRD patterns of the LVP-1 and LVP-2 are shown in Fig. 1. All diffraction peaks are well indexed to be

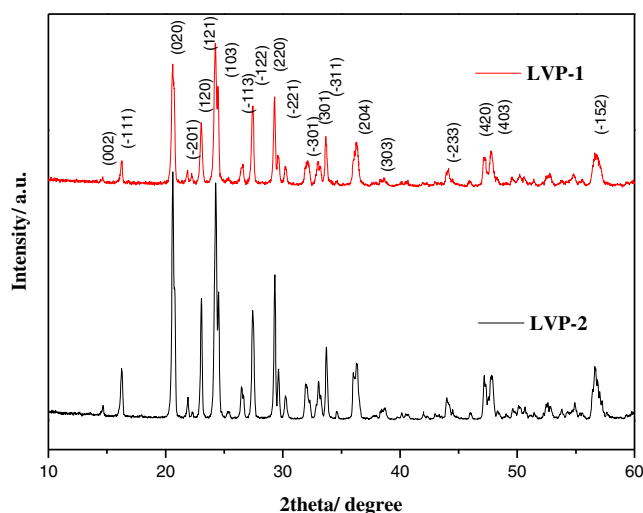


Fig. 1 XRD patterns of LVP-1 and LVP-2

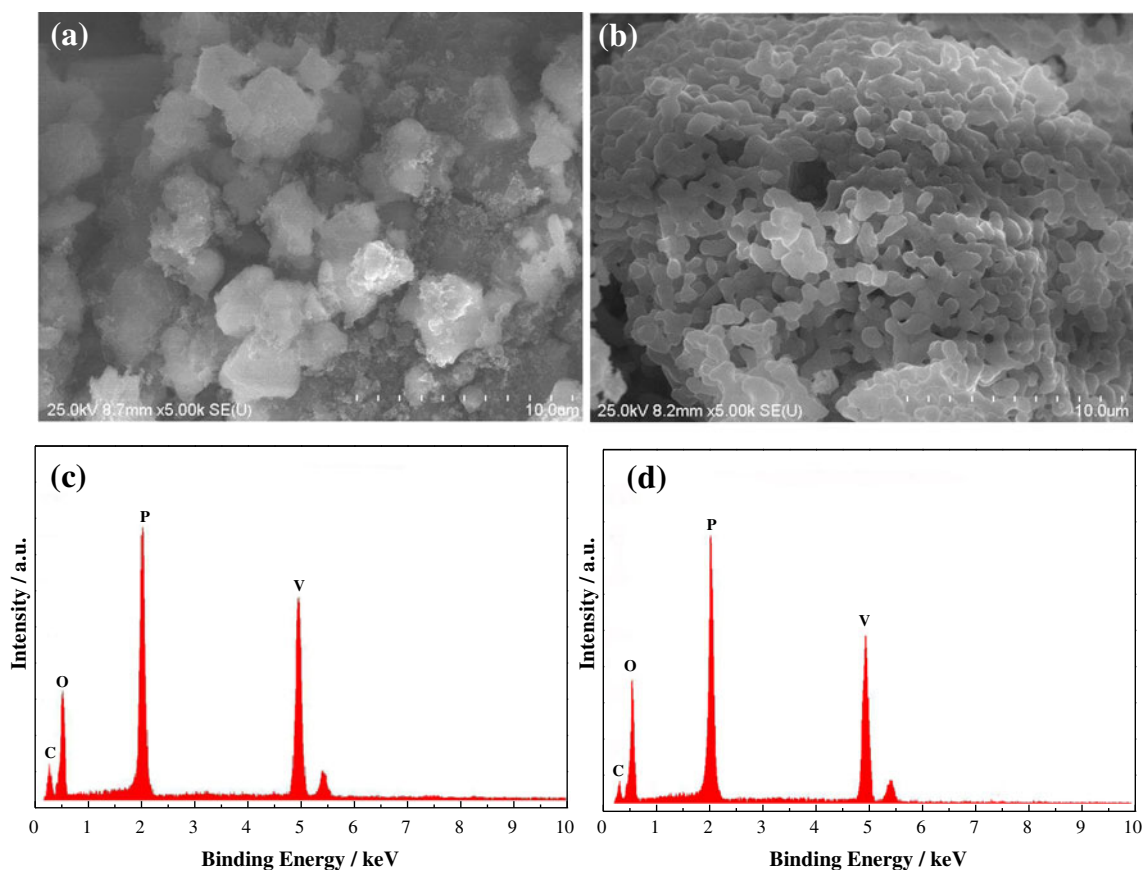
monoclinic structure with space group of  $P2_1/n$  and no phase of impurity is detected in these patterns, which are consistent with the previous reports [9, 22]. And there are no obvious differences in the XRD patterns of the two samples. This suggests that the crystal structure of LVP-2 remained stable when the oxalic acid was added during preparation. And the EDX results as shown in Fig. 2c, d display that there is a carbon element in both samples.

### SEM of $\text{Li}_3\text{V}_2(\text{PO}_4)_3/\text{C}$ composite

Figure 2 presents the SEM images of the two samples. As Fig. 2a shows, LVP-1 appears the agglomeration of particles in an irregular shape. When the oxalic acid was introduced during preparation, bulky well-formed macroporous morphology in Fig. 2b is related to the vigorous evolution of gases by the oxalic acid anion degradation in the progress of calcination, which is in good agreement with Dominko et al. [23]. They thought the porous morphology was due to the formation of large quantity of gases during citrate anion degradation.

To illustrate the advantage of the macroporous morphology material, a model was built as shown in Fig. 3. For a bulk morphology material (Fig. 3a), the material contact with electrolytes mainly on the surface, little electrolytes can penetrate the material. Whereas in macroporous morphology material (Fig. 3b), the electrolytes permeate into the interior of the material and the electrolytes contact with the material sufficiently, which reduces the transportation distance of  $\text{Li}^+$  and facilitates the diffusion of  $\text{Li}^+$ . Thus, it is beneficial to the electrochemical performance of the cathode material as mentioned in Refs. [24, 25].

To investigate the effect of carbon coating, the electronic conductivity of the samples were tested by a four-point probe method. The electronic conductivities of LVP-1 and



**Fig. 2** SEM images of LVP-1 (a), LVP-2 (b) and EDS of LVP-1 (c) and LVP-2 (d)

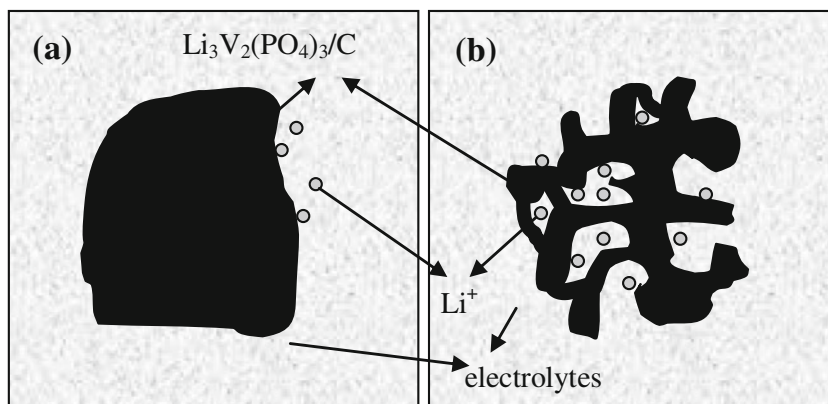
LVP-2 are  $4.79$  and  $5.23 \times 10^{-3} \text{ S cm}^{-1}$ , which are nearly five orders of magnitude greater than that of the carbon free  $\text{Li}_3\text{V}_2(\text{PO}_4)_3$  ( $9 \times 10^{-8} \text{ S cm}^{-1}$ ) [10]. Furthermore, the amount of residual carbon in LVP-1 and LVP-2 are 2.71 and 3.45 wt.%, respectively, which is measured by C-S 600 infrared carbon sulfur analyzer. The amount of residual carbon in LVP-2 is higher, which could be attributed to the reduction of oxalic acid. The difference of residual carbon in both samples has not seriously affected the electronic conductivity as the result of four-point probe method

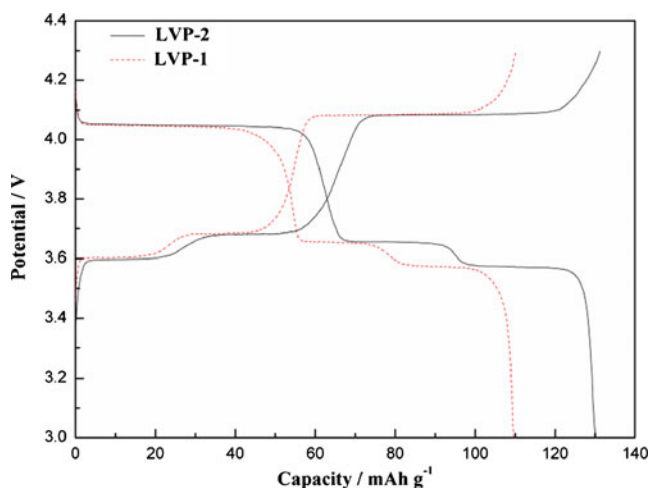
shows. It indicates that the effect of carbon coating on the electronic conductivity for both samples could be deemed to be equivalent.

Electrochemical performance at room temperature

The initial charge/discharge curves for LVP-1 and LVP-2 at 0.1 C in the potential range of 3.0–4.3 V are shown in Fig. 4. As it shows, both the samples exhibit three charge plateaus around 3.6, 3.7, and 4.1 V and the

**Fig. 3** Schematic presentation of the penetration of the electrolytes in LVP-1 (a) and LVP-2 (b)



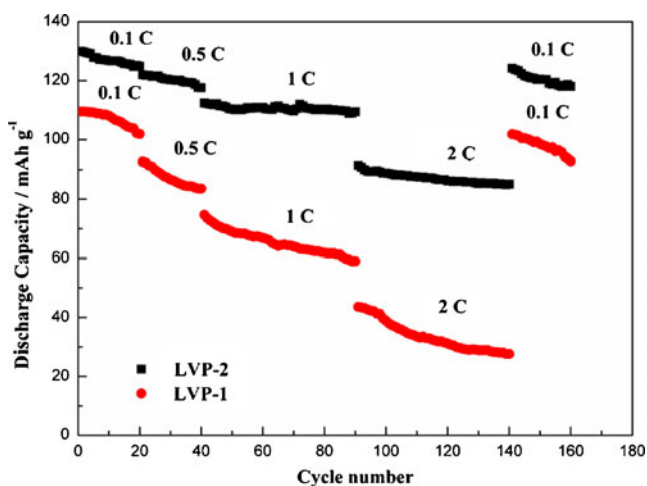


**Fig. 4** The initial charge/discharge curves of LVP-1 and LVP-2

corresponding three discharge plateaus around 3.5, 3.6, and 4.0 V, which are identified as the two-phase transition process during the electrochemical reaction. The initial special discharge capacities for LVP-1 and LVP-2 are 109.5 and 130 mAh g<sup>-1</sup>, respectively. Apparently, the initial discharge capacity of LVP-2 is much higher than that of LVP-1, which should be contributed to the effect of macroporous morphology.

The cycling performance of LVP-1 and LVP-2 at different rates were conducted and shown in Fig. 5. LVP-1 delivers the discharge capacity of 109.5, 92.6, 74.7, and 43.6 mAh g<sup>-1</sup> at 0.1, 0.5, 1, and 2 C, respectively. For LVP-2, the corresponding discharge capacity is 130.0, 122.0, 112.4, and 91.5 mAh g<sup>-1</sup>, respectively. Obviously, the discharge capacity decreases a little with an increasing charge/discharge rate.

It is observed that LVP-2 has higher discharge capacity and better cycling stability than that of LVP-1 at various rates. Especially in high rates such as at 2 C, LVP-2 shows

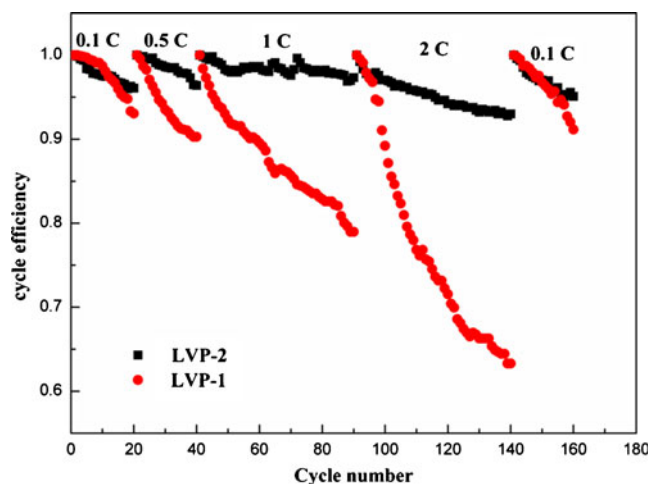


**Fig. 5** Cycling performances of LVP-1 and LVP-2 at different rates

much better cycling performance than that of LVP-1. The discharge capacity of LVP-2 achieves 85.1 mAh g<sup>-1</sup> (93.00% of the initial discharge capacity) after 50 cycles, while that of LVP-1 is only 27.6 mAh g<sup>-1</sup> after 50 cycles. Further, both the samples are applied again at 0.1 C after high rates. The first discharge capacity of LVP-2 is 124.2 mAh g<sup>-1</sup>, which is 95.54% of the initial discharge capacity at 0.1 C before cycling at high rates. And the capacity retention is 95.09% after 20 cycles. The first discharge capacity and the capacity retention of LVP-1 are 101.8 mAh g<sup>-1</sup> and 91.16%, which are less than that of the LVP-2.

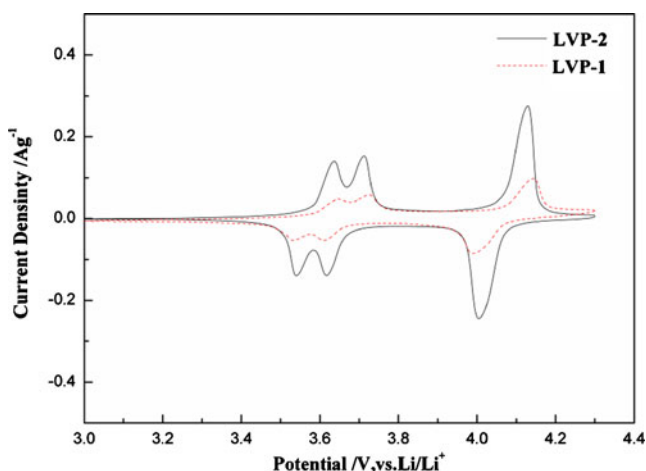
The cycle efficiency of both samples during cycling at various rates is shown in Fig. 6. The LVP-2 holds high cycle efficiency during cycling. During 20 (at the rates 0.1 and 0.5 C) and 50 (at the rates 1 and 2 C) cycles, the lowest cycle efficiencies are 96.08%, 96.39%, 97.33%, and 93.00%, respectively. After cycling at high rates and returning to cycle at 0.1 C again, the LVP-2 still has high cycle efficiency which is not lower than 95.09%, whereas the cycle efficiency of LVP-1 at various rates drops seriously. During 20 (at the rates 0.1 C and 0.5 C) and 50 (at the rates 1 C and 2 C) cycles, the lowest cycle efficiency are 93.06%, 90.28%, 78.98%, and 63.30%, respectively.

As the Figs. 5 and 6 has shown, both of the samples existing capacity fade during cycling, while the capacity retention of the LVP-2 at various rates is higher than that of LVP-1. The irreversible capacity of lithium ion battery may be caused by many reasons such as the change of structure and powdering during charge/discharge, overcharge, and overdischarge [9, 26, 27]. The specific surface area of LVP-1 and LVP-2 which is measured by BET method are 2 and 35 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>, respectively. According to the mosaic model [28], the bulk morphology of LVP-1 is adverse to the efficiency of active materials, leading to the irreversible



**Fig. 6** The cycle efficiency of both samples LVP-1 and LVP-2 at various rates





**Fig. 7** Cyclic voltammograms of LVP-1 and LVP-2 at 0.1 mV/s between 3.0 and 4.3 V in the second cycle

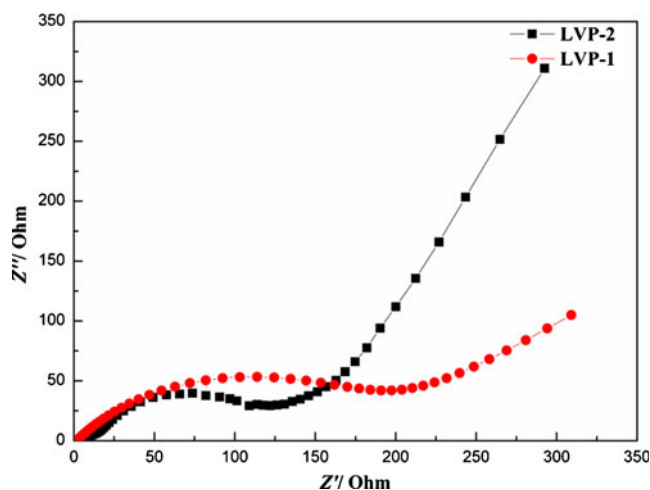
capacity, especially at high rates. While the large surface area of material favors to shorten diffusion pathway and get the diffusion of ionic easily, resulting in excellent electrochemical performance [29–31].

The cyclic voltammograms of both samples at a scan rate of 0.1 mV s<sup>-1</sup> is presented in Fig. 7. There are three pairs of redox peaks with the oxidation peaks located at about 3.63, 3.71, and 4.13 V and the corresponding reduction peaks at about 3.54, 3.61, and 4.00 V, respectively, which agree with the charge/discharge curves in Fig. 3. The appearance of redox peaks indicates the reversible Li<sup>+</sup> de-intercalation and intercalation in solid phase. Moreover, the current density of LVP-2 electrode is higher than that of the LVP-1 electrode. It is well known that the relationship between the current density and the diffusion coefficient of lithium ions *i*<sub>p</sub> is complied with the following formula [32]:

$$i_p = 2.6 \times 10^5 n^{3/2} C_0 D^{1/2} \nu^{1/2}$$

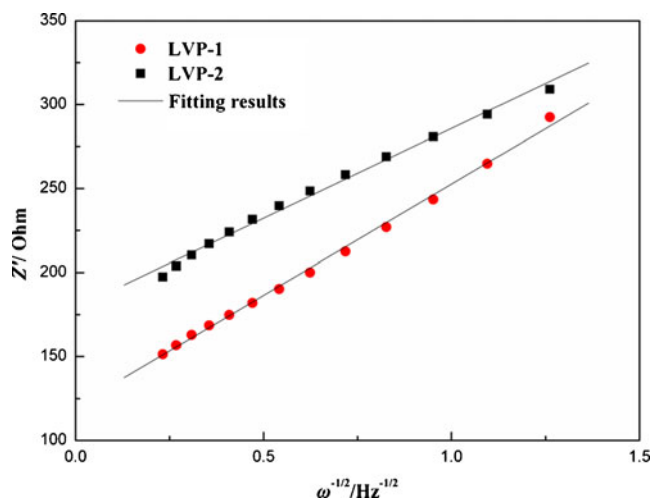
where *n* is the number of electrons transferred per molecule during the intercalation, *C*<sub>0</sub> is the concentration of lithium ions, *D* is the diffusion coefficient of lithium ions, and *ν* is the scan rate. Since *i*<sub>p</sub> is proportional to *D*<sup>1/2</sup>, it is easily inferred that the Li<sup>+</sup> diffusion coefficient of LVP-2 is higher than that of the LVP-1. Meanwhile, the potential differences between anodic and cathodic peaks are smaller in LVP-2 electrode, suggesting the faster transport of electrons and ions in the LVP-2 electrode case.

To further understand the reason for a better electrochemical performance of LVP-2, Nyquist plots of both the samples are recorded in Fig. 8. The half-cells were charged to 4.3 V at the second cycle and kept at that voltage for 3 h before EIS tests. As shown, both the EIS curves are composed of a semicircle and a linear part in the frequency range from 100 kHz to 10 mHz. The high frequency semicircle is attributed to the migration of Li<sup>+</sup> through the

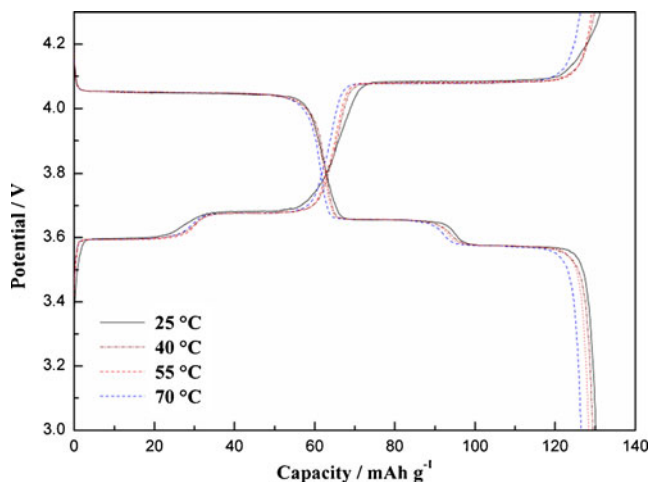


**Fig. 8** Impedance spectra of LVP-1 and LVP-2 at the charge potential of 4.3 V during the second cycle

SEI film which represents the charge transfer resistance. The inclined line in the low frequency range represents the Warburg impedance, which is associated with the diffusion of Li<sup>+</sup> in the bulk of the electrode material. It is well known that the charge transfer resistance is proportional to the diameter of semicircle in high frequency region and the Warburg impedance is inversely proportional to the slope of the inclined line in the low frequency. As shown in Fig. 8, the diameter of semicircle for LVP-2 is obviously smaller than that of the LVP-1, indicating that the charge transfer is more favorable on LVP-2 electrode (the charge transfer resistances of LVP-1 and LVP-2 are 256.3 and 183.0 Ω, respectively). And the slope of the low frequency inclined line of LVP-2 is larger than that of LVP-1, indicating that the lithium ion diffusion coefficients of LVP-2 may be higher than that of LVP-1.



**Fig. 9** The relationship between *Z''* and square root of frequency ( $\omega^{-1/2}$ ) in the low-frequency region of LVP-1 and LVP-2



**Fig. 10** The initial charge/discharge curves of macroporous material after aging at different temperature

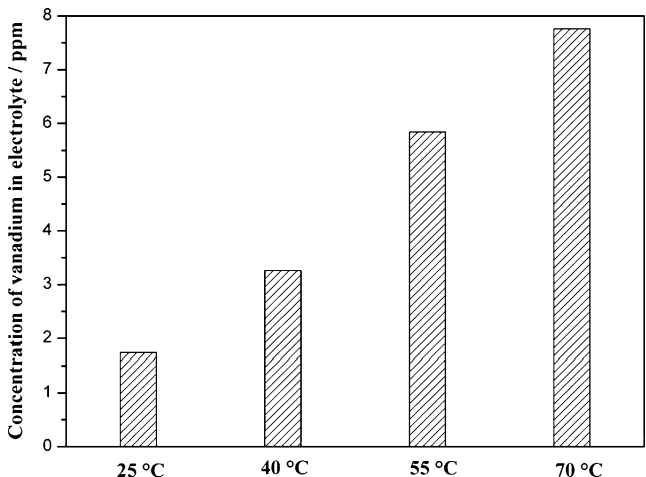
To further investigate the difference of the lithium ion diffusion coefficients ( $D$ ) between LVP-1 and LVP-2, they are calculated according to the following equation [33]:

$$D = R^2 T^2 / 2A^2 n^4 F^4 C^2 \sigma^2 \tag{1}$$

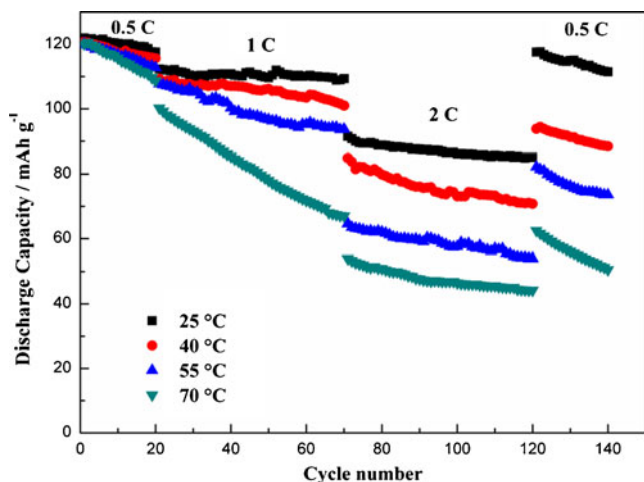
Where  $R$  is the gas constant,  $T$  is the absolute temperature,  $A$  is the surface area of the cathode,  $n$  is the number of electrons per molecule during oxidization,  $F$  is the Faraday constant,  $C$  is the concentration of lithium ion, and  $\sigma$  is the Warburg factor which has relationship with  $Z'$ :

$$Z' = R_D + R_L + \sigma \omega^{-1/2} \tag{2}$$

Figure 9 shows the relationship between  $Z'$  and square root of frequency ( $\omega^{-1/2}$ ) in the low-frequency region. The diffusion coefficient of lithium ion is calculated based on



**Fig. 11** Concentration of vanadium ion in electrolyte after aging at different temperature

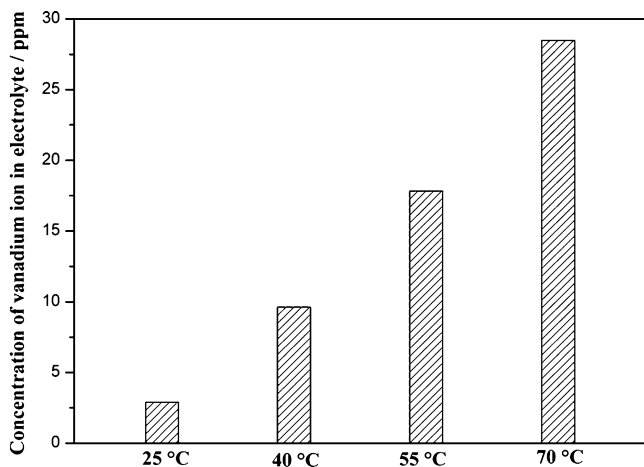


**Fig. 12** Rate capability of  $\text{Li}_3\text{V}_2(\text{PO}_4)_3/\text{C}$  samples at different test temperatures

Eqs. 1 and 2. The calculated lithium ion diffusion coefficients of LVP-1 and LVP-2 are  $9.24 \times 10^{-12}$  and  $1.42 \times 10^{-11} \text{ cm}^2 \text{ s}^{-1}$ , respectively. It is obvious that the lithium ion diffusion coefficient drastically increases, implying that the insertion/extraction of  $\text{Li}^+$  in LVP-2 electrode is much easier. From the EIS analysis above, the LVP-2 has the lower charge transfer resistances and higher lithium ion diffusion coefficient, which led to the excellent electrochemical performance of LVP-2 in high rates [34, 35]. The EIS results further confirmed that the modified electrochemical performance is associated with the bulky well-formed macroporous morphology of LVP-2.

Electrochemical performance at elevated temperatures

In the previous investigation, LVP-2 with macroporous morphology exhibits an excellent electrochemical performance at room temperature. Herein, the performance of



**Fig. 13** Concentration of vanadium ion in electrolyte after rate performance testing at different temperatures

LVP-2 at elevated temperature is evaluated. The charge/discharge test was carried out after aging at 25, 40, 55, and 70 °C for about 3 days. The initial charge/discharge curves of LVP-2 at 0.1 C are shown in Fig. 10. The initial discharge capacities of the samples at 25, 40, 55, and 70 °C are 130.0, 129.4, 128.3, and 126.5 mAh g<sup>-1</sup>, respectively. It is suggested that when the operation temperature is elevated, the initial discharge capacity of LVP-2 drops down slightly.

To investigate the reason for the fading of the initial discharge capacity, the vanadium ion concentration in electrolyte was detected by ICP analysis. As shown in Fig. 11, the vanadium concentration in the electrolyte after testing at different operation temperatures are 1.73, 3.26, 5.84, and 7.76 ppm, respectively, indicating that the vanadium ion concentration in electrolyte increased with the operation temperature elevating.

The discharge capacity and the cycle performance of the LVP-2 at different rates were shown in Fig. 12. As the temperature was elevating, the discharge capacity and the cycle performance of the samples decreased progressively. The initial discharge capacities of LVP-2 at 25 °C are 122, 112.4, and 91.5 mAh g<sup>-1</sup> at 0.5, 1, and 2 C, respectively, which are higher than that of the 70 °C sample (120.1, 100.2, and 53.9 mAh g<sup>-1</sup>). After 20 (at 0.5 C) and 50 cycles (at 1 and 2 C), the capacity retentions of LVP-2 at 25 °C are 96.39%, 97.33%, and 93.01%, which are higher than that at other temperatures. Even when 0.5 C is applied again, the LVP-2 at 25 °C present the best reproducibility in the all operation temperatures. The reason for the fading of the electrochemical performance with the elevation of operation temperature may be attributed to the dissolution of the active material. Then, the concentrations of vanadium ions in the electrolytes operating at different temperatures were determined by ICP. As shown in Fig. 13, the concentration of vanadium ions in electrolyte increased with the temperature rising. It indicates that more active materials dissolve into electrolyte with the operation temperature increasing. Fu et al. [36] and Amine et al. [37] found that the dissolution of transition metal cations was adverse to their electrochemical performance.

The results suggest that some further work need to be done to improve the high temperature performance of the LVP-2. However, the excellent electrochemical performance of the LVP-2 at room temperature indicates that it is a very promising cathode material for Li-ion battery.

## Conclusions

In summary, Li<sub>3</sub>V<sub>2</sub>(PO<sub>4</sub>)<sub>3</sub>/C composite with macroporous morphology was successfully synthesized by oxalic acid-assisted carbon thermal reaction. The XRD results show

that no other impurity is detected. Compared with LVP-1, LVP-2 shows better reversible capacity and improved rate capability, which is due to the higher lithium ion diffusion coefficient for its macroporous morphology. LVP-2 exhibits an initial discharge capacity of 130.0, 122.0, 112.4, and 91.5 mAh g<sup>-1</sup> as it is discharged at 0.1, 0.5, 1, and 2 C rates, respectively. After 20 (at the rates 0.1 and 0.5 C) and 50 (at the rates 1 and 2 C) cycles, the corresponding discharge capacity values are about 124.9, 117.6, 109.4, and 85 mAh g<sup>-1</sup>, respectively. And the cell retains 96.08%, 96.39%, 97.33%, and 93.00% of its initial discharge capacity. Therefore, the as-prepared macroporous Li<sub>3</sub>V<sub>2</sub>(PO<sub>4</sub>)<sub>3</sub>/C with high capacity and good cyclic stability is a very promising cathode material for Li-ion battery.

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