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Density functional theory analysis of structural and electronic properties of orthorhombic perovskite CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$

Yun Wang, a Tim Gould, b John F. Dobson, Haimin Zhang, a Huagui Yang, a,c Xiangdong Yao, b and Huijun Zhao a,d

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The organic/inorganic hybrid perovskite CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ is a novel light harvester, which can greatly improve the solar-conversion efficiency of dye-sensitized solar cells. In this study, a first principle theoretical study is performed using local, semi-local and non-local exchange-correlation approximations to find a suitable method for this material. Our results, using the non-local optB86b+vdWDF functional, excellently agree with the experimental data. Thus, consideration of weak van der Waals interactions is demonstrated to be important for the accurate description of the properties of this type of organic/inorganic hybrid materials. Further analysis of the electronic properties reveals that I 5p electrons can be photo-excited to Pb 6p empty states. The main interaction between the organic cations and inorganic framework is through the ionic bonding between CH$_3$ and I ions. Furthermore, I atoms in the Pb-I framework are found to be chemically inequivalent because of their different chemical environments.

1. Introduction

Dye-sensitized solar cells (DSCs) have stood out among various photovoltaic devices owing to their low cost, simple fabricating procedure, environment friendliness, and relatively high efficiency. Consequently, DSCs are promising candidates for the next generation of solar cells. One recent breakthrough on DSCs is the introduction of organic/inorganic hybrid perovskite materials as novel light harvesters, such as CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$, which can improve the solar conversion efficiency of DSCs to the current best record, ca. 15%. The high efficiency has been demonstrated to the long exciton diffusion lengths in the perovskite materials. Therefore, understanding the structures and chemistries of these prototype light harvesters is important for the molecular design of organic/inorganic perovskite materials with defined properties.

Perovskite CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ was synthesized and characterized by Weber at 1978. He found that each Pb$^{2+}$ cation is coordinated to six I$^-$ anions to form [PbI$_6$] octahedra, which are corner-connected to each other form a three-dimensional Pb-I framework. Each CH$_3$NH$_3$$^+$ cation locates at the centre of four [PbI$_6$] octahedra. Thus, each cation interacts with 12 I$^-$ anions. Previous experiments demonstrate that the symmetry and structure of CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ crystals are highly dependent on the temperature. At low temperature, an orthorhombic phase (space group: Pnma) is found. The orthorhombic phase transforms into a tetragonal structure (space group: I$^4$/m) above 161.4 K. The cubic phase (space group: Pm-3m) is observed when the temperature is higher than 330.4 K. The improved symmetry at the higher temperature is experimentally proposed to be related to the fast dynamic movement of CH$_3$NH$_3$$^+$ cations within the Pb-I framework. As a result, the location of CH$_3$NH$_3$$^+$ cations can only be determined experimentally in the orthorhombic phase at low temperature. At the same time, the lattice constants of the orthorhombic crystal vary little at the low temperature. Therefore, this investigation is focused on the orthorhombic perovskite CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$.

Both structural and electronic properties of organic/inorganic hybrid perovskite CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ crystals are investigated in the present ab initio calculations. Density functional theory (DFT) is employed as it offers an efficient, yet accurate quantum mechanical method for theorists to optimize structures, determine energies of reactants and products, examine the nature of intermediates, and predict the reaction energies for elementary steps. However, there are still areas where traditional DFT...
with local density (LDA) or generalized gradient (GGA) approximations has its difficulties, such as the depiction of the van der Waals (vdW) interactions. This is because the local (LDA) or semi-local (GGA) exchange-correlation (XC) functional approximations neglect the necessary ingredients to describe non-local vdw interactions. The vdw force plays an important role in a range of systems with weak interactions, such as organic/inorganic hybrid materials, particularly in their geometries. Recently, GGA/DFT calculations have been performed to analyze the electronic properties of cubic, tetrahedral and orthorhombic CH$_3$NH$_2$PbI$_3$. In their study, the experimental structures were employed without consideration of vDW interactions. Thus, to get a precise theoretical understanding of organic/inorganic hybrids, methods beyond traditional DFT are required.

In the last decade, empirical and less empirical approaches have been developed for prediction of vdw interactions in the DFT context. The vdw-DF class of dispersion energy functionals is generally considered to be a good choice for large systems, except possibly for weakly bound layers, or where strongly non-additive effects are important. For the present system, a remaining issue regarding vDW-DF comes from the choice of associated semi-local exchange functionals. Here we will use a recently-proposed semi-local functional optB86b that has been shown to work well in conjunction with vDW-DF for the cohesive properties of conventional solids. To confirm the importance of vdw effects for the properties of CH$_3$NH$_2$PbI$_3$, a systematic study using local, semi-local, and non-local XC functionals is performed herein. We present results for fully optimized structures, density of states, band structures, and charge distributions, which are compared with the available experimental data.

### 2. Computation Details

All the theoretical computations are performed by using the Vienna ab initio simulation package (VASP) based on DFT with the all-electron projected augmented wave (PAW) method in this study. Electron-ion interactions are described using ultrasoft pseudopotentials with a kinetic energy cut-off of 520.0 eV. Valence states included the Pb 6s, 6p, and 5d states, I 5s and 5p states, and C 2s and 2p states. The supercell of (8×8×8) meshes for the calculation of energy.

### 3. Results and discussion

Determining correct structural properties of materials is essential for the analysis of their other properties, such as the bandgap of semiconductors. To compare the performance of various functionals, the structures of organic/inorganic hybrid perovskite CH$_3$NH$_2$PbI$_3$ crystals are firstly optimized. The initial lattice constants and atomic coordinates of orthorhombic CH$_3$NH$_2$PbI$_3$ crystals for theoretical optimizations are from the X-ray diffraction (XRD) experiments at 100 K. The optimized lattice constants and volumes using the various functionals are listed in Table 1 with the available experimental values. In general, the PZ81/LDA functional underestimates all the lattice constants, while PBE/GGA functional overestimates them.

![Fig. 1 Atomic structures of orthorhombic perovskite CH$_3$NH$_2$PbI$_3$ crystals without (left) or with (right) showing the [PbI$_6$] octahedra. Key: grey: Pb, purple: I, light blue: N, brown: C, and pink: H.](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compound</th>
<th>a (Å)</th>
<th>b (Å)</th>
<th>c (Å)</th>
<th>V (Å$^3$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CH$_3$NH$_2$PbI$_3$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PZ81/LDA</td>
<td>4.674</td>
<td>10.17</td>
<td>17.27</td>
<td>820.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBE/GGA</td>
<td>4.909</td>
<td>10.80</td>
<td>18.26</td>
<td>968.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>optB86b+vdWDF</td>
<td>4.793</td>
<td>10.45</td>
<td>17.74</td>
<td>888.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exp</td>
<td>4.795</td>
<td>10.45</td>
<td>17.76</td>
<td>889.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CsPbI$_3$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PZ81/LDA</td>
<td>4.674</td>
<td>10.17</td>
<td>17.27</td>
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<tr>
<td>PBE/GGA</td>
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<tr>
<td>optB86b+vdWDF</td>
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<td>17.74</td>
<td>888.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exp</td>
<td>4.795</td>
<td>10.45</td>
<td>17.76</td>
<td>889.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The variations of the theoretical lattice constants using PZ81 and PBE are close to those of other solids using similar functionals. In our calculation, the best structural descriptions are obtained with the non-local optB86b+vdWDF functional. The deviation with respect to the experimental data is less than 1.0%. To detect the origin of the improvement, we also calculate the structural properties of orthorhombic CsPbI$_3$ crystals, as listed in Table 1. It can be found that properties determined using PBE/GGA and optB86b + vdWDF methods are similar as that of orthorhombic CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$. The significant improvement on the calculation accuracy of the orthorhombic CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ crystals demonstrates that the weak vdW binding between the organic components across the inorganic framework is required to depict the structural properties for this type of organic/inorganic hybrid materials. This conclusion is different from the assumption used in the recent theoretical studies on organic/inorganic hybrid tetragonal perovskite materials. The optimized atomic structure of the orthorhombic CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ crystals using the optB86b+vdWDF functional is shown in Fig.1.

The structures from the XRD refinement experiments show angular distortions of the [PbI$_6$] octahedra, such as $\Gamma$ anions, have a significant transverse displacement from the mid-point of the Pb-Pb distance to which they are constrained in the ideal crystallographic description (see Fig. 1). The displacements of atoms cause a reduction in symmetry of the CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ crystal from the cubic phase to the orthorhombic phase. Table 2 lists the theoretical displacement parameters of Pb1, I1 and I2 atoms, marked in Fig. 1, using various functionals compared with the experimental data. The displacement parameters are the differences of the fractional coordinates of atoms between optimized structures and ideal crystallographic structures. It can be seen that most of the theoretical displacement parameters are in very good agreement with the experimental values, except the displacement of I1 atoms along the $c$ direction. Also, the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pb1</th>
<th>PZ81</th>
<th>0.000</th>
<th>0.000</th>
<th>0.000</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PBE</td>
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<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.002</td>
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<td></td>
<td>optB86b+vdWDF</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exp$^{15}$</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>0.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1</td>
<td>PZ81</td>
<td>0.020</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PBE</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>optB86b+vdWDF</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exp$^{15}$</td>
<td>0.019</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I2</td>
<td>PZ81</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PBE</td>
<td>0.015</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>0.013</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>optB86b+vdWDF</td>
<td>0.015</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exp$^{15}$</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>0.014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 The displacements parameters of Pb1, I1 and I2 atoms for orthorhombic CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$.

Consequently, the experimental bandgap energies of hybrid CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ crystals are 1.68 - 1.72 eV at low temperature. Consequently, the experimental bandgap energies of hybrid CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ are surprisingly close to the theoretical predictions at the semi-local and non-local level. Previous DFT studies demonstrate that the bandgap energies of solid-state semiconductors are seriously underestimated by using pure DFT functionals. In some cases, the deviation is about 30%, This is because good band gaps are not normally to be expected from functionals of the types tested here, which do not have hybrid characters. This successful match is likely to be fortuitous, which is also observed in other Pb-based materials. Fig. 2 also shows that the characteristics of peaks using various functionals in TDOS images are broadly similar, except for the locations of the peaks.
different functional. The black and red lines are for s and p states, respectively.

To understand the bonding mechanisms between the atoms, the analysis of partial density of states (PDOS) has been performed. The calculations of TDOS reveal that the functionals have small effects on the main characteristics of peaks. Therefore, only the analysis of PDOS using the optB86b+vdWDF functional is shown in Fig. 3. The PDOS images of I1 and I2 supports the argument that these two kinds of I atoms are chemically inequivalent. The PDOS peaks of I2 atoms are closer to the Fermi energy and sharper than those of I1 atoms in the top valence bands. The stronger hybridization of the orbitals can shift the location of valence bands to the lower energy area with wider peaks. Thus, the different PDOS images of I1 and I2 atoms indicate a weaker bonding between Pb and I2 atoms. From Fig. 3, organic CH3NH3+ cations have little contribution to the top valence and bottom conduction bands around the Fermi energy level (4.0 eV < E-EFermi < 4.0 eV). The main contribution to the top valence band is from the 5p states with an overlapping of Pb 6s states. In the bottom conduction bands, the main components are Pb 6p states. The PDOS images suggest that I 5p electrons, especially the I2 5p electrons, can be photo-excited to Pb 6p empty states. Consequently, I atoms change into photohole sites and Pb atoms hold the photoelectrons after the photo-excitation. From Fig. 3, we also find that the highest C and N 2p bands and H 1s bands locate at -6.8 and -4.8 eV, which has little overlap with the Pb and I orbitals. Thus, there is no covalent interaction between the organic cations and the inorganic Pb-I framework.

The band structures of orthorhombic CH3NH3PbI3 using different functionals are shown in Fig. 4. Our results agree with previous studies in showing that the orthorhombic CH3NH3PbI3 is a direct-bandgap crystal with the minimum band gap at the Γ symmetry point. The minimum indirect bandgap is from the Γ point to the X point. For all band structures, several sets of bands can be found. They correspond to C 2p and H_C (the H atoms bonded to C atoms) 1s states around -5 eV, mainly I 5p states below the Fermi level, and Pb 6p states above the Fermi level. Both the top valence band and the bottom conduction band are broad, indicating these states are non-localized. This explains why the excitons can be transported long distance in this material. Moreover, the fluctuations of the states in the bottom conduction band are stronger, indicating a faster transport of photoelectrons that matches the experimental observations. On the contrary, the band for organic fragments (the band around -5 eV) is flat and narrow, suggesting that the electrons around them are localized. It should also be noted that the band structure of the orthorhombic CH3NH3PbI3 crystal is quite different from that of cubic phase due to the lower symmetry and bigger primitive cell. The main functional dependent properties are the locations of the bands, which confirm the conclusion from the analysis of DOS images.

The Bader charges of Pb, I1, I2, N and C atoms in the Table 3. Bader atomic charges of CH3NH3PbI3 using various functionals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LDA</th>
<th>PBE</th>
<th>optB86b+vdWDF</th>
<th>optB86b+vdWDF (AE)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pb</td>
<td>+0.85</td>
<td>+0.95</td>
<td>+0.92</td>
<td>+0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1</td>
<td>-0.52</td>
<td>-0.57</td>
<td>-0.55</td>
<td>-0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I2</td>
<td>-0.50</td>
<td>-0.55</td>
<td>-0.54</td>
<td>-0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>-3.01</td>
<td>-2.96</td>
<td>-2.95</td>
<td>-1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>+0.35</td>
<td>+0.53</td>
<td>+0.48</td>
<td>+0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PbI</td>
<td>-0.67</td>
<td>-0.72</td>
<td>-0.70</td>
<td>-0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CH3</td>
<td>+0.67</td>
<td>+0.67</td>
<td>+0.64</td>
<td>+0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NH3</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>+0.04</td>
<td>+0.05</td>
<td>+0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
orthorhombic perovskite $\text{CH}_3\text{NH}_2\text{PbI}_3$ crystals based on the pseudo valence density using different functionals are listed in Table 3. In general, the charge analysis provides a picture of ionic interactions between inorganic Pb-I framework and organic $\text{CH}_3\text{NH}_2^+$ cations since the average charge per PbI$_3$ and CH$_3$NH$_3$ unit is ca. -0.7 e and +0.7 e. On the contrary, charges of Pb and I atoms correspond to significant deviations from purely ionic interactions (i.e., Pb$^{2+}$ and I$^-$), which suggests a combined cova lent and ionic bonding mechanism between Pb and I atoms.

The Pb-I covalent bonding characteristics can also be supported by the hybridization of the Pb 6s, 6p states with the I 5p states at the top valence bands shown in Fig. 3. Within CH$_3$NH$_2^+$ cations, the NH$_3$ group is almost charge neutral; and most of positive charge is the contribution from the CH$_3$ group. This charge distribution matches the chemical instinct because NH$_3$ is a charge neutral molecule and CH$_3$ is a positively charge cation in the gas phase. The charge distribution shown in Table 3 indicates that there is a slightly stronger ionic interaction between CH$_3$ group and I1 atoms. From the PDOS analysis, there is a stronger Pb-II covalent bonding. Thus, I1 atoms have overall stronger interactions with their adjacent atoms, which explains why I1 and I2 atoms are chemically inequivalent, as observed in Fig. 3. In the tetragonal and cubic phase, the symmetries of Pb-I frameworks are improved due to the thermal movement of organic cations. In those cases, the inequivalence of I atoms may be eliminated. A study on the thermal effect on the phase change and properties of CH$_3$NH$_2$PbI$_3$ materials is currently under way. Since the charge analysis using the all-electron (AE) reconstructed valence density could give more accurate results, the calculations based on the AE data with optB86b+vdWDF are also performed, as listed in Table 3. It can be seen that conclusions drawn from both sets of data are almost identical. The main difference is the charge of N atoms and the H atoms bonded with N atoms.

4. Conclusions

In summary, first-principle DFT calculations have been performed to study structural and electronic properties of orthorhombic perovskite CH$_3$NH$_2$PbI$_3$ materials. Our results demonstrate that the employment of optB86b+vdWDF XC functional improves the accuracy of the calculated structural properties significantly compared with the non-vdW functionals employed here. Thus, consideration of the vdW interaction is important for theoretical studies of this organic/inorganic hybrid material. The main interaction between the organic groups and inorganic framework is through the ionic bonding between CH$_3^+$ cations and I$^-$ anions. The different interaction strengths between I atoms with their adjacent atoms cause the formation of two kinds of I atoms in the Pb-I framework. Analysis of the electronic properties supports the conclusion that orthorhombic CH$_3$NH$_2$PbI$_3$ is a direct-bandgap crystal with the minimum band gap at the $\Gamma$ symmetry point. During light harvesting, 15p electrons can be photo-excited to Pb 6p empty states. Our results, therefore, pave a way for the further theoretical studies on this type of organic/inorganic hybrid perovskite materials for sensitized solar cells.

Acknowledgements

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Notes and references

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