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**To be cited as:** 10.1002/anie.201409334

**Link to VoR:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/anie.201409334>

# A highly stable zeotype mesoporous zirconium metal-organic framework with ultralarge pores \*\*

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**Abstract:** Through topological rationalization, we designed and synthesized a zeotype mesoporous Zr-MOF, PCN-777. PCN-777 exhibits not only the largest cage of 3.8 nm but also the highest pore volume of 2.8 cm<sup>3</sup>/g among all the reported Zr-MOFs. Moreover, PCN-777 shows excellent stability in aqueous environments, which makes it an ideal candidate as a support to incorporate different functional moieties. Through facile internal surface modification, we can vary the interaction between PCN-777 and different guests to realize efficient immobilization

Mesoporous metal-organic frameworks (MOFs) have been extensively studied as heterogeneous platforms to immobilize functional moieties, such as organometallic catalysts, nanoparticles, polyalkyl amine chains, and enzymes.<sup>[1,2]</sup> Due to their readily adjustable structures and tunable functionalities inside the frameworks, mesoporous MOFs facilitate the performance of those materials through heterogenization or isolation. However, the majority of reported MOFs are microporous. Difficulty in organic linker extension, variation of synthetic conditions in isoreticular structures, framework interpenetration and challenges in activation all hamper the development of novel mesoporous MOFs. Most importantly, when the organic linker size grows larger, both the

mechanical and the chemical stability of the framework decrease gradually.<sup>[3]</sup> Furthermore, the working environments of those immobilized moieties are usually harsh, which requires the frameworks to be chemically very stable. The requirement of a combination of good chemical stability and large pores means that very few candidates are widely utilized. MIL-101 and MIL-100 are two extraordinary examples that exhibit both properties and are suitable supports.<sup>[4]</sup>

MIL-100 and MIL-101, both of which have zeotype *mtn* topology (zeotype refers to structures sharing the same topology with zeolites), contain super-tetrahedral cages to substitute for the tetrahedral unit in zeolites.<sup>[5]</sup> Hence, their largest pores reach 31 Å and 29 Å respectively although the organic linkers are relatively small. Moreover, the metal nodes in these MOFs are based on trivalent metal species. The strong interaction between carboxylates and high valent metal species accompanied with the small organic linker endows these frameworks with excellent chemical stability.

Despite these advantages, the pore size still restricts further application of these MOFs when it comes to larger guests such as nanoparticles or enzymes. Therefore, synthesis of mesoporous materials with larger pore size which also maintain excellent chemical stability is highly desired. Application of a ligand larger than those in the MIL-100 and MIL-101 MOFs to create zeotype frameworks would be an effective way to generate extra-large pores, while avoiding complicated organic synthesis to make the linker extremely large. Unfortunately, there are several challenges in the way of extending these *mtn* topological MOFs: First, the M<sub>3</sub>O(COO)<sub>6</sub> (M = Fe(III), Al(III), Cr(III), In(III), V(III), Sc(III)) building block is not the thermodynamically favored form, which makes the controllable formation of target products difficult;<sup>[6]</sup> second, even if the inorganic building block can be obtained, competitive framework isomers, such as the MIL-88 structure, still dominate as the major products; moreover, most of the synthesis needs to be conducted under hydrothermal conditions, which is infeasible for large organic linkers with poor water solubility. Therefore, searching for other zeotype frameworks, which can be synthetically controlled more easily, is one promising strategy.

Through a topological analysis, we herein present a zeotype mesoporous Zr-MOF, namely PCN-777, which has the  $\beta$ -cristobalite type structure. PCN-777 exhibits the largest cage (3.8 nm) and the highest porosity (2.8 cm<sup>3</sup>/g) among all the reported Zr-MOFs. Moreover, it shows high stability in aqueous solution with a wide range of pH values.

Zirconium MOFs have been extensively studied recently due to their excellent chemical stability.<sup>[7]</sup> One major reason is the controllable synthesis of crystalline product or even single crystals by using competing reagents.<sup>[8]</sup> Moreover, the symmetry of a Zr<sub>6</sub> cluster (Zr<sub>6</sub>O<sub>4</sub>(OH)<sub>4</sub>(COO)<sub>12</sub>) fully coordinated by 12 carboxylates is *O<sub>h</sub>*, which has many high symmetry subgroups. This means that it is possible to reduce the connectivity and symmetry of Zr<sub>6</sub> to make it compatible with almost all kinds of organic linkers and form three

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[\*\*] Research Center funded by the U. S. Department of Energy (DOE), Office of Science, Office of Basic Energy Sciences, and as part of N000141310753 supported by the Office of Naval Research. Use of the Advanced Photon Source, an Office of Science User Facility operated for the U. S. Department of Energy (DOE) Office of Science by Argonne National Laboratory, was supported by the U.S. DOE under Contract No. DE-AC02-06CH11357. The structure characterization by PXRD and TEM was supported by the Swedish Research Council (VR) and VINNOVA, the Knut & Alice Wallenberg Foundation through the project grant 3DEM-NATUR.



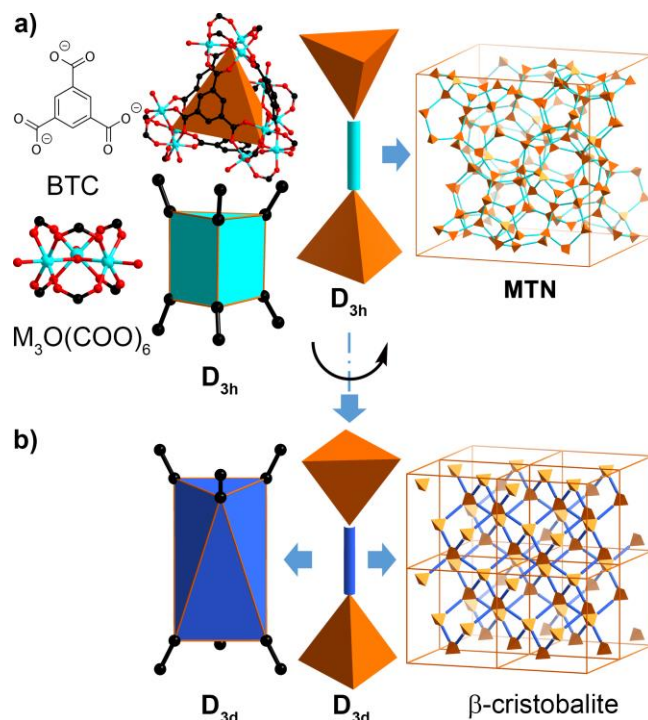
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dimensional (3-D) periodic frameworks. Since almost all the Zr-MOFs contain the  $Zr_6$  cluster, tuning the symmetry and connectivity of the  $Zr_6$  cluster into a suitable node in a zeolite net would be an ideal approach to develop zeotype mesoporous MOFs.

Considering  $M_3O(COO)_6$  in MIL-100 and MIL-101 has  $D_{3h}$  symmetry, a direct way to make zeotype Zr-MOFs is to lower the connectivity and symmetry of  $Zr_6$  to  $D_{3h}$  while using the same organic linker. However, since  $D_{3h}$  is not a subgroup of  $O_h$ , it is not possible to obtain the same **mtn** network with  $Zr_6$  when using only one type of organic linker. Fortunately, the major factor resulting in the diverse zeolite structures is the variation of relative positions between adjacent tetrahedral nodes, and the  $M_3O(COO)_6$  unit with  $D_{3h}$  symmetry in MIL-100 and MIL-101 only determines the eclipsed configuration between adjacent super-tetrahedra to generate the **mtn** network (Figure 1a). When making a  $60^\circ$  rotation between each super-tetrahedron to form a staggered configuration, a  $\beta$ -cristobalite network can be constructed, which requires a six-connected  $D_{3d}$  node (Figure 1b). Coincidentally,  $D_{3d}$  is a subgroup of  $O_h$ , which shows the theoretical feasibility of using the  $Zr_6$  unit to build zeotype frameworks.

Topologically, both ditopic linear organic linkers and tritopic trigonal planar organic linkers can form super-tetrahedra with six-connected  $D_{3d}$   $Zr_6$  clusters of antiprism configuration. Linear organic linkers could serve as the edge while the trigonal planar organic linkers could be the face. However, the challenge is to guarantee the formation of  $Zr_6$  with reduced connectivity as well as the right symmetry to form expected structures. With ditopic linear organic linkers, the  $Zr_6$  cluster can form an **fcu-a** network with a twelve-connected  $O_h$ , a **bcu-a** network with an eight-connected  $D_{4h}$ , an **hcg-a** network with a six-connected hexagonal  $D_{3d}$  and a  $\beta$ -cristobalite network with six-connected antiprismatic  $D_{3d}$ . Although these frameworks are topologically different, the other three are actually the sub-networks of the twelve connected **fcu-a** network, which means that they can be obtained by simply reducing the connecting linkers in the **fcu-a** network. Therefore, it is challenging to control the specific connectivity and symmetry without controlling the inherent kinetic or thermodynamic preference. All efforts to use higher zirconium to organic linker ratios and more competing reagents to realize connectivity elimination have resulted in the formation of the **fcu-a** network with defects.<sup>[9]</sup>

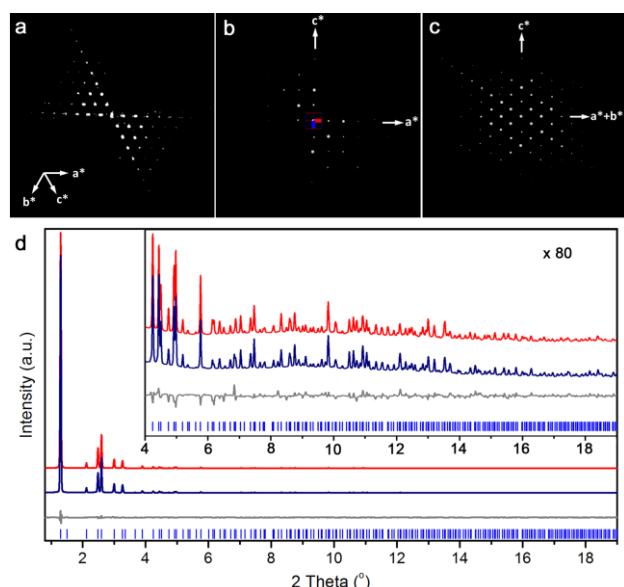
In comparison, trigonal planar organic linkers with three carboxylates in the same plane, which can form super-tetrahedra with six-connected antiprismatic  $D_{3d}$   $Zr_6$ , can topologically form only one type of edge transitive binodal network - the  $\beta$ -cristobalite type network.  $Zr_6$  clusters with all other reported connectivity and symmetry, such as twelve-connected  $O_h$ , eight-connected  $D_{4h}$  and six-connected hexagonal  $D_{3d}$ , are not compatible with the formation of binodal edge transitive networks with trigonal planar organic linkers. Therefore, it is more likely to obtain mesoporous Zr-MOFs with a  $\beta$ -cristobalite network with trigonal planar organic linkers.



**Figure 1.** (a) Inorganic, organic building units and symmetry analysis in the **mtn** type MIL-100. (b) Super-tetrahedral rotation from the **mtn** network to the  $\beta$ -cristobalite network.

Bearing such structural rationalization in mind, we selected a relatively large 4,4',4''-s-triazine-2,4,6-triyl-tribenzoate (TATB) linker, which prefers the trigonal planar configuration, to construct the proposed Zr-MOF. To afford a partially substituted  $Zr_6$  cluster, we used extra Zr starting materials as well as a strong competing reagent, trifluoroacetic acid (TFA). Solvothermal reaction of TATB,  $ZrOCl_2 \cdot 8H_2O$ ,  $N,N$ -diethylformamide (DEF) and TFA gave rise to a white powder product, PCN-777 (supporting information, section 3).

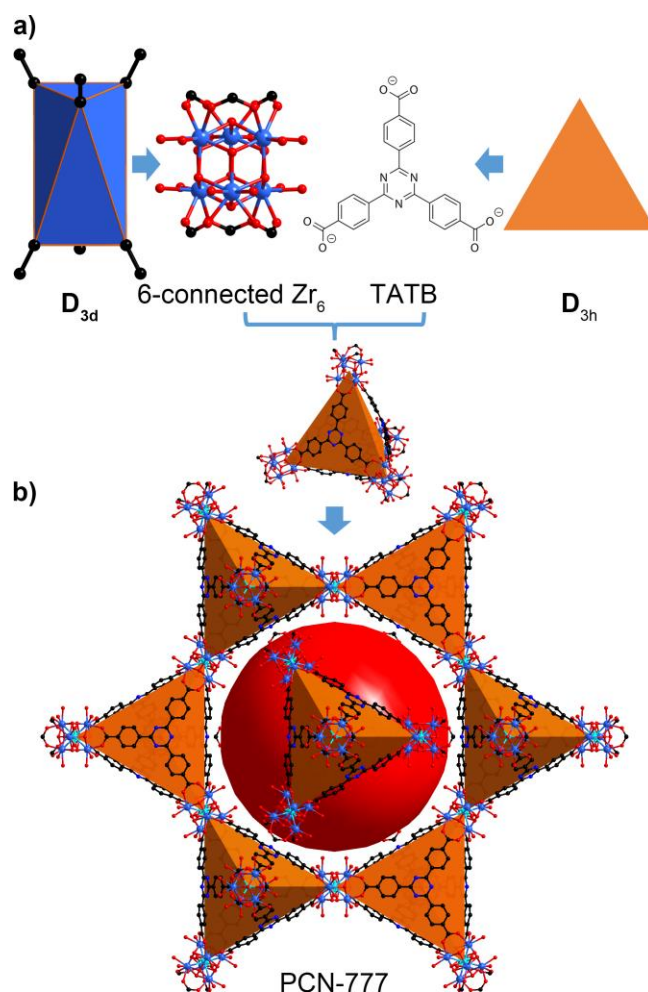
Synchrotron powder X-ray diffraction (PXRD) collected at 17-BM beamline at Advanced Photon Source, Argonne National Laboratory shows that PCN-777 is cubic with  $a \sim 55 \text{ \AA}$ . This was further confirmed by 3D rotation electron diffraction (RED)<sup>[10]</sup> (Figure 2a-c and supporting information section 4). The reflection conditions deduced from the RED data gave the following five possible space groups:  $F23$ ,  $Fm-3$ ,  $F432$ ,  $F-43m$  and  $Fm-3m$ . Considering the ideal space group of  $\beta$ -cristobalite is  $Fd-3m$ , the space group  $F-43m$ , which is the sub-space group of  $Fd-3m$ , was chosen for the further structural study. A structural model of PCN-777, with a formula of  $Zr_6(O)_4(OH)_{10}(H_2O)_6(TATB)_2$ , was built based on our proposed  $\beta$ -cristobalite network using Material Studio 6.0<sup>[11]</sup> and further refined against the synchrotron PXRD data. Rietveld refinement with soft restraints for the M-O bond distances and a rigid body for the ligands shows a precise match between the experimental PXRD data and that simulated from the proposed structure (Figure 2d).



**Figure 2.** (a) 3D reciprocal lattice of PCN-777 reconstructed from the RED data. (b-c) 2D slices cut from the reconstructed 3D reciprocal lattice showing (b)  $h0l$  and (c)  $hhl$  plane. (d) Rietveld refinement of PCN-777 using synchrotron PXRD data. The curves from top to bottom are simulated (red), observed (blue), and difference profiles (grey), respectively; the bars below curves indicate peak positions.

The excess zirconium helps form a six-connected  $D_{3d}$   $Zr_6$  building block, while the remaining coordinating positions are occupied by terminal OH and  $H_2O$  moieties. Unlike the  $D_{3d}$   $Zr_6$  in PCN-224,<sup>[7h]</sup> the positions of the carboxylates and terminal OH/ $H_2O$  are switched to form an antiprismatic connecting mode in PCN-777. The overall structure of PCN-777 is built by sharing the vertexes of the super-tetrahedra, which consists of four  $Zr_6$  units linked along the faces by the organic linkers (Figure 3a). Compared to BTC, the size of TATB is almost doubled, which makes the size of the super-tetrahedra in PCN-777 twice as large as those in MIL-100. Consequently, a mesoporous cage of 38 Å is formed in PCN-777, which is the largest pore among all the reported Zr-MOFs. Due to the high concentration of such mesoporous cages, the calculated porosity of PCN-777 reaches 3.38  $cm^3/g$ . As we expected, the  $D_{3d}$  symmetric  $Zr_6$  cluster results in a perfectly staggered configuration of adjacent super-tetrahedra instead of the eclipsed configuration in MIL-100. The overall topology of PCN-777 changes from the *mtn* topology in MIL-100 to the  $\beta$ -cristobalite type.

Owing to the relatively small ligand size and strong coordination bond between the organic linker and metal struts, PCN-777 can be activated directly upon the removal of solvent, while many other MOFs with such large pores and high porosity must be carefully activated with supercritical  $CO_2$ .<sup>[12]</sup> In order to assess the porosity of PCN-777, we performed  $N_2$  sorption at 77 K (Figure 4a). PCN-777 shows  $N_2$  uptake of around 1460  $cm^3/g$  at 1 bar (Figure 4a). The experimental Brunauer-Emmett-Teller (BET) surface area of PCN-777 is 2008  $m^2/g$ . A steep increase at  $p/p_0 = 0.4$  on the  $N_2$  adsorption isotherm corresponds to a meso-porous cage of 3.5 nm in PCN-777 (Figure 4a, inset). The experimental void volume of PCN-777 is 2.82  $cm^3/g$ , which is the highest among all the reported Zr-MOFs (Table S2).



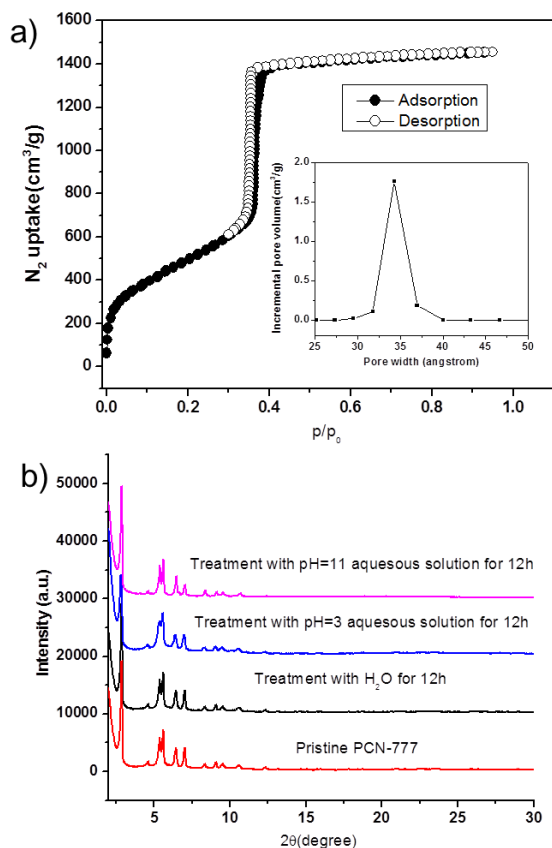
**Figure 3.** (a) Six-connected  $D_{3d}$   $Zr_6$  antiprism and trigonal planar organic linker TATB. (b) The structure of PCN-777 with the large mesoporous cage (in red)

Remarkably, PCN-777 still has very high stability in aqueous solutions, despite its high porosity. After soaking in distilled water and in aqueous solutions of pH of 3 and 11, PXRD patterns of PCN-777 are well maintained (Figure 4b);  $N_2$  adsorption isotherms of these samples after different treatment confirms the excellent stability of PCN-777 in pure  $H_2O$  and the basic environment while showing relatively weak stability in the acidic environment (Figure S2). The high positive charge density ( $Zr/r$ ) on  $Zr^{4+}$  causes a strong electrostatic interaction between the metal nodes and ligand carboxylates, which endows the frameworks with excellent stability towards attack by reactive species. Thermal gravimetric analysis (TGA) shows that the decomposition temperature of PCN-777 is around 500 °C (Figure S4), showing the very high thermal stability of the framework. The TGA curve also indicates there few or no missing-linker defects in the structure (supporting information section 6).<sup>[13]</sup>

As a mesoporous MOF with very large pores and excellent chemical stability, PCN-777 is a suitable candidate to incorporate functional moieties with relatively large size through post-synthetic modification.<sup>[14]</sup> There are three major approaches to introduce functional moieties into MOFs: direct physisorption, ionic trapping (in ionic MOFs) and covalent attachment through the functional anchors. Since  $Zr_6$  cluster is only partially occupied by organic linkers, there are still functionable positions available for further modification. On one hand, the terminal OH/ $H_2O$  groups can interact strongly with guests through either hydrogen or



coordination bonding after deprotonation.<sup>[15]</sup> On the other hand, after one-step treatment, the terminal OH and H<sub>2</sub>O on the Zr<sub>6</sub> cluster can be easily substituted by other carboxylate containing species under very mild conditions, which is a method to introduce many kinds of anchors conveniently.<sup>[16]</sup> Moreover, there are only six carboxylates coordinating to the Zr<sub>6</sub> cluster in PCN-777 and the empty positions are all pointing into the mesoporous cages. Therefore, the properties of the internal surface of the mesoporous cages in PCN-777 can be easily adjusted for further applications.



**Figure 4.** (a) N<sub>2</sub> sorption isotherm of PCN-777. (b) PXRD patterns of PCN-777 after different treatments.

In fact, the trapping and leaching of guests in porous materials can be considered as equilibrium processes. When trapped guests are heterogeneously used, leaching becomes an entropically favored process. Therefore, to effectively prevent or diminish the leaching process, trapping guests inside the pores should be a highly enthalpically favored process, which requires strong interaction between the guests and supports.

Covalent attachment of guests can be thought of as an extreme method of enhancing the trapping enthalpy. However, this approach always requires additional anchors on both the MOF's framework and the incoming guests, which requires extra synthetic effort. In comparison, physical adsorption can directly incorporate guests. Although the interaction is usually weak, when the substrate is relatively large and multiple interacting sites could be provided by the framework, the overall interaction can still be strong enough to effectively prevent the substrate leaching. Accordingly, by post-synthetic modification of the internal surface, we examined the adsorption and leaching of different guests inside PCN-777. Using 4-(tert-butyl) benzoic acid (denoted as **tBu**) and 4-Carboxy-1-

methylpyridinium iodide (denoted as **Me-Py**), we altered the internal surface from having the originally hydrophilic properties into being either highly hydrophobic or ionic. Three guests, meso 4-tetra-sulfonatophenyl porphyrin (**TSPP**), Tris(2,2'-bipyridine)dichlororuthenium(II) (**[Ru(bpy)<sub>3</sub>]Cl<sub>2</sub>**), Tetra-Amido Macrocylic Ligand catalytic activators (**TAML-NaFeB\***) (supporting information, section 7), all of which have relatively large sizes but different functionalities, were incorporated into the modified PCN-777 (Figure 5). **TSPP**, as a porphyrinic derivative, can serve as a catalyst for different reactions and light harvesting species. It shows the highest loading amount and slowest leaching in the pristine PCN-777 due to hydrogen bonding between the peripheral sulfonic groups and terminal OH/H<sub>2</sub>O on the Zr<sub>6</sub> cluster. For the anionic **TAML-NaFeB\*** (the major part), a catalyst for C-H bond activation, it shows the highest volumetric loading amount in Me-Py modified PCN-777 despite of the lowest porosity due to the strong electrostatic interaction. While for **[Ru(bpy)<sub>3</sub>]Cl<sub>2</sub>**, a light harvesting reagent as well as a photocatalyst, there is no preferential loading in any framework as the functional part is cationic. As expected, the **tBu** modified PCN-777 shows the weakest interaction to both **TSPP** and **TAML-NaFeB\*** because of the primarily nonpolar feature of the internal pore surface. We further test the catalytic activity of those trapped species in the post-synthetically modified PCN-777 species (supporting information, section 8).



**Figure 5.** Color variation of pristine, tBu and Me-py modified PCN-777 when loaded with different guests.

In conclusion, we designed and synthesized a zeotype mesoporous Zr-MOF, PCN-777. PCN-777 exhibits cages as large as 3.8 nm and excellent stability in aqueous environments, which make it an ideal candidate as a support to incorporate different functional moieties. Through facile internal pore surface modification, we can vary the interaction between PCN-777 and different guests to realize efficient immobilization.

## Experimental Section

**Synthesis of PCN-777:** ZrOCl<sub>2</sub>·8H<sub>2</sub>O (360 mg), TATB (90 mg) and trifluoroacetic acid (0.6mL) in 12mL of DEF were ultrasonically dissolved in a 20 mL Pyrex vial. The mixture was heated at 120 °C in an oven for 12 h. After cooling to room temperature, a white powder product of PCN-777 was harvested by filtration.

Crystal data from PXRD of PCN-777: Zr<sub>6</sub>O<sub>12</sub>C<sub>48</sub>N<sub>6</sub>H<sub>24</sub>, *M* = 3184.05, space group *F*-43*m*, *a* = 55.568(3) Å, *V* = 171583(5) Å<sup>3</sup>, *Z* = 16, total reflections = 514, GOF = 1.134, Rp = 0.0395, Rwp = 0.0564, Rexp = 0.0497 (supporting information, section 4).

Crystallographic data for the PCN-777 has been deposited with the Cambridge Crystallographic Data Centre (CCDC) under reference number CCDC 1013322. The data can be obtained free of charge via [www.ccdc.cam.ac.uk/conts/retrieving.html](http://www.ccdc.cam.ac.uk/conts/retrieving.html).

Full experimental details can be found in Supporting Information.

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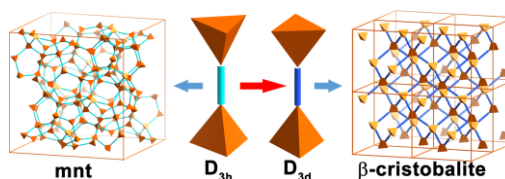
Published online on ((will be filled in by the editorial staff))

**Keywords:** metal-organic frameworks • zirconium • zeotype structures

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A highly stable zeotype mesoporous zirconium metal-organic framework with ultralarge pores



**Highly stable mesoporous Zr-MOF:** Through a topology rationalization, we designed and synthesized a zeotype mesoporous Zr-MOF, PCN-777. PCN-777 exhibits cages as large as 3.8 nm and excellent stability in aqueous environments, which make it an ideal candidate as a support to incorporate different functional moieties. Through facile inner pore surface modification, we can easily vary the interaction between PCN-777 and different guests to realize efficient immobilization.