

# **Cu<sub>x</sub>Ir<sub>1-x</sub> Nanoalloy Catalysts Achieve Near 100% Selectivity for Aqueous Nitrite Reduction to NH<sub>3</sub>**

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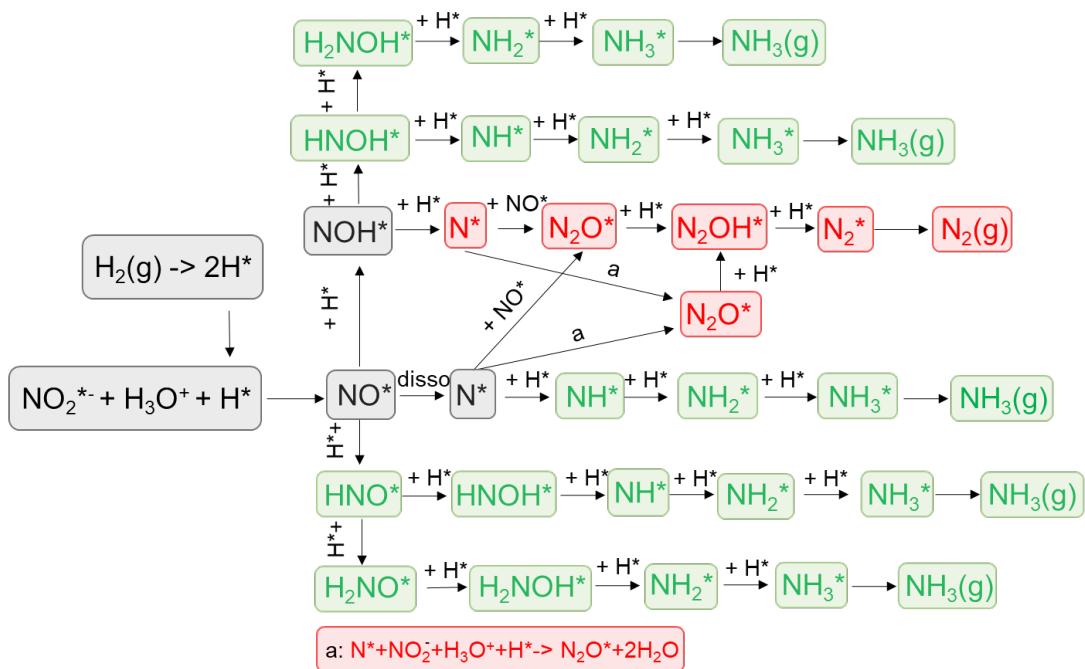
## ABSTRACT

Nitrite ( $\text{NO}_2^-$ ) is an abundant contaminant in nature that threatens human health. A catalytic process that converts  $\text{NO}_2^-$  to less harmful products has been proven to be an effective strategy for  $\text{NO}_2^-$  removal. Most previous studies, however, targeted selectivity towards  $\text{N}_2$  using Pd catalysts, which severely limits the potential for the recovery of value-added byproducts from the catalytic process. Here, we report experimental and theoretical evidence that both Ir and  $\text{Cu}_x\text{Ir}_{(100-x)}$  nanoparticles possess near 100%  $\text{NH}_3$  selectivity for  $\text{NO}_2^-$  reduction compared to the <1%  $\text{NH}_3$  selectivity achieved by nano-Pd. These  $\text{NH}_3$ -selective catalysts could be useful for both water purification and ammonia production.

**Keywords:** Nitrite reduction; iridium; ammonia selectivity; density functional theory; Cu-Ir alloy; nanoparticles.

## Main Text

Nitrite ( $\text{NO}_2^-$ ) is a harmful contaminant widely found in water and soil.<sup>1-3</sup> Anthropogenic sources of  $\text{NO}_2^-$  accumulate in crops and other foods, and in drinking water. Ingestion of  $\text{NO}_2^-$  leads to the generation of *N*-nitrosamine byproducts, which are proven carcinogens and also damage hemoglobin, leading to cellular degradation and even brain damage in infants.<sup>4,5</sup> Many countries, therefore have strict regulations on the maximum  $\text{NO}_2^-$  level in drinking water. However, few cost-effective methods have been identified thus far to effectively abate  $\text{NO}_2^-$  contamination on an industrial scale.



**Figure 1.** Catalytic reaction pathways for nitrite reduction with hydrogen gas as the reducing agent. The formation of water in the reactions is not shown.

Catalytic reduction has proven to be a powerful strategy for denitrification in water.<sup>6</sup> Compared to conventional  $\text{NO}_2^-$  removal methods (*e.g.*, ion exchange<sup>7</sup>), catalytic degradation holds a number of significant advantages including, less secondary waste, shorter industrial-scale startup times, lower overall energy consumption, and higher  $\text{NO}_2^-$  removal efficiency.<sup>6,8,9</sup> However, given the complicated reaction network of nitrite reduction (**Figure 1**), the design and scalable synthesis of  $\text{NO}_2^-$  reduction catalysts presents a major and as-yet unsolved challenge.<sup>6</sup>

In recent years, several studies have reported effective  $\text{NO}_2^-$  reduction catalysts for water treatment (**Table 1**). For example, Seraj *et al.* showed that PdAu alloy nanoparticles (NPs) have enhanced nitrite reduction activity as compared to pure Pd NPs.<sup>8</sup> Qian *et al.* found that Pd precursors directly reduced on pure AuNPs had a much greater activity per gram of Pd for  $\text{NO}_2^-$  reduction.<sup>10</sup> Recently, a combined theoretical and experimental strategy was employed by our group to design a series of bimetallic core@shell structures (*e.g.*, Au@Pd) that led to a high density of optimized reaction sites on the NP surfaces, leading to a corresponding enhancement in  $\text{NO}_2^-$  reduction activity.<sup>9</sup> Until now, Pd-based NPs have been the most commonly studied catalysts for  $\text{NO}_2^-$  reduction due to their high activities and selectivities toward dinitrogen ( $\text{N}_2$ ) formation, as observed in both experiments<sup>8,10,11</sup> and calculations<sup>9,12</sup> (**Table 1**).

In contrast, only a handful of studies have targeted the selectivity of nitrite reduction toward ammonia ( $\text{NH}_3$ ),<sup>13,14</sup> primarily because of its environmental and human health toxicity (**Table 1**).<sup>6</sup> Yet,  $\text{NH}_3$  is also a crucial precursor to fertilizer production for agriculture (*i.e.*, the Haber-Bosch process<sup>15</sup>);  $\text{NH}_3$  is also an emerging energy storage material for use in fuel cell technologies.<sup>16-18</sup> Haber-Bosch plants are notoriously energy-intensive, utilizing 1% of total global energy to achieve the necessarily forcing reaction conditions (*i.e.*,  $T \sim 450 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  &  $p \sim 300 \text{ bar}$ ).<sup>19</sup> Alternative

$\text{NH}_3$  production methods could therefore greatly help to produce this valuable product from waste streams. To the best of our knowledge, no prior studies have reported non-Pd based catalysts that select almost exclusively for  $\text{NH}_3$ . One exception is work on electrocatalytic nitrate/nitrite reduction, which has emerged as a promising process for  $\text{NH}_3$  production with the goal of using electricity supplied by renewable energy such as solar and wind in order to achieve on-demand production of fertilizers.<sup>20,21</sup> However, since the hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) is more facile than electrochemical nitrate/nitrite reduction,  $\text{H}_2$  gas is lost from these reactors and the Faradic efficiencies are low; as a result, this process has not yet met the requirements for industrial-scale applications.<sup>22</sup> Another exception is a recently developed Rh/ $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  catalyst, but it was only evaluated at  $\text{pH} = 11.5$ .<sup>23</sup> Higher pH favors  $\text{NH}_3$  selectivity due to competitive adsorption of  $\text{OH}^-$  over nitrite that lowers the N:H ratio on the catalyst surface, making N-N pairing less likely and therefore selecting towards  $\text{NH}_3$ .<sup>24</sup> Additionally, the use of an  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  support could also contribute to the  $\text{NH}_3$  selectivity.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, alternative heterogeneous catalysts that can selectively form  $\text{NH}_3$  from  $\text{NO}_2^-$  at near-circumneutral pH with high  $\text{H}_2$  gas utilization are currently unknown and have not been investigated in detail.

**Table 1.** Summary of nitrite reduction catalysts reported in recent years.

Catalyst	Activity	$\text{NH}_3$ Selectivity	Temperature	Reference
Au NPs (~4.4 nm)	Not Active	N/A	$22 \pm 1$ °C	Seraj <i>et al.</i> <sup>8</sup>
Pd NPs (~14.8 nm)	$1.99 \text{ L g}_{\text{metal}}^{-1} \text{ min}^{-1}$	< 2%	$22 \pm 1$ °C	Seraj <i>et al.</i> <sup>8</sup>
$\text{Pd}_{53}\text{Au}_{47}$ NPs <sup>a</sup> (~2.2 nm)	$5.12 \text{ L g}_{\text{metal}}^{-1} \text{ min}^{-1}$	< 2%	$22 \pm 1$ °C	Seraj <i>et al.</i> <sup>8</sup>
$\text{Pd}_{80}\text{Cu}_{20}$ Colloids (~5.0 nm)	$9.8 \text{ L mmol}^{-1} \text{ M h}^{-1}$	0.8%	Room Temperature	Guy <i>et al.</i> <sup>11</sup>
80 sc% Pd-on-Au NPs (~4.3 nm)	$576 \text{ L g}_{\text{Pd}}^{-1} \text{ min}^{-1}$	0.4%	N/A	Qian <i>et al.</i> <sup>10</sup>
$\text{Au}@\text{Pd}_{\text{monolayer}}$ NPs (~4.4 nm)	$246 \text{ L g}_{\text{Pd}}^{-1} \text{ min}^{-1}$	2.5%	Room Temperature	Li <i>et al.</i> <sup>9</sup>
$\text{Pd}@\text{MIL-101}$ <sup>b</sup> (~2.4 nm)	$1.252 \text{ mg}^{0.3} \text{ L}^{-0.3} \text{ min}^{-1}$	7.48%	Room Temperature	Zhang <i>et al.</i> <sup>13</sup>
Pd-ethanol@MIL-101 <sup>c</sup>	$0.894 \text{ mg}^{0.3} \text{ L}^{-0.3} \text{ min}^{-1}$	0.31%	Room Temperature	Zhang <i>et al.</i> <sup>13</sup>
Pd-1-dodecanethiol@MIL-101 <sup>d</sup>	$0.546 \text{ mg}^{0.3} \text{ L}^{-0.3} \text{ min}^{-1}$	10.18%	Room Temperature	Zhang <i>et al.</i> <sup>13</sup>
CNFs/Ni <sup>e</sup>	N/A	~70%	Room Temperature	Espinosa and Lefferts <sup>14</sup>

Rh/Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub> <sup>f</sup>	~3-24 L g <sub>metal</sub> <sup>-1</sup> min <sup>-1</sup>	~68%-95%	Room Temperature	Clark <i>et al.</i> <sup>23</sup>
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a: Composition measured from inductively coupled plasma optical emission spectrometry (ICP-OES).

b: Pd NPs prepared on a type of metal-organic framework (MIL-101).

c & d: Pd@MIL-101 chelated with (c) ethanol and (d) 1-dodecanethiol, respectively.

e: Carbon nanofibers (CNFs) grown on the surface of polycrystalline Ni foam.

f: Commercial Rh/Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> in a solution with pH measured from 7.5-11.5.

Considering the aforementioned limitations of current NH<sub>3</sub> synthesis methods and the abundance of NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> and its parent compound NO<sub>3</sub><sup>-</sup> in the environment, we are motivated to discover new nitrite reduction catalysts that favor NH<sub>3</sub> over N<sub>2</sub> formation to treat agricultural run-off or groundwater affected by this run-off for ammonia recovery as fertilizer. Although nitrite concentration in these streams might be too low for an economical direct treatment,<sup>26-29</sup> a selective catalyst that converts NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> to NH<sub>3</sub> could be valuable in a two-stage catalytic process which converts the more abundant parent compound NO<sub>3</sub><sup>-</sup> to NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> in the first stage and selectively reduce nitrite to ammonia for recovery in the second stage.<sup>30</sup> The NH<sub>3</sub> selective catalyst with the two-stage process could be even more useful to treat high nitrate/nitrite waste brine from current state-of-the-art technologies for nitrate and nitrite removal (*e.g.*, ion exchange and reverse osmosis), which are costly to dispose of.<sup>31</sup> This process would simultaneously alleviate NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> contamination and reduce the cost of agricultural fertilizer and brine disposal. In a previous combined theoretical and experimental study, Shin *et al.*<sup>12</sup> proposed a catalyst design guideline; they suggested that higher NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> concentration promotes selectivity toward N<sub>2</sub>, whereas a facile supply of H<sub>2</sub> favors selectivity towards NH<sub>3</sub> formation. Inspired by this hypothesis, we have undertaken a systematic search for new nanocatalysts with high H coverages, which should favor NH<sub>3</sub> production from aqueous NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup>. Using a volcano activity model to represent NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> reduction towards NH<sub>3</sub> selectivity as a function of catalyst-reagent binding strength, we theoretically

identified for a number of potential NH<sub>3</sub>-selective catalysts from a range of transition-metal surfaces that achieve high NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> reduction activities and correspondingly high H-coverage at workable H<sub>2</sub> pressures.

More specifically, we have employed density functional theory (DFT) calculations to generate a catalytic model to estimate the activity of NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> reduction towards NH<sub>3</sub>, where the relative NH<sub>3</sub> selectivity was derived using N and NH<sub>3</sub> binding energies at the catalytic surfaces as reactivity descriptors (**Figure 2a**).<sup>9</sup> Based on linear scaling realtionships<sup>32</sup> between the binding energies of N and other adsorbates (*e.g.*, HNO\* and NH\*) in this reaction network, it was found that all binding energies of reaction intermediates can be estimated through linear relationships with the N binding energy. Therefore, the reaction free energies can be estimated using the N and NH<sub>3</sub> binding energies together with linear relationships between the binding energy of N and the other relevant adsorbates.<sup>9</sup> The two peaks found in the volcano plot represent the highest theoretical activity of two pathways (*i.e.*, those with the lowest estimated reaction free energies): the left peak corresponds to the NH<sub>3</sub> formation through a NO dissociative pathway, while the right peak corresponds to the NO associative pathways where the activation of N-O bond occurs after NO hydrogenation (**Figure 1**). Note that the volcano plot of N<sub>2</sub> formation selectivity has the same trend as the NH<sub>3</sub> selectivity volcano,<sup>9</sup> due to the fact that both reactions have the same rate-determining step. Additionally, while we note that considering the transition states and reaction kinetics in the model can help to acquire a more precise volcano activity plot. However, due to the high computation cost of the energy barrier calculations for nitrite reduction with such a complicated reaction network, and the proven predictive power of the use of reaction free energy for evaluating nitrite reduction activity,<sup>8,9,11,12,33</sup> the use of reaction free energy is expected to

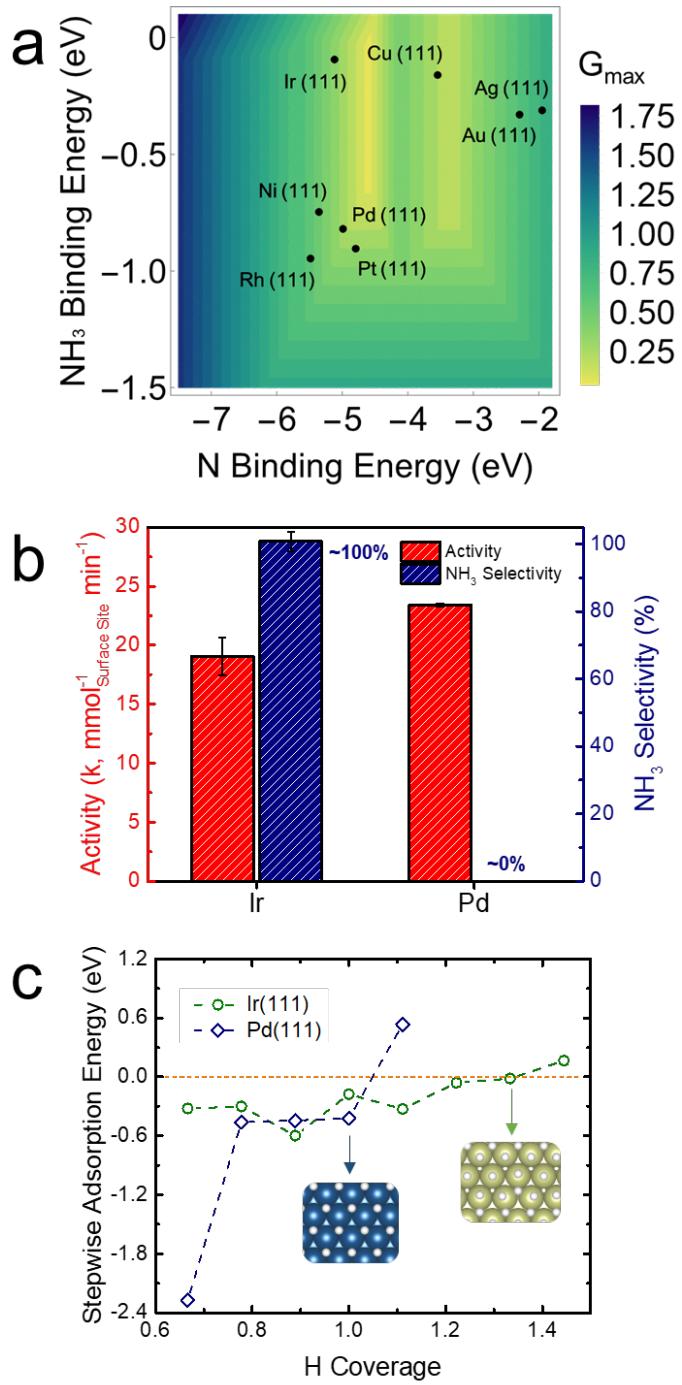
provide an inexpensive descriptor for nitrite reduction catalyst design. By adding the calculated N and NH<sub>3</sub> binding energies of the catalysts on to the volcano plot, we found that some monometallic catalysts have promising NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> reduction activities that are close to one of the volcano peaks. It can be clearly seen that, in addition to the well-studied Pd catalysts, there are other promising candidates, such as Ir, that should also have high activities for NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> reduction, as they are also close to the volcano peak. It should be noted that this volcano model was not used to predict the competing product selectivities between NH<sub>3</sub> and N<sub>2</sub> due to a lack of information about the complicated co-adsorbate coverage. Instead, the reaction selectivities here are evaluated independently using the models developed by Shin *et al.*<sup>12</sup> Specifically, compared to Pd, Ir has 5d electrons which were found to give rise to different hydrogen adsorption properties on the surface;<sup>9,34,35</sup> thus, we expect that this difference should lead to a different selectivity in nitrite reduction. To test these predictions, we then used experiments to validate the predictions (*vide infra*).

Based on the predictions gleaned from the volcano model, we first prepared monometallic IrNPs and PdNPs with a similar size (~ 2 nm) and supported them on amorphous silica (*a*-SiO<sub>2</sub>) for use in model batch NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> reduction experiments. To do so, a 0.1 M phosphate buffer solution (pH = 6.4 ± 0.1) containing 1.25 g L<sup>-1</sup> catalyst in a sealed, well-mixed serum bottle was purged with H<sub>2</sub> at 120 cm<sup>3</sup> min<sup>-1</sup> for 1 h. Next, a small aliquot of nitrite stock solution was spiked into the serum bottle to start the reaction and samples were taken regularly for analysis of NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> and NH<sub>3</sub> concentrations using ion chromatography and Hach colorimetric kits. The apparent *pseudo*-first-order rate constants were obtained from the slopes of the linear regression of the natural log of NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> concentration *versus* time plots for up to 80% NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> conversion. The data were then

normalized to the number of surface metal atoms in each catalyst (using transmission electron microscopy (TEM) data and assuming all NPs have a cuboctahedral shape). The resulting NH<sub>3</sub> selectivity was defined as the percentage of reduced NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> that was converted to NH<sub>3</sub>. The experimental activity (red bars) and NH<sub>3</sub> selectivity (blue bars) for both IrNPs and PdNPs are shown in **Figure 2b**. The NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> reduction activity of IrNPs was 19.1 mmol<sup>-1</sup><sub>surface atom</sub> min<sup>-1</sup>, similar to that of PdNPs (23.5 mmol<sup>-1</sup><sub>surface atom</sub> min<sup>-1</sup>). Excitingly, however, despite the close activities of the two metal NPs, the IrNPs exhibited ~100% selectivity towards NH<sub>3</sub> while the NH<sub>3</sub> selectivity of PdNPs was negligible and below the detection limit of the analytical method used (< 0.07%). The slightly higher overall reduction activity of the PdNPs compared to the IrNPs is in good agreement with the theoretical predictions from the volcano model (**Figure 2a**). TEM images of the as-prepared catalysts indicated a homogenous distribution of NPs on the *a*-SiO<sub>2</sub> support (**Figure S1**). The IrNPs and PdNPs were all found to be approximately cuboctahedral in shape with narrow size distributions (1.7 ±0.2 nm (Ir); 2.4 ±0.5 nm (Pd)) (**Figure S2**). The slight size difference between the IrNPs and PdNPs originated from an intrinsic difficulty to obtain larger IrNPs;<sup>35-37</sup> but the normalized activities shown in **Figure 2b** reflect the surface to bulk atom ratio, providing qualitatively comparable trends between Ir and Pd. We also attempted to alter the H<sub>2</sub> flow rates and the initial concentration of NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> in the reduction experiments using both Ir and Pd catalysts; only significantly lower initial NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> concentrations were found to improve the NH<sub>3</sub> selectivity on PdNPs (*e.g.*, an initial NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> concentration of 10 ppm led to an NH<sub>3</sub> selectivity of *ca.* 2.3%). This result is in good agreement with our expectation that lowering the NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> concentration promotes NH<sub>3</sub> selectivity due to a higher coverage of hydrogen on the surface.

The theory proposed by Shin *et al.* indicates that a higher H coverage promotes NH<sub>3</sub> selectivity by providing a higher chance of hydrogenation reactions (**Figure 1**).<sup>12</sup> To understand the significantly higher NH<sub>3</sub> selectivity on IrNPs compared to PdNPs observed in our work, we evaluated the relative H coverage on different catalysts by calculating stepwise adsorption energies of H on the Ir(111) and Pd(111) surfaces (**Figure 2c**, with the calculation methods described in the **Supporting Information**).<sup>38</sup> It can be seen that the theoretical maximum H coverage (the coverage before the stepwise adsorption energy becomes greater than zero) of Ir(111) is ~1.3, which is higher than that of Pd(111) ( = 1). This indicates that Ir(111) can thermodynamically accommodate more H on the surface than Pd(111).<sup>39</sup> These results can be further generalized with our previous conclusions: 5d transition metals have larger orbitals compared to 4d transition metals,<sup>40</sup> which leads to stronger interactions with H and correspondingly higher theoretical H surface coverages under ambient conditions.<sup>35,41</sup> This qualitatively explains why PdNPs have slightly better activity for NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> reduction as shown on the volcano plot (**Figure 2a**) because IrNPs has higher NH<sub>3</sub> selectivity due to the stronger capacity of accommodating H on the catalyst surfaces. This also helps to explain why other 5d transition metals catalysts such as Pt also have relatively high NH<sub>3</sub> selectivity, as found in previous studies.<sup>42,43</sup> Although the hydrogen coverages at both Pd and Ir(111) appear relatively high, these calculations are done without considering competition of other adsorbates. According to our previous calculations,<sup>9</sup> N and many N-related species of nitrite reduction have stronger binding strengths than H. Therefore, the actual coverage of H will be significantly lower when the nitrite reduction reaction reaches equilibrium; the trend, however, is not expected to change. These results are in good agreement with our previous combined experimental and computational study

that the slightly higher H coverage on  $5d$  transition metal leads to significantly different hydrogenation activity, as compared to  $4d$  transition metals.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, as shown in the previous results by Shin *et al.*,<sup>12</sup> a minor increase in the hydrogen supply can significantly improve the  $\text{NH}_3$  selectivity in experiments. Based on these results, and given the fact that the H coverage on Ir(111) is  $> 30\%$  higher than that on Pd(111), we consider this is a significant difference in the hydrogen accommodation capacity that contributes to the observed difference in the resulting  $\text{NH}_3$  selectivity. It should be noted that there are other factors that could be used to tune the  $\text{NO}_2^-$  reduction selectivity including the use of an active support/substrate or increasing the solution pH.<sup>24,44,45</sup> Notably, some previous studies have shown that  $\text{NH}_3$  selectivity increases with a higher solution pH.<sup>23</sup> A pH higher than the  $\text{pH}_{\text{ZPC}}$  ( $\text{ZPC} =$  zero point of charge) of the metallic surface will promote a negatively charged catalyst surface, resulting in electrostatic repulsion of  $\text{NO}_3^-$  and  $\text{NO}_2^-$  ions and therefore a higher H:N ratio on the catalytic surface that favors  $\text{NH}_3$  formation.<sup>24,44</sup> Despite the fact that  $\text{NH}_3$  selectivity can be improved by raising the solution pH, to the best of our knowledge, the IrNP catalyst is the only current example to have achieved near 100%  $\text{NH}_3$  selectivity under very mildly acidic conditions ( $\text{pH} = 6.4 \pm 0.1$ ). Such a moderate pH is environmentally-relevant, meaning that the IrNPs could operate effectively under realistic conditions, while achieving  $\text{NH}_3$  selectivity values that are superior to other  $\text{NO}_2^-$  reduction catalysts.



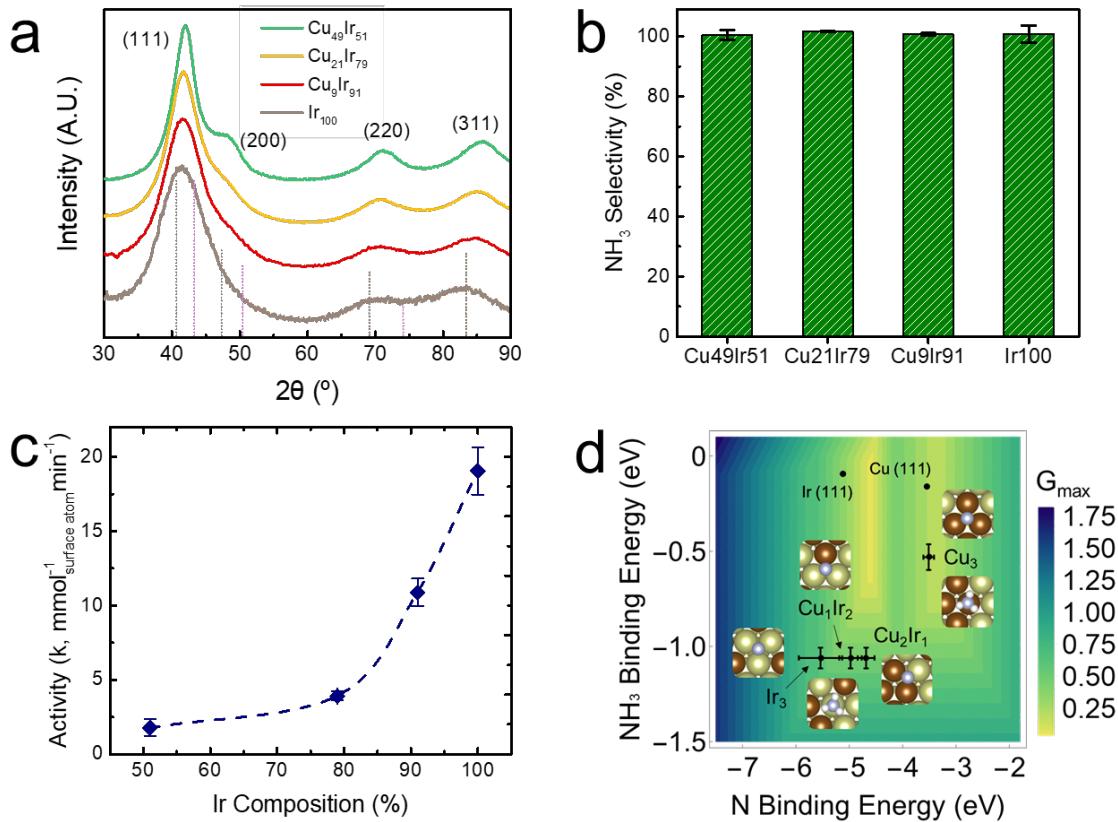
**Figure 2.** (a) Volcano activity plot for nitrite reduction through the NH<sub>3</sub> formation pathway with the close-packed monometallic surfaces indicated (black marks). (b) Nitrite reduction activities and their NH<sub>3</sub> selectivities on pure Pd and Ir NPs. The measured selectivity that is slightly higher

than 100% was due to statistical uncertainty in the measurements of the  $\text{NO}_2^-$  and  $\text{NH}_3$  components. (c) Calculated stepwise adsorption energy of H on Pd and Ir (111) surfaces. Insets show the saturated H adsorption on the surfaces. Blue, yellow, and white spheres represent Pd, Ir, and H, respectively. More computational and experimental details can be found in the **Supporting Information**.

Since IrNPs were found to be highly selective towards  $\text{NH}_3$  formation, we then performed similar batch kinetics experiments for nitrite reduction using as-synthesized  $\text{Cu}_x\text{Ir}_{(100-x)}$  alloy NPs. Ir-based alloys, especially those containing earth-abundant 3d metals are attractive for several reasons: (a) alloying cheaper Cu with Ir can reduce the overall dependence on Ir; (b) from a theoretical perspective, a theoretical line joining Cu and Ir in the volcano plot in **Figure 2a** is found to cross the volcano peak, which suggests that homogeneous Cu-Ir alloys (*i.e.*, solid-solutions) can further tune the binding energies of N and  $\text{NH}_3$  and also the catalytic activity of the alloy (**Figure S3**),<sup>8,9,11,46</sup> (c) alloying more noble and therefore less reactive metals (*e.g.*, Cu, Ag, and Au) with more reactive metals can reduce sulfur poisoning in practical water treatment due to beneficial atomic ensemble effects (**Figure S4**);<sup>8,41,47</sup> and, (d) Ir-based alloy catalysts are rarely explored because many are only accessible as metastable structures on the nanoscale.<sup>35,36</sup> Here, bimetallic  $\text{Cu}_x\text{Ir}_{(100-x)}$ NPs with various target compositions ( $x = 10, 25$ , and  $50$ ) were prepared using our previously developed methods.<sup>37</sup> The alloy  $\text{Cu}_x\text{Ir}_{(100-x)}$ NPs were deposited on  $\alpha$ - $\text{SiO}_2$  and their catalytic activities for nitrite reduction were measured. Powder X-ray diffraction (PXRD) patterns confirmed the random solid-solution structure of the alloy NPs, as the reflections showed a consistent shift to a higher angle with increasing Cu content (**Figure 3a**). Further, 2D

energy dispersive spectroscopy (EDS) mapping of the NPs showed a homogenous distribution of Cu and Ir across the NPs.<sup>37</sup> The actual composition of the as-synthesized alloy NPs was found to be close to the nominal ratio, as indicated by inductively-coupled plasma optical emission spectroscopy of bulk samples (ICP-OES) (**Table S1**). Corresponding TEM images showed that the alloy NPs have an average size of around 2 nm, similar to the monometallic Ir NPs (**Figure S5**). It should be noted that Cu is more easily oxidized by atmospheric oxygen during synthesis and storage, since the standard reduction potential of Cu<sup>2+</sup>/Cu<sup>0</sup> (0.34 V) is much lower than that of Ir<sup>3+</sup>/Ir<sup>0</sup> (1.16 V).<sup>48</sup> A combined Cu 2p X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) spectrum and Cu LMM Auger spectrum confirmed that the majority (~74%) of the copper was in the metallic state, with slight (~26%) Cu(II) oxide on the surface (**Figure S6**). Using similar catalytic tests as described above for the PdNPs and IrNPs, the Cu<sub>x</sub>Ir<sub>(100-x)</sub>NPs showed a NH<sub>3</sub> selectivity of ~100% (**Figure 3b**). Surprisingly, instead of having improved activities, our experimental results show that alloying Cu into Ir leads to a monotonic decrease in the activity (**Figure 3c**). For example, the activity of pure IrNPs was about five times the activity of Cu<sub>49</sub>Ir<sub>51</sub> NPs (19.06 mmol<sup>-1</sup><sub>surface atom min<sup>-1</sup></sub> vs 3.92 mmol<sup>-1</sup><sub>surface atom min<sup>-1</sup></sub>). Using DFT calculations, the activity trends found on the Cu<sub>x</sub>Ir<sub>(100-x)</sub> NPs could be adequately explained by the volcano activity plots with the calculated average N and NH<sub>3</sub> binding energies at different triatomic ensembles on the alloyed Cu<sub>x</sub>Ir<sub>(100-x)</sub> surfaces: although the N binding energy is tunable with the increased ratio of Ir in a triatomic ensemble, the average binding of NH<sub>3</sub> is not altered on the Ir sites of Cu<sub>x</sub>Ir<sub>(100-x)</sub> surfaces, since NH<sub>3</sub> is adsorbed at Ir-atop sites instead of at three-fold hollow sites (**Figure 3d, inset**).<sup>9,49</sup> Due to the significant electronic and strain effects induced in the Cu-Ir alloys,<sup>41,47,50,51</sup> NH<sub>3</sub> tends to become over-bound at Ir-atop sites, which in turn breaks the well-known scaling relationship of

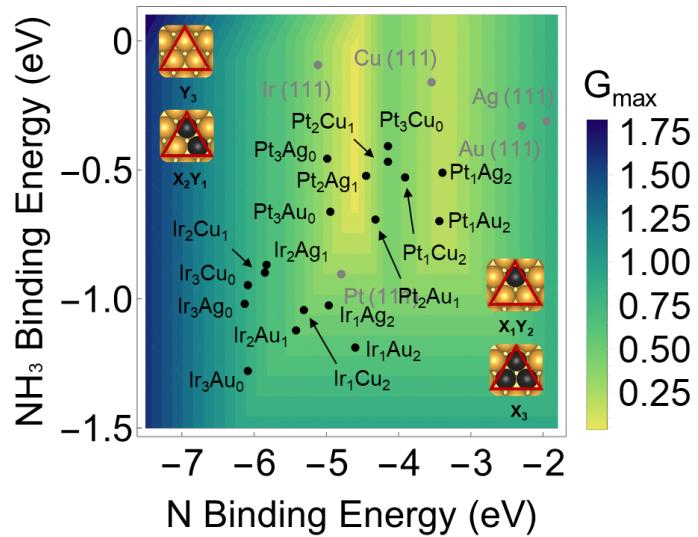
adsorbs on transition metal surfaces<sup>52</sup> and leads to lower activities on the Cu<sub>x</sub>Ir<sub>(100-x)</sub> alloy NPs. This effect of alloying can be further evaluated by the projected density of states (PDOS) of *d*-electrons of the surface Ir sites and the observed up-shift of the calculated *d*-band center (average energy of *d*-electrons)<sup>53</sup> after alloying (**Figure S7**). According to the *d*-band center theory,<sup>53</sup> an up-shift of *d*-band center pushes more anti-bonding states above the Fermi level, which in turn strengthens the NH<sub>3</sub> binding. These results are similar to our previous studies on PtAu and AgIr alloy NPs for hydrogenation:<sup>34,35</sup> although the line between Pt and Au (or Ir and Ag) on the C=C hydrogenation volcano plot goes across the volcano peak, alloying Au into Pt (or Ag into Ir) does not lead to an improved performance for C=C hydrogenation since their binding energy descriptors at the alloyed ensembles are located far from the volcano peak, which in turn leads to lower activity with the increased ratio of inert metallics.<sup>34,41</sup> Meanwhile, as Cu-Ir was found to be less tunable for H adsorption on Ir-related sites due to the intrinsic properties on the active 5*d* transition metals (**Figure S8**),<sup>37</sup> the H coverage at those Ir-sites of the alloys are expected to remain similar to that of Ir(111), leading to the superior NH<sub>3</sub> selectivity similar to pure Ir NPs (**Figure 2**).



**Figure 3.** (a) PXRD patterns of  $\text{Cu}_x\text{Ir}_{(100-x)}$  alloy NPs with different compositions. The theoretical reflection positions of Cu (pink dash lines, JCPDS card # 04-0836) and Ir (brown dash lines, JCPDS card # 006-0598) are shown for reference. (b) The  $\text{NH}_3$  selectivity and (c) the measured reaction rate constants of nitrite reduction on  $\text{Cu}_x\text{Ir}_{(100-x)}$  NPs. The measured selectivity slightly higher than 100% was due to uncertainties in the measurements of the  $\text{NO}_2^-$  and  $\text{NH}_3$  contents. (d) Volcano activity plot for nitrite reduction through the  $\text{NH}_3$  formation pathways, with points indicating Ir(111), Cu(111), and the four triatomic ensembles (Ir<sub>3</sub>, Cu<sub>1</sub>Ir<sub>2</sub>, Cu<sub>2</sub>Ir<sub>1</sub>, and Cu<sub>3</sub>) sampled on more than fifteen randomly generated alloyed Cu<sub>25</sub>Ir<sub>75</sub>(111) surfaces. The error bars indicate the standard deviation of adsorption energies calculated from ten binding sites. Insets show the adsorption geometries of N and  $\text{NH}_3$  at typical binding sites. Teal, brown, white, and

blue spheres represent Ir, Cu, H, and N, respectively. Calculations on other Cu-Ir compositions can be found in **Figure S9**.

To generalize our conclusions and enable further useful structure-function predictions, we also screened the surface alloys of some other inert metallic surfaces (Cu, Ag, and Au(111)) doped with catalytically active *5d* transition metals included in **Figure 2a** (Ir and Pt) (**Figure 4**). It can be clearly seen that alloying Ir onto an inert surface leads to over-binding of NH<sub>3</sub> at the Ir-atop site, resulting in a low nitrite conversion rate. However, some of the Pt-based alloys show good activity, with their binding energies at the triatomic ensembles close to the volcano peak. In addition to the Ir-based catalysts, other active *5d* transition metals including Pt are also expected to have good NH<sub>3</sub> selectivity.<sup>42,43</sup> Due to the predicted high activity of Pt alloys from the volcano model (**Figure 4**), we predict that alloying Pt and other inert transition metal (*e.g.*, Ag) could guarantee both high activity for NO<sub>2</sub><sup>−</sup> reduction and a promising NH<sub>3</sub> selectivity.



**Figure 4.** Volcano activity plot for nitrite reduction through the NH<sub>3</sub> formation pathways, with triatomic ensembles indicated (Y<sub>3</sub>, X<sub>1</sub>Y<sub>2</sub>, and X<sub>2</sub>Y<sub>1</sub>; X = Ir and Pt and Y = Cu, Au, and Ag) of the

surface alloys on X (111). The  $X_1Y_2$ ,  $X_2Y_1$ , and  $X_3$  triatomic ensembles were modeled as an X (111) surface respectively replaced by 1, 2 (2-fold), and 3 (3-fold) Y atoms. Insets show the surface alloy models considered for the calculations: yellow and black spheres represent the Y and X atoms, respectively. The red triangles represent the triatomic ensembles as the binding sites.

In summary, we report that pure IrNPs and alloyed  $Cu_xIr_{(100-x)}$ NPs possess outstanding  $NH_3$  selectivity (~100%) for aqueous nitrite reduction in near-neutral pH solution. Additionally, pure IrNPs are found to have a nitrite reduction activity that is close to Pd NPs, which are used industrially. Compared to those  $N_2$ -selective catalysts including Pd and Pd alloys, we expect that the use of the  $NH_3$ -selective catalysts can help to expand the potential applications of  $NO_2^-$  removal as well as in  $NH_3$  production.

## Supporting Information

Detailed computational, modeling, and experimental methods and additional computational, catalytic, and characterization results.

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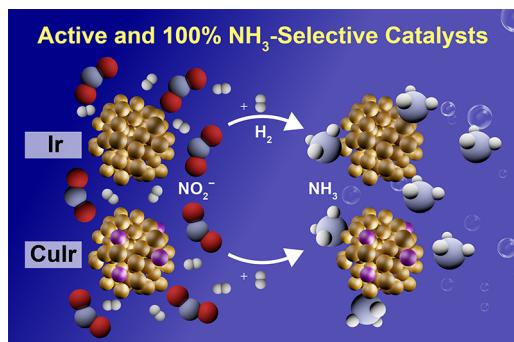
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