Highly effective removal of Methylene Blue using functionalized attapulgite via hydrothermal process

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ABSTRACT

Attapulgite (APT) has been frequently used for the adsorptive removal of dyes from aqueous solution owing to its unique one-dimensional nanoscale structure and low-cost, abundant, eco-friendly advantages. In this work, APT was functionalized under mild hydrothermal condition using chloroacetic acid (CA) with –COOH functional groups to improve its adsorption properties. The effect of hydrothermal modification on the microstructure and physicochemical features of APT was investigated by Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy, X-ray diffraction and Field-emission scanning electron microscopy analyses. The effects of hydrothermal reaction parameters on the adsorption properties of modified APT were intensively investigated. It was revealed that the rearrangement of crystal structure and the surface functionalization of APT with –COOH groups cause the surprising increase of adsorption capability for Methylene Blue (MB). The removal ratio of raw APT for MB is only 59.52%, while modified APT could almost completely remove MB in the 200 mg/L of MB solution with a removal ratio of 99.8%. The adsorption kinetics fitted pseudo second-order kinetic model, and the adsorption isotherm could be described with Langmuir isotherm model very well. The hydrogen-bonding interaction, electrostatic attraction and chemical association are the main driving force for the adsorption process.

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Introduction

In recent years, environmental contamination problems induced by the excessive discharge of dye and heavy metal pollutants bring severe threat to human health and whole ecosystem, and so the effective elimination of these pollutants from wastewater have aroused worldwide attention. The effluents of dyes drawn a major concern because they are visible, toxic to microorganisms and harmful to human health even at low concentration in wastewater (Verma et al., 2012; Auta and Hameed, 2013; Kabra et al., 2013). Therefore, the removal of dyes from industrial wastewater has been engaged much effort in both academic and industrial fields. During the past decades, many physical, chemical and biological decolorization methods have been used to remove dye; however, some treatment methods are hardly to be accepted by some industries (Ghoreishi and Haghighi, 2003).

Recently, it was found that adsorption is a more efficient method to remove dye than other techniques, and thus it was frequently used to remove different kinds of coloring matter (Qu, 2008; Liu et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2010; Clark and Pitt, 2012). So far, many adsorbents have been widely applied for removing dye. Activated carbon is the most commonly used adsorbent (Hassler,
compositions are SiO$_2$ 52.37%, Al$_2$O$_3$ 11.67%, MgO 6.92%, Fe$_2$O$_3$ 7.91%, CaO 1.91%, K$_2$O 1.49% and Na$_2$O 0.27%, as determined by a MiniPal 4 X-ray fluorescence spectrometer (PANalytical Co., Almelo, Netherland). CA (CICH$_2$COOH, AR grade) was purchased from Alfa Aesar A Johnson Matthey Company, Shanghai, China. MB (indicator grade), with the molecular formula of C$_{16}$H$_{18}$N$_3$SCl, was purchased from Alfa Aesar.

1. Experimental

1.1. Materials

Natural APT is from Huangnishan Mine located at Xuyi County of Jiangsu Province in China, and provided by Huida Mineral Sci-Technology Co. Ltd. (Jiangsu, China). Its chemical compositions are SiO$_2$ 52.37%, Al$_2$O$_3$ 11.67%, MgO 6.92%, Fe$_2$O$_3$ 7.91%, CaO 1.91%, K$_2$O 1.49% and Na$_2$O 0.27%, as determined by a MiniPal 4 X-ray fluorescence spectrometer (PANalytical Co., Almelo, Netherland). CA (CICH$_2$COOH, AR grade) was purchased from Alfa Aesar A Johnson Matthey Company, Shanghai, China. MB (indicator grade), with the molecular formula of C$_{16}$H$_{18}$N$_3$SCl, was purchased from Alfa Aesar.

1.2. Preparation of functionalized APT

APT was pretreated using 5% of HCl solution at the solid/liquid ratio of 1/10 to remove the associated carbonates. The resultant suspension was passed through a 300-mesh sieve to remove the undesirable quartz. The filtrate was collected and then centrifuged at 5000 r/min for 20 min to separate the solid from the solution. The obtained solid product was fully washed with distilled water until pH around 7. The solid product was oven-dried at 105°C for 4 hr to a constant mass, and then smashed and passed through a 200-mesh screen for further use.

The pretreated APT was uniformly dispersed in 60 mL of aqueous solution of CA at a solid/liquid of 1/200 (M/V) under continuous mechanical stirring. Then, the resultant dispersion was transferred to a 100 mL Teflon reactor, and reacted at 180°C for 48 hr. The reactor was naturally cooled to room temperature, and then the solid was separated by centrifugation at 5000 r/min, and vacuum-dried at 60°C to a constant mass. The raw APT and functionalized APT under hydrothermal condition are marked as RAPT and CA(x)-APT (x represents the dosage of CA), respectively.

1.3. Adsorption experiment

The adsorption experiments were carried out using the standard batch method as the following procedure: 0.0250 g of APT was added to 25 mL of MB solution (the initial concentration is 200 mg/L), and then centrifuged at 5000 r/min, and vacuum-dried at 60°C to a constant mass. The raw APT and functionalized APT under hydrothermal condition are marked as RAPT and CA(x)-APT (x represents the dosage of CA), respectively.

\[
q_e = \frac{(C_0 - C) \times V}{W}
\]  

where, \( q_e \) (mg/g) is the adsorption amount of MB; \( C_0 \) (mg/L) and \( C \) (mg/L) are the concentration of MB solution before and after adsorption, respectively; \( V \) (L) is the volume of MB solution used; and \( W \) (g) is the mass of the adsorbent used.
1.4. Characterization

Zeta potential is measured on a ZEN3600 Zeta voltmeter (Malvern, Worcestershire county, Britain). The morphologies are observed using a field-emission scanning electron microscopy (FESEM, JEOL JSM-6701F SEM, Tokyo, Japan). FT-IR spectra are recorded on a Fourier transform infrared spectrometry (Thermo Nicolet NEXUS TM, USA) in the range of 4000–400 cm$^{-1}$ using KBr pellets. Powder XRD patterns are collected using an X-ray diffractometer with Cu anode (PANanalytical Co. X’pert PRO), running at 40 kV and 30 mA. The specific surface area ($S_{BET}$) is determined by the Brunauer–Emmett–Teller (BET) method. The pore volume (PV) and pore-size (PZ) distribution are estimated by the Barrett–Joyner–Halenda (BJH) method at 77 K (ASAP 2020 V4.00 (V4.00 H), Micromeritics Instrument Corporation).

2. Results and discussion

2.1. SEM morphologies

The SEM images of APT before and after functionalized with CA via a hydrothermal process are shown in Fig. 1. A lot of bulk crystal bundles composed of rods could be clearly observed in the SEM image of RAPT (Fig. 1a). After modified with different concentration of CA, the crystal bundle of APT was possibly damaged. Only a small amount of nanorods existed and the length of rod becomes shorter. Detailed information can be observed from Fig. 1b–d. As the increase of CA concentration, the surface of APT became more and more rough, in which numerous fine particles were produced and APT embedded in these particles. This may be due to the interaction between CA and APT. Furthermore, it can be clearly observed that a lot of pores were formed on the surface. At the same time, the associated minerals (the amorphous matters in the images) were reduced after hydrothermal process, indicating that the hydrothermal process may decompose the impurity among crystal bundles or aggregates and make them disperse to a better degree.

![Fig. 1 – Field-emission scanning electron microscopy images of (a) RAPT, (b) CA (0.01)-APT, (c) CA (0.04)-APT, and (d) CA (0.16)-APT.](image)

Fig. 2 – FT-IR spectroscopy of RAPT and CA-APT.

![Fig. 2 – FT-IR spectroscopy of RAPT and CA-APT.](image)
could be revealed that some Si–O–Si or Si–O–M bonds may be broken and induced the local collapse or rearrangement of APT crystal. This is fitted with the SEM and XRD results very well.

2.3. XRD analysis

The X-ray diffraction patterns of APT before and after modification further illustrate the structure change of APT. As shown in Fig. 3, the diffraction peaks of (110), (200), (130) and (040) crystal planes of APT appear at 2θ = 8.31°, 13.5°, 16.4° and 19.8°, respectively. After being modified with low dosage of CA (0.01 mol/L), the intensity of these peaks obviously decreased. However, the situation becomes different when the dosage of CA was further increased. The intensity of (110) diffraction peak further decreased (without disappearance), and the (200) and (130) diffraction peaks almost disappeared, indicating that the ribbon-layer structure composed of continuous tetrahedron sheets and discontinuous octahedron sheets deformed and the ordered arrangement of overall lattice structure are partially destroyed (Frost and Ding, 2003). Meanwhile, the diffraction peak at 2θ = 35.1°, corresponding to the tetrahedral sheets, becomes sharper with no obvious change of intensity. It gives direct evidence that the silicon-oxygen tetrahedron chains have not been disintegrated, and the lattice arrangement seems to be more ordered, which is consistent with the FT-IR results (Fig. 2). However, the diffraction peak appearing at 2θ = 19.8° (040) has no change after modification, indicating the octahedral structure of APT does not be damaged. Simultaneously, after hydrothermal treatment, the diffraction peak of dolomite (2θ = 30.9°) diminished and no new diffraction peak was observed. This confirmed that the associated dolomite minerals may be removed during the hydrothermal process.

2.4. BET analysis

The N2 adsorption–desorption isotherm of APT before and after modified with CA was measured and the textural parameters were calculated by BJH method (Table 1). RAPT presents a high \( S_{BET} \) of 226.27 m²/g with the micropore surface area \( (S_{micro}) \) of 68.76 m²/g and external surface area \( (S_{ext}) \) of 157.50 m²/g. The average pore size (PZ) of RAPT is 6.80 nm, the pore volume \( (V_{total}) \) is 0.3846 cm³/g and the micropore volume \( (V_{micro}) \) is 0.0363 cm³/g. After modified with CA by hydrothermal process, the \( S_{BET} \) and PZ decreased with the increase of CA dosage. This is possibly attributed to the reaction between CA and the –OH groups on the surface of APT, which lead to the block of pore or

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Samples</th>
<th>( S_{BET} ) (m²/g)</th>
<th>( S_{micro} ) (m²/g)</th>
<th>( S_{ext} ) (m²/g)</th>
<th>( V_{total} ) (cm³/g)</th>
<th>( V_{micro} ) (cm³/g)</th>
<th>PZ (nm)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RAPT</td>
<td>226.27</td>
<td>68.76</td>
<td>157.50</td>
<td>0.3846</td>
<td>0.0363</td>
<td>6.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA(0.01)-APT</td>
<td>169.32</td>
<td>41.17</td>
<td>126.15</td>
<td>0.2366</td>
<td>0.0219</td>
<td>5.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA(0.04)-APT</td>
<td>159.41</td>
<td>39.98</td>
<td>119.43</td>
<td>0.2157</td>
<td>0.0212</td>
<td>5.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA(0.16)-APT</td>
<td>159.68</td>
<td>41.08</td>
<td>118.60</td>
<td>0.2110</td>
<td>0.0219</td>
<td>5.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( S_{BET} \) is the BET specific surface area of APT samples; \( S_{micro} \) is the micropore area calculated by the t-Plot method; \( S_{ext} \) is the external surface area calculated by the t-Plot method; \( V_{total} \) is the total pore volume of pores; \( V_{micro} \) is the micropore volume by t-Plot method; and PZ is the average pore width.

![Fig. 3 – X-ray diffraction patterns of RAPT and CA-APT samples.](image-url)
tunnel in the crystal. More $\text{COOH}$ is possibly reacted onto APT with the increase of CA dosage, and the specific surface is gradually decreased.

2.5. Zeta potential

The structure change and surface reacting with CA may alter the composition of groups and charge distribution on APT. It can be seen from Fig. 4 that the Zeta potentials of raw and modified APT are all negative, and became more negative after modification. The Zeta potential of raw APT is $-25.5 \text{ mV}$, which increases to $-32.9, -38.1$ and $-54.3 \text{ mV}$ with increasing the CA concentration to 0.01, 0.04 and 0.16 mol/L, respectively. The main reasons are that, (1) the hydrothermal process causes the breakage of Si–O–Si and Si–O–M bonds and the partial collapse of crystal structure, which may generate more $\text{Si–O}^-$ groups; and (2) the carboxyl groups on the surface of APT bring more negative charge. It was revealed that the functionalization of APT with CA via hydrothermal process is more effective to alter the surface groups and charges, because the structure optimization and surface reaction could be achieved by one-step process. The increase of negative charges is favorable to enhance the affinity of APT with cationic matters, e.g., cationic dyes, and then improve the adsorption for them.

2.6. Adsorption capacities

Fig. 5 shows the effect of hydrothermal modification parameters, e.g., CA concentration, pH and solid–liquid ratio on the adsorption capacities of APT for MB. It was observed that the adsorption capacity of APT for MB increased with the increase in CA dosage (Fig. 5a). The adsorption capacity of RAPT for MB is only 119.08 mg/g, whereas it sharply increases to 199.70 mg/g after being modified with 0.04 mol/L of CA solution. With the further increase of CA concentration, the adsorption capacity slightly decreases, indicating that the moderate CA concentration is beneficial to enhance the adsorption removal for MB, and 0.04 mol/L is selected as the optimum concentration. The enhanced adsorption of functionalized APT for MB is mainly ascribed to the contribution of APT and $\text{COOH}$ groups. From Figs. 3 and 4, it can be noticed that the Zeta potential of CA(0.04)-APT is not the most negative, and the structure of APT changes to a greater degree. This may cause the breakage of Si–O–Si and Si–O–M bonds to generate more $\text{Si–O}^-$ groups that are favorable to the adsorption of MB. As the same, the $\text{C=O}$ absorbance band of CA(0.04)-APT is more obvious than the others, implying that more $\text{COOH}$ groups were attached on the surface of APT, which may contribute to the enhancement of adsorption capacity.

Fig. 5b shows the effects of pH on the adsorption capacity of APT for MB. It is obvious that the adsorption capacity increased with increasing pH values and reached the maximum at pH 5. As discussed above, the structure and surface groups of APT could be changed after hydrothermal modification. At acidic condition, the Si–OH groups on APT are existed as the protonation state Si–OH$, which has weaker affinity with cationic MB. When pH increased to above 5, the Si–OH may react with CA more easily, and such a range of pH is favorable to the reaction of $\text{COOH}$ groups, which is helpful to the adsorption of MB. Thus, pH 5 was identified as the optimum condition.

Fig. 5c shows the effect of solid/liquid ratio on the adsorption capacities of modified APT for MB. It is clearly observed that the adsorption capacity of APT was greatly increased from 119.08 mg/g (for RAPT) to 199.70 mg/g (for CA-APT) after being modified at the solid/liquid ratio of 1/200. It is encouraging that the optimal sample can almost completely remove the MB in the solution with the initial concentration of 200 mg/g, which indicates that the functionalized APT can be used as a high-efficient adsorbent for the removal of cationic dyes.

![Fig. 4 - Zeta potential of RAPT and CA-APT samples.](image1)

![Fig. 5 - Effect of concentration of CA (a), pH of CA solution (b), solid–liquid ratio (c) on the adsorption properties of APT for MB.](image2)
2.7. Effect of contact time on adsorption

As an adsorbent, adsorption rate is especially important to its practical application. Fig. 6 shows the effect of contact time on the adsorption properties of APT. As can be seen, the adsorption rate of functionalized APT is very fast and the adsorption equilibrium could be reached within 60 min, indicating that the adsorption of APT for MB is a rapid process. Also, removal ratio of functionalized APT for MB is evidently higher than that of RAPT, and 99.8% of MB could be removed. The MB solution with the initial concentration of 200 mg/L could be decolored by CA-APT, but the color is still deep-blue after adsorbed with RAPT (the inset in Fig. 6). In order to study the adsorption kinetics of APT for MB, the commonly used kinetic models, including the pseudo first-order (Eq. (2)) (Lagergren, 1898; Ho, 2004) and pseudo second-order (Eq. (3)) (Ho and Mckay, 1999a, 1999b, 2000) kinetic models, were introduced:

\[
\ln\left(\frac{q_e}{q_t}\right) = \ln q_e - k_1 t
\]

\[
\frac{t}{q_t} = \frac{1}{k_2 q_e^2} + \frac{t}{q_e}
\]

where, \(q_e\) (mg/g) is the amount of dye adsorbed at equilibrium; \(q_t\) (mg/g) is the amount of dye adsorbed by per unit mass of adsorbent at any time \(t\) (sec); \(k_1\) (min\(^{-1}\)) and \(k_2\) (g/(mg-min)) are the rate constants calculated from pseudo first-order and pseudo second-order kinetic models, respectively. As shown in Fig. 7, the linear correlation coefficient \(R^2 < 0.9317\) obtained from the fitting data by pseudo first-order kinetic model is very low; whereas the fitting curves from pseudo second-order model present straight lines with higher correlation coefficient \(R^2 > 0.9998\). Also, the theoretically calculated \(q_{2e}\) from pseudo second-order model is almost equivalent to the experimental data, but the obtained \(q_{1e}\) value from pseudo first-order model has obvious difference from the experimental data (Table 2). Therefore, the pseudo second-order kinetic model is more suitable to describe the adsorption behaviors of APT and CA-APT for MB, which means that the adsorption process is inclined to an associated chemisorption and surface diffusion process, and the electrostatic and interior complexing interaction provide the main driving force for adsorption.

2.8. Effect of initial concentration and adsorption isotherms

It is crucial that how the adsorbed molecules divide themselves into the liquid phase and solid phase until the adsorption process attains an equilibrium state. The effect of initial MB concentration on the adsorption capacities of APT samples is shown in Fig. 8. It can be seen that the adsorption capacities quickly increased with the increase of initial concentration, and achieve equilibrium at the concentration higher than 200 mg/L, which means that almost all of the available adsorption sites on the APT samples may be saturated at the equilibrium state (Fig. 8a). In order to illustrate the adsorption process and mechanism, the Langmuir and Freundlich isotherm models were adopted to analyze the experimental data, and the results are shown in Fig. 8b-d. The linear forms of Langmuir and Freundlich equations are presented as follows (Langmuir, 1918; Ho et al., 2002):

\[
\frac{c_e}{q_e} = \frac{1}{b \times q_m} + \frac{c_e}{q_m}
\]

\[
\frac{1}{q_e} = \frac{1}{b q_m} + \frac{1}{q_m}
\]
\[ \log q_e = \log K_F + \frac{1}{n} \log C_e \]  \hspace{1cm} (5)

where, \( q_m \) (mg/g) is the saturated adsorption capacity calculated from Langmuir fitted lines, \( C_e \) (mg/L) and \( q_e \) (mg/g) are the concentration of MB after adsorption and the equilibrium adsorption capacity, respectively. The constant \( b \) (L/mg) is in relation to the adsorption energy. \( K_F \) ((mg/g)(L/mg)^{1/n}) is a Freundlich constant and roughly defined as the adsorption capacity. The constant \( 1/n \) usually represents the adsorption intensity.

The dimensionless equilibrium parameter (\( R_L \)) is the significant characteristic of Langmuir isotherm, which can be expressed by the following equation (Hall et al., 1966):

\[ R_L = \frac{1}{1 + b / C_0} \]  \hspace{1cm} (6)

### Table 2 - Adsorption kinetic parameters of RAPT and CA-APT for MB.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Samples</th>
<th>( q_{exp} ) (mg/g)</th>
<th>Pseudo first-order model</th>
<th>Pseudo second-order model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( q_{1e} ) (mg/g)</td>
<td>( k_1 \times 10^3 ) (min^{-1})</td>
<td>( R^2 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAPT</td>
<td>105.01</td>
<td>18.92</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA-APT</td>
<td>199.70</td>
<td>15.71</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

where, \( b \) is the constant as in the Langmuir isotherm equation (Eq. (4)). \( C_0 \) (mg/L) is the initial concentration of MB solution. The \( R_L \) value is calculated from the Eq. (6) by fitting the plot of \( R_L \) vs \( C_0 \), which reflects the shape of isotherm. If \( R_L > 1 \), it is unfavorable for adsorption; while \( 0 < R_L < 1 \) suggests a favorable adsorption; \( R_L = 1 \) indicates that the plot is linear, belonging to linear adsorption; \( R_L = 0 \) implies it is irreversible.

The equilibrium adsorption data was fitted by the Langmuir and Freundlich isotherm models (Fig. 8c and d), and the parameters and linear correlation coefficients calculated from the slope and intercept of fitting plots are listed in Table 3. As can be seen, the linear correlation coefficient (\( R^2 = 0.9999 \)) calculated from the Langmuir isotherm model is better than those calculated from Freundlich isotherm model (\( R^2 = 0.6553 \)). In addition, the experimental adsorption

![Fig. 8 - Effect of initial concentration on the adsorption of CA-APT for MB (a), (b) plot of the \( R_L \) values for MB adsorption at different initial concentrations, Langmuir (c) and Freundlich isotherm model (d) fitting curves for the adsorption of MB on CA-APT.](image)
capacity \( q_e = 207.48 \text{ mg/g} \) is very close to the theoretical value \( 208.33 \text{ mg/g} \), which revealed that the adsorption process was supposed to obey the Langmuir model, instead of the Freundlich model. Langmuir isotherm is used to the assumption that all of the adsorption sites are identical on the adsorbent. So, the fitting results suggest that the monolayer adsorption only occurs on a surface, instead of immigration of adsorbate on the surface (Langmuir, 1918). Furthermore, the curves of \( R_L \) versus initial MB concentration are presented in Fig. 8b. It can be seen that the values of \( R_L \) are in the range of 0.002–0.010, in the range of 0–1, which indicate that it is favorable to adsorption and close to the ideal irreversible case (Gupta et al., 2006).

Fig. 9 presented the removal ratio of RAPT and CA-APT for MB (initial concentration, 200 mg/L). The removal ratio of CA-APT for MB (99.8%) is much higher than that of RAPT (59.52%). This means that the CA-APT may almost completely remove the MB in 200 mg/L of solution, and is valuable to the practical application. Table 4 compared adsorption capacity of CA-APT for MB with various kinds of previously reported adsorbents, such as MMT@C nanocomposites (Ai and Li, 2013), attapulgit/bentonite (50%) (Liu et al., 2014), titanate nanotubes (Xiong et al., 2010), grinding palygorskite (Guo et al., 2008), powdered activated carbon (Yener et al., 2008), MtMIO material (Cottet et al., 2014), sepiolite (Auta and Hameed, 2012), and palygorskite (Frini-Srasra and Srasra, 2009). It could be clearly observed that the functionalized CA-APT adsorbent shows a relatively higher adsorption capacity for MB than the others.

The FT-IR spectra of the adsorbent before and after adsorption were measured to study the adsorption mechanism, and the results are shown in Fig. 10. As shown in Fig. 10b, the absorption band of hydroxyl groups at about 1654 cm\(^{-1}\) for APT-MB slightly weakened, but it almost disappear for APT-CA-MB materials. The above results indicate that hydrogen-bonding interaction generated between APT and MB, and then the adsorption capability was enhanced. Compared with the FT-IR spectra of samples before adsorbing MB (Fig. 1), after adsorbing MB, the new absorption bands at about 1601 cm\(^{-1}\), 1396 cm\(^{-1}\) and 1352 cm\(^{-1}\) were observed. These peaks belong to the stretching vibration of the C=S and C–N bond of MB (Xiong et al., 2010; Ai et al., 2011; Ma et al., 2012). All the absorption peaks for CA-APT-MB are stronger than those of APT-MB, indicating the MB could be joined tightly on the surface of CA-APT adsorbent during the adsorption process. Besides, the weak absorption peak at about 1734 cm\(^{-1}\) (ascribed to the –COOH bending vibration in CA-APT) is possibly overlapped with the peak of MB. This further suggests the strong interaction between CA-APT and MB molecules. In addition, the modified APT obtained by hydrothermal process at low concentration of CA solution is also negatively charged due to the presence of oxygen-containing groups. Compared to the raw APT, the surface charges of modified APT are more negative as shown by the Zeta potential results. Then it is regarded that the electrostatic interaction occurs between negatively charged modified APT and positively charged MB molecules, which resulting in the surprising adsorption of CA-APT for MB. Meanwhile, the hydrogen-bonding interaction would generate between the Si–OH groups of APT and MB, but for modified APT, which is more intensive than that of RAPT. As illustrated in Fig. 10a, the additionally generated strong electrostatic attraction and the chemical association between –COOH groups of CA-APT and MB molecules may be responsible for the hither adsorption removal capacity of CA-APT for MB.

### Table 3 – Isotherm parameters for the adsorption of MB onto the CA-APT.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Samples</th>
<th>( q_e ) (mg/g)</th>
<th>( q_{m} ) (mg/g)</th>
<th>( b ) (L/mg)</th>
<th>( R^2 )</th>
<th>( n )</th>
<th>( K_F )</th>
<th>( R^2 )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CA-APT</td>
<td>207.48</td>
<td>208.33</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>0.9999</td>
<td>5.31</td>
<td>107.87</td>
<td>0.6553</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4 – Comparison of the adsorption capacities of MB onto various adsorbents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adsorbents</th>
<th>( q_{m} ) (mg/g)</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CA-APT</td>
<td>207.48 *</td>
<td>In this work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MMT@C nanocomposites</td>
<td>194.2</td>
<td>Ai and Li (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attapulgit/bentonite (50%)</td>
<td>168.63</td>
<td>Liu et al. (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Titanate nanotubes</td>
<td>133.33</td>
<td>Xiong et al. (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grinding palygorskite</td>
<td>111.78</td>
<td>Liu et al. (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powdered activated carbon</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>Yener et al. (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MtMIO</td>
<td>69.11</td>
<td>Cottet et al. (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sepiolite</td>
<td>57.38</td>
<td>Auta and Hameed (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palygorskite</td>
<td>48.39</td>
<td>Chen et al. (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porous MnO_2 microspheres</td>
<td>259.2 (80°C)</td>
<td>Chen et al. (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAU-CL</td>
<td>33.65</td>
<td>Kadirova et al. (2013)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Initial MB concentration, 300 mg/g; adsorbent dosage, 1 g/L.
of APT could be broken during hydrothermal process, and more active sites generated on the APT. CA reacted with APT, and bring –COOH groups on its surface to form more adsorption sites. The adsorption properties of the functionalized APT for MB were systematically evaluated by batch adsorption experiments. It was found that the resultant functionalized APT shows surprisingly better adsorption performance. The adsorption capacity of raw APT for MB is only 119.08 mg/g, but it sharply increased to 199.70 mg/g (enhanced by 67.8%). More importantly, the raw APT can only remove 59.5% of MB from 200 mg/L of initial solution, while the functionalized APT can almost thoroughly remove the MB in the same concentration, with a removal rate of 99.8%. The adsorption of modified APT for MB follows the pseudo-second-order kinetic model and the Langmuir isotherm very well, suggesting that both the physical and chemical adsorption process contributes to the adsorption process. The adsorption process is involved with the synergistic effect of hydrogen-bonding interaction, electrostatic attraction and chemisorptions. Therefore, the functionalized APT adsorbents derived from abundant, low-cost, non-toxic and stable APT minerals show excellent adsorption capacity and higher removal rate for MB, which are a promising candidate for the application in the fields of environment remedy.

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