Structures and Electronic Properties of Different CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$/TiO$_2$ Interface: A First-Principles Study

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Methylammonium lead iodide perovskite, CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$, has attracted particular attention due to its fast increase in efficiency in dye sensitization TiO$_2$ solid-state solar cells. We performed first-principles calculations to investigate several different types of CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$/TiO$_2$ interfaces. The interfacial structures between the different terminated CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ and phase TiO$_2$ are thoroughly explored, and the calculated results suggest that the interfacial Pb atoms play important roles in the structure stability and electronic properties. A charge transfer from Pb atoms to the O atoms of TiO$_2$ lead to the band edge alignment of Pb-$p$ above Ti-$d$ about 0.4 eV, suggesting a better carries separation. On the other hand, for TiO$_2$, rutile (001) is the better candidate due to the better lattice and atoms arrangement match with CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$.

Organic-inorganic hybrid perovskites, such as CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$, are becoming one of the most promising materials for sunlight energy conversion because of their high efficiency, low cost, easy to prepare and solution process-ability$^{1,2}$. Since they are firstly used as sensitizing materials in 2009 by Kojima $et$ $al.$ CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ has attracted increasing attentions and makes extremely fast progress in photovoltaic applications$^{3-7}$. Recently, researches of perovskite-based solar cells steeply increase and the power conversion efficiency (PCE) reach rapidly to nearly 20%$^8$. Several kinds of fabrication techniques were used to prepare perovskite solar cells with both mesoporous and thin-film device architectures$^{9-15}$. The typical structure of perovskite-based solar cells is a layered structure with TiO$_2$ layer as electron transport layer as well as CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ as hole transport layers. Nevertheless, the different power conversion efficiency achieved by various synthetic method implies the complexity and importance of the interface structure in efficient charge separation. For example, Yella $et$ $al.$ found that the nanocrystalline rutile TiO$_2$ was much more effective in extracting photo-generated electrons from the perovskite than anatase TiO$_2$ film with a higher open circuit potential$^{16}$. Which implies the interfacial interactions are very complicated and the mechanism of interfacial electron transfer process remains unclear, thus it is important to investigate the structural, electronic properties of various perovskite interfaces.

In this study, we employed first principles method to investigate interface-related issues. Many theoretical efforts such as density functional theory (DFT) also have been devoted to study CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ perovskites, and partly clarified the mechanism of energy conversion in CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ perovskite based solar cell$^{17-27}$. However, there are relatively few reports on the theoretical studies of CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ perovskite/TiO$_2$ interface. Our previous studies investigated two kinds of CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ perovskite (001) and related electronic properties of the two kinds of surface$^{28,29}$. Based on these, we continue our work on the CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$/TiO$_2$ interface.

**Results**

The calculated cell parameters of tetragonal CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ perovskite are $a = 8.94$, $b = 8.94$ and $c = 12.69$ Å, which are close to the experiment values$^{30}$. In this work, the (001) surface of CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ perovskite is considered, considering the CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ contains by the PbI$_3$ and CH$_3$NH$_3$I (CH$_3$NH$_3^+$, hereafter abbreviated as MA$^+$) units, which is built along the (001). Along the $c$ axis, CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ perovskite are composed by MAI and PbI$_3$.

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layers, therefore, the (001) slab of perovskite owns two types of surfaces based on the different terminations: the MAI termination (MAI-T) with MA\(^+\) and I\(^-\) ions, and the PbI\(_2\) termination (PbI\(_2\)-T) with Pb\(_{2}^{2+}\) and I\(^-\) ions. Here both terminations are considered, and seven-layer slabs is used to mimic the surface, which is thick enough to represent the surface as shown in the previous work\(^{31}\).

In the reality, the TiO\(_2\) is substrate to grow perovskite, therefore we use the optimized TiO\(_2\) cell parameters to build our supercells. Among many possible combinations between TiO\(_2\) and perovskite surfaces, the interfaces between rutile (001), anatase (001) and CH\(_3\)NH\(_3\)PbI\(_3\) (001) have the relatively small lattice mismatch between TiO\(_2\) and CH\(_3\)NH\(_3\)PbI\(_3\), thus we mainly consider the above two types of interfaces. The rutile (001) slab is represented with four layer, and the anatase (001) is consistent with five layer rotated 26.565\(^\circ\) anatase surface. Coincidentally, both slabs contain 20 TiO\(_2\) unit, namely 120 atoms. The corresponding lattice mismatch between rutile and perovskite are \(-3.97\%\), and between anatase and perovskite are 4.56\%, respectively.

The TiO\(_2\)/perovskite interfaces is built by connecting TiO\(_2\) slabs with seven layers MAI-T (four MAI and three PbI\(_2\) layers) or PbI\(_2\)-T (four PbI\(_2\) and three MAI layers) slabs, as mentioned above, leaving 20 Å vacuum along the nonperiodic direction orthogonal to the surface direction. In some case, perovskite slabs were slightly shifted to avoid interaction between anion-anion, namely I-O. The system is full relaxed, and the optimized four types of interface configurations are shown in Fig. 1: Fig. 1a. MAI-T/anatase (MAI/A), Fig. 1b. PbI\(_2\)-T/anatase (PbI/A), Fig. 1c. MAI-T/rutile (MAI/R) and Fig. 1d. PbI\(_2\)-T/rutile (PbI/R).

As shown in Fig. 1a, the interaction between the perovskite and TiO\(_2\) is mainly through perovskite I atoms and under-coordinated Ti atoms of the TiO\(_2\) surface. The detailed bonding situation of CH\(_3\)NH\(_3\)PbI\(_3\) perovskite/TiO\(_2\) interface are shown in Table 1. The proportion of perovskite surface ions bonded to TiO\(_2\) are 50\% (the bond number of one kind of atom are defined as the surface chemical bond/surface atoms number), with the bond length of 2.98 (I-Ti) and 1.73 (H-O) Å, respectively. It is also observed some structure distortion arises on the interface, for example, the shift of interlayer under-coordinated I atoms lead to the distortion of surface PbI\(_6\) octahedron. The PbI\(_6\) octahedron framework is the skeleton of CH\(_3\)NH\(_3\)PbI\(_3\) perovskite, and the bond angle between the PbI\(_6\) octahedrons (Pb-I-Pb) is rather flexible, which could decrease to 150\(^\circ\) to stabilize the structure under phase change\(^{28}\), while the bond angle in the PbI\(_6\) octahedron (I-Pb-I) is rigid and always around 180\(^\circ\). Here the angle of interface I-Pb-I decrease to about 174\(^\circ\) relative to 176\(^\circ\) in the tetragonal phase bulk, confirming the interaction of the interface. In addition, some interfacial O atoms of the TiO\(_2\) rise slightly with broken of original O-Ti bond to

| Cation (MA\(^+\) or Pb\(_{2}^{2+}\)) | Anion (I\(^-\)) |
|--------------------------------|--------------|
| Bond number | Bond length(Å) | Bond number | Bond length(Å) |
|----------------|--------------|
| MAI/A | 50% | 1.73 | 50% | 2.98 |
| PbI/A | 50% | 2.33 | 50% | 3.28 |
| MAI/R | 100% | 1.50, 1.72 | 100% | 2.88, 2.89 |
| PbI/R | 200% | 2.41, 2.42, 2.38, 2.39 | 100% | 2.88, 2.91 |

Table 1. The proportion of bonded atoms of perovskite surface and bond length of the interface structures.

![Figure 1. Optimized stable geometrical structures of (a) MAI/A, (b) PbI/A, (c) MAI/R and (d) PbI/R.](https://www.nature.com/scientificreports/)

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form new O-H bond. The formation of O-H bond limits the orientation and rotation of MA ions, which plays an important role in the ferroelectric domain wall of CH₃NH₃PbI₃ perovskite. For PbI/A system, the formation of interfacial I-Ti bond and Pb-O bond with bond length of 3.28 and 2.33 Å. The protonation of bonded atoms for perovskite surface are 50%, which are same as MAI/A system. The interaction between them leads to a large distortion of the original surface, for example, equatorial I-Pb-I angle decrease, and partly O-Ti bond are broken. For MAI/R system, the interfacial bond types are same as MAI/A system. However, the bond lengths are slightly shorter than the MAI/A system, more importantly, all the perovskite interfacial atoms are involved in chemical bonding, indicating a better atom arrangement match between rutile (001) and perovskite than that of anatase (001). For PbI/R system, interestingly, it is observed the formation of O-Pb-O bond without the breaking of O-Ti bond. The interfacial Pb atoms obviously move towards the pervoskite, and the corresponding bond lengths of Pb-O and I-Ti are 2.4 Å and 2.9 Å, respectively. The relative shorter interfacial bond lengths indicate a strong interaction between the two surfaces. In the interfacial region, the surface Pb6 of perovskite are seriously distorted, and the opposite I-Pb-I bond angle sharply decrease to 152°.

The calculated binding energies of the different interfaces as listed in Table 2 together with lattice mismatch and Bader charges. The binding energies of the composites were calculated by the equation:

\[ E_b = E_{total} - E_p - E_{sub} \]

where \( E_{total} \) is the total energy of the perovskite/TiO₂ system, isolated perovskite, and TiO₂ substrate, respectively, especially, the \( E_{sub} \) were calculated with allowing the cell parameter relaxation, hence the strain energy of the CH₃NH₃PbI₃ slabs have been taken into account the binding energies. It is not surprising that the interfaces with PbI₂-T slab are 0.86 and 2.82 eV more stable than the corresponding MAI-T slab for the anatase (001) and rutile (001), respectively. The reason should be that the interaction between MA ions of the MAI-T with other ions is through either van der Waals (vdW) or hydrogen bond, which is rather weak. The interaction between the Pb atom with PbI₂-T with the other atoms is chemical bonding, which connects TiO₂ and perovskite as a bridge.

On the other hand, the interface with rutile (001) are thermodynamically more stable than the corresponding of anatise (001) for both terminations. As shown in Table 2, the calculated binding energy of PbI/R is about 3.21 eV larger than the one of the corresponding PbI/A. The corresponding lattice mismatch between TiO₂ and perovskite are 4.56% for anatase and 3.97% for rutile, respectively. Thus the different binding energy should come from the different lattice match between rutile and anatase TiO₂ with perovskite (001). The lattice mismatch is relatively large between the CH₃NH₃PbI₃ slabs and TiO₂ is relatively large, thus the strain may affect the interfacial stability between CH₃NH₃PbI₃ and TiO₂. The calculated \( E_b \) is negative, which suggests that the interaction between the interface atoms could compensate the mismatch energy. Mosconi et al. calculated the perovskite and anatase (101) interface, and they found that the lattice mismatch of pseudocubic phase perovskite with anatase (101) were small (0.75 and 1.85%) but that of tetragonal phase were large (6.4% and 13.52%).

Here we consider the tetragonal phase, which is stable under room temperature, and found the better lattice match for tetragonal phase perovskite (001) with anatase (001) as well as rutile (001).

In order to check whether the seven layer is thick enough, we also examined the binding energy with nine layers for both terminations, and the calculated \( E_b \) are within 3% compared with the one with seven layers, which indicates seven layers is thick enough to represent the properties of (001) slab of MAPbI₂ perovskite. To summarize, the interfaces are strongly stabilized by interaction with rutile (001) than anatase (001) as well as, with interfacial Pb atoms leading to additionally higher binding energy to TiO₂ in PbI₂-T surface compared to that of MAI-T surface. This stability is primarily due to the presence of the oppositely charged attractive interfacing ions.

To analyze the interactions, we have calculated the electron localization function (ELF), which can effectively reveal the nature of different chemical interactions directly from the charge localization between individual atoms. Figure 2 shows the ELF contour plots with color scheme for the four optimized CH₃NH₃PbI₃ perovskite/ TiO₂ systems interfaces. The value of the ELF ranges from 0 to 1, where red color represents the electrons that are highly localized, blue color signifies electrons with almost no localization and green color with value of 0.5 corresponds to the electron-gas-like pair probability as in metallic bonds. Here, we see that in all the systems, the electrons around H atoms of MA ions, I atoms and O atoms are more localized, while the electrons around Pb and Ti atoms show an electron-gas-like feature. The blue color between interface anions and cations suggest the chemical interactions between them mainly origins from electrostatic interaction. Comparing Fig. 2a,c, the PbI₂-T systems show more electron-gas-like in the interface, means a better charge transfer feature in the surface.

The left panel of Fig. 3 displays the difference charge density plot, i.e., the difference between the density of the perovskite/TiO₂ system and its individual constituent, and the right panel of Fig. 3 show the plane-averaged electrostatic potential of the four structures to estimate the electronic level positions. When the TiO₂ and perovskite forms the interface, electrons transfer from perovskite slab to TiO₂ slab due to the Fermi level difference.

Table 2. The calculated Binding energy, lattice mismatch and Bader charge of the interface structures.
therefore, it generate a built-in electric field from perovskite to TiO$_2$ slab to against the charge transfer, then the interface is under equilibrium. To clarify quantitatively the charge transfer between perovskite and TiO$_2$, we calculated Bader charge and which of perovskite fragment as shown in Table 2. The calculated Bader charge of perovskite fragment are $-0.11$, $-0.07$, $-0.19$ and $-0.22$ e for the four systems respectively, negative value means electron transfer from perovskite to TiO$_2$. The direction of charge transfer are same for all the systems, but the charge transfer of rutile interface are larger than that of anatase.

As shown in the right panel of Fig. 3, for perovskite slabs, the electrostatic potential of MAI layers are higher than that of PbI$_2$ slayers. The average potential of TiO$_2$ slab is lower than that of perovskite slab, suggesting a charge transfer from perovskite to TiO$_2$ in line with above results. The potential difference between rutile and perovskite slabs are relatively larger than that of anatase systems, therefore, charge transfer amount for rutile systems are larger. Since the potential of MAI layers are higher than that of PbI$_2$ slayers, potential drop on the interface of PbI$_2$-T systems are deeper than that of MAI-T, large amount of electrons can be accumulated to the TiO$_2$ side, suggesting a better separation of electron-hole in the solar cells.

The built-in electric field behavior widely exists in the metal/semiconductor systems, the charge transfer situations of the perovskite/TiO$_2$ systems are more complicated due to the variety of interface atoms arrangement. To know the details of charge transfer behavior of the perovskite/TiO$_2$ systems, we draw the difference charge density plots, in which the blue color represents charge accumulation, while the red color represents charge depletion. In Fig. 3a,c, the blue color mainly distributes on the middle of I and Ti atoms, around O atoms, while the red color distributes around Ti atoms and H atoms of NH$_3$. In Fig. 3b,d, the charge redistribution led by I-Ti interaction is

Figure 2. ELF o (a) MAI/A, (b) PbI/A, (c) MAI/R and (d) PbI/R.
similar as the former, and the charge redistribution around Pb atoms includes both depletion region forward to O atoms and the charge accumulation region backward to O atoms. For all the case, no redistributions is observed beyond the second layer of perovskite. Both the charge depletion and the charge accumulation make the interfacial charge redistribution, leading to the interfacial electric dipole formation. The presence of the interface dipole induce band bending, leading to the band edge alignment shift.

In order to further understand the electronic properties of the TiO₂/perovskite interfaces, the partial density of states (PDOS) is calculated. As shown in Fig. 4, the conduction band minimum (CBM) of TiO₂ is obviously lower than that of perovskite. Considering the bandgap of perovskite is smaller than that of TiO₂, the electron should excite from valence band (VB) of perovskite (I-\(p\) and partly Pb-\(s\) orbital) to conduction band (CB) of perovskite.

Figure 3. Charge density difference (left panel) and plane-averaged electrostatic potential (right panel) for (a) MAI/A, (b) PbI/A, (c) MAI/R and (d) PbI/R.
(Pb-p), and then transfer to CB of TiO2 (Ti-d). Therefore, the energy difference between I-p and Pb-p decided the photo absorption efficiency, and the difference between Pb-p and Ti-d decided the efficiency of charge transfer across the interface. Generally speaking, electron injection to a state lead to the left shift relative to the Fermi level, and the electron outflow are contrary. As shown in Fig. 4, the calculated band gap of PbI2-T is slightly smaller than that of MAI-T, because the electron outflow from the Pb atoms lead to the left shift of Pb states lower the gaps. The perovskite CB edge, contribution main from Pb-p, is calculated to lay about 0.7, 0.3, 0.1 and 0.2 eV above the TiO2 CB edge respectively for the MAI/A, PbI/A, MAI/R and PbI/R. It is noted that the band offset of MAI/A system is obviously larger than the others. This value is in line with Mosconi et al. calculated result of 0.8 eV obtained from a similar system of combine anatase (101) and MAI terminated perovskite (110) by GGA-DFT including SOC (spin orbit coupling)31. While the value of MAI/R system is slightly underestimated compared to experimental result. The PbI2–T systems agrees well with experimental result of 0.4 eV, which come from Lindblad et al. directly measuring the occupied energy levels of the MAPbI3 and the underneath TiO2 34. It is well-known that the spin-orbit coupling (SOC) effect has great effect on the calculated band gap, as shown in the previous work20. In order to check the effect of the SOC, we check the SOC effect on the band gap of bulk CH3NH3PbI3. The calculated band gap is 0.60 eV, which is obviously smaller than the one with pure PBE and experimental results3. Therefore, we retain the PBE calculated of the electronic structure of the investigated interfaces, which was shown to qualitatively give the same trend as experiment.

Figure 4. PDOS of (a) MAI/A, (b) PbI/A, (c) MAI/R and (d) PbI/R.
Discussion

In summary, we have performed first-principles calculations to study the structure and electronic properties of the interface between CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ and TiO$_2$ including four types structures: MAI/A, PbI$_{2}$/A, MAI/R and PbI$_{2}$/R. The calculated results suggest the PbI$_{2}$/T surface of CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ interact with TiO$_2$ stronger due to the formation of the bridge bond. Rutile (001) surface has better lattice and atoms arrangement match with CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$. The charge transfers from CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ to TiO$_2$ are observed for all the four systems. The different band edge alignment show the PbI$_{2}$/T surface and rutile (001) are better candidate for the charge separation.

Methods

The DFT calculations were performed using the Vienna Ab Initio Simulation Package (VASP) code$^{35,36}$. The electron-ion interaction was described by the projector augmented wave (PAW) method$^{37-39}$. Electronic orbitals 5s5p, 5s5p, 2s2p, 2s2p and 1s were considered as valence orbitals for Pb, I, C, N and H atoms, respectively. The cutoff energy for basis functions was 400 eV, and the k-space integration was done with a 4 x 4 x 1 k-mesh in the Monkhorst-Pack scheme$^{40}$. Further increasing the energy cutoff and k-points showed little difference on the results. All the structures considered in this study were relaxed with conjugate-gradient algorithm until the forces on the atoms were less than 0.01 eV/Å. Periodic boundary conditions were applied in all three dimensions. Due to large sizes of Pb and I ions, cages formed by four PbI$_6$ octahedron are large enough to accommodate MA$^+$ ions and there is no obvious chemical bond formation between MA$^+$ ions and Ti in the Ti d-states, a Hubbard correction was added (DFT$^{U}$) with an effective U parameter of 4.2 eV$^{45}$. Here, the Perdew-Burke-Ernzerhof (PBE) exchange functional was employed$^{44}$. To account for the van der Waal (vdW) interaction, the semilocal generalized gradient approximation (GGA) correlation term is replaced by the nonlocal form of “vdW correlation” ($E_{\text{vdW}}^{\text{LDA}} + E_{\text{vdW}}^{\text{nl}}$ correlation energy). To improve the description of the on-site Coulomb interactions in the Ti d-states, a Hubbard correction was added (DFT$^{U}$ + U) with an effective U parameter of 4.2 eV$^{45}$.

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Author Contributions
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