

A Novel Pillar[5]arene-Cucurbit[10]uril based Host-Guest Complex: Synthesis, Characterization and Detection of Paraquat

Yang Luo,^a Wei Zhang,^a Jie Zhao,^a Mao-Xia Yang,^a Qian Ren,^a Carl Redshaw,^b Zhu Tao,^a Xin Xiao,^{a}*

^a Key Laboratory of Macrocyclic and Supramolecular Chemistry of Guizhou Province, Institute of Applied Chemistry, Guizhou University, Guiyang 550025, China

^b Department of Chemistry, University of Hull, Hull HU6 7RX, U.K.

Abstract

The macrocyclic families comprising pillar[*n*]arenes and cucurbit[*n*]urils have received much recent attention. However, studies on the construction of supramolecular complexes formed directly with derivatized pillar[*n*]arenes and cucurbit[*n*]urils are scant. Given the interest in such systems, herein we have synthesized a new type of naphthalene-derivatized pillar[*n*]arene NTP5 and selected Q[10] as the host molecule. The 4-[2-(1-naphthalenyl)ethenyl] pyridine of NTP5 is encapsulated by the Q[10] and formed a host-guest complex in water-acetic acid (1:1) solution

accompanied by enhanced fluorescence, which changed the morphology of NTP5 from a sphere to a porous form. In addition, the fluorescence of Q[10]-NTP5 can be quenched by the addition of the highly toxic pesticide paraquat (PQ), and the mechanism was shown to be due to the formation of a new yet classical charge transfer ternary system of the type Q[10]-NTP5-PQ. This work provides new ideas for the contribution of supramolecular assemblies based on derivatized pillar[*n*]arenes and their combination with cucurbit[*n*]urils and reveals their potential for useful applications.

Keywords: pillar[*n*]arene, cucurbit[*n*]uril; paraquat; supramolecular assembly; detection.

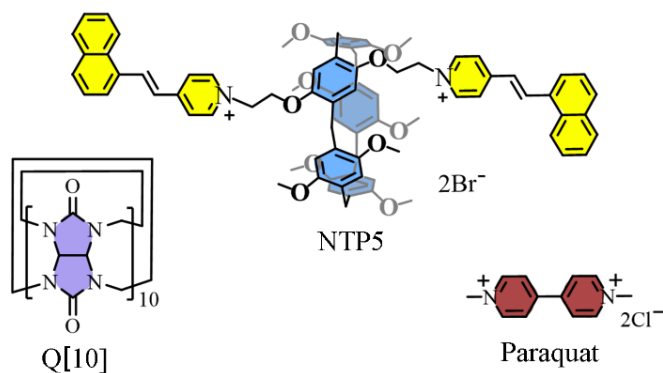
Introduction

In recent years, pillar[*n*]arenes have received increased attention as a new type of macrocyclic molecule^[1-3]. Among the numerous types of research studies conducted on pillar[*n*]arenes, the use of functionalized pillar[*n*]arenes, notably branched-chain functionalized pillar[*n*]arenes, has become particularly popular and they have been widely employed in many domains, including nanomaterials, sensing, catalysis, etc.^[4-12]. With the development of functionalized pillar[*n*]arenes, researchers are now beginning to integrate other macrocyclic molecules, such as cucurbit[*n*]urils (Q[*n*]) into their studies^[13-18]. Stoddart and coworkers combined the advantages of cucurbit[6]uril and pillar[5]arene for the first time to construct a novel supramolecular rotaxane by making use of their rigid cavities and unique dimensions. Similarly, Huang's group has also ingeniously designed and constructed chain supramolecular polymers using pillar[6]arene and cucurbit[8]uril, where cucurbit[8]uril-enhanced π - π interactions are the main driving force. Such work demonstrates the fascination of combining two macrocyclic compounds, however surprisingly, little work has been

done thus far to probe their potential applications. Moreover, most work to-date is based on the use of the same guest molecule in order to study the synergistic interaction of two macrocyclic compounds. However, in this paper, the focus of our study involves a derivatized pillar[5]arene as the guest molecule of a cucurbit[*n*]uril. The decision to employ Q[10], which has the largest cavity among Q[*n*] found to date, as the host molecule is crucial because of its unique host-guest chemistry ^[19-24]. The huge cavity of the Q[10] can accommodate one Q[5], one calix[4]arene, two giant pyrene molecules, two tripyridine-ligated metal complexes, *etc.*, and it is also very easy to bind three guest molecules to construct a unique charge transfer complex ^[25-30]. In addition to encapsulating large-sized molecules, Q[10]-based complexes have the unique property of enabling poorly water-soluble guest molecules to exhibit enhanced water-solubility post-assembly. This can greatly improve the performance of the assemblies as well as expanding their application prospects ^[31-34]. The use of Q[10] for the construction of supramolecular assemblies with functionalized pillar[5]arene will no doubt lead to unexpected effects. In addition to the construction of supramolecular assemblies based on functionalized pillar[5]arene and Q[10], some simple applications have been explored in this work.

Paraquat, also known as *N,N*'-dimethyl-4,4'-bipyridyl dichloride (PQ, Scheme 1), is a fast-exterminating herbicide that also can be rapidly absorbed by the green tissues of plants, causing them to die, whilst the non-green tissues (plant roots) remain unaffected. However, this herbicide is extremely toxic to humans and has no effective antidote. Indeed, a very small dose of paraquat can reach the lethal dose for adults, and long-term skin contact with its solution can also be lethal. Paraquat is therefore banned in most parts of the world, but small amounts are still available on the market. Therefore, it is necessary to be able to detect trace amounts of paraquat ^[31-37].

In this work, we have designed and synthesized a novel fluorescent functionalized pillar[5]arene (NTP5, Scheme 1) using the classical fluorescent molecule 4-[2-(1-naphthalenyl)ethenyl]pyridine. Given the large size of the derivatized branched-chain of the functionalized pillar[5]arene, Q[10] (Scheme 1) was selected as the host molecule. The host-guest interaction between Q[10] with NTP5 was explored by UV-Vis, fluorescence and NMR spectroscopy, and the morphology of the Q[10]-NTP5 assemblies was also characterized by means of scanning electron microscope (SEM) and dynamic light scattering (DLS). Lastly, the Q[10]-NTP5 system was applied to the detection of paraquat and it was found that the detection level was good with a calculated detection limit of $7.06 \times 10^{-8} \text{ M}^{-1}$. This work is more intricate than the previous Q[*n*]-based and pillar[*n*]arenes-based supramolecular polymers in terms of construction. The selection of naphthalene groups as functional groups with suitable molecular size not only enhances the fluorescence performance of the NTP5, but also facilitates the formation of host-guest complexes and interesting ternary supramolecular assemblies with PQ. Moreover, this work is not only limited to the construction of interesting polymers, but also involves detection studies, which will greatly promote the subsequent study of such supramolecular polymers in more depth, and provide new ideas for building supramolecular complexes based on cucurbit[*n*]urils and functionalized pillar[*n*]arenes for future applications.



Scheme 1. The structures of **NTP5**, **Q[10]** and **paraquat**.

Results and Discussions

NTP5 was synthesized by refluxing bromine-substituted copillar[5]arenes (DBP5) and 4-[2-(1-naphthalenyl)ethenyl] pyridine in DMF for 2 days (Scheme S1). Due to the large modified groups of NTP5, it no longer has a high degree of symmetry, which makes crystal preparation difficult. However, with the help of computational chemistry, the simulated structure of NTP5 was obtained via the semi-empirical method GFN2-xTB. As shown in Figure 1, NTP5 retains the characteristic columnar cavity of the pillar[*n*]arenes, but the modified 4-[2-(1-naphthalenyl)ethenyl] pyridine group flips due to a large steric effect. In terms of solubility, although NTP5 is modified by two quaternary ammonium groups, its water solubility is still poor, but it has good solubility in solvents such as acetic acid, which is more polar. In addition, NTP5 also retains the unique aggregation-induced emission (AIE) effect of a pillar[*n*]arene in macrocyclic molecules (Figure S6) [38]. NTP5 displays a weak yellow fluorescence at 350 nm excitation in 50% water (water: acetic acid = 1:1), while in 90% water, NTP5 exhibits strong fluorescence properties due to its aggregation in insoluble solvents, resulting in the well-known restricted intramolecular rotation (RIR). Meanwhile, the fluorescence intensity decreases with increasing water content from 0 to 50%, which is due to the change in solution polarity [39-41] (Figure S7 and S8). The interesting AIE effect of NTP5 enables NTP5 to exhibit good fluorescence properties in the aggregated state, which means that fluorescent materials, fluorescent sensors, *etc.* with more application potential can be prepared via the self-assembly of NTP5.

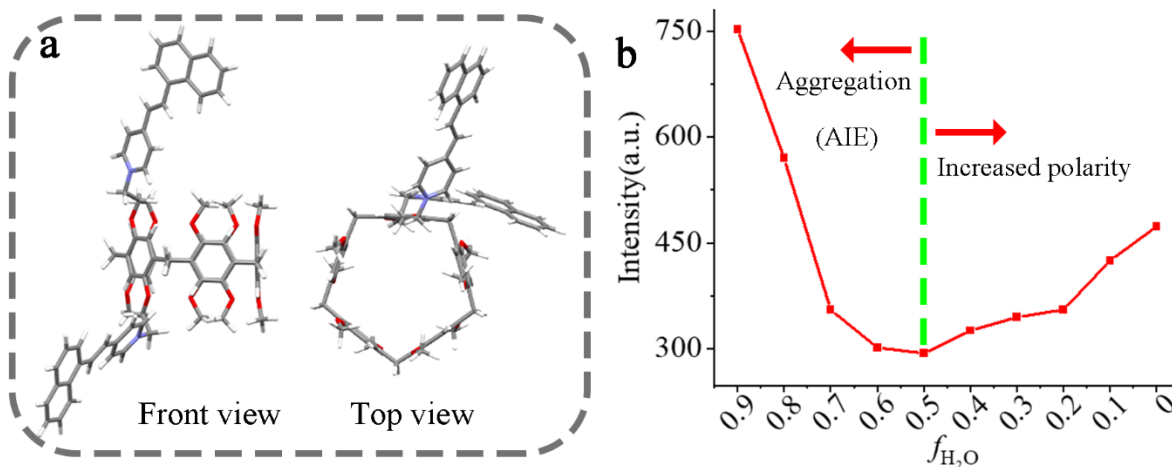


Figure 1. The molecular modeling of **NTP5** (a), grey for carbon, pale for hydrogen, blue for nitrogen, and red for oxygen. The changes in fluorescent peak intensity with water fractions (b), data are extracted from Figure S6.

The interaction between NTP5 and Q[10] in a mixture of acetic acid and water solvents (volume ratio = 1:1) was first studied by fluorescence titration, because the fluorescence of NTP5 was very weak under these conditions and the fluorescence changes were more easily observed. As seen in Figure 2, the fluorescence change of NTP5 after the addition of Q[10] can be divided into three stages, *i.e.*, flat, rising, and flat. When the molar ratio of Q[10]:NTP5 was below 1:2, the fluorescence intensity of NTP5 grew very slowly. When the ratio exceeded 1:2, the fluorescence intensity of NTP5 started to increase sharply from 148 a.u. to 965 a.u. ($\Delta I=817$ a.u.), indicating that NTP5 starts to aggregate at this point ($N_{Q[10]}: N_{NTP5} = 1:2$). When the molar ratio continued to rise to 1:1 (Q[10]:NTP5), the rising trend of the fluorescence intensity of NTP5 started to level

off, indicating that the aggregation of NTP5 had reached saturation. The above fluorescence experiments showed that the interaction ratio of Q[10] and NTP5 is 1:1.

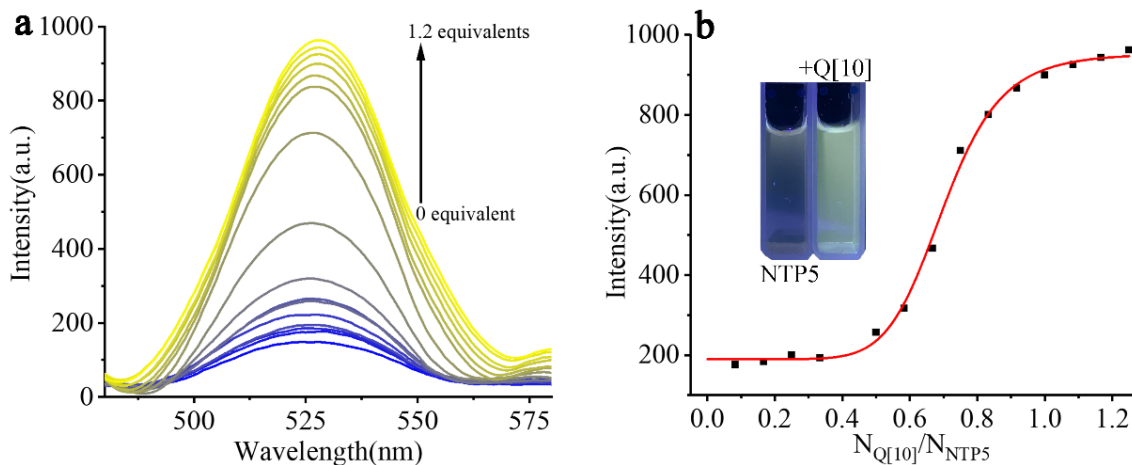


Figure 2. The fluorescence spectrum (a, b) of **NTP5** in a mixed solution of water/AcOH=1:1 with an increasing amount of **Q[10]** from 0, 0.1...to 1.2 equivalents at the $\lambda_{ex}=375$ nm; insert, the fluorescence change observed with a 365 UV lamp.

To better understand the interaction between Q[10] and NTP5, NMR spectroscopic titrations were carried out. Considering the solubility of Q[10] and NTP5, we carried out ^1H NMR spectroscopic experiments in a mixture of D_2O and DMSO-d_6 . Due to their poor solubility in the mixed solutions, the proton signal peaks of NTP5 and Q[10] are very weak and difficult to distinguish. Nevertheless, NMR spectroscopy still provides a generalized interpretation of the host-guest interactions (Figure S9). With increasing Q[10], it can be seen that the proton signals of the 4-(1-naphthylenevinyl)pyridine of NTP5 ($\delta=6.95\text{-}8.62$ ppm) as a whole shift considerably upfield ($\delta=6.37\text{-}6.88$ ppm), while that of the benzene ring of NTP5 shifts downfield from $\delta=6.56$ to 6.72 ppm. At the same time, the proton signal peaks of the Q[10] split significantly, with the

peak at $\delta=5.67$ ppm changing from a doublet into a triplet peak and the peak at $\delta=5.25$ ppm splitting into multiple peaks. The above changes in chemical shifts and the splitting of the proton peak suggest that the Q[10] interacts with NTP5 through host-guest interactions and that the large cavity of the Q[10] tightly binds with the 4-[2-(1-naphthalenyl)ethenyl]pyridine group of NTP5. Subsequently, UV-vis spectroscopy was further applied to study the electronic transition of NTP5 (Figure S10). NTP5 has a strong absorption peak at 288 nm caused by the $\pi-\pi^*$ transition and a weak absorption peak at 395 nm caused by the $n-\pi^*$ transition. As the amount of Q[10] increased, the absorption peak of NTP5 at $\lambda = 288$ and $\lambda = 395$ nm decreased and then increased with an inflection point of 1:1, which is mainly due to the $\pi-\pi^*$ and $n-\pi^*$ transition caused by the hydrophobic effect of the Q[10] cavity. The above series of electron transfer changes are caused by the host-guest interactions between Q[10] and NTP5, consistent with the previous observations.

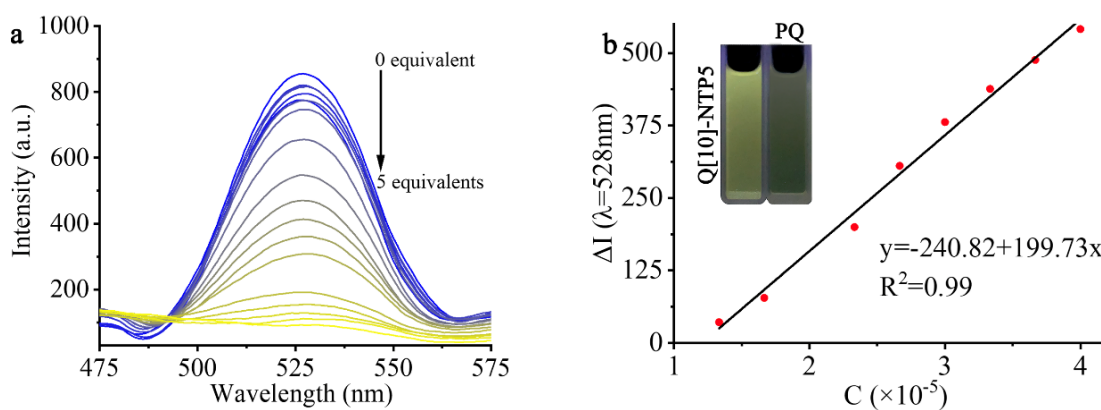


Figure 3. The fluorescence spectrum (a) of **Q[10]-NTP5** in a mixed solution of water/AcOH=1:1 with an increasing amount of **PQ** from 0, 0.2...to 5 equivalents at the $\lambda_{ex} = 375$ nm, inserting the fluorescence change observed with 365 UV lamp; The plot (b) of DL.

Since the addition of Q[10] leads to a sharp increase in the fluorescence of NTP5, this feature allows the Q[10]-NTP5 complex to be applied to the detection of small organic compounds. Paraquat, as a classical guest molecule of both cucurbit[*n*]uril and pillar[5]arene is also a very harmful pesticide to humans, hence it is a very important that it can be detected. The Q[10]-NTP5 complex proved to exhibit a good detection performance for paraquat. As shown in Figure 3, it was found that the dropwise addition of a paraquat solution to the Q[10]-NTP5 complex rapidly and sharply quenched the fluorescence of the Q[10]-NTP5 complex, and the fluorescence intensity dropped directly from 800 a.u. to 100 a.u. Meanwhile, the change in fluorescence from yellow to colorless can also be observed in the cuvette, which indicates that the test can be observed by the naked eye. The detection limit was calculated to be $7.06 \times 10^{-8} \text{ M}^{-1}$ using the formula $y = -240 + 199.73x$ to fit a good straight line.

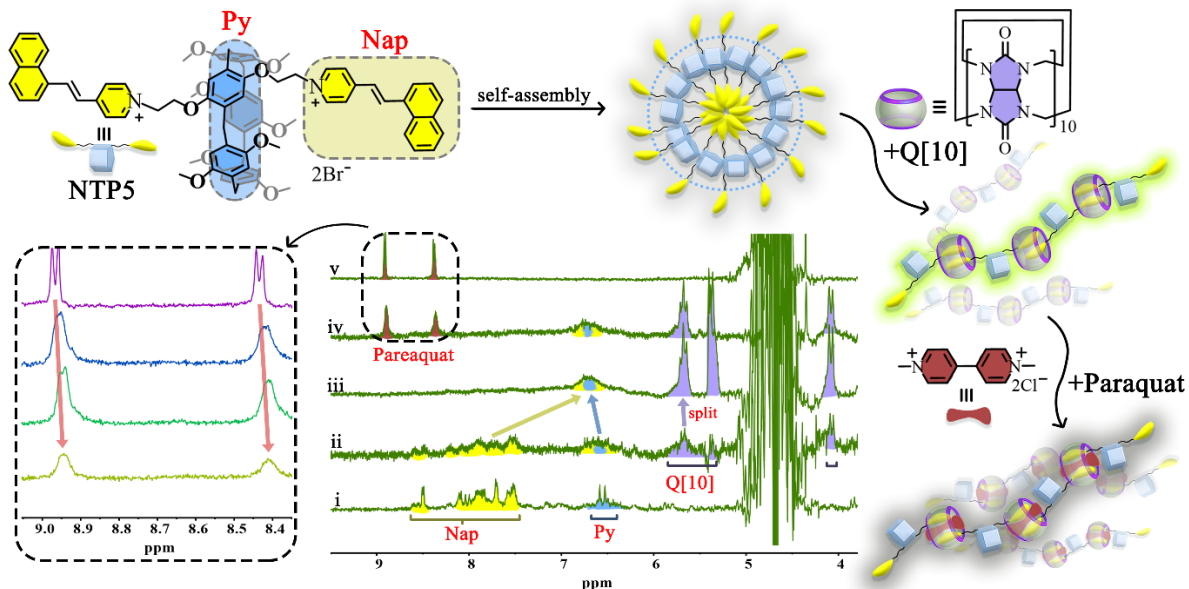


Figure 4. Illustration (top) of the interaction of NTP5, Q[10]-NTP5, Q[10]-NTP5-PQ; The ¹H NMR spectrum (bottom) of (i) 0.5 mM NTP5, (ii) Q[10]-NTP5 (1:2, c_{NTP5}=0.5 mM), (iii) Q[10]-

NTP5 (1:1, $c_{\text{NTP5}}=0.5$ mM), (iv) **Q[10]-NTP5-PQ** (1:1:2, $c_{\text{NTP5}}=0.5$ mM), (v) 1 mM **PQ** in 90% D_2O of DMSO-d_6 , insert is **Q[10]-NTP5** at different concentrations of **PQ** (Figure S12 for full spectrum). Color marking of proton signal peaks: yellow for the 4-[2-(1-naphthalenyl)ethenyl]pyridine group of **NTP5**, blue for the benzene rings of **NTP5**, purple for **Q[10]**, and dark red for paraquat.

^1H NMR spectroscopic titrations were then used to investigate the detection mechanism. Normally, paraquat can enter the cavity of a conventional pillar[5]arene. However, in this case, the portals of **NTP5** have been modified with the large derivatized branched chains of (4-[2-(1-naphthalenyl)ethenyl]pyridine), which may prevent the paraquat from entering the cavity (Figure S13). After adding paraquat, the proton signals of paraquat shifted to low field, suggesting that the derivatized branched chains (4-[2-(1-naphthalenyl)ethenyl]pyridine) indeed prevented the paraquat from entering the cavity. Therefore, the use of ^1H NMR spectroscopic titration experiments on the **Q[10]-NTP5** complex and paraquat is crucial for elucidating its mechanism. As shown in Figure 4, on addition of paraquat, the proton signal of paraquat is slightly displaced to high field, and the proton signals of the **Q[10]-NTP5** assembly were not significantly affected, which means that paraquat enters the huge cavity of **Q[10]** rather than that of **NTP5**. Therefore, it can be inferred that the decline of fluorescence caused by the addition of paraquat is due to the construction of the classic charge transfer complex of **Q[10]-NTP5-PQ** ^[26,27,42-44]. In addition to NMR spectroscopy, we also employed DLS and SEM to corroborate the finding of the charge transfer complex (Figure 5d). The results of DLS indicate that both **Q[10]-NTP5** (740 nm) and **Q[10]-NTP5-PQ** (857 nm) have larger particle sizes than **NTP5** (137 nm) and **NTP5-PQ** (265 nm), indicating that paraquat not only did not dissociate the **Q[10]-NTP5** assembly into monomers but

that it also further contributed to the formation of the charge-transfer complex. The structure of Q[10]-NTP5-PQ has also been subjected to quantitative calculations to confirm its credibility. SEM and TEM (Figure S14) were able to confirm the formation of ternary complexes and to visualize the above-mentioned complexes. NTP5 in the solid-state is a more homogeneous sphere (Figure 5a), while the addition of Q[10] makes the spheres sparse without obvious contours and somewhat porous in structure (Figure 5b). After the addition of paraquat, the whole shape becomes very compact and uneven spherical particles can be observed at the outer surface of these compact structures (Figure 5c).

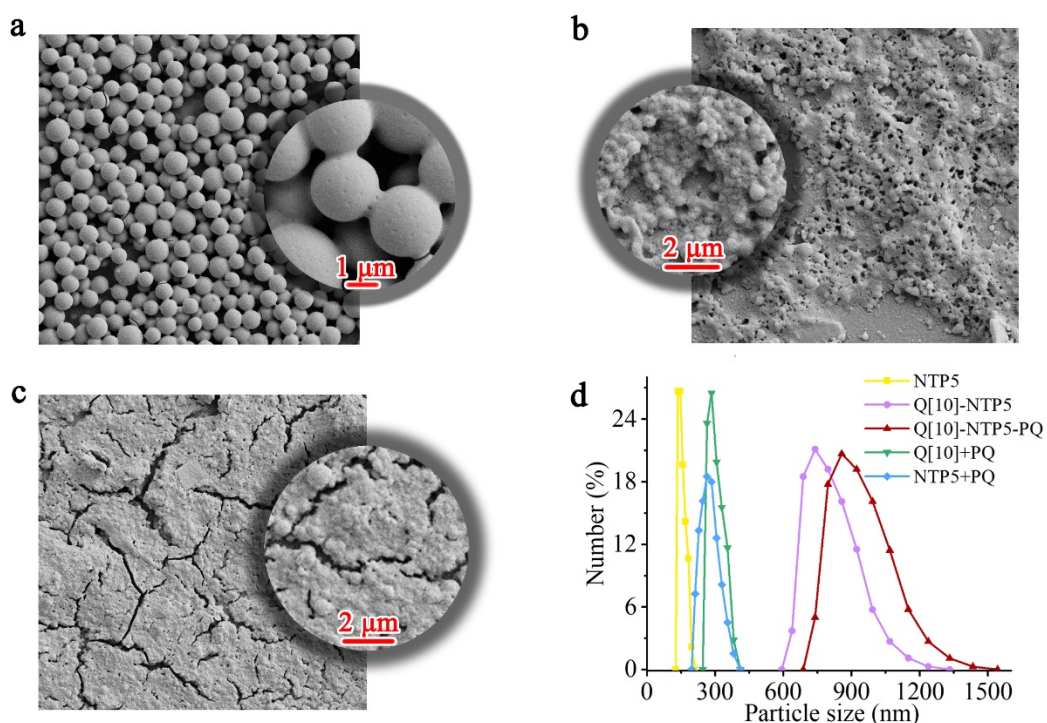


Figure 5. The SEM of (a) **NTP5**; (b) **Q[10]-NTP5**; (c) **Q[10]-NTP5-PQ**, insert for the morphological details and the red line is the corresponding ruler; (d) The DLS of **NTP5** (yellow), **Q[10]-NTP5** (purple), **Q[10]-NTP5-PQ** (dark red), **Q[10]-PQ** (green), **NTP5-PQ** (blue), and the detailed DLS data are also presented in Table S1 in the Supporting Information.

Conclusion

4-[2-(1-naphthalenyl)ethenyl]pyridine was used to design and synthesize a new type of pillar[*n*]arene, namely NTP5. Due to its larger size, Q[10] was selected as the host molecule, and their host-guest interaction was investigated. It was found that Q[10] greatly improved the fluorescence performance of NTP5 by restricting its intramolecular rotation. Subsequently, Q[10]-NTP5 was used to detect highly toxic paraquat and good results were achieved, with the addition of paraquat promoting the formation of the charge-transfer complex. The work in this paper provides new insights for the derivatization of pillar[*n*]arenes and their combination with cucurbit[*n*]urils and reveals that such systems have potentially useful applications, such as the construction of novel supramolecular polymers via two macrocyclic host molecules, as well as utilizing these polymers for specific molecular recognition, bioimaging etc.

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ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information. A listing of the contents of each file supplied as Supporting Information should be included.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Corresponding Author

*Xin Xiao (gyhxxiaoxin@163.com): Key Laboratory of Macrocyclic and Supramolecular Chemistry of Guizhou Province, Guizhou University, Guiyang 550025, China.

Author Contributions

Yang Luo: experimentation and writing - original draft; Wei Zhang: resources; Jie Zhao: quantitative computing; Mao-Xia Yang: Calibration of manuscripts; Qian Ren: experimentation; Carl Redshaw: review & editing; Zhu Tao: review & editing; Xin Xiao: supervision.

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