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# Promoting Intersystem Crossing of Fluorescent Molecule via Single Functional Group Modification

Ran Liu,<sup>a</sup> Xing Gao,<sup>b</sup> Mario Barbatti,<sup>\*c</sup> Jun Jiang,<sup>a</sup> Guozhen Zhang<sup>\*a</sup>

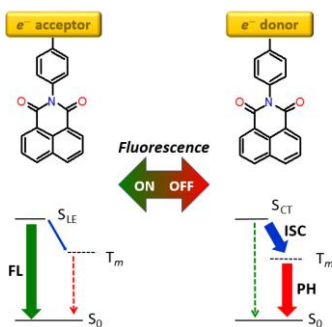
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**Abstract:** Pure light-atoms organic phosphorescent molecules have been under scientific scrutiny because they are inexpensive, flexible, and environment friendly. The development of such materials, however, faces a bottleneck problem of intrinsically small spin-orbit couplings (SOC), which can be addressed by seeking a proper balance between intersystem crossing (ISC) and fluorescence rates. Using N-substituted naphthalimides (NNI) as the prototype molecule, we applied chemical modifications with several electrophilic and nucleophilic functional groups, to approach the goal. The selected electron donating groups actively restrain the fluorescence, enabling an efficient ISC to the triplet manifold. Electron withdrawing groups do not change the luminescent properties of the parent species. The changes in ISC and fluorescence rates are related to the nature of the lowest singlet state, which changes from localized excitation into charge-transfer excitation. This finding opens an alternative strategy for designing pure light-atoms organic phosphorescent molecules for emerging luminescent materials applications.

## TOC Graphic



Molecular phosphorescence has a high potential in information processing applications, including sensors, biological imaging, and LEDs, which has promoted a vivid search for efficient, low-cost, and environment-friendly phosphorescent materials.<sup>1-6</sup> Naturally, a crucial point in this search is to develop molecules with efficient intersystem crossing (ISC), the nonradiative transition between electronic states with different spin multiplicity.<sup>7-14</sup> In organometallic LEDs, for instance, the interaction between the singlet metal-to-ligand charge transfer (<sup>1</sup>MLCT) and the lowest triplet metal-to-ligand charge transfer (<sup>3</sup>MLCT) states leads to robust ISC, resulting in high phosphorescence quantum yield.<sup>15-16</sup>

To date, many phosphorescent molecules are either organometallic molecules or organic molecules with halogen atoms.<sup>17-18</sup> Such dominance has two causes, both well-documented. First, heavy, occasionally magnetic metal ions help to strengthen the spin-orbit coupling (SOC), which is the root of ISC.<sup>19-20</sup> Secondly, charge transfer (CT) processes contribute to tuning the relevant excited energies favorably.<sup>21-23</sup> That is, the poor superposition of the orbitals from the metal center and ligand results in tiny singlet-triplet energy gap ( $\Delta E_{ST}$ , the energy difference between the lowest singlet excited state and neighboring triplet state).<sup>3</sup> Thus, the ISC efficiency can be improved by either reducing  $\Delta E_{ST}$  or enlarging the SOC matrix element<sup>24-25</sup> (see also eq. (1)).

It has been reported that small  $\Delta E_{ST}$  led to efficient ISC and thereby strong phosphorescence in dibenzothiophene-*S,S*-dioxide and 2-biphenyl-4,6-bis(12-phenylindolo[2,3-*a*]carbazole-11-yl)-1,3,5-triazine complexes.<sup>26-27</sup> In suitable conditions, the metal-ligand compounds may emit phosphorescence thanks to the ligand-localized nature ( ${}^3\text{IL}^*$  or  ${}^3\pi\text{-}\pi^*$ ) of the lowest triplet state and the relaxation of  ${}^3\text{LMCT}/{}^3\text{MLCT}$  to  ${}^3\pi\text{LC}^*$ .<sup>28</sup> However, the risk of toxicity and instability of organometallic or halo-organic molecules limits their applications.<sup>29</sup>

By comparison, pure light-atoms organic molecules could be an alternative because of their low cost, potentially low toxicity, and high engineering flexibility. Recently, pure light-atoms organic materials have emerged as a promising type of phosphorescent materials. Their luminescent properties were modified through crystallization and aggregation-induced emission enhancement to reduce nonradiative losses.<sup>29-33</sup> Nevertheless, the designing of pure light-atoms organic phosphorescent chromophores has still been a significant challenge because of their tiny SOC, ranging from around  $1\text{ cm}^{-1}$  in El-Sayed<sup>34</sup> forbidden transitions to typically 50 to  $100\text{ cm}^{-1}$  in El-Sayed allowed transitions.<sup>35-36</sup> Such SOC values are truly too small compared to those above  $500\text{ cm}^{-1}$  observed in organometallic systems,<sup>37</sup> especially considering that the ISC rate depends on their squared values.

Despite their tiny SOC, specific chemical modification to pure light-atoms organic fluorescent molecules with functional groups have successfully activated phosphorescence. This is the case, for instance, of *N*-substituted naphthalimides (NNI), whose luminescent properties can be fundamentally altered when the functional group  $-\text{OCH}_3$  is added, as reported by Chen et al.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, NNI is fluorescence active but phosphorescence inactive. By contrast, NNI- $\text{OCH}_3$  is phosphorescence active but fluorescence inactive (see Figure 1(a)). The proposed mechanism<sup>3</sup> explaining the phosphorescence activation in NNI- $\text{OCH}_3$  claims that both the first singlet excited state ( $S_1$ ) and the closest triplet excited state of NNI- $\text{OCH}_3$  have charge-transfer (CT)

characters, reducing  $\Delta E_{ST}$  and, consequently, enhancing the ISC rate (see Figure 1(b)).

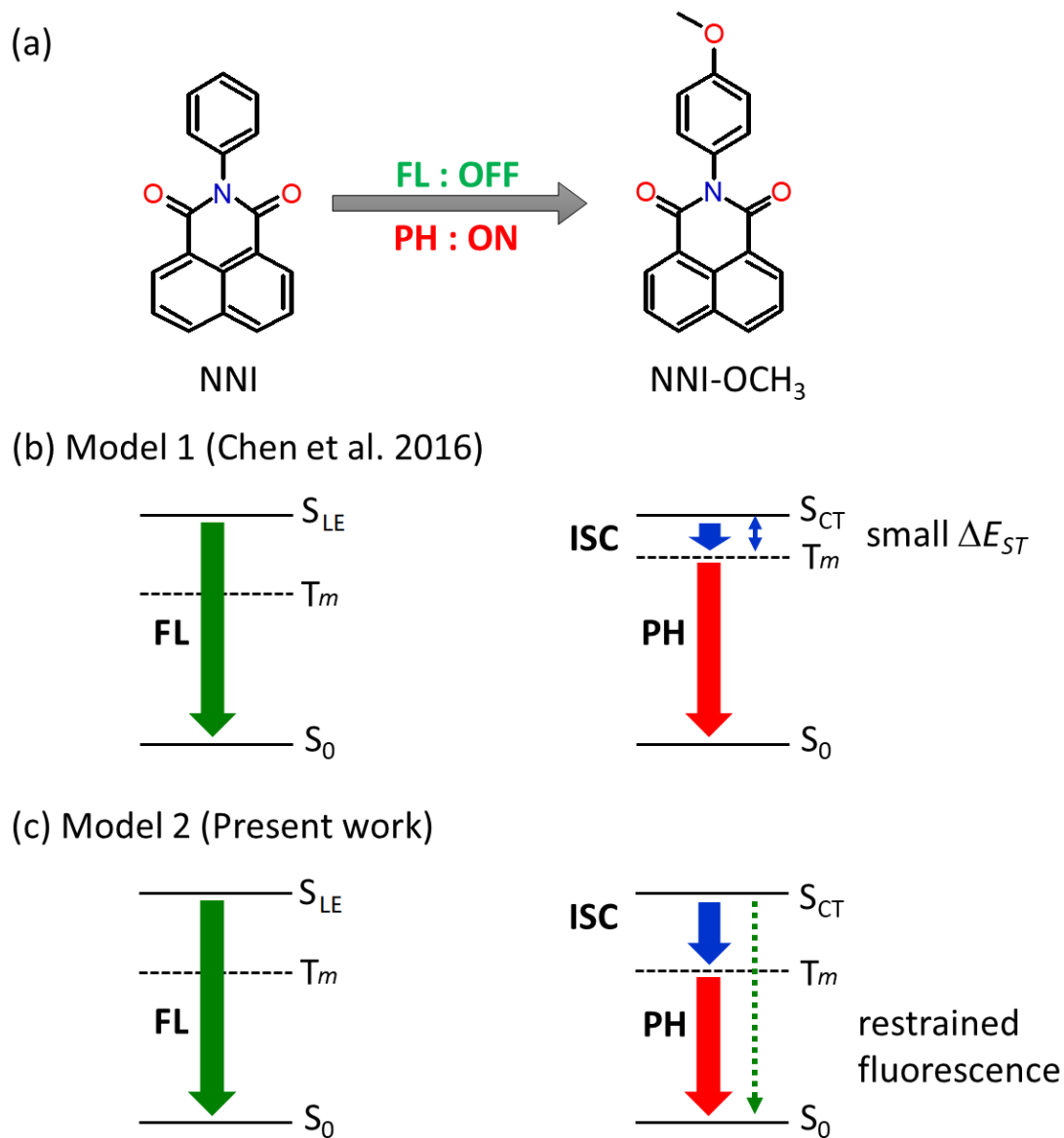


Figure 1. (a) The luminescence properties of NNI and NNI-OCH<sub>3</sub>. The addition of -OCH<sub>3</sub> turns the fluorescent NNI into a phosphorescent molecule. (b) A previously proposed mechanism to explain NNI-OCH<sub>3</sub> phosphorescence is based on a small  $\Delta E_{ST}$  due to low-lying CT states.<sup>3</sup> (c) The mechanism proposed in this work is based on restrained fluorescence also caused by low-lying CT states.

These findings prompt us to investigate the photophysics of NNI from a theoretical standpoint, to learn how to control the luminescence behavior of a dye molecule through a delicate modification of its chemical structure. Here, we applied density functional theory (DFT) and time-dependent DFT (TD-DFT) to map electron-hole distributions and to estimate fluorescence and phosphorescence rates in NNI and NNI substituted with diverse functional groups. By studying functional groups that are either electron withdrawing (EWGs:  $-\text{F}$  and  $-\text{COOH}$ ) or electron donating (EDGs:  $-\text{OH}$  and  $-\text{OCH}_3$ ), we aimed to understand how these different classes of functional substitutions impact the luminescent properties.

We have found out that EDG substitutions strongly enhance the triplet population, while EWG substitutions have little effect compared to the parent system. As proposed by Chen et al.,<sup>3</sup> the CT character of the  $S_1$  state in NNI-EDG is the crucial piece to understand the enhanced ISC in these systems. Nevertheless, the reason underlying the ISC enhancement is not a reduction of  $\Delta E_{ST}$ , but rather a strongly-restrained fluorescence due to transition dipole moment reduction (Figure 1(c)), which compensates for the small SOCs.

Based on the semiclassical Marcus theory, the ISC rate,  $k_{ISC} = \tau_{ISC}^{-1}$ , from  $S_1$  to a neighbor triplet state  $T_m$  can be estimated as<sup>38</sup>

$$k_{ISC} = \frac{2\pi}{\hbar} |V_{SOC}|^2 \frac{1}{\sqrt{4\pi\lambda k_B T}} \exp\left(-\frac{(\Delta G_{ST}^v)^2}{4\lambda k_B T}\right) \quad (1)$$

where  $V_{SOC}$  is the spin-orbit coupling (SOC) matrix element,  $\lambda$  is the reorganization energy, and  $\Delta G_{ST}^v$  is the vertical free Gibbs energy variation. As usual,  $\hbar$  is the reduced Planck constant,  $k_B$  is the Boltzmann constant, and  $T$  is the absolute temperature. The reorganization energy was approximated as  $\lambda \approx E_{T_2}(\mathbf{R}_{\min S_1}) - E_{T_2}(\mathbf{R}_{\min T_2})$  and the vertical free energy gap as

$\Delta G_{ST}^v \approx \Delta E_{ST} = E_{T_m}(\mathbf{R}_{\min,S_1}) - E_{S_1}(\mathbf{R}_{\min,S_1})$ . The SOC matrix elements of selected singlet-triplet channels were calculated at the optimized structure of  $S_1$ . They were evaluated adopting the Breit-Pauli (BP) spin-orbital Hamiltonian with effective-charge approximation,<sup>39</sup> using Casida's wavefunction Ansatz.<sup>40</sup> Given proper approximations (See details in the Supporting Information), the simplified rate model in Eq. (1) is supposed to deliver a qualitative estimate of the ISC rate. This limitation is not a major impediment for us, as the rates here are only needed for a qualitative comparison between different photophysical processes.

Meantime, the fluorescence rate,  $k_{FL} = \tau_{FL}^{-1}$ , was estimated as<sup>41</sup>

$$k_{FL} = \frac{e^2}{2\pi\epsilon_0 m_e c^3 \hbar^2} \Delta E^2 f \quad (2)$$

where  $\epsilon_0$  is the vacuum permittivity,  $m_e$  is the electron mass,  $e$  is the electron charge,  $c$  is the speed of light.  $\Delta E = E_{S_0}(\mathbf{R}_{\min,S_1}) - E_{S_1}(\mathbf{R}_{\min,S_1})$  and  $f$  are the  $S_1$ - $S_0$  energy gap and the oscillator strength calculated at the  $S_1$  minimum.

The chemical structures of NNI and its four derivatives with single *para*-substitution are collected in the upper half of Figure 2. We first examined the ground states of all species. Intriguingly, regardless of the substituent added to NNI, the benzene and naphthalimide groups are always perpendicular to each other in optimized structures (See Cartesian coordinates in Supporting Information). Further, vertical excitation calculations based on optimized  $S_0$  geometries show that the  $S_1$  states of all species are almost the same (See Table S1 in Supporting Information). Thus, for NNI-OCH<sub>3</sub> and NNI-OH, there may be some configurational change during the relaxation of  $S_1$  that can induce the change of its nature.

The electron-hole distributions of their respective  $S_1$  and  $T_2$  states based on optimized  $S_1$  structures are collected in the lower half of Figure 2. Compared to the NNI molecule, the EDGs concerned in the work ( $-\text{OH}$  and  $-\text{OCH}_3$ ) alter the nature of

$S_1$  and  $T_2$  from locally excited states to charge-transfer (CT) states, with an electron transfer from the benzene to the naphthalimide group. Noticeably, this shift is closely related to the conformational change of  $S_1$  and  $T_2$ . For NNI, the benzene and the naphthalimide groups are perpendicular to each other, while for NNI-X (X =  $-\text{OH}$  or  $-\text{OCH}_3$ ), they are not. Also, the  $S_1$  of NNI-OH and NNI-OCH<sub>3</sub> is a dark state because the two molecular orbitals involved in  $S_1$  (see Table S2 in the Supporting Information) are poorly  $\pi$ -conjugated as the two corresponding molecular fragments appreciably deviated from co-planarity.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, the EWGs groups  $-\text{F}$  and  $-\text{COOH}$  left almost unchanged the nature of  $S_1$  and  $T_2$ .

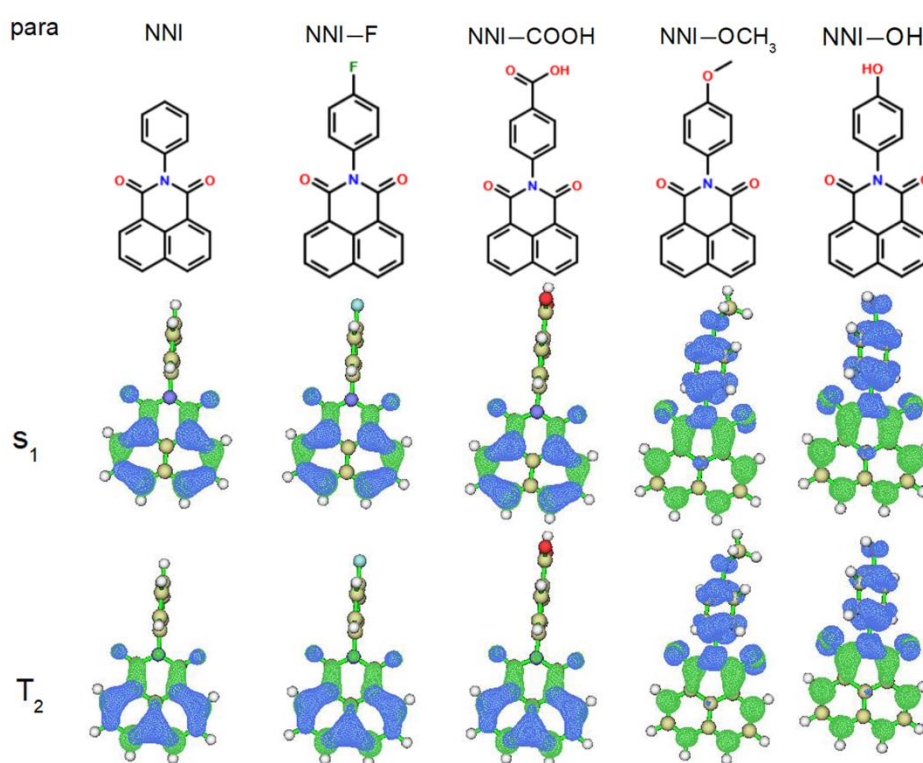


Figure 2. Upper half: chemical structures; lower half: the electron-hole distribution of  $S_1$  and  $T_2$  of NNI and its *para*-substituted derivatives. (The blue and green regions represent the hole and electron, respectively.)



The occurrence of an  $S_1$  state with CT character in NNI-EDG has major consequences for the photophysics of these molecules. While the  $S_1 \rightarrow T_2$  ISC rate in the EWG substitutions is not significantly altered in relation to the parent NNI (Table 1), in the case of the EDGs, it shows an increase of three times for  $-\text{OCH}_3$  and doubling for  $-\text{OH}$ . Thus, the ISC lifetime shortens from 23 - 26 ns in NNI and NNI-EWG to about 8 - 11 ns in NNI-EDG. The data in Table 1 also show that the ISC rate variation is caused by the increase of the  $V_{SOC}$ , from 0.5 to 1.3  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  upon EDG substitution, which compensates the small but unfavorable growth of  $\Delta E_{ST}$ .

Curiously, the reason  $V_{SOC}$  is so small in either NNI-EWGs or NNI-EDGs is not the same. In NNI-EWGs (and in the parent NNI), the singlet-triplet transition between  $\pi\pi^*$  states is unfavorable by the El-Sayed rule.<sup>34</sup> In NNI-EDGs,  $V_{SOC}$  is tiny due to the local nature of the spin-orbit coupling Hamiltonian,<sup>43</sup> which tends to return vanishing elements for non-local transitions, as in CT states.

Table 1.  $S_1$ - $T_2$  energy gap ( $\Delta E_{ST}$ ) at the  $S_1$  minimum, reorganization energy ( $\lambda$ ), and SOC ( $V_{SOC}$ ). ISC rate ( $k_{ISC}$ ), ISC rate relative to that of NNI ( $k_{rel}$ ), ISC lifetime ( $\tau_{ISC}$ ). All quantities calculated for NNI and its *para*- and *meta*-substituted derivatives with electron withdrawing ( $-\text{F}$  and  $-\text{COOH}$ ) and electron donating ( $-\text{OCH}_3$  and  $-\text{OH}$ ) groups.

	$\Delta E_{ST}$ (eV)	$\lambda$ (eV)	$V_{SOC}$ ( $\text{cm}^{-1}$ )	$k_{ISC}$ ( $10^7 \text{ s}^{-1}$ )	$k_{rel}$	$\tau_{ISC}$ (ns)
NNI	-0.162	0.202	0.5	4.3	1	23
<i>Para</i>						
-F	-0.166	0.202	0.5	4.1	1	25
-COOH	-0.170	0.202	0.5	3.9	1	26
-OCH <sub>3</sub>	-0.258	0.371	1.3	12.2	3	8
-OH	-0.265	0.320	1.3	8.8	2	11
<i>Meta</i>						
-F	-0.168	0.202	0.5	3.9	1	25.3
-COOH	-0.169	0.202	0.5	3.9	1	25.5
-OCH <sub>3</sub>	-0.268	0.368	2.2	31.0	7	3.2
-OH	-0.286	0.406	2.2	27.7	6	3.6

Such modest changes in the ISC rates would not alone explain the fluorescence switch-on reported in Chen et al.'s work.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the effect of the EDG substitutions on

the fluorescence is more impressive. In NNI and NNI-EWGs, the fluorescence rate is about  $2 \times 10^8 \text{ s}^{-1}$  (Table 2). In NNI-EDGs, this value is strongly reduced by a factor  $\sim 35$ . Thus, the fluorescence lifetime is elongated from 5 ns in NNI and NNI-EWGs to about 180 ns in NNI-EDGs. This substantial shift in the fluorescence rates caused by the EDG substitutions is a direct result of the CT character of the  $S_1$  state, which reduces the  $S_1$ - $S_0$  oscillator strength. In addition, large  $S_1$ - $S_0$  energy gaps at the  $S_1$  minimum (Table 2) suggests that nonradiative decay of  $S_1$  are not significant for these molecules, even though we have not explicitly investigated nonradiative decay pathways in this work.

Table 2.  $S_1$ - $S_0$  energy gap  $\Delta E$  and oscillator strength  $f$  at the  $S_1$  minimum. Fluorescence rate ( $k_{FL}$ ), fluorescence rate relative to that of NNI ( $k_{rel}$ ), and fluorescence lifetime ( $\tau_{FL}$ ). All quantities calculated for NNI and its *para*- and *meta*-substituted derivatives with electron withdrawing ( $-F$  and  $-COOH$ ) and electron donating ( $-OCH_3$  and  $-OH$ ) groups.

	$\Delta E$ (eV)	$f$	$k_{FL}$ ( $10^8 \text{ s}^{-1}$ )	$k_{rel}$	$\tau_{FL}$ (ns)
NNI	-3.444	0.367	1.89	1.00	5
<i>Para</i>					
-F	-3.444	0.367	1.89	1.00	5
-COOH	-3.442	0.389	2.00	1.06	5
-OCH <sub>3</sub>	-3.306	0.011	0.05	0.03	185
-OH	-3.340	0.012	0.06	0.03	178
<i>Meta</i>					
-F	-3.444	0.368	1.89	1.00	5
-COOH	-3.443	0.378	1.90	1.03	5
-OCH <sub>3</sub>	-3.049	0.007	0.03	0.02	340
-OH	-3.042	0.006	0.02	0.01	408

In short, we show that substitution of selected EDGs in NNI ~~results in the enhancement of ISC rate between its lowest singlet excited states and adjacent triplet excited states thanks to a larger SOC~~ induces discernable configuration change of the lowest singlet excited state, resulting in a larger SOC between  $S_1$  and adjacent  $T_2$  and ensuing enhancement of ISC rate. In contrast to the hypothesis in the experimental work which emphasizes the decisive role of reducing singlet-triplet gap to boost ISC, we

show that it follows an alternative mechanism for NNI species. Moreover, the dark nature of the  $S_1$  state in the NNI-EDG, which also roots from the structural change of  $S_1$ , strongly elongates the fluorescence lifetime, making it slower than ISC and favoring the phosphorescence in these species. Thus, our theoretical results suggest the significance of configuration tuning of chromophores on their luminescent properties, casting new physical insight into the hypothesis proposed in the precedent work of Chen et al.<sup>3</sup>

To further exploit this design strategy, we studied the effect of substitutions in the *meta*- position. Our results, presented below, revealed the general relationship between the mechanism of intersystem crossing and the charge-transfer excited-state process.

Figure 3 shows the chemical structures of NNI and its four derivatives with single *meta*-substitution, and the electron-hole distributions of their  $S_1$  and  $T_2$ . They are like their counterpart species of *para*-substitution in both geometric and electronic structures.

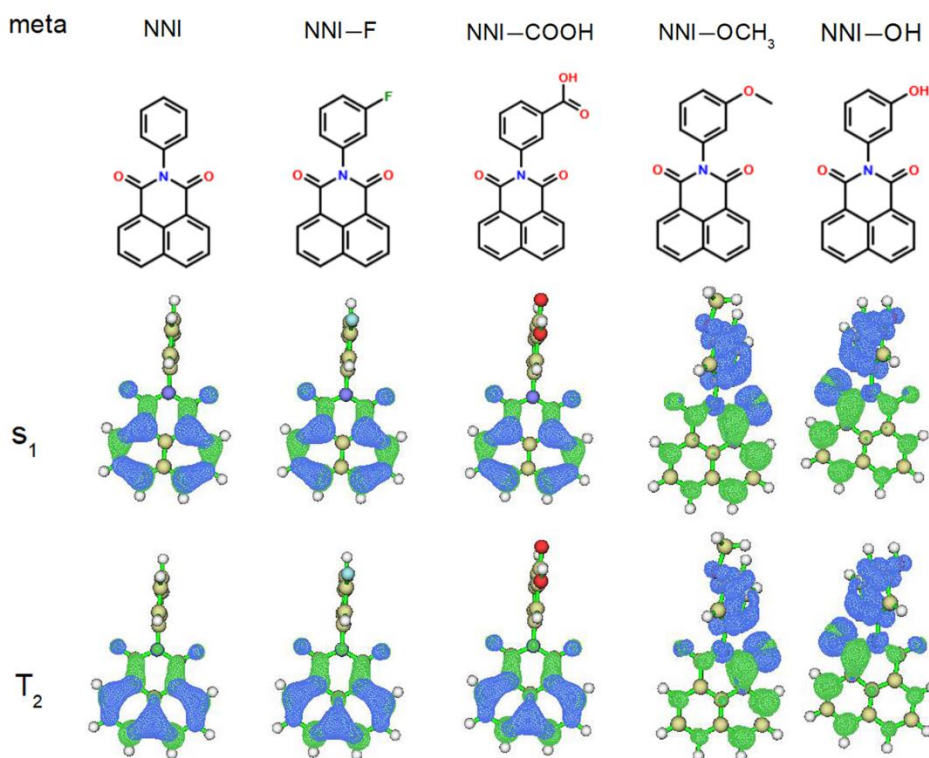


Figure 3. Upper half: chemical structures; lower half: the electron-hole distribution of  $S_1$  and  $T_2$  of NNI and its meta-substitution derivatives.

The  $S_1$ - $T_2$  energy gaps of each *meta*-substituted species are almost invariant compared to their *para*-substituted counterpart, as seen from the data in Table 1 and Table 2. The natures of  $S_1$  are barely changed as well. (See Table S2 and Table S3 in the Supporting Information). The main reason for the insensitivity to the substitution position on the excitation energy of  $S_1$  lies in that the region the electron moves out during the  $S_0 \rightarrow S_1$  excitation does not directly involve the added group.

The effects of the substitutions on the ISC and fluorescence rates are also qualitatively the same as those observed in the *para*-substitutions. Nevertheless, there are some interesting quantitative variations.

The ISC rates of the *meta*-NNI-EDGs are about 6 to 7 times larger than that of NNI (Table 1). In the *para*-NNI-EDGs, this growth was no larger than 3. The reason for this additional enhancement is once again in  $V_{SOC}$ , which reaches  $2.2 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  in *meta*-NNI-EDGs against  $0.5 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  in NNI and  $1.3 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  in *para*-NNI-EDGs. Although all these values are within the error bar our methodology for  $V_{SOC}$  calculation,<sup>35</sup> we can speculate that the slightly larger value upon *meta*-substitutions are due to the asymmetry it introduces, helping to mix the singly-occupied orbitals in the singlet and triplet states.

The fluorescence rates are also more significantly impacted by the *meta*- than by the *para*-substitutions. While in the latter, they are reduced by a factor 35 compared to NNI, in upon a *meta*-substitution this reduction is between 64 and 77 times. Thus, the fluorescence lifetime is elongated up to 408 ns. Once more, the reduction of the fluorescence rates is due to the dark nature of  $S_1$ .

Efficient ISC is the prerequisite for photoinduced phosphorescence process. It is crucial to enhance ISC in molecular design towards organic phosphorescence.<sup>14</sup> In this theoretical study, we showed that for specific fluorescent molecules like NNI,

chemical modification by adding an electron donating group (EDG) could appreciably shift the balance between fluorescence and ISC, favoring the latter. In NNI and NNI with electron withdrawing group (EWG), ISC occurs within ~25 ns, while fluorescence is faster, occurring within 5 ns. Thus, these molecules tend to show strong fluorescence. In NNI-EDG, however, ISC becomes faster, between 3 and 11 ns, while fluorescence becomes much longer, between 185 and 408 ns. Therefore, these molecules efficiently populate the triplet manifold and, under adequate conditions, may become phosphorescent. It is encouraging to see that the EDG substitution enhances the transference from singlet to triplet states and enables phosphorescence, even in systems with very small spin-orbit couplings ( $\sim 1 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ ), as it is often the case of pure light-atoms organic molecules.

The strong photophysical shift between NNI and NNI-EWG on the one hand and NNI-EDG on the other is related to the nature of the  $S_1$  state. In the former molecules, the lowest singlet state has a localized character, while upon an EDG substitution it becomes a charge-transfer (CT) state in response to the configurational change of molecules. The CT state has a slightly stronger coupling to  $T_2$ . Although the spin-orbit coupling is still tiny, about  $2 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ , it is enough to enhance the ISC rate by up to a factor 7 compared to the parent NNI. Concerning fluorescence, while the localized  $S_1$  state is strongly dipole-coupled to  $S_0$ , with oscillator strength near 0.4, the CT  $S_1$  state has a vanishing coupling to  $S_0$ , with an oscillator strength not larger than 0.01. Therefore, the fluorescence rate reduces by up 77 times.

These are systematic findings observed in the comparison between the parent NNI and NNI functionalized by  $-F$  and  $-COOH$  EWGs and  $-OCH_3$  and  $-OH$  EDGs. Substitution of these groups in either *para* or *meta* locations does not change the qualitative results, although the population of triplet states is even more favorable after a *meta*-substitution.

In short, we have shown that ISC can be promoted by restrained fluorescence due to low-lying CT singlet states. The triplet population formed in this way may

fluoresce as long as conventional conditions are met: nonradiative rates are small, and the chromophore is in an oxygen-depleted atmosphere. Restrained-fluorescence ISC turns out to be so efficient that it can deplete the singlet population even in systems with spin-orbit couplings as small as those in El-Sayed forbidden transitions.

This study cast new insight into the design of pure light-atoms organic phosphorescent molecules via chemical modifications of functional groups. By exploring more organic molecules using the same strategy and employing more comprehensive theoretical framework that can compute phosphorescent radiative decay rate,<sup>44-45</sup> we are on the way of rational design of new organic phosphorescent molecules.

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### **Note**

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## Supporting Information Available

The computational details, transition energies, transition related molecular orbitals and corresponding electron-hole distribution of the lowest singlet excited state, the energy level diagrams of low-lying excited states, the Cartesian coordinates of all optimized molecules.

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