

# Hydrogen-Induced Restructuring of a Cu(100) Electrode in Electroreduction Conditions

Zisheng Zhang, Ziyang Wei, Philippe Sautet,\* and Anastassia N. Alexandrova\*



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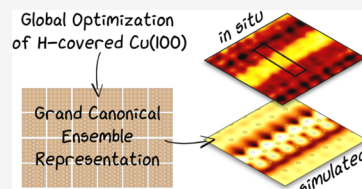
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**ABSTRACT:** The rearrangement of Cu surfaces under electrochemical conditions is known to play a key role in the surface activation for major electrocatalytic reactions. Despite the extensive experimental insights into such rearrangements, from surface-sensitive spectroscopy and microscopy, the spatial and temporal resolution of these methods is insufficient to provide an atomistic picture of the electrochemical interface. Theoretical characterization has also been challenged by the diversity of restructuring configurations, surface stoichiometry, adsorbate configurations, and the effect of the electrode potential. Here, atomistic insight into the restructuring of the electrochemical interface is gained from first principles. Cu(100)

restructuring under varying applied potentials and adsorbate coverages is studied by grand canonical density functional theory and global optimization techniques, as well as ab initio molecular dynamics and mechanistic calculations. We show that electroreduction conditions cause the formation of a shifted-row reconstruction on Cu(100), induced by hydrogen adsorption. The reconstruction is initiated at 1/6 ML H coverage, when the Cu–H bonding sufficiently weakens the Cu–Cu bonds between the top- and sublayer, and further stabilized at 1/3 ML when H adsorbates fill all the created 3-fold hollow sites. The simulated scanning tunneling microscopy (STM) images of the calculated reconstructed interfaces agree with experimental *in situ* STM. However, compared to the thermodynamic prediction, the onsets of reconstruction events in the experiment occur at more negative applied voltages. This is attributed to kinetic effects in restructuring, which we describe via different statistical models, to produce the potential- and pH-dependent surface stability diagram. This manuscript provides rich atomistic insight into surface restructuring in electroreduction conditions, which is required for the understanding and design of Cu-based materials for electrocatalytic processes. It also offers the methodology to study the problem of *in situ* electrode reconstruction.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Understanding of the surface structure is crucial for investigation of catalytic/deactivation mechanisms and for further optimization of a heterogeneous catalyst. While conventionally, static bulk-derived surface slab models are used to represent the catalytic interface, such models are often grossly unrealistic. Under reaction conditions, the catalyst surface is in constant adsorbate exchange with its environment and may be subject to the electrochemical potential or near-surface electrolyte polarization—such factors can induce nontrivial structural rearrangement, dynamical behavior, or populating an ensemble of coexisting metastable surface states with diverse structures and reactivities.<sup>1,2</sup> Even the simplest adsorbate, H, can induce dramatic restructuring on various metal surfaces.<sup>3</sup>

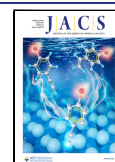
Cu has been the only transition metal that can catalyze the CO<sub>2</sub> reduction reaction (CO<sub>2</sub>RR) efficiently toward deeper C<sub>2+</sub> reduction products beyond CO (up to C<sub>3</sub> products with a decent Faradaic efficiency).<sup>4</sup> Such reactivity, as well as the low cost and earth abundance of Cu, has made Cu-based materials a research hot spot in energy and environmental science in the recent decade.<sup>5,6</sup> With the development of electrochemical *in situ* characterization techniques, Cu-based catalysts have been shown to undergo dramatic restructuring under electrochemical conditions, including surface phase transitions,<sup>7</sup>

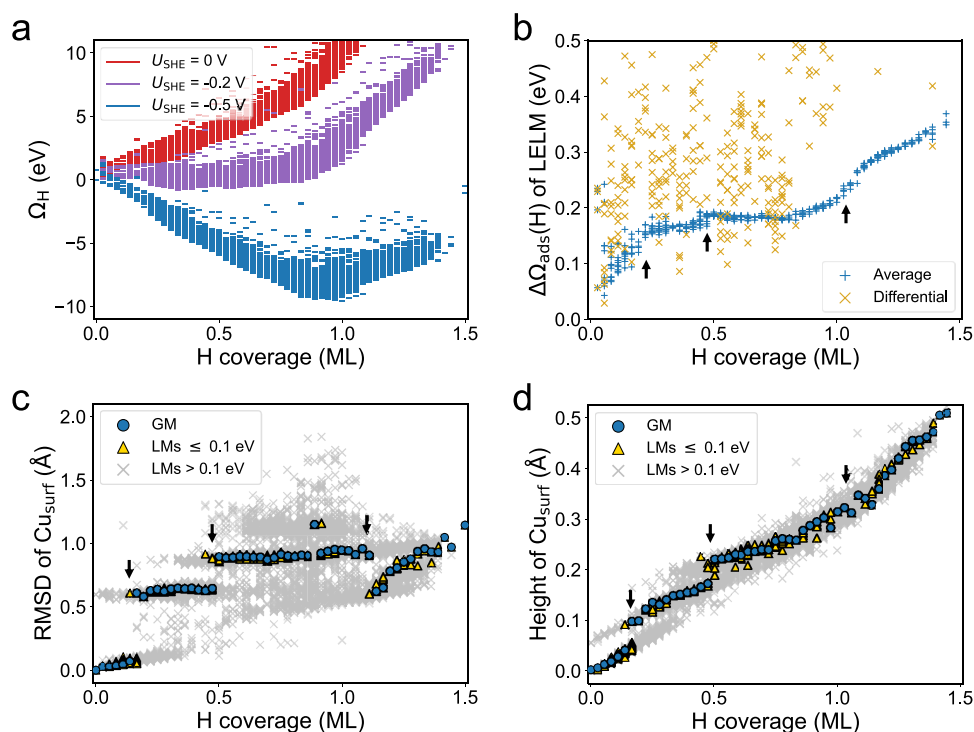
reversible morphological changes at the nanoscale,<sup>8,9</sup> potential- and CO-induced nanoclustering,<sup>10,11</sup> nanocrystal reconstruction,<sup>12</sup> and undercoordinated Cu structure formation.<sup>13</sup>

A stunning type of restructuring is the formation of stripes on Cu(100) observed via *in situ* scanning tunneling microscopy (STM) during the hydrogen evolution reaction (HER), one of the most studied electrocatalytic reactions. The effect is seen in acidic media (HClO<sub>4</sub>, pH = 1) at a reducing potential of −0.326 V vs standard hydrogen electrode (noted as V<sub>SHE</sub>).<sup>14</sup> The stripes become sharper at −0.396 V<sub>SHE</sub>, showing that they consist of two atomic rows. As the potential sweeps to −0.406 V<sub>SHE</sub>, neighboring stripes start to form, roughly doubling the surface concentration of the stripes. The interstripe regions (forming a dark line) become darker at −0.436 V<sub>SHE</sub>, with tiny periodic bright spots appearing along the dark stripe.<sup>15</sup> Such stripe formation is hindered at a higher pH, with the onset potential of stripe formation first shifted to

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**Figure 1.** Energetic and geometric analysis of the surface states from GCGA sampling. (a) Grand canonical free energy as a function of H coverage at different potentials. (b) Average and differential (with respect to the GM of the preadsorption coverage) adsorption free energy plotted versus H coverage at pH = 1 and  $U_{\text{SHE}} = 0$  V. (c) RMSD of the surface Cu coordinates with respect to the pristine Cu(100) and (d) average height of surface Cu for the GM, low-energy local minima, and other minima, plotted versus H coverage. The notable “jumps” at ca. 1/6, 1/2, and 1 ML H coverage are marked by black arrows in (b–d).

a more negative potential ( $-0.456$  V<sub>SHE</sub> at pH = 2 and  $-0.586$  V<sub>SHE</sub> at pH = 2.75); the stripes also become blurrier. Above pH = 3, no restructuring is observed.<sup>14</sup> The reconstruction results in an increase of the electrode reactivity for HER. Although several surface structures of the stripes have been proposed,<sup>14,16</sup> they are either putative or based on small unit cell simulations. In addition, the diversity of adsorbate configurations/coverages and the potential/pH dependence, which have been shown to be necessary for describing electrochemical interfaces,<sup>17</sup> are not well-addressed using a static model and constant-charge density functional theory (DFT).

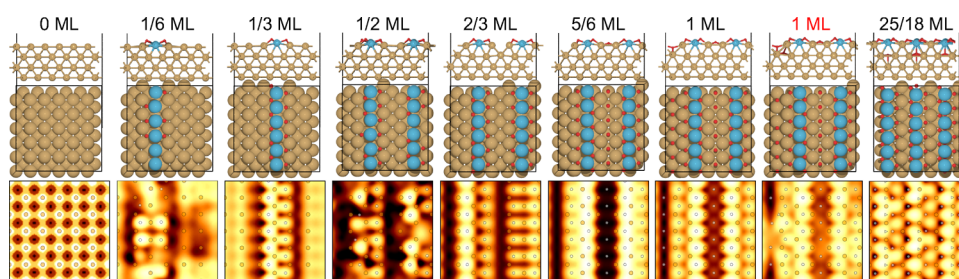
Here, we use this case as an example and interrogate the atomic mechanism of hydrogen-induced restructuring of Cu(100) under an electrocatalytic reduction potential. The chemical space of surface reconstruction, adsorbate coverage, and adsorption sites is sampled by grand canonical genetic algorithm (GCGA) global optimization to construct an ensemble of structurally diverse and chemically relevant surface configurations under different hydrogen coverages. Potential dependence of the surface states is investigated by grand canonical DFT (GCDFT), and a row-shifting reconstruction is found to emerge upon hydrogen coverage and negative potentials. Surface stability diagrams as a function of the electrode potential and pH are investigated using different statistical models (global minimum-only, Boltzmann, or trapping in metastable states), and corrections that can be made to the purely thermodynamic picture of the system are discussed. The electronic structure origin of the restructuring is rationalized through chemical bonding analysis, revealing the key role for hydrogen adsorption on the formed 3-fold hollow sites formed upon Cu row-shifting. The coverage dependence

of the various surface events is probed with Born–Oppenheimer molecular dynamics and transition state search. This study provides insights into the energetics, dynamics, and chemical bonding of the potential- and hydrogen coverage-induced restructuring of the Cu(100) electrode. It advances our understanding of the electrocatalytic interface and guides the design of active and durable electrocatalysts.

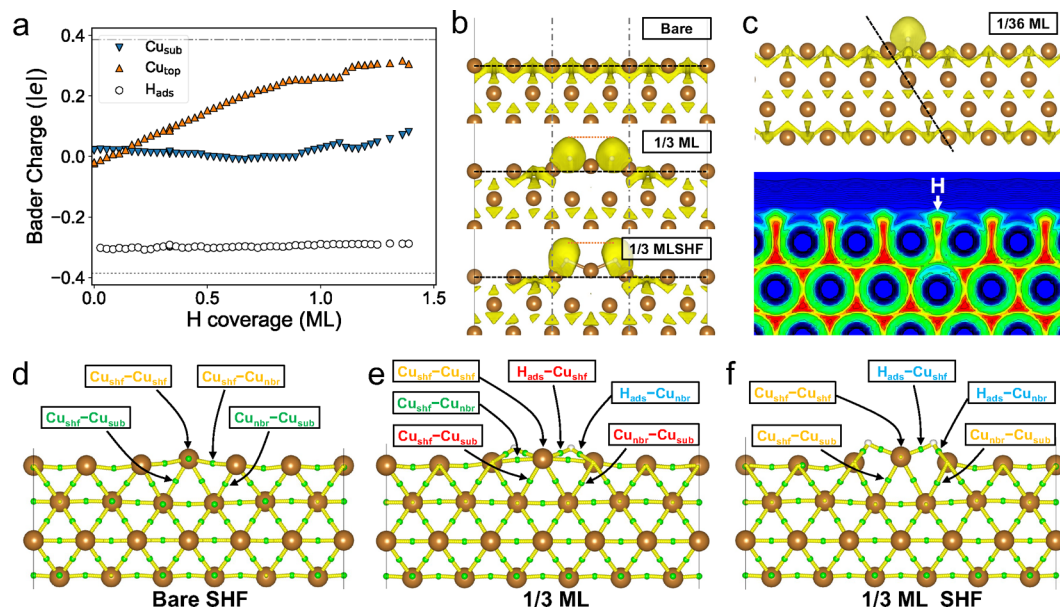
## 2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Due to the vast chemical space spanned by the configurational and compositional degrees of freedom, the grand canonical genetic algorithm (GCGA)<sup>18,19</sup> is used to globally optimize the geometry and stoichiometry of the 4-layer  $6 \times 6$  supercell of Cu(100) under coverage of H (the simulation cell and the algorithm flow chart are in Figure S1). Specifically, the system is allowed to exchange H with a reservoir with a fixed H chemical potential,  $\mu_{\text{H}}(\text{pH}, U, T)$ . To cover the chemically relevant range of  $\mu_{\text{H}}$ , eight GCGA searches are performed at a pH of 1 and electrode potentials of 0,  $-0.15$ ,  $-0.2$ ,  $-0.25$ ,  $-0.3$ ,  $-0.4$ ,  $-0.5$ , and  $-0.75$  V<sub>SHE</sub>.

In total, 7420 unique surface states are obtained in a rather broad stoichiometric distribution (Figure S2), with H coverage ranging from 0H to 54H per supercell ( $\theta_{\text{H}}$  from 0 to 1.5 ML). The structure database is available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7155426>. At each stoichiometry, there are multiple low-energy local minimum (LM) surface states within 0.1 eV from the global minimum (GM), corresponding to a Boltzmann factor of 1/49 at 298.15 K (Figure S2). This suggests coexisting surface states at room temperature. Hence, we treat the obtained surface states (configurations) as a grand canonical ensemble and compute their grand canonical free energy,  $\Omega_{\text{H}}$ , as a function of  $\mu_{\text{H}}$ . At 0 V<sub>SHE</sub>,  $\Omega_{\text{H}}$  increases with



**Figure 2.** Geometries and simulated STM images of the key surface states. The side-view, top-view, and simulated STM images of the GM surface state of key coverage cases. The shifted atomic rows and surface H are highlighted by blue and red, respectively. The second to the last column shows the restructured surface at 1 ML H coverage including a subsurface H (*vide infra*).



**Figure 3.** Electronic structure and chemical bonding analysis of the H-covered Cu(100). (a) Average Bader charge of the top layer, sublayer, and H adsorbates of the global minimum surface state of each coverage. (b) ELF isosurfaces of the bare Cu(100), unrestructured Cu(100) at 1/3 ML coverage, and shifted-row Cu(100) at 1/3 ML coverage at an isovalue of 0.275. (c) Color-filled contour map of the ELF cross section of Cu(100) with 1 H showing weakening of the Cu–Cu bond between the top layer and the sublayer. Bond critical points and bond paths for (d) shifted-row bare Cu(100), (e) unrestructured Cu(100) at 1/3 ML coverage, and (f) shifted-row Cu(100) at 1/3 ML coverage, with key bonds labeled. Labels are colored according to their  $\rho_{\text{BCP}}$  relative to surface Cu–Cu in unrestructured bare Cu(100) or Cu–H in 1H-covered Cu(100) with the following color code: red (lower than the reference by more than 0.005), yellow (lower than the reference by less than 0.005), green (higher than the reference by more than 0.005), and blue (higher than the reference by less than 0.005).

H coverage, suggesting unfavorable H adsorption (Figure 1a). At more negative potentials, the  $\mu_{\text{H}}$  increases, favoring the higher surface coverage. The shape of the free energy plot (Figure 1a) resembles several concatenated convex hulls. The average adsorption free energy of H in those surface states exhibits “jumps” at ca. 1/6, 1/2, and 1 ML H coverage (black arrow markers in Figure 1b). The transitions between the local regions of lower  $\Omega_{\text{H}}$  correspond to crossing free energy barriers.

To understand the cause of such unusual energetics, we analyze the geometry of the surface states, with a focus on the GMs and LMs at each coverage. The root-mean-square deviation (RMSD) of the top-layer Cu (referenced to the unrestructured bare surface) is shown in Figure 1c. Below 1/6 ML of H, the RMSDs of the GMs and accessible LMs stay below 0.1 Å, showing no significant structural change of copper. At 1/6 ML, the RMSD jumps to ca. 0.6 Å, marking the first stage of the restructuring. This corresponds to the shift of one atomic row on the Cu surface by half a Cu–Cu distance, creating a double row of 3-fold Cu hollow sites to maximize

adsorbate binding (Figure 2). At the 1/2 ML coverage, the RMSD jumps to ca. 0.9 Å, which is attributed to a second shifted row in the unit cell so that one out of every three rows is shifted. This resembles the surface oxide configurations.<sup>20</sup> Each row-shifting is accompanied by an increase in the height of the top-layer Cu atoms due to elevation of the shifted row (Figure 1d). This surface Cu configuration remains until 10/9 ML H, at which the RMSD of  $\text{Cu}_{\text{surf}}$  goes back to ca. 0.6 Å and then keeps increasing as coverage increases. This corresponds to the filling of subsurface sites by H, causing continuous structural changes (Figure S3). At ca. 4/3 ML, a third row shifts, and the surface is transformed into an elongated (111)-like configuration, with a H-saturated top surface and a significant concentration of subsurface H.

To link the found surface structures with the experimental STM images,<sup>14,15</sup> STM simulations based on geometries of selected GMs and LMs are performed (Figure 2 and Figure S4). A very distinct image contrast is shown as a function of H coverage/Cu restructuring explaining the changes seen in the experiment. The current on Cu atoms close to H adsorbates is

**Table 1. QTAIM and COHP Analyses of Chemical Bonds in the 1/3 ML GM:  $\rho_{\text{BCP}}$  (First Entry) and the Integrated COHP (ICOHP) up to  $E_{\text{F}}$  (in Parentheses) Are Provided for Each Bond<sup>a</sup>**

	0H	0H line-shifted	1H	12H	12H line-shifted
Cu <sub>top</sub> –Cu <sub>top</sub>	0.039 (0.228)		0.041 (0.262)		
Cu <sub>top</sub> –Cu <sub>sub</sub>	0.039 (0.233)		0.033 (0.149)		
Cu <sub>shf</sub> –Cu <sub>shf</sub>		0.038 (0.336)		0.038 (0.314)	0.035 (0.257)
Cu <sub>shf</sub> –Cu <sub>nbr</sub>		0.034 (0.201)		0.042 (0.235)	- (0.102)
Cu <sub>shf</sub> –Cu <sub>sub</sub>		0.040 (0.276)		0.027 (0.184)	0.035 (0.257)
Cu <sub>nbr</sub> –Cu <sub>sub</sub>		0.039 (0.253)		0.033 (0.161)	0.036 (0.212)
H <sub>ads</sub> –Cu <sub>shf</sub>			0.054 (0.461)	0.049 (0.455)	0.072 (0.893)
H <sub>ads</sub> –Cu <sub>nbr</sub>				0.062 (0.480)	0.073 (0.601)

<sup>a</sup>A few reference values: Cu–Cu in bulk Cu: 0.0392 (0.314); Cu–H in bulk CuH: 0.0700 (0.814).

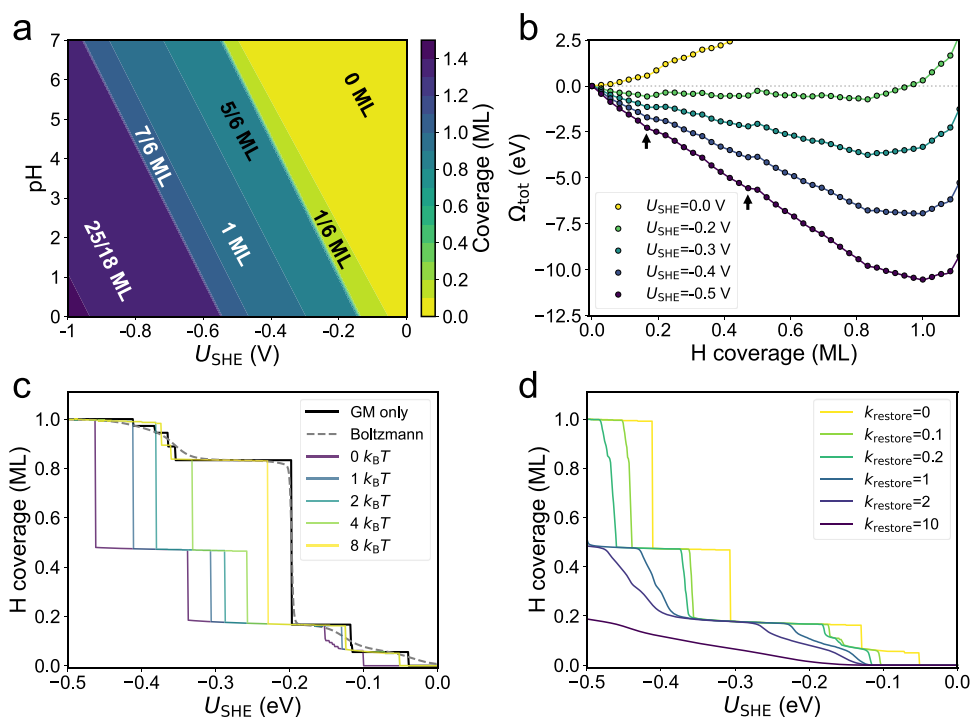
generally decreased since this interaction shifted some Cu states away from the Fermi level, while H atoms at the highest  $z$  coordinate themselves appear as new protrusions. At 1/6 ML, the shifted row has formed, but the induced 3-fold hollow sites are only partially filled, leading to a disordered pattern. At room temperature, thermal fluctuation enables H migration along the shifted rows (*vide infra*), and that can yield a more ordered image due to time-averaging of the STM imaging on the timescale of milliseconds per pixel. Experiments note a “blurry stripe” potential regime ( $-0.326 V_{\text{SHE}}$ ), which corresponds to this low coverage situation.<sup>15</sup> At 1/3 ML coverage, the shifted Cu row is fully coordinated by H, suppressing the H migration along it and giving a well-defined bright stripe in the image, in agreement with experiment at a potential of  $-0.396 V_{\text{SHE}}$ . The second row-shifting initiates at the 1/2 ML coverage, and the row is saturated at 2/3 ML, corresponding to the potential regime ( $-0.406 V_{\text{SHE}}$ ) where neighboring stripes start to form. The formation of parallel stripes is due to the frustration in the lattice caused by the initial row-shifting, which acts similarly to a nucleation site in crystal growth. Next, H starts to fill the interstripe region. Since the shifted row draws neighboring rows closer to it, the Cu–Cu distance of the interstripe regions is elongated, allowing the H atoms to bury more deeply. The result is a decrease of the neighboring Cu contribution to the image, and no bright features from H. A darker region in the experimental STM at  $-0.436 V_{\text{SHE}}$  therefore develops in-between the stripes. Subsurface H atoms can be populated at coverage  $>1$  ML, they induce an upward relaxation of surface Cu atoms above them, and bright spots in the interstripe regions are seen also in the experiment (see [Supplementary Note 3](#) and associated figures). Beyond the coverage of 10/9 ML, the surface restructures into an elongated (111)-like configuration with the surface layer deeply hydrogenated. Although such a phase is a thermodynamic minimum, we expect it to be unfeasible and metastable with respect to (i) competing hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) at a very negative potential and (ii) the decomposition of surface hydride to form H<sub>2</sub> in acidic media.<sup>21</sup> Some other notable reported structures and motifs are discussed in [Supplementary Notes 6 and 7](#).

The electronic origin of the row-shifting restructuring is addressed in [Figure 3](#). At the unstructured bare Cu(100), the Cu<sub>top</sub> has a slightly negative Bader charge ([Figure 3a](#) and [Figure S5](#)), and it transfers electrons to H<sub>ads</sub> upon adsorption. At high H coverages, the charge on Cu<sub>top</sub> converges at ca. +0.30 |e|, which is quite close to that in CuH (+0.38 |e|). The charge on H<sub>ads</sub> stays around  $-0.30$  |e| at all coverages, even upon row-shifting, and in the entire considered potential window ([Figure S6](#)). The change in surface bonding reveals

deeper details. The electron localization function (ELF) is plotted for unstructured bare Cu(100), the unstructured surface at 1/3 ML coverage, and the shifted-row surface with 1/3 ML coverage ([Figure 3b](#)). The analysis suggests that, upon H adsorption, Cu–H bonds form, and the Cu<sub>top</sub>–Cu<sub>sub</sub> bonds vanish, explaining why the shifted-row configuration is thermodynamically favorable only at higher H coverages. Upon row-shifting, the Cu in the shifted row (Cu<sub>shf</sub>) and in the neighboring rows (Cu<sub>nbr</sub>) are further elevated by 0.428 and 0.162 Å, compared to the unstructured structure. The ELF lobe corresponding to Cu–H is enlarged, suggesting strengthening of the Cu–H bond. The ELF lobe in the Cu<sub>nbr</sub>–Cu<sub>sub</sub> is also enlarged slightly, upon Cu<sub>nbr</sub> being drawn toward Cu<sub>shf</sub> by 0.246 Å. The weakening of the Cu<sub>top</sub>–Cu<sub>sub</sub> by H<sub>ads</sub> can be seen more clearly in the contour map of the ELF cross section ([Figure 3c](#)).

To quantify the found bonding changes, quantum theory of atom in molecule (QTAIM) analysis is performed ([Figure 3d–f](#) and [Table 1](#)), where the charge density at bond critical points, BCPs, ( $\rho_{\text{BCP}}$ ) is used as a bond-strength descriptor. If the Cu row is shifted in the absence of surface H, then the Cu<sub>shf</sub>–Cu<sub>sub</sub> and Cu<sub>nbr</sub>–Cu<sub>sub</sub> would be strengthened slightly. However, the Cu<sub>shf</sub>–Cu<sub>nbr</sub> is significantly weakened, which destabilizes the shifted row. When the Cu row is saturated by H at 1/3 ML, the Cu<sub>shf</sub>–Cu<sub>sub</sub> and Cu<sub>nbr</sub>–Cu<sub>sub</sub> are further weakened. Meanwhile, the H<sub>ads</sub>–Cu<sub>shf</sub> and H<sub>ads</sub>–Cu<sub>nbr</sub> are of a similar strength to that of H–Cu at 1H coverage. However, when the H-saturated Cu row shifts, the strengths of Cu<sub>shf</sub>–Cu<sub>sub</sub> and Cu<sub>nbr</sub>–Cu<sub>sub</sub> are restored, which are close to the strength of Cu<sub>top</sub>–Cu<sub>sub</sub> in the bare unstructured surface. At the same time, the binding site of H switches from 4-fold to 3-fold hollow, boosting the strength of H<sub>ads</sub>–Cu<sub>shf</sub> and H<sub>ads</sub>–Cu<sub>nbr</sub> to a similar extent to that of Cu–H in CuH. The above results are further supported by crystal orbital Hamilton population analysis (key data shown in [Table 1](#) and details in [Figures S7–S12](#)). In summary, the H adsorbates can greatly stabilize the shifted row by filling the 3-fold hollow sites in a hydride-like bonding mode.

We now investigate how the surface phase evolves at different pHs and electrode potentials. To obtain the exact potential-dependent electronic free energy,  $\Omega_{\text{el}}$ , of the surface, we refined all LMs within 0.25 eV from the GM of their coverage with grand canonical DFT, using the surface charging technique with a polarizable continuum solvation model.<sup>22</sup> In this way, we can calculate the total free energy  $\Omega_{\text{tot}}$  of each surface state in the grand canonical ensemble of electrons and adsorbates at different pHs and electrode potentials. If we assume that the surface is representable by a single state with the lowest  $\Omega_{\text{tot}}$  GM, at pH = 1 and within the potential



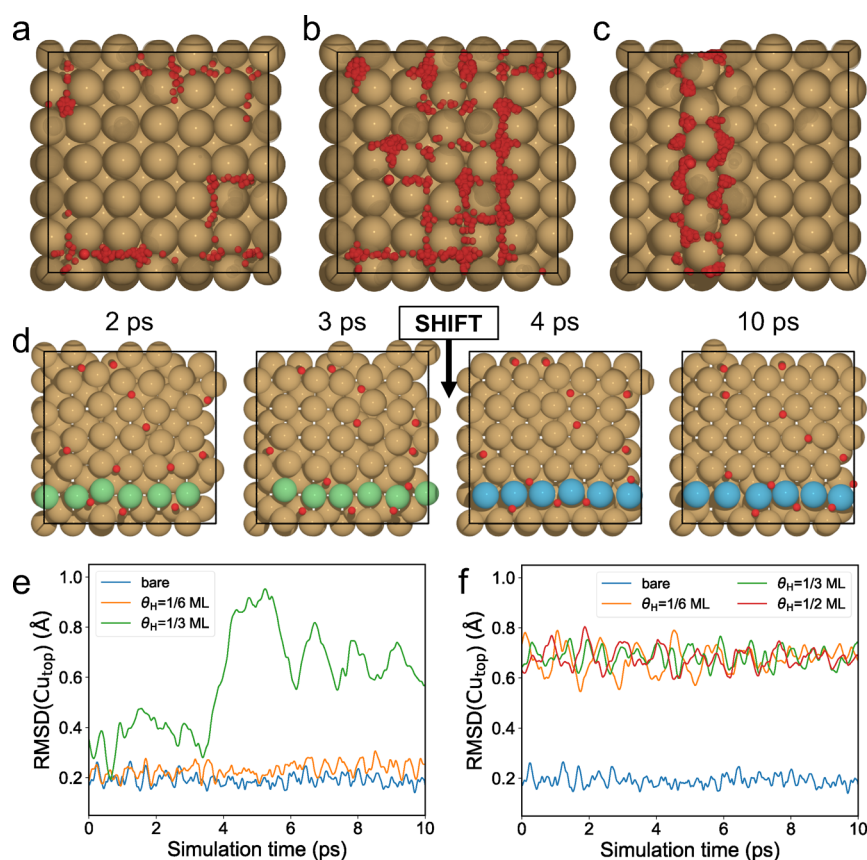
**Figure 4.** Potential and pH dependence of the Cu surface state. (a) Surface Pourbaix diagram assuming global thermodynamic equilibrium, with the color bar indicating the H coverage (in ML). (b) Total grand canonical free energy (adsorbates and electrons) as a function of H coverage at different electrode potentials. Metastable local minima are marked by black arrows. (c) Evolution of H coverage during a simulated cathodic scan within a GM-only picture and a Boltzmann picture at global thermodynamic equilibrium and test cases with different thermal energies supplied to the system considering the metastable states. (d) Evolution of H coverage during a simulated cathodic scan with different restoring force constants (in units of eV per adsorbate<sup>2</sup>) and thermal energy of  $1k_B T$ .

window of 0 to  $-0.5 V_{SHE}$ , then the coverages of 1/6 (first Cu row-shifting), 5/6 (second row-shifting), and 1 ML (filling of the interstripe region by H) are predicted to form at  $-0.11$ ,  $-0.20$ , and  $-0.44 V_{SHE}$ , respectively. If we approximate the population distribution of all accessible LMs by Boltzmann statistics, then the steps of the coverage change are smoothed, but the major coverage stages are still the same. The Pourbaix diagram of surface phases as a function of the pH and the electrode potential is shown in Figure 4a. As the pH increases, the phase boundaries corresponding to the coverage increase (accompanied by restructuring) shift to more negative potentials, and that is qualitatively consistent with the postponed potential onset of restructuring at a higher pH in ref 14. However, the predicted potentials corresponding to row-shifting deviate from the experiment by up to 300 mV. The nonlinear shift of the onset potential at a pH beyond 2.75 is also not reflected in the thermodynamic picture. Moreover, it is questionable whether the predicted coverage jump from 1/6 to 5/6 ML is kinetically feasible.

Hence, here, we view the restructuring-coupled coverage increase as a reaction coordinate and inspect the free energy change during the restructuring and H adsorption. In Figure 4b, the ensemble-averaged  $\Omega_{tot}$  is plotted as a function of H coverage at different potentials. During a cathodic scan, the initial state of the surface is clean (zero coverage) at  $0 V_{SHE}$ . At  $-0.2 V_{SHE}$  the higher coverages of up to 17/18 ML become more stable than the clean surface, and several coverages become competitive: 1/6, 1/3, 1/2, and 5/6 ML. However, not all of them appear to be readily kinetically accessible from the initial state: the coverage increase encounters several local maxima in free energy. To be specific, the row-shifting is

initiated at partial coverage, where the 3-fold hollow sites formed along the stripe bind H more strongly than the unrestructured regions. This causes the system to switch to another free energy surface, which is overall deeper and has its minimum at a higher coverage. The crossing of the two surfaces (the unrestructured and the shifted-row reconstruction) leads to a “spike” on the restructuring–coverage coupled surface in Figure 4b. Hence, the free energy landscape should be treated as a multiwell model with “coverage barriers” separating the minima. At more negative potentials, although the higher 5/6 ML coverage suddenly becomes the GM, there are still kinetic barriers to reach 5/6 ML via intermediate coverages through adsorption or desorption. Hence, the system is likely to be trapped in a metastable state with intermediate coverage, until a more negative potential reshapes the free energy surface and smoothens the barriers (Schematic S1). This scenario is analogous to the formation of metastable domains in phase transition dynamics.<sup>23</sup>

Since the explicit consideration of all involved events at the surface (including their kinetics) is prohibitively expensive (see Supplementary Note 10 for details), we can phenomenologically describe the surface restructuring during the cathodic scan by modeling the system as a particle in a one-dimension multimimima free energy potential, with the H coverage as the reaction coordinate. As the electrode potential scans from 0 to  $-0.5 V_{SHE}$ , the free energy landscape is reshaped, making higher coverages more thermodynamically favorable. The system can access neighboring coverages or cross coverage barriers via thermal fluctuations. In Figure 4c, the coverage evolution during such a simulated cathodic scan at different supplied thermal energies is shown. At a high supplied energy



**Figure 5.** Dynamics of H-covered Cu(100) with different initial configurations and H coverage. The spatial distribution of surface atoms on (a) 1H-covered, (b) unrestructured 6H-covered, and (c) shifted-row 6H-covered Cu(100) surfaces during equilibrated BOMD simulations of 10 ps duration. (d) Key snapshots during an equilibrated 10 ps BOMD simulation of the 12H state with an unrestructured initial configuration (the shifting row is highlighted by green or blue, before or after the shift). RMSD of top-layer Cu positions during equilibrated 10 ps BOMD simulations of the unrestructured surface with 0, 1/6, and 1/3 ML H coverage and (f) shifted-row surface with 1/6, 1/3, and 1/2 ML H coverages.

of  $8k_B T$ , the system is able to access almost all coverage states, yielding a very similar distribution to the GM-only picture and the thermodynamic Boltzmann picture (which assumes global thermodynamic equilibrium). At a lower supplied energy of  $1k_B T$ , the onset potential of the first row-shifting is postponed slightly due to kinetic trapping. Note that such postponing is not a simple systematic shift; instead, it highly depends on the local structure of the free energy surface. For example, a new step of 1/2 ML corresponding to the second row-shifting at  $-0.28 V_{SHE}$ , which is a metastable intermediate-coverage LM not observed in the thermodynamic picture. At even smaller supplied energies, the onset potentials corresponding to restructuring are postponed even more; however, at all supplied thermal energies, the system is able to access 1 ML coverage before  $-0.5 V_{SHE}$ . The suppression of restructuring at a higher pH is not observed, likely because the pH effect within the computational hydrogen electrode (CHE) scheme is addressed by adding a thermodynamic correction term to the  $\mu_H$ , which leads to simple translation of the curve in Figure 4c without changing its shape.

The failure to capture such restructuring suppression at high pH suggests the presence of another factor, which acts against the coverage increase. Here, we attribute it to the configurational entropic contribution, which is impossible to fully evaluate with periodic DFT: The restructuring of Cu to form a protruding row (over some critical initiation length) and the local H coverage increase to stabilize the row come with a configurational entropic penalty of the whole interface. Faster

intrasurface H diffusion will tend to smear out the local high coverages toward the global average, whereas a faster surface-solution exchange will favor a larger fluctuation of local coverages (which can initiate row-shifting). Note that this effect would be beyond the length scale of our super cell and with an implicit electrolyte and thus cannot be considered explicitly. Entropy maximization can be viewed as a phenomenological collective “restoring force” or a generalized conjugate force of adsorbate coverage (coupled with restructuring events). It opposes ordering and drives the system to a uniform coverage, thus depleting high local coverage needed to initiate restructuring (Schematic S1). The “force” is a collective of many factors and may change as a function of pH and current coverage. Since we are not able to explicitly evaluate such a force with the current model, in Figure 4d, we simulate the cathodic scans with  $1k_B T$  supplied energy and with different “restoring force constants”,  $k_{restore}$ , to probe its impact on the surface phase diagram. At  $k_{restore} = 0.1$  eV/adsorbate<sup>2</sup>, the onset potentials for the formation of the 1/6, 1/2, and 1 ML states are postponed to  $-0.17$ ,  $-0.36$ , and  $-0.42 V_{SHE}$ , respectively, approaching the experimental results. At  $k_{restore} = 1$  eV/adsorbate<sup>2</sup>, the steps are smoothed due to reshaping of the local free energy surface, the onset potentials for 1/6 and 1/2 ML states are postponed to  $-0.23$  and  $-0.41 V_{SHE}$ , respectively, and the 1 ML state does not form before  $-0.5 V_{SHE}$ . At  $k_{restore} = 10$  eV/adsorbate<sup>2</sup>, the entropic restoring potential overrides the flat low-coverage region of the free energy surface, and no row-shifting is observed in the

entire potential window of 0 to  $-0.5 V_{\text{SHE}}$ . Considering the competition with HER at more negative potentials, the restructuring may be completely prevented.

We note that the above analysis is purely phenomenological and provides not a proof of a mechanism but a possible insight: the restructuring events could involve local barriers in the free energy surface, which render the thermodynamic-based statistics problematic. The entropic contributions in the surface restructuring process are crucial for understanding the experimental surface measurements. The results call for going beyond the global accessibility assumption and incorporating entropic effects for describing the restructuring surfaces (detailed discussions in [Supplementary Note 10](#)).

The proposed model of reconstruction under high coverage of H and the interplay between H migration and row-shifting are supported by Born–Oppenheimer molecular dynamics (BOMD) simulations (NVT ensemble, 1 fs step size), performed for the unrestructured surface at 1/36 and 1/6 ML coverages and the shifted-row surface at 1/6 ML coverage, in the NVT ensemble at 300 K with a Nosé–Hoover thermostat ([Figure 5a–c](#) and [Figure S13](#)). At 1/6 ML H, the mobility of H remains high on the unreconstructed surface, though apparently slightly hindered by the H–H interaction. No spontaneous reconstruction of Cu is observed at 1/36 and 1/6 ML coverages, within the simulated timescale of 10 ps. However, if the BOMD of 1/6 ML coverage starts from a shifted-row GM configuration, then H atoms stay in the vicinity of the shifted row, hopping between 3-fold hollow sites in the timescale of ca. 1 ps. No H migration into the unrestructured region is observed. This sharp contrast of H migration kinetics before and after row-shifting is confirmed by climbing image nudged elastic band (CINEB) calculations ([Figure S14](#)): H migration on unrestructured Cu(100) is nearly barrier-less, migration along the shifted row has a barrier of 0.10 eV, and migration away from the shifted row to the 4-fold hollow site on the unrestructured surface is more hindered with a barrier of 0.28 eV and a  $\Delta G$  of 0.25 eV. In other words, the shifted row acts as a local H trap. The results help in interpreting the blurry STM image at the start of the stripe formation: the shifted row is partially occupied then with frequent H hopping between 3-fold hollow sites along the stripe, on the timescale that is shorter than the STM measurement.

Lastly, row-shifting does not spontaneously occur in BOMD starting from the unreconstructed Cu surface at 1/36 and 1/6 ML, in 10 ps, but at 1/3 ML on the unrestructured surface ([Figure 5d,e](#) and [Figure S13](#)), spontaneous Cu row-shifting is directly observed in the dynamics. Notably, the H migration creates local regions of higher surface concentration of H, weakening  $\text{Cu}_{\text{top}}-\text{Cu}_{\text{sub}}$  and causing transient row intrusions. However, a sufficient local concentration of H is required to stabilize such intrusions; otherwise, hydrogens dissipate and return the surface to the pristine configuration. We compare the RMSD of the top-layer Cu atoms during all BOMD simulations in [Figure 5e,f](#), to illustrate these local coverage-dependent effects. The coverage dependences of surface dynamics and coordination environments are detailed in [Supplementary Note 2](#). Accordingly, CINEB shows the Cu row-shifting to be highly endothermic and kinetically unfeasible without H on the surface but exothermic and kinetically feasible at increased coverage and barrier-less at 1/3 ML, resulting from the strong H binding at 3-fold hollow sites ([Figure S16](#) and [Supplementary Note 1](#)). Taken together,

these results illustrate how the serendipitous creation of a local high concentration of H is essential for successful and sustained Cu reconstruction despite the thermodynamic drive toward it. This supports the kinetic and entropic arguments for the delay of Cu reconstruction (as a function of the electrode potential in the experiment ([Figure 4](#)), overriding the thermodynamics-based prediction.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

This work extensively explores the chemical space of H-covered Cu(100) (with the adsorbate coverage/configuration and the electrochemical potential explicitly addressed) and provides atomistic insight into the hydrogen-induced stripe restructuring of Cu(100) in electrochemical conditions. We discover a Cu shifted-row restructuring pattern, which forms upon H adsorption at a negative electrode potential. The simulated STM images of the predicted phases agree with and rationalize the structural patterns in experimental *in situ* STM images, including the formation of blurry stripes, bright stripes of different surface densities, interstripe dark lines, and bright spots along the dark lines seen at various potentials. Chemical bonding analysis reveals the weakening of Cu–Cu bonds between the top- and sublayer by the H adsorbates, which facilitates the row-shifting both kinetically and thermodynamically. The row-shifting creates 3-fold hollow sites with high H affinity, which acts as a local H trap and stabilizes the restructuring stripe with increasing H coverage, ultimately leading to a hydride-like surface phase. Row-shifting is observed in BOMD simulation at 1/3 ML H coverage in the timescale of a few picoseconds at room temperature, and analysis indicates enhanced Cu mobility and reduced H mobility as H coverage increases. Different statistical models for describing the potential and pH dependence of the surface phase are proposed, and the discrepancies from experiments are probed with these models. We show how metastability domains can significantly hinder the restructuring to a more negative onset potential and reveal the surface phases with intermediate coverages. Limitations of the existing thermodynamic-based model for predicting the surface phase and pH dependence are discussed, and possible directions for revision are proposed, which include entropic and kinetic effects. We believe that the gained insight allows a deeper understanding and potential utilization of the surface restructuring in electrocatalysts and functional materials.

### 4. METHODS

**4.1. Model Setup.** The Cu(100) surface was modeled by a 4-layer  $6 \times 6$  supercell of Cu(100) termination with a cell dimension of  $15.336 \text{ \AA} \times 15.336 \text{ \AA}$  (constructed with an experimental lattice parameter from ref 24 to directly compare with experimental *in situ* STM images). The bottom two layers of the slab were constrained as the bulk region, and everything else was allowed to relax as the interface region. A vacuum slab of 15 Å thickness was added in the Z direction to avoid spurious interactions between periodic images.

**4.2. DFT Calculations.** The local optimizations and energy evaluation were performed with the RPBE functional<sup>25</sup> and PBE PAW pseudopotentials<sup>26</sup> using the VASP program (version 5.4.4).<sup>27–30</sup> The convergence criteria for electronic and force minimization were set to  $10^{-5}$  eV and 0.05 eV/Å during the global optimization and  $10^{-6}$  eV and 0.01 eV/Å for the final refinement. Due to the relatively large system and sampling size, only the  $\Gamma$  *k*-point was sampled in the reciprocal space of the Brillouin zone throughout, and the cutoff energy for the kinetic energy of the plane-waves was 400 eV.

The transition states (TS) were located using the climbing image nudged elastic band (CI-NEB) method<sup>31</sup> with image-dependent pair potential (IDPP) interpolation.<sup>32</sup> Each TS geometry was confirmed to have only one imaginary mode.

All electronic structure analyses were performed based on a converged charge density or wavefunction. The Bader charges were calculated using the Bader Charge Analysis program.<sup>33</sup> The QTAIM analysis was performed using the critic2 program using the Wigner–Seitz method with a subdivision level of 2.<sup>34</sup> The COHP analysis was performed using the LOBSTER program with the pbeVaspFit2015 basis set.<sup>35</sup>

**4.3. STM Simulations.** STM images were simulated using the BSKAN package<sup>36</sup> based on the converged wavefunction generated by VASP. The vacuum was increased to 30 Å to eliminate the response from the other side of the slab. The Tersoff–Hamman approach was used with a bias voltage of 20 mV, corresponding to the experimental value in refs 14 and 15. Constant current scans with a current value of 4 μA were performed to give the simulated STM images.

**4.4. Grand Canonical Genetic Algorithm.** To sample the chemical space of both Cu restructuring and H coverage/configuration, we performed global optimization using the grand canonical genetic algorithm (GCGA) as implemented in our open-source GOCIA python package (<https://github.com/zishengz/gocia>). To be specific, the system was treated as a grand canonical ensemble of H adsorbates, and the search target was to minimize the coverage-dependent grand canonical free energy  $\Omega_{\text{H}}$ :

$$\Omega_{\text{H}} = U - TS - \sum \mu_{\text{N}} \approx E^{\text{slab}-n\text{H}} - E^{\text{slab}} - n \cdot \mu_{\text{H}}(\text{pH}, U, T) \quad (1)$$

where the  $E^{\text{slab}-n\text{H}}$  and  $E^{\text{slab}}$  are electronic energies of the H-covered and bare Cu(100) slabs. The vibrational contributions to free energy by the slab atoms were neglected considering their small contribution and high computational cost.<sup>37</sup> The chemical potential of H,  $\mu_{\text{H}}$ , was calculated by

$$\begin{aligned} \mu_{\text{H}}(\text{pH}, U, T) = & \frac{1}{2} E_{\text{H}_2}^{\text{gas}} - \ln(10) k_{\text{B}} T \text{pH} - |e| U_{\text{SHE}} \\ & + (\text{ZPE}^{\text{gas}} + C_p^{\text{gas}} - TS^{\text{gas}}) \\ & - (\text{ZPE}^{\text{ads}} + C_p^{\text{ads}} - TS^{\text{ads}}) \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

where the pH and  $U$  (in the SHE scale)-dependent terms are calculated using the computational hydrogen electrode model.<sup>38</sup> The ZPE and thermal contribution terms of adsorbates were obtained from frequency calculations and evaluated at 298.15 K (see [Supplementary Note 4](#) for details).

A population size of 25 and a mutation rate of 30% were chosen for the GCGA sampling. The pool of initial candidates was generated using the bond length distribution algorithm (BLDA), which is a random structure generation method based on the covalent radii of the atoms.<sup>39</sup> A preoptimization with the Hookean potential was performed to produce reasonable starting geometries before they were fed to electronic structure method codes for local optimization and energy evaluation. Offspring were created by mating between the candidates alive by the split-and-splice operation,<sup>40</sup> in which the parent slabs were cut along a random plane and then spliced together. A fitness factor was assigned to each candidate based on the mating counts and the grand canonical free energy. Candidates with higher fitness were more probable to mate. Similarity check against the current population was performed by the interatomic comparison criterion detailed in ref 45 before adding any new candidate to prevent duplicates. Adopted mutation operations included (1) adding or removing an adsorbate, (2) rattling the surface atoms along random vectors drawn from a normal distribution, (3) translating the buffer slab along the  $x$  or  $y$  axis by  $1/n$  ( $n = 2, 3,$  and  $6$ ) of the cell length, and (4) permuting a random half of the buffer slab. If an offspring was too similar with its parent, then its mutation rate was raised to 100%. Upon the addition of each offspring to the population, the candidate with the lowest fitness was archived to maintain the

population size. The structures with unbound fragments were removed from the population to avoid sampling into chemically irrelevant regions of the PES. The progress plot of a typical GCGA search is shown in [Figure S21](#).

**4.5. Grand Canonical DFT Calculations.** Under a constant applied potential, the electrode surface was effectively a grand canonical ensemble of electrons where the number of electrons was varied to adapt to the change in the workfunction of the surface. The potential-dependent electronic grand canonical free energy of the surface  $\Omega_{\text{el}}$  can be approximated by a surface charging model:<sup>22</sup>

$$\Omega_{\text{el}}(U) = E(U) - q(U) \cdot FU \approx E(U_0) - \frac{1}{2} C(U - U_0)^2 \quad (3)$$

which treats the electrochemical interface as an effective capacitor. Here,  $E(U)$  is the electronic energy of the surface under a potential  $U$ , which is calculated by referencing the Fermi level of the system against the vacuum level.  $q(U)$  is the surface charge difference referenced against the neutral system, and  $F$  is the Faradaic constant.  $U_0$  stands for the potential of zero charge in the vacuum scale, and  $C$  is the effective capacitance.

The self-consistent implicit solvation model VASPsol<sup>41</sup> was used to represent the polarizable electrolyte region. The surface slab was symmetrized along the  $z$  axis to avoid an asymmetric potential in the implicit solvation region. The thickness of the implicit solvent slab was increased to  $5\lambda$  where the Debye screening length is evaluated by<sup>42</sup>

$$\lambda \approx \frac{3}{\sqrt{I}} \text{Å} \quad (4)$$

where  $I$  is the ionic strength in M; in this study, we took it to be 0.1 to model 0.1 M HClO<sub>4</sub>. Hence, the implicit solvent thickness was set to 50 Å for the symmetrized slab ([Figure S1c](#)).

By varying the number of electrons in the system, the  $E(U)$  of the system at the corresponding  $U$  and  $q(U)$  can be obtained, and thereby, a quadratic relation between  $\Omega_{\text{el}}(U)$  and  $U$  can be fitted by sampling a series of  $q$  values (see [Supplementary Note 5](#) for details). The  $U$  (in the vacuum scale) can be converted into the SHE scale by referencing it against the benchmarked value (4.60 V) for VASPsol, validated against an experimental dataset of metallic surfaces in ref 43.

The final coverage- and potential-dependent grand canonical free energy  $\Omega_{\text{tot}}$  was approximated by

$$\Omega_{\text{tot}}(n, U) \approx \Omega_{\text{el}}^{\text{slab}-n\text{H}}(U) - \Omega_{\text{el}}^{\text{slab}}(U) - n \cdot \mu_{\text{H}}(\text{pH}, U, T) \quad (5)$$

The fitting plots of four representative surface states with 0, 1/3, 2/3, and 1 ML H coverages are shown in [Figure S22](#), validating the adopted model.

**4.6. Molecular Dynamics.** The ab initio molecular dynamics simulations were performed on the optimized structures with the same DFT setting as the geometry optimization using the VASP program. Simulation was performed in the NVT (canonical) ensemble at 300 K with a Nosé–Hoover thermostat. The time step was set to 1 fs, and a 10 ps trajectory after the equilibration of the system was collected for analysis. The radial distribution function analysis was performed using the VMD program (version 1.9.4a48).<sup>44</sup>

## ■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

### SI Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/jacs.2c06188>.

Computational details; simulated STM images; Bader charge of surface atoms; COHP analysis of selected surface states and bulk references; reaction profile of row-shifting and H migration; QTAIM analysis of surface bonds during row-shifting; selected snapshots of BOMD simulations; progress plot of a typical GCGA search; quadratic fit for the GCDFT calculations;



discussions on the vibrational contribution to the free energy, details of GCDFT calculations, notable structures in previous reports, and symmetric/asymmetric alignment of H along the shifted row (PDF)

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

### Corresponding Authors

**Philippe Sautet** – Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry and California NanoSystems Institute, University of California, Los Angeles, California 90094, United States; Department of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering, University of California, Los Angeles, California 90094, United States; [orcid.org/0000-0002-8444-3348](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8444-3348); Email: [sautet@ucla.edu](mailto:sautet@ucla.edu)

**Anastassia N. Alexandrova** – Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry and California NanoSystems Institute, University of California, Los Angeles, California 90094, United States; [orcid.org/0000-0002-3003-1911](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3003-1911); Email: [ana@chem.ucla.edu](mailto:ana@chem.ucla.edu)

### Authors

**Zisheng Zhang** – Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry, University of California, Los Angeles, California 90094, United States

**Ziyang Wei** – Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry, University of California, Los Angeles, California 90094, United States

Complete contact information is available at:

<https://pubs.acs.org/10.1021/jacs.2c06188>

### Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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