Graphitic carbon nitride with S and O codoping for enhanced visible light photocatalytic performance

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Graphitic carbon nitride (g-C₃N₄) shows great possibility to enhance its visible light photocatalytic performance by tuning its electronic structure and band gap via nonmetal element doping. S and O codoped g-C₃N₄ is synthesized by the polymerization of melamine and H₂O₂ bonded trithiocyanuric acid (TCA) at an elevated temperature and characterized as crimped nanosheets with mesoporous structures. The photocatalytic performance of S–O codoped g-C₃N₄ for RhB degradation increases 6 fold by enhancing visible light adsorption and decreasing its band gap compared to pristine g-C₃N₄ nanosheets. The substitution of the edge N with S and O dopant causes much more strongly delocalized HOMO and LUMO and increases the number of reactive sites, facilitating the migration of photogenerated electron/hole pairs.

1. Introduction

Nowadays humans consume even more fossil energy to meet insatiable demands for more high-quality products and high-efficiency transportation, leading to the ever-increasing problem of energy shortage and environmental deterioration. It is generally considered that one prospective strategy is to utilize solar resources effectively and efficiently. Semiconductor based photocatalysts provide promising approaches in water splitting and pollutant degradation using solar energy directly and have gained considerable attention from research experts in materials science and chemistry. Graphitic carbon nitride (g-C₃N₄) is composed of stacked 2D layers which are constructed from tri-s-triazine units connecting through planar amino groups. The g-C₃N₄ possesses excellent thermal and chemical stability, as well as an appropriate band structure and a band gap of 2.7 eV allowing it to be driven under visible light when serving as a photocatalyst for solar resource conversion.©–3 Therefore, ever since its emergence, g-C₃N₄ has attracted extensive attention in the field of visible light photocatalysis and pollutant degradation because of its unique atomic and electronic structures.

Some intrinsic characteristics, such as small specific surface area and rapid recombinant of the photogenerated electron–hole pair, restrict its application. Accordingly, many strategies have been adopted to improve the photocatalytic performance of g-C₃N₄ by means of the fabrication of nano/mesoporous structures with a soft or hard template,©–⁹ a heterojunction with other semiconductors,©–⁹–¹¹ coupling with metal particles,©–¹⁵ and metal or non-metal doping.©–¹⁷ etc. Among these methods, doping with nonmetal elements showed great possibility to enhance the visible light photocatalysis of g-C₃N₄, since the electronic structure and band gap changed dramatically via atomic doping.©–²⁹ Carbon and nitrogen self-doped g-C₃N₄ exhibited improved photoactivity by forming delocalized π bonds to increase visible light absorption and electric conductivity.©–²¹ Many nonmetal heteroatoms, such as B,©–²⁴ P,©–³⁶ S,©–³⁶ O,©–³⁶©–³⁸ were introduced to improve the visible light photocatalytic activities for hydrogen generation and organic degradation compared with pristine g-C₃N₄. Experimental and theoretical studies showed that the dopants tune the electronic structure by forming localized states in the band gap, facilitating the transfer of photogenerated electron hole pairs. B-doped g-C₃N₄ was usually prepared by heating melamine and boron oxide.©–²³,²⁴ Different molecular structures, however, were deduced, such as C-NB₂ groups in the linkage©–²³ and B atoms replacing C atoms in the g-C₃N₄ frame.©–²⁴ As for S-doped g-C₃N₄, Hong et al. reported that the S atoms substitute the C sites,©–²⁸ while some researchers reported that the doped S forms the S–C bond in the triazine frame by replacing the N sites.©–²⁸–³⁰ Different preparation techniques may affect the substitution sites with dopant atoms, which leads to different electronic structures and subsequently affects the photocatalytic performance. Contradictions still exist about how to prepare, characterize and understand its mechanism. Therefore, further experimental and theoretical investigations are needed to gain deeper insight into the mechanism of photocatalytic performance via element doping. It is meaningful to explore a simple and effective approach to synthesize an efficient g-C₃N₄ photocatalyst via atomic doping with single or twofold elements and to study the dopant effect on the photocatalytic performance.

A valid pathway to improve the photocatalytic performance of g-C₃N₄ is by changing its electronic band structure and
2. Experimental details

0.01 mol of melamine (M) powder was dissolved into 30 mL of water solution with 30% H₂O₂ in mass percentage. Then the solution was fully mixed inside a beaker and dried at 60 °C overnight. The obtained white substance was mixed with 0.01 mol of trithiocyanuric acid (TCA), and ground into a powder and then transferred to a silica boat with a cover and heated at 550 °C for 2 h in a nitrogen atmosphere. The obtained S–O doped g-C₃N₄ product was a yellow powder and was collected for further use. The S doped g-C₃N₄ was prepared in the same way without the H₂O₂ solution being involved in the preparation process. Scheme 1 illustrated the facile process for preparing the pristine (CN) and the doped g-C₃N₄ with S (S–CN) and S–O (S,O–CN) elements.

The surface morphology was observed by a scanning electron microscope (SEM, JSE-7800F, Jeol). X-ray diffraction (XRD) measurements were used to characterize the crystalline structures of the g-C₃N₄ by a diffractometer (ShimadzuXRD7000) with Cu Kα radiation (λ = 1.5418 Å). The vibrational information was measured using a Fourier transform infrared (FTIR, PerkinElmer) spectroscopy instrument in KBr pellets. X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) was carried out to analyze the chemical state and composition on a VG ESCALAB 250 spectrometer with Al Kα radiation (hv = 1486.8 eV). Ultraviolet-visible (UV-vis) absorption spectra were performed on a U-3310 spectrophotometer (Hitachi, Japan) in the wavelength range of 300 nm to 800 nm. Photoluminescence (PL) spectra were carried out on an F-7000 fluorescence spectrophotometer (Hitachi, Japan) with an excitation wavelength at 273 nm using a 150 W Xe lamp as the excitation source.

3. Results and discussion

The SEM image of the pristine g-C₃N₄ nanosheets, shown in Fig. 1(a), indicates the g-C₃N₄ nanosheets appearing as a lamella structure with some wrinkles. The S doped g-C₃N₄ in Fig. 1(b) appears as an elongated slate and crimped g-C₃N₄ sheets with irregular mesoporous structures after the M had reacted with TCA at an elevated temperature. This may be ascribed to the polymerization reaction of –SH in TCA and –NH in M facilitating the formation of larger g-C₃N₄ sheets. After the H₂O₂ hydrothermal treatment, the g-C₃N₄ sheets in Fig. 1(c) become longer and the lamella structures even more curved than those of the S doped g-C₃N₄ with irregular porous structures. The mesoporous structures may result from the decomposition of TCA during the polymerization process.16 The energy dispersive X-ray spectrum (EDS) analysis shows the composition of the S–O doped g-C₃N₄, comprising rich carbon (C) and nitrogen (N) with dispersed S and O elements. The overlapped C, N, S and O elemental EDS image (Fig. 1(d)) shows that the S and O elements are dispersed in g-C₃N₄ sheets. The EDS elemental mappings in Fig. 1(e–h) indicate clearly that the S and O elements are distributed discretely on the continuous C, N elemental background.

The crystal structures of the pristine g-C₃N₄ nanosheets, the S-doped and the S–O codoped g-C₃N₄ were demonstrated by their XRD patterns. As shown in Fig. 2(a), the XRD pattern for the pristine g-C₃N₄ displays two distinct diffraction peaks located at 2θ of about 13.1° and 27.3°, which are in good accordance with the characteristic peaks of g-C₃N₄. These peaks correspond to the (100) and (002) crystal planes of g-C₃N₄ attributed to the lattice planes parallel to the c-axis and the stacking of the conjugated aromatic systems in the layered structure,15,27,31,18 respectively. With S and O doped g-C₃N₄, the 2θ position for the lattice peak (002) increases a little bit to 27.5° from the 27.3° of the pure g-C₃N₄. This indicates that the interplanar stacking distance becomes smaller after S and O doping, since the dopant elements of S and O have changed the localized

![Scheme 1](image-url)
The stronger attraction between the g-C$_3$N$_4$ layers would result in shorter interplanar distances. The XRD results indicate that the S and O atoms have been incorporated into the g-C$_3$N$_4$ layer. The FTIR spectra of the pristine g-C$_3$N$_4$ nanosheets, the S-doped and the S–O codoped g-C$_3$N$_4$ are depicted in Fig. 2(b), in which the typical characteristic peaks at 1228, 1312, 1390, 1534, and 1625 cm$^{-1}$ can be assigned to the stretching modes of the aromatic C–N heterocycle and the peak at 805 cm$^{-1}$ is ascribed to the breathing mode of the triazine units. This demonstrates that the original graphitic C–N network was kept intact. The peak at 1228 cm$^{-1}$ corresponds to aromatic C–N, C–O and might represent S–O stretching vibrations. Compared to the pristine g-C$_3$N$_4$, a new peak at 1078 cm$^{-1}$ appears in the FTIR spectra for the O doped and S–O codoped g-C$_3$N$_4$, which can be attributed to the stretching mode of the C–O or C–S bond, which confirms that the oxygen and sulfur are doped into the g-C$_3$N$_4$ lattice. This is consistent with the FTIR results of the stretching vibration of C–O reported by Ma et al.$^{26}$ and Seredych et al.$^{34}$

XPS measurement was carried out to further investigate the chemical state and element valence changes of the pristine g-C$_3$N$_4$ and the g-C$_3$N$_4$ after S and S–O doping. Fig. 3 shows the high-resolution XPS spectra of C, N, O and S elements of the pristine g-C$_3$N$_4$, and the S-doped, and S–O codoped g-C$_3$N$_4$. The high-resolution C 1s XPS spectra of the three samples are shown in Fig. 3(a). For the pristine g-C$_3$N$_4$ nanosheets, the peak
398.4 eV (N1), 399.7 eV (N2), and 401.0 eV (N3), which could be mainly decomposed to three typical peaks located at about 284.6 eV (C3), 285.48 eV (C2) is attributed to the sp2-hybridized aromatic N atoms bonded to the C atom. The N 1s spectra remain unchanged since S and O doping does not change the chemical shift of the C 1s spectrum which is fairly close to the stoichiometric value of g-C3N4. The C/N atomic ratio is 0.74 for the pristine g-C3N4, which is slightly larger that that of the pristine g-C3N4. XPS results show that the S and O atoms have been doped into the g-C3N4 lattice and may preferentially substitute N atoms. For the S–O codoped g-C3N4, the S content is about 0.08% and the O content is about 0.15%.

The absorption peaks around 300–400 nm are assigned to π–π* transitions in the conjugated ring systems, including heterocyclic aromatics. The features near 500 nm are due to n–π* transitions involving lone pairs on the edge N atoms of the triazine rings and the intensity increases for the S, O codoped g-C3N4 compared with the pristine g-C3N4. SEM images have shown that S and O doping causes the g-C3N4 sheets to curl up. The crimped structure facilitates the n–π* transitions. These results reveal that the S–O doping g-C3N4 composites could significantly promote the optical absorption performance and enhance the utilized efficiency of solar light, which subsequently results in its promotion of the photocatalytic activity.37

Photoluminescence (PL) spectra were carried out to investigate the recombination/separation of photoinduced charge carriers in the pristine g-C3N4 nanosheets and the S–O codoped g-C3N4 under the excitation wavelength of 273 nm. The measured PL spectra, shown in Fig. 4(c), showed that all of the samples exhibit a main emission peak appearing at about 440 nm, which is consistent with the reported value in the literature.36,37 Compared to the pristine g-C3N4, the S–O doped g-C3N4 shows weaker PL intensity, revealing the lower recombination probability of photoinduced electrons and holes,37 which could give rise to a higher photocatalytic activity.

Electrochemical impedance spectra (EIS) of the pristine g-C3N4 and the g-C3N4 doped with S and O were measured to compare the electric transient behavior of the pure and doped g-C3N4 materials. 

![Graph showing the absorption edge for the pristine g-C3N4 nanosheets at around 460 nm indexing to a band gap energy of about 2.7 eV, vs. the absorption edge for the S-doped g-C3N4 and 2.3 eV for the S–O codoped g-C3N4.](image)
understand the photocatalytic mechanism. The arc on the EIS Nyquist plot indicates the charge transfer resistance. Generally speaking, the smaller the arc radius, the lower the charge transfer resistance will be. As shown in Fig. 4(d), the Nyquist plots of all the O and S doped g-C3N4 samples demonstrate a smaller arc radius attributed to the reduced electronic resistance and increased electronic conductivity by doping with O and S elements compared to the pristine g-C3N4. Similarly, the arc radius for S–O codoped g-C3N4 is smallest in all three samples, which is associated with the highest efficiency of the charge separation. Moreover, it is vital that the change trend of the arc radius for g-C3N4 samples is roughly consistent with the results displayed in the PL spectra.

The photocatalytic performance of S–O doped g-C3N4 was evaluated by RhB degradation under visible light irradiation (Fig. 5(a)). After 3 h of irradiation with visible light, about 48% of the RhB is degraded in presence of the S doped g-C3N4, compared to only 20% of the RhB being decomposed in the presence of the pristine g-C3N4. As for the S–O codoped g-C3N4, approximately 75% of RhB is decomposed after 3 h of visible light irradiation. Fig. 5(b) shows the first-order reaction kinetics for the RhB degradation, which is expressed as $-\ln(C/C_0) = kt$, where $k$ is the reaction rate, and $t$ is the reaction time. The photocatalytic performance of the S–O doped g-C3N4 is 6 times that of the pristine g-C3N4 calculated from the results in Fig. 5(b). The stability of the S–O codoped g-C3N4 was evaluated by recycle experiments for RhB degradation. After 3 h of visible light irradiation, the catalysts were retrieved by centrifugation and a subsequent drying process and used for the next RhB degradation test. The photocatalytic performance was investigated in fresh material and after three recycles, as shown in Fig. 5(c). No obvious difference was observed after three recycles, indicating that the S–O codoped g-C3N4 is relatively stable under visible light irradiation.

A theoretical investigation was carried out to further understand the effect of different atomic doping on the electrical structure of the g-C3N4 layer. We performed density functional theory (DFT) calculations using the Gaussian09 software package for the O and S doped monolayer g-C3N4. DFT B3LYP/6-31G(d) level of theory was used to optimize the geometry of g-C3N4 and to calculate the natural orbital population distribution. The calculation of HOMO and LUMO, and density of state were based on the DFT B3PW91/6-31G(d) level.

Fig. 6 shows the highest occupied molecular orbital (HOMO) and the lowest unoccupied molecular orbital (LUMO) for the (001) lattice plane of the g-C3N4 monolayer. The calculated HOMO for the pristine g-C3N4 suggests that the edge N atoms provide the sites for oxidation of water to O2, whereas the LUMO indicates that the C and the inner N atoms are the preferred reduction sites to form H2. The migration of the photogenerated e-/h+ pairs is not efficient due to the differently localized HOMO and LUMO. No HOMO and LUMO present on the bridge N atoms inhibits the carrier migration from one heptazine unit to another and this reduces the photocatalytic performance. The substitution of the edge N with O causes slightly more strongly delocalized HOMO and LUMO compared to the pristine g-C3N4 monolayer. The dispersion of the HOMO and LUMO distribution can enhance the carrier mobility. The substitution of the edge N with S causes more strongly delocalized HOMO and LUMO, and thus increases the number of reactive sites. It is noted that the bridge N can act as a channel to connect the adjacent heptazine unit and facilitate the migration of photogenerated electron/hole pairs. The geometry for the S doped g-C3N4 monolayer is inclined to...
deform and become crimped, which is consistent with the morphology shown in the SEM image.

The total and partial density of state (DOS) for the pristine g-C₃N₄ are shown in Fig. 7(a). The DOS in the valance bond is mainly contributed by the carbon and nitrogen atoms, while the DOS in the conductance bond is from the nitrogen atoms. The band gap narrows upon the S and O doping and the Fermi level is shifted to the conducting band, as shown in Fig. 7(b) and (c). The intensity and wave profile of the partial DOS for C and N are similar in the ranges of −20 to −12 eV and −5 eV to the Fermi level for the g-C₃N₄ monolayer, which indicates that the orbitals of C and N hybridized. The S dopant contributes more DOS compared with the O dopant and the partial DOS of S elements near the Fermi level is stronger than that of O elements.36,40

The calculated natural orbital population distribution showed that the valence electron configuration of the carbon atom is 2s<sup>0.74</sup>–0.76 2p<sup>2.60</sup>–2.61. The valence electron of the carbon atoms alters imperceptibly after the O and S doping, and the modification disappears far away from the dopant atoms. The valence electron configurations of the doped O and S are 2s<sup>1.59</sup> 2p<sup>4.89</sup>, 3s<sup>1.67</sup> 3p<sup>3.95</sup>, respectively. The electron orbitals of the doped O and S have hybridized with those of other atoms, covalently binding with adjacent atoms. The valence electron divergence between the dopant atoms and the adjacent intrinsic

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**Fig. 5** (a) Photocatalytic performances and (b) corresponding first-order reaction kinetics in the degradation of RhB under visible light irradiation for the pristine g-C₃N₄, the S doped and S–O codoped g-C₃N₄. (c) Stability test of the S–O codoped g-C₃N₄.

**Fig. 6** Calculated HOMO (top) and LUMO (bottom) of the pristine (a), O doped (b) and S doped (c) g-C₃N₄ monolayer. The isosurface is taken at a value of 0.003e/Bohr<sup>3</sup>. Carbon atoms are in grey and nitrogen in blue.
atoms yields a new energy band in the g-C₃N₄ monolayer, thus changing its photocatalytic performance.

Finally, a clearer picture can be drawn by taking above-mentioned experimental and theoretical strands into consideration. The semiconductor photocatalysis process involves the generation, the separation and transfer, and the recombination of photoinduced charge carriers under visible light excitation. Non-metal element doping causes slightly delocalized HOMO and LUMO, and tunes the semiconductor band structure and the band gap as well. XPS and XRD results showed that the O and S atoms substitute the N atoms in the g-C₃N₄ lattice by forming O–C and S–C bonds and leaving the N 1s spectra unchanged after O and S doping. The O and S doping has narrowed the band gap by the UV-vis spectra, and promotes the optical absorption performance. In addition, the PL and EIS spectra confirm the higher separation and transfer efficiency of the photoinduced charge carriers. The DFT calculations show that dispersion of the HOMO and LUMO distribution can enhance the carrier mobility. For the pristine g-C₃N₄, no HOMO and LUMO are present on the bridge N atoms, thus suppressing the carrier migration from one heptazine unit to another and reducing the photocatalytic performance. The substitution of the edge N with S causes more strongly delocalized HOMO and LUMO, thus increasing the number of reactive sites. It is noted that the bridge N can act as a channel to connect the adjacent heptazine unit and facilitate the migration of photo-generated electron/hole pairs by increasing the density of state around the bridge N atoms. The g-C₃N₄ layers doped with S and O result in an integrated effect under visible light irradiation, having largely promoted the separation and suppressed the recombination of photoexcited charge carriers, thus achieving a higher photocatalytic activity than that of the pristine g-C₃N₄.

4. Conclusion

In summary, the doped S and O atoms substituting the lattice N atoms facilitate the separation and transfer of the photoinduced electron–hole pairs. The crimped structure resulting from the S and O doping enhanced UV-vis absorption by boosting the n–π* transition. The photocatalytic performance for RhB degradation increases 6 fold compared to the pristine g-C₃N₄ nanosheets. The more strongly delocalized HOMO and LUMO and narrower band gap by S and O doping facilitate the photoexcitation and migration of photoinduced charge carriers, thus enhancing the photocatalytic performance.

Author contributions

The manuscript was written through contributions of all authors. All authors have given approval to the final version of the manuscript.

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