Organic-inorganic hybrid perovskites (OIHPs) have attracted extensive research interest as a promising candidate for efficient and inexpensive solar cells. Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) characterizations that can benefit the fundamental understanding and the degradation mechanism are widely used for these materials. However, their sensitivity to the electron beam illumination and hence structural instabilities usually prevent us from obtaining the intrinsic information or even lead to significant artifacts. Here, we systematically investigate the structural degradation behaviors under different experimental factors to reveal the optimized conditions for TEM characterizations of OIHPs by using low-dose electron diffraction and imaging techniques. We find that a low temperature (−180 °C) does not slow down the beam damage but instead induces a rapid amorphization for OIHPs. Moreover, a less severe damage is observed at a higher accelerating voltage. The beam-sensitivity is found to be facet-dependent that a (1 0 0) exposed CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ (MAPbI$_3$) surface is more stable than a (0 0 1) surface. We successfully acquire the atomic structure of pristine MAPbI$_3$ and identify the damage mechanism for these materials. However, their sensitivity to the electron beam illumination and hence structural instabilities usually prevent us from obtaining the intrinsic information or even lead to significant artifacts. Here, we systematically investigate the structural degradation behaviors under different experimental factors to reveal the optimized conditions for TEM characterizations of OIHPs by using low-dose electron diffraction and imaging techniques. We find that a low temperature (−180 °C) does not slow down the beam damage but instead induces a rapid amorphization for OIHPs. Moreover, a less severe damage is observed at a higher accelerating voltage. The beam-sensitivity is found to be facet-dependent that a (1 0 0) exposed CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ (MAPbI$_3$) surface is more stable than a (0 0 1) surface. With these guidance, we successfully acquire the atomic structure of pristine MAPbI$_3$ and identify the characteristic window that is very narrow. These findings are helpful to guide future electron microscopy characterizations of these beam-sensitive materials, which are also useful for finding strategies to improve the stability and performance of the perovskite solar cells.

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1. Introduction

Organic-inorganic hybrid perovskites (OIHPs) have achieved impressive improvements as promising photovoltaic materials, whose power conversion efficiency rapidly increases from initial 3.8% [1] to most recent 25.2% [2]. However the commercialization of the technology is still hindered by the poor long-term stability issues [3,4]. Transmission electron microscopy (TEM)-based studies benefit the fundamental understanding of their nature, functionality as well as the degradation mechanism for these fascinating materials [5,6], which makes great contribution to the development of OIHPs based solar cells. OIHPs are extremely sensitive to the electron beam [7,8]. It is reported that the high energy electron beam at 300 kV has already caused damage within 100 e Å$^{-2}$ and induced the degradation from CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ (MAPbI$_3$) to PbI$_2$ within 2200 e Å$^{-2}$ [7]. However, many studies ignored such electron beam sensitivity. Thus, even for basic phase identifications by relatively low dose electron diffraction (ED) technique, many researchers mistakenly identified the PbI$_2$ as MAPbI$_3$ [9–16]. The situation for in situ TEM studies on OIHPs is even worse since under common high resolution TEM (HRTEM) (dose rate: thousands of e Å$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$) or high-angle annular dark field scanning TEM (STEM) (dose rate: hundreds or thousands of e Å$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$) imaging modes, the total doses within several seconds are large enough to induce damage or full decomposition, likely leading to inaccurate or even incorrect conclusions (see Table S1 online for detailed discussion). For example, Segawa group [17] used in situ HRTEM patterns to record the microstructural changes of MAPbI$_3$ for 5 min. At such
a high dose, the sample is likely PbI$_2$ rather than MAPbI$_3$ thus the observed structural changes are likely mainly due to the electron beam irradiation instead of temperature effect. Also, Divitini et al. [11] observed the heat-induced structural and chemical changes by in situ heating, however both the sample preparation by focused ion beam and STEM imaging mode can cause large damage or complete decomposition, as a result the ion migration under heating likely takes place in PbI$_2$ rather than MAPbI$_3$. In situ electrical biasing TEM experiments by Jeangros et al. [18] and Jung et al. [19] also ignored the beam sensitivity of OIHPs. Therefore, it is highly desirable to investigate and clarify the effect of the electron beam itself on the structure instability so that we can draw valid conclusions from the TEM characterizations, especially under external stimuli by in situ TEM.

So far, not too many literatures have been devoted to investigating the effect of the electron beam illumination on OIHPs in TEM [7,20–22]. Rothmann et al. [22] noticed the dose rate for these extremely beam-sensitive materials and acquired selected area electron diffraction (SAED) pattern from the intrinsic MAPbI$_3$ at a low dose rate 1 e Å$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$. Chen et al. [7] uncovered that the structure damage has already been induced within 100 e Å$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$ and proposed a detailed decomposition pathway for single crystalline MAPbI$_3$. Recently, Alberti et al. [20] unveiled a Pb-clusters related degradation mechanism for polycrystalline MAPbI$_3$ films. Besides these studies based on the ED patterns, Zhang et al. [23] acquired the structure of CH$_3$NH$_3$PbBr$_3$ (MAPbBr$_3$) with extremely low doses using direct-detection electron-counting camera. These TEM studies showed that dozens of e Å$^{-2}$ doses are able to induce damage or even decomposition for OIHPs, preventing atomic-scale investigation as well as in situ study under external stimuli. To minimize radiation damage effect, Li et al. [8] retrieved the structure of MAPbI$_3$ by cryo-electron microscopy (cryo-EM), highlighting the importance of low temperature for beam sensitive material characterization. However, this is inconsistent with Rothmann’s study that a low temperature causes a rapid amorphization [21]. Thus whether or not the low temperature is beneficial for EM characterizations of OIHPs is still unclear. Furthermore, what kind of factors influence the beam sensitivity and how to increase the total damage-free doses during characterizations have been rarely explored and thus motivate this study.

In this work, we study the effect of external factors (temperature, accelerating voltage) and internal factors (exposed facets) on the structural instabilities of OIHPs under electron beam irradiation. It is found that a low temperature (–180 °C) causes a rapid crystal-amorphous transition within low doses (129 to 150 e Å$^{-2}$), suggesting that low temperature is not helpful in preventing the electron beam damage while a high temperature (90 °C) does not change the degradation pathway observed at room temperature (RT). The beam damage mechanism is identified to be radiolysis since a high voltage is beneficial to reduce the damage. Besides we reveal that the beam-sensitivity is facet-dependent, with a (1 0 0) exposed MAPbI$_3$ surface more stable than a (0 0 1) surface. We also acquire the atomic structure of MAPbI$_3$ at an extremely low dose. Our findings can guide future EM characterizations of these beam-sensitive materials and also lay a foundation for the in-depth decomposition study under various stimuli by EM.

2. Experimental

2.1. CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ single crystalline film fabrication

PbI$_2$ and CH$_3$NH$_3$I (molar ratio 1:1) were dissolved in γ-butyrolactone (GBL) with the concentration of 1.3 mol L$^{-1}$, prior to stirring in 12 h at the 70 °C. The MAPbI$_3$ precursor solution was obtained and filtered using polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE) filter with 0.22 μm pore size. The fluorine-doped tin oxide (FTO)/TiO$_2$ substrates [24] were face-to-face clamped together at fixed distance of 50–200 μm. The fixed FTO/TiO$_2$ substrates were vertically and partially soaked in a 10 mL MAPbI$_3$ precursor solution at 120 °C, and then the feeding MAPbI$_3$ precursor solution was added twice a day in the nitrogen glove box. The perovskite solution climbed along the pores of the mesoporous TiO$_2$ substrate from bottom to top and covered the entire substrate, and then crystallized into a film due to the temperature difference, forming the single crystal film [7,24]. After some days, the substrates with MAPbI$_3$ single crystal film were taken out, and then dried at 120 °C for 10 min in nitrogen.

2.2. CH$_3$NH$_3$PbBr$_3$ single crystal preparation

PbBr$_3$ and CH$_3$NH$_3$Br were dissolved in N,N-dimethylformamide (DMF) and stirred at 30 °C for 12 h to obtain 1 mol L$^{-1}$ MAPbBr$_3$ precursor solution. The MAPbBr$_3$ precursor solution was purified by PTFE filter with 0.22 μm pore size, and then heated to 95 °C in a 10 mL container in dark environment. The container can be taken out by daylight at 30%–50% humidity until the MAPbBr$_3$ single crystals were grown after one night [25].

2.3. TEM samples preparation

To avoid side reactions, all TEM samples were prepared in an argon-filled glovebox. We firstly scratched samples from substrate and dispersed them into anhydrous ether. Then, the clear suspensions were deposited on holey carbon copper grids. We sealed the carbon copper grids with a plastic bag full of argon before transformed into the TEM column. The water concentration inside the plastic bag is below 0.1 ppm. The perovskite powders were exposed inside the plastic bag for about 5 min during the transport of perovskite sample.

2.4. Characterization

Powder X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns were obtained on D8 Advance diffractometer using Cu Kα radiation (40 kV and 40 mA) with a scanning rate of 4° min$^{-1}$ for wide-angle test increment. The HRTEM and the SAED patterns were conducted at an aberration corrected FEI (Titan Cubed Themis G2) operated at 80 and 300 kV. The energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS) was carried out at 300 kV, 10–20 pA, (0.5–1) × 10$^3$ counts per second for 120 s. The cooling and heating experiments were performed at FEI Tecnai F20 at 200 kV by a liquid nitrogen side-entry specimen holder (Gatan 636). The temperature is stable at the expected value for 1 h before turning on the illumination to record data. As for all SAED images, it takes about 30 s to get the first SAED patterns since the sample comes into sight. The HRTEM images of the MAPbI$_3$ were acquired at a magnification of 71,000 by Gatan K2 direct-detection camera in the electron-counting mode with the dose fractionation function. The simulated ED patterns were obtained by the Single Crystalmaker software.

3. Results and discussion

To study the effect of temperature on the beam sensitivity, we first examine the phase of MAPbI$_3$ at different temperature, which is reported to be orthorhombic phase below (111 ± 2) °C, tetragonal phase between (111 ± 2) and (58 ± 5) °C and cubic phase over (58 ± 5) °C [26,27], as shown in Fig. 1a–c. The MAPbI$_3$ is known to be a tetragonal phase (Fig. S1 online) [24], whose SAED pattern (Fig. 1e) matches with the simulated one (Fig. 1h). At –180 °C, the acquired SAED pattern (Fig. 1d) shows no superstructure diffraction
spots of the orthorhombic phase, highlighted by the circle on the simulated ED pattern (Fig. 1g), suggesting that a low temperature in vacuum will not cause the transition from tetragonal to orthorhombic phase for the single crystal MAPbI$_3$, which has also been observed in Diroll’s study[28]. We also examine the phase at a high temperature and find the SAED pattern at 90°C (Fig. 1f) indicates either a [1 1 0] direction of cubic phase (Fig. 1i) or a [1 0 0] direction of the tetragonal phase (Fig. 1h), thus making us unable to indentify the specific phase. Since the obtained SAED patterns can match with the pristine MAPbI$_3$, it is concluded the structure of MAPbI$_3$ is not damaged under low and high temperature in vacuum.

Then we further investigate the degradation pathway at −180, 25 and 90°C to reveal the effect of temperature on the beam sensitivity as shown in Fig. 2. At −180°C, the SAED pattern (Fig. 2a) is identified to be a [0 0 1] zone axis of tetragonal MAPbI$_3$ with additional superstructure diffraction spots marked by the circles, which are possibly caused by the ordered iodine vacancies [7]. With increased doses, the sharp diffraction reflections continuously disappear and finally change into an amorphous ring within 150 e Å$^{-2}$ (Fig. 2b–d), indicating a crystal-amorphous transition. The HRTEM image of the amorphous phase is shown in Fig. S2 (online). Comparably, a crystal-crystal transition from MAPbI$_3$ to PbI$_2$ is observed at 25°C (Fig. 2e–h), whose degradation pathway starts with the loss of ordered halogen ions, followed by the loss of remaining halogen and methylamine ions, leading to final decomposition into PbI$_2$, as we reported before [7]. From [1 0 0] direction of tetragonal MAPbI$_3$, we again observe such crystal-amorphous transition at −180°C within 129 e Å$^{-2}$ and a crystal-crystal transition at 25°C (Fig. S3 online). When temperature increases to 90°C, MAPbI$_3$ can maintain its stucture within 38 e Å$^{-2}$ (Fig. S4 online), and the observed degradation pathway (Fig. 2i–l) is consistent with that at 25°C, which is through an intermediate phase to the final PbI$_2$. Fig. 2m presents the total doses to observe the appearance of superstructure, transformation into amorphous phase and PbI$_2$ at different temperature. At −180°C, the doses for generating superstructure (below 30 e Å$^{-2}$) and crystal-amorphous transition (150 e Å$^{-2}$) are smaller than 35 and 475 e Å$^{-2}$.
transformation into PbI$_2$) at 25 °C and 38 and 523 e Å$^2$ (transformation into PbI$_2$) at 90 °C, suggesting MAPbI$_3$ is less stable at low temperature under electron beam irradiation. In fact, the data from earlier cryo-EM study also showed the formation of superstructure at 7.6 e Å$^2$ [8], although it was not discussed, and their dose is too low to observe amorphous transition. Rothmann et al. [21], on the other hand, observed crystal-amorphous transition in polycrystalline MAPbI$_3$ film, while no superstructure has been observed. The total dose for becoming amorphous (~820 e Å$^2$) in their study is larger than that in our case (150 e Å$^2$), likely due to the enhanced stability with the appearance of orthorhombic phase in tetragonal phase [29]. Such amorphization transition only occurs at low temperature. It should also be noted that although the dose for transforming into PbI$_2$ at 90 °C (523 e Å$^2$) is slightly larger than that at 25 °C (451 e Å$^2$), considering the possible variations of sample conditions such as different thickness [10] and crystalline quality from one specimen to another, it does not necessarily suggest a higher stability for MAPbI$_3$ at 90 °C.

To confirm the generalization of such crystal-amorphous transition at −180 °C, we also investigate the structure evolution of cubic MAPbBr$_3$ (Fig. S5 online) at different temperature as shown in Fig. S6 (online). With increased dose, MAPbBr$_3$ gradually decomposes to form intermediate phase with superstructure reflections similar to MAPbI$_3$, and eventually decomposes into final PbBr$_2$ (Fig. S6e–h online). Comparably, at −180 °C, the sharp diffraction spots disappear quickly during the continuous electron beam irradiation and finally become diffused diffraction ring within 81 e Å$^2$ (Fig. S6a–d online), again indicating a crystal-amorphous transition, which has also been observed in pure inorganic halide perovskite CsPbBr$_3$ [30]. We have carried out the EDS experiment to determine the composition of such amorphous phase at −180 °C as shown in Fig. S7 (online), which suggests the formation of Pb and PbBr$_2$ with negligible signal of N and C. However, the composition may be different from initial amorphous material due to the large electron dose illumination during the EDS measurement. Therefore, for both tetragonal MAPbI$_3$ and cubic MAPbBr$_3$, low temperature cannot suppress the beam damage but cause a rapid crystal-amorphous transition. This is because under the electron beam irradiation, many defects (interstitials and vacancies) can be generated, which are mobile or form other quasi-stable configurations, causing new kinds of order at RT [31]. However, the atomic defects are frozen and much less mobile [32,33] at low temperature, thus they are prone to be accumulated as clusters, further becoming amorphous [21].

Besides temperature, accelerating voltage is another important factor concerning about beam sensitivity during TEM characterization. The total doses ($D_t$) before the superstructure spots appear is used as a reference to determine the beam sensitivity. We acquire the $D_t$ at 80 and 300 kV from samples on the same TEM grid. As shown in Fig. 3, the $D_t$ at 300 kV (38–39 e Å$^2$) is about 2–3 times larger than that at 80 kV (13–16 e Å$^2$) and the raw data is shown Fig. 2. (Color online) The effect of temperature on the beam sensitivity of MAPbI$_3$. Time-series SAED patterns along the [0 0 1] direction showing the degradation pathway at (a–d) −180 °C, (e–h) 25 °C, (i–l) 90 °C. The dose rate is 1 e Å$^2$ s$^{-1}$ at 200 kV. (m) The critical doses to observe the appearance of superstructure phase, transformation into amorphous phase and PbI$_2$. The doses marked by pentagram and rhombus are 7.6 and 820 e Å$^2$.

Fig. 3. (Color online) The effect of voltage and electron beam damage mechanism. The measured $D_t$ values at 80 and 300 kV of MAPbI$_3$, indicating a radiolysis mechanism that a high voltage can decrease the damage. The dose rate is 0.2 e Å$^2$ s$^{-1}$ for #1–3 and 0.4 e Å$^2$ s$^{-1}$ for #4.
in Fig. S8 (online), which suggests EM characterizations of OIHPs at a high voltage is helpful to reduce the damage. The smaller damage at a higher voltage also indicates knock-on damage is not the main damage mechanism since a higher energy incident electron is expected to cause a severer knock-on damage [34,35]. The data recorded at 200 kV (Fig. S9 online) presents consistent conclusion that higher voltage brings in smaller damage. Moreover, lowering temperature should help reduce the damage for heating damage mechanism but instead it is observed a rapid crystal-amorphous transition. Thus the damage mechanism for MAPbI₃ is identified to be radiolysis, which is consistent with its semi-conduct nature [36].

We also find a facet-dependent electron beam sensitivity for MAPbI₃. Specifically, as shown in Fig. 4, the Dₑ for a (1 0 0) exposed plane ranges from 210 to 500 e Å⁻² which is about 10 times larger than a (0 0 1) exposed plane (30–41 e Å⁻²) for MAPbI₃, obtained from Fig. S10 online. This is because the migration barrier of iodine on (0 0 1) surface (0.32 eV) is smaller than that on (1 0 0) surface (0.45 eV), calculated by the first-principles study [37], suggesting an easier diffusion of iodine on (0 0 1) surface and relatively higher stability of (1 0 0) surface. In fact, the higher stability of (1 0 0) exposed MAPbI₃ surface is also consistent with Lv’s study that (0 0 1) facet exhibited greater sensitivity and faster erosion rate to water than the (1 0 0) facet [38].

We further study the effect of anion and compare the beam sensitivity of tetragonal MAPbI₃ and cubic MAPbBr₃. The Dₑ for MAPbI₃ ranges from 30 to 41 e Å⁻² (Fig. S10a–c online) which is about half of MAPbBr₃ (63–113 e Å⁻²), acquired from Fig. S11 (online), suggesting that MAPbBr₃ is more stable than MAPbI₃ under electron beam irradiation. The result is consistent with the conclusion that MAPbBr₃ is more thermally and chemically stable than MAPbI₃ [39,40], further indicating it is reasonable to judge the stability by comparing the Dₑ values.

OIHPs are extremely sensitive to electron beam and it is always difficult to acquire the atomic structure. Our findings suggest TEM characterizations may be carried out at 300 kV and RT rather than a low voltage and a low temperature. With these guidance, we have also acquired the structure of MAPbI₃ at 300 kV and 25 °C, as shown in Fig. 5. At a low dose (3.1 e Å⁻²), the HRTEM image (Fig. 5a) is identified to be the pristine MAPbI₃ judging from the corresponding fast Fourier transform (FFT) (Fig. 5b), which is consistent with the simulated ED pattern in Fig. 5c. When the summed dose increases to 24.9 e Å⁻², many additional superstructure diffraction spots appear (Fig. 5d,e), which is likely due to the ordered vacancies in MAPbI₂.₅, whose simulated ED (Fig. 5f) can match the FFT, as we reported previously [7]. In fact, a few dim additional diffraction spots have already appeared even at
6.2 e Å⁻² (Fig. S12 online), suggesting several e Å⁻² is able to induce phase transition or damage for MAPbI₃. Accordingly, on the one hand, extra attention should be paid to the dim additional superstructure spots that are easily ignored but indicating the phase transition when dealing with the atomic structure of MAPbI₃. On the other hand, extremely low dose must be used to acquire the structure of MAPbI₃ as well as its structure evolution.

### 4. Conclusion

Recently, the cryo-EM is widely believed to mitigate the electron beam damage, especially for organic materials, by lessening mass loss and the heating damage to a certain degree [41,42]. For example, the study of Li et al. [8] has inspired extensive investigations of cryo-EM for characterizing OIHPs [43,44]. While the paper was under review, a cryo-TEM work by Zhu et al. [45] reported the observation of the atomic steps of surface and stacking faults in MAPbI₃ at 70–100 e Å⁻². Our study however, suggests that for OIHPs lowering temperature by a cryo-holder cannot prevent the damage but causes a rapid crystal-amorphous transition. The inconsistency may come from the difference between diverse specimens, or the discrepancy between the cryo-holder and cryo-microscope methods. In fact, the specimens prepared for cryo-EM are naturally coated with an amorphous ice layer [46] that likely severs as a protective layer and thus slows down the beam damage, while the general cryo-holder method can only provide low-temperature without any coating layer. Nevertheless, further study is needed in future to clarify whether coating or low-temperature dominates the protection for the cryo-OIHPs. Besides the temperature effect, the recognized damage mechanism suggests a smaller damage of OIHPs is expected at a higher voltage.

Moreover, our work might shed lights on improving the performance of perovskite solar cells (PSCs). For example, we find that heating to 90 °C does not cause more severe degradation of MAPbI₃. Therefore, more attention can be paid to stabilize the interface or other layers in PSCs to improve the high temperature performance. In addition, the facet-dependent beam sensitivity suggests that (1 0 0) surface might be more stable than (0 0 1) facet, which can also guide facet engineering to imporve the stability and performance of PSCs by growing (1 0 0)-textured perovskite films.

In summary, by using low-dose ED imaging techniques, we have investigated the optimized condition for TEM characterizations of OIHPs. We have also quantified the threshold electron dose to acquire the pristine SAED as well as the HRTEM image of MAPbI₃. These findings are helpful to guide the further TEM characterizations. On the other hand, our work provides some valuable insights into understanding the degradation mechanism of OIHPs and can also be useful for improving the performance of PSCs.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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### Author contributions

Peng Gao, Jiangyu Li, Junlei Qi, and Jinjin Zhao conceived the idea and designed the experiments. Shulin Chen performed TEM related experiments with the help of Jingmin Zhang and analyzed TEM data under the direction of Peng Gao. Ying Zhang synthesized the MAPbI₃ single crystal films and MAPbBr₃ single crystals under the direction of Jinjin Zhao. Zhou Mi and Guanglei Zhang performed the SEM and XRD. Jian Cao, Jicai Feng and Junlei Qi provided crystals. Shulin Chen, Jiangyu Li and Peng Gao wrote the manuscript and all authors participated in the discussion.

### Appendix A. Supplementary materials

Supplementary materials to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scib.2020.05.020.

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