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Assembling CdS mesoporous nanosheets into 3D hierarchitectures for effectively photocatalytic performance

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Received (in XXX, XXX) Xth XXXXXXXXX 20XX, Accepted Xth XXXXXXXXX 20XX
DOI: 10.1039/b000000x

3D hierarchical CdS assembled with mesoporous nanosheets are prepared via a facile hydrothermal method in the presence of soulcarboxymthi chitosan. By investigation of various reaction parameters, it is demonstrated that the reaction temperature and the amount of ammonia, thiourea and Cd(NO₃)₂ play important roles in the formation of 3D hierarchical CdS. The optical property of 3D hierarchical CdS is investigated by ultraviolet-visible (UV-vis) spectroscopy. The photocatalytic activity experiment reveals that the as-synthesized 3D hierarchical CdS exhibits an excellent photocatalytic performance for the degradation of methyl orange (MO) aqueous solution under the visible-light illumination, suggesting that the 3D hierarchical CdS nanomaterial might be used as a promising candidate for the treatment organic pollutants in the waste water.

1. Introduction

During the past decades, the controlled synthesis of inorganic macro/nanostructured materials with desired morphology and dimensionality has attracted considerable interest for their distinctive properties. In particular, 3D hierarchical structures with porous materials, which are able to interact with liquids and gases not only at the surface, but also in the inner part of the materials, have been attracting considerable attention for their broad applications in catalytic, sensors, energy storage, environment protection and biomedical fields. Therefore, the design and fabrication of 3D hierarchical structures with porous materials represents a hot topic in the material fields. So far, several approaches have been reported for the fabrication of 3D hierarchical structures materials. Among them, hydrothermal treatment is one of the simplest routes owing to its easily tunable synthesis condition.

As an important II-VI semiconductor, CdS with a direct band gap of 2.5 eV has been extensively studied because of its promising application in catalysis, optical materials and photonics. Recently, some 3D hierarchical structures CdS materials such as dendritic, urchin-like nanoflowers, flower/sphere networks and hyperbranched, have been successfully fabricated to improve their physical and chemical properties. However, the development of convenient and feasible approach for synthesis of 3D hierarchical CdS is expected to be further development. Biomolecule assisted-synthesis has been proven to be a new focus and promising routes in the preparation of metal chalcogenides 3D hierarchical structures because of its convenience, environmentally friendly and strong function in morphology control. For example, PbS, InₓSᵧ, NiₓSᵧ, and BiₓSᵧ, 3D hierarchical structures have been fabricated through the biomolecule assisted-synthesis route. More importantly, CdS with various morphologies recently have also been prepared via the biomolecule assisted-synthesis route. Soulcarboxymthi chitosan is a kind of representative polyanion green biomolecular and has been widely used in biomedical fields, which contains a large number of carboxymethyl groups and has ability to coordinate with Cd²⁺. Therefore, these reasons inspired the use of soulcarboxymthi chitosan in the preparation of nanomaterials.

Herein, we firstly present a simple hydrothermal approach to prepare 3D hierarchical mesoporous CdS in the presence of soulcarboxymthi chitosan. Moreover, the effect of the experimental parameters on the morphology of 3D hierarchical structures CdS was further studied. More importantly, the photocatalytic activity of as-prepared 3D hierarchical structures CdS was also evaluated by the degradation of MO aqueous solution under visible-light illumination.

2. Experimental Section

2.1 The synthesis of 3D hierarchical CdS
In a typical synthesis, 0.5 mmol Cd(NO₃)₂·5H₂O (analytically pure) was dissolved in 7.0 mL of deionized water with magnetic stirring, then 3.0 mL of ammonia solution (25%, analytically pure) and 3.0 mmol thiourea (analytically pure) were added, followed by the addition of a solution of 10.0 mL of 11.2 g L⁻¹ soulcarboxymthi chitosan aqueous solution. After stirring for 5 min, the resulting solution was transferred into a 50 mL autoclave. The autoclave was sealed, heated at 80 °C for 6 h and cooled down to room temperature naturally. The precipitate was centrifuged under 3000 rpm min⁻¹ for 10 minutes and washed with distilled water and ethanol several times, then dried at 50 °C for 12 h.

2.2 Characterizations
The phase of these obtained samples was characterized by X-ray diffraction (XRD) with a Shimadzu XRD-6000 powder X-ray diffractometer with Cu Kα radiation (λ=1.5418 Å). The morphology of the samples was taken by a Hitachi S-4800 field-emission scanning electron microscope (FE-SEM) at an acceleration voltage of 10.0 KV. Transmission electron
microscopy (TEM), high-resolution TEM (HRTEM) images and
the corresponding selected area electron diffraction (SAED) were
obtained on the JEOL JEM-2100 instrument microscopy at an
acceleration voltage of 200 KV. The UV-vis diffusion reflectance
spectrum (DRS) of the samples was studied with a UV-vis
spectrophotometer (UV-3600, Shimadzu, Japan) and BaSO₄ was
used as reference. The surface area, pore size, and pore size
distribution of the products were determined by
Brunauer-Emmet-Teller (BET) nitrogen adsorption-desorption
and Barett-Joyner-Halenda (BJH) methods (Micromeritics,
ASAP2020).

2.3 Photocatalytic experiments
The photocatalytic activities of the as-synthesized samples for
photocatalytic decolorization of MO aqueous solution were
performed as follows: A 300 W xenon lamp was used as the
visible light source with a cutoff filter to cut off the light below
420 nm. Before being irradiated, the suspensions were
continuously magnetically stirred in the dark for 30 min to
establish an adsorption/desorption equilibrium between CdS
powder and the dye. Then, the photocatalytic reaction was
initiated. At given time intervals, a series of aqueous solutions
were taken from the reaction cell and separated through
centrifugation (10000 rpm/min) for absorbance measurements,
which were recorded with a Hitachi U-3900 spectrophotometer.

3. Results and Discussion

![Fig. 1](image1.png)

**Fig. 1** (a) XRD pattern, and (b) EDS spectrum of the as-
synthesized samples.

The phase composition and purity of the as-prepared products
were characterized by X-ray diffraction (XRD). Fig. 1a shows a
typical XRD pattern of the as-prepared sample. All of the
diffraction peaks can be perfectly indexed to that of hexagonal
wurtzite CdS (JCPDS No. 41-1049). No characteristic peaks
Corresponding to other impurities were found in this pattern,
which indicated the high purity of the product. The chemical
composition of the as-prepared sample was also determined by
energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS). As shown in Fig.
1b, the EDS spectrum displays strong peaks of C, Cd and S. The
peak of C is due to the carbon on the conductive adhesive tape
used to hold the sample for SEM observations. Quantitative
analysis confirmed that the atom ratio of Cd to S is about 1:1,
indicating a normal composition of CdS. All these results
confirmed that the as-obtained sample is the pure CdS phase.

![Fig. 2](image2.png)

**Fig. 2** SEM images of the as-synthesized 3D hierarchical CdS.

![Fig. 3](image3.png)

**Fig. 3** TEM images of (a, b) 3D hierarchical CdS; (c, d) the
SAED pattern, and HRTEM image from the area marked with the
white cycle in inset of b.

The morphologies and structures of the as-prepared CdS
sample were examined by FE-SEM and TEM. As shown in Fig.
2, a panoramic SEM image (Fig. 2a) shows that the sample
consists of 3D hierarchical structures with average diameter of 2
µm. The magnified SEM images (Fig. 2b, c) reveal that the 3D
hierarchical CdS is well assembled by many interleaving
nanosheets. After the further magnification in Fig. 2d, it is found
that the thickness of the nanosheet is about 20 nm, and the
nanosheet is constructed by many small nanoparticles.

Fig. 3a displays a TEM image of a representative 3D
hierarchical CdS, and Fig. 3b shows the corresponding high-magnification image. It is obviously found that the nanosheet has a unique porous structure composed of many nanoparticles. Fig. 3c shows the corresponding SAED pattern taken from the nanosheet of 3D hierarchical CdS. The diffraction rings suggest the nanosheet is polycrystalline in nature. The HRTEM image (Fig. 3d) obtained from the area marked with white pane shown in Fig. 3b also confirms that the nanosheet is polycrystalline, the fringe spacings 0.26 nm, 0.32 nm and 0.36 nm are consistent with the interplanar of (102), (101) and (100) lattice planes, respectively.

![Fig. 4](image)

**Fig. 4** (a) N₂ adsorption-desorption isotherms of as-prepared CdS samples; (b) Corresponding pore size distribution curves of as-prepared CdS samples.

To gain further insight into the porous structure and pore size distribution of samples, Brunauer-Emmett-Teller (BET) measurements were performed to examine their specific structural properties. As shown in Fig. 4a, the BET surface area of 3D hierarchical CdS (42.26 m² g⁻¹) is much larger than that of solid CdS sphere (7.08 m² g⁻¹). The Barrett-Joyner-Halenda (BJH) pore size distribution curves (Fig. 4b) shows that the pore size for 3D hierarchical CdS is in the range of the mesopores (2-5 nm), indicating the mesopores possibly formed by porous stacking of component nanoparticles, while the solid CdS sphere has few pores.

![Fig. 5](image)

**Fig. 5** SEM images of the sample obtained at different amounts of ammonia: (a, b) 1.0 mL, (c, d) 4.0 mL.

In this work, the addition of ammonia and sodiumthiocyanate/chitosan is crucial to the formation of such 3D hierarchical CdS. Without adding ammonia into the reaction system, unfortunately, we could not obtain sample. This result is reasonable, thiourea could not easily be decomposed under low temperature. When ammonia was introduced into the reaction solution, the basic of the solution could be increased. Thiourea could be decomposed under the basic condition at the same reaction temperature. By decreasing the volume of ammonia to 1.0 mL, while other conditions were kept constant, disklike structures could be obtained (Fig. 5a, b). When the volume of ammonia was increased to 4.0 mL, CdS nanospheres are observed (Fig. 5c, d). This phenomenon can be explained that the pH value of the reaction solution was increased remarkably with adding 4.0 mL ammonia into the solution. Thiourea could be decomposed fast under strong basic condition. Then CdS nanoparticles formed and soon assembled into nanosphere with the assistance of sodiumthiocyanate/chitosan. Interestingly, by replacing ammonia with NaOH aqueous solution, we obtain CdS nanoparticles instead of novel 3D hierarchical CdS in the reaction system (Fig. S1 in the electronic supplementary information). As is known, the basic of NaOH is much stronger than ammonia, the change of the reaction system pH can affect the growth of CdS crystal. Therefore, in our reaction system, a certain volume of ammonia is suitable for the formation of 3D hierarchical CdS structures.

![Fig. 6](image)

**Fig. 6** SEM images of the sample obtained at different amounts of Cd(NO₃)₂: (a, b) 0.25 mmol, (c, d) 1.0 mmol.

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The controlled experiments have also shown that the biomolecule sulcarboxymethyl chitosan is crucial to the formation of well-defined CdS 3D hierarchical structures. When there was no sulcarboxymethyl chitosan being used, irregular CdS assemblies with nanosheet could be obtained (Fig. S2). This result directly confirmed that the sulcarboxymethyl chitosan could promote the delicate assembly. As is known, the sulcarboxymethyl chitosan molecules contain a large number of carboxymethyl groups, such that the carboxymethyl groups can coordinate with Cd\(^{2-}\).\(^{2,5,15}\) The sulcarboxymethyl chitosan molecules play important roles: a) preventing the aggregation of CdS nanoparticles in the initial nucleation stage via coordination with Cd\(^{2+}\), and b) kinetically controlling the growth rates of CdS crystals, which induce the formation of perfectly 3D hierarchical CdS.

Furthermore, it was also found that the morphologies of 3D hierarchical CdS structures were sensitive to the amount of reagents and the reaction temperatures. For example, by decreasing the amount of Cd(NO\(_3\))\(_2\) from 0.50 mmol to 0.25 mmol while keeping other experimental conditions unchanged, only CdS nanospheres were obtained (Fig. 6a, b). However, when the amount of Cd(NO\(_3\))\(_2\) is increased to 1.0 mmol, no significant morphology change is found (Fig. 6c, d).

As shown in Fig. 7a, b, when the amount of thiourea was 1.0 mmol, disklike morphology and flowerlike structures CdS could be obtained. When increasing the amount of thiourea to 6.0 mmol, the 3D hierarchical CdS assembled with nanosheets was observed (Fig. 7c, d). The successful fabrication of 3D hierarchical CdS structures assembled with nanosheets revealed that thiourea functions were not only as the S source but also as the shape controlling agent in the reaction process.

Moreover, when the reaction temperature was decreased to 60 °C, the perfect 3D hierarchical CdS structures were prepared (Fig. 8a, b). Increasing the reaction temperature to 120 °C, we could only acquire CdS nanospheres (Fig. 8c, d). It might be related to the reaction rate increase at high temperature. Furthermore, the reaction rate could alter the growth process of CdS crystals in the present reaction system, leading to the formation of the CdS nanospheres at 120 °C. Based on the above discussion, it was found that the high reaction temperature was not suitable for the formation of 3D hierarchical CdS in our reaction system.

Interestingly, no 3D hierarchical CdS structures were obtained by replacing thiourea with thiocacetic acid (Fig. S3). Comparing with thiourea, the hydrolysis rate of thiocacetic acid to release S\(^{2-}\) is more quickly, CdS nanoparticles soon formed and have not enough time to form 3D hierarchical structures. It indicated that the formation of the flowerlike structures might be dependent on the special properties of thiourea. When CdCl\(_2\) or Cd(AC)\(_2\) was used as the cadmium source instead of Cd(NO\(_3\))\(_2\), the morphologies of the products were not changed (Fig. 9), comparing with the typical synthesis condition.

![Fig. 8](image8.png)

**Fig. 8** SEM images of the sample obtained at different reaction temperature: (a, b) 60 °C, (c, d) 120 °C.

![Fig. 9](image9.png)

**Fig. 9** SEM images of the CdS prepared from different cadmium source: (a,b) Cd(AC)\(_2\), (c,d) CdCl\(_2\).

The UV-visible diffuse reflectance was employed for studying the optical properties of the 3D hierarchical and solid sphere CdS. As shown in Fig. 10A, it can be found that both of them have a strong absorption in the range of visible-light region because of the intrinsic band gap absorption of CdS. The 3D hierarchical and solid CdS spheres have an absorption edge at about 567 nm and 563 nm, respectively. The absorption edge for the 3D hierarchical CdS at visible-light region showed a red-shift, comparing with the solid CdS spheres. It demonstrates that the band gap of 3D hierarchical CdS was smaller than that of solid CdS spheres. As a crystalline semiconductor, the optical absorption near the band edge follows the formula \( (Ahv)^{\frac{1}{2}} = B(hv - E_g) \), where \( A \), \( h \), \( E_g \) and \( B \) are the absorption coefficient, photon energy, band gap, and a constant, respectively. Among them, “\( n \)” is an index determined by the nature of electron transition in a semiconductor, which is either 2 for direct inter-band transition or 1/2 for indirect inter-band transition.\(^{24,34}\) In this manuscript, for
CdS, it is a case of semiconductor of direct band gap, and the value of \( n \) is 2 for the direct transition. Fig. 10B presents the \((A h \nu)^2\) versus photon energy \( (h \nu) \) curve for CdS samples. The band gap energies (\( E_g \) values) of the CdS samples can be estimated by extrapolating the straight portion of \((A h \nu)^2\) - \( h \nu \) plot to the point \( A = 0 \). Therefore, the band gaps calculated by this approach are about 2.18 eV and 2.20 eV for the 3D hierarchical CdS and solid CdS spheres, respectively. The band gap of 3D hierarchical CdS is narrower than the value of solid CdS spheres. The possible reason is its specific structure. In general, the interaction among the lattice binding, the free electrons and holes can lead the band gap to a narrow one. The experimental results suggested that the 3D hierarchical CdS have great potential as photocatalysts to decompose organic pollutants under visible-light irradiation.

![Fig. 10](image)

**Fig. 10** (A) UV-vis diffuse reflectance spectra of the as-prepared CdS samples: (a) 3D hierarchical CdS; (b) solid CdS sphere. (B) Plots of the \((A h \nu)^2\) versus \( h \nu \) of the CdS samples: (a) 3D hierarchical CdS; (b) solid CdS sphere.

The photocatalytic performance of as-synthesized 3D hierarchical CdS was studied by photocatalytic decolorization of MO aqueous solution. Fig. 11a shows the absorption spectra of MO aqueous solution in the presence of 3D hierarchical CdS under visible-light for various irradiation times. With the increasing of irradiation time, the intensity of the characteristic absorption peak drops obviously. The concentration curve of residual MO as a function of irradiation time is shown in Fig. 11b. After being irradiated with visible light for 100 min in the presence of 3D hierarchical CdS, the MO was almost completely degraded. In contrast, about 89% of the MO was degraded after being irradiated 100 min for the solid CdS spheres. The 3D hierarchical CdS showed the best photocatalytic performance for MO degradation, which might be related to the special structure. Specifically, the higher specific surface area could increase the contact area between the CdS and MO aqueous solution. It has been reported that large specific surface area not only helped increase the photocatalytic reaction sites but also promoted the efficiency of the electron hole separation. In addition, 3D hierarchical CdS with pores could benefit the transfer of the light generated charging to the surface to react with the organic molecules, which allowed the rapid diffusion of the reactants and products during the reaction. Without adding catalyst, it was found that the MO was nearly not degraded under visible-light irradiation condition. These results suggest that 3D hierarchical CdS is an effective catalyst for decolorization of methyl-orange solution, and its photocatalytic activity is superior to that of CdS hollow spheres and flower like CdS. More importantly, the photocatalytic activity of as-prepared 3D hierarchical CdS is also superior to that of other photocatalytic materials, such as TiO\(_2\), ZnO, SnO\(_2\) and Cu/C materials. Based on the above discussion, it demonstrate that the 3D hierarchical CdS have a good photocatalytic activity under the visible-light region and might be used as a promising photocatalyst for treating organic pollutants in the waste water.

![Fig. 11](image)

**Fig. 11** (a) Absorption spectrum of a solution of MO in the presence of 3D hierarchical CdS under visible light irradiation, (b) The photodegradation efficiency of MO as a function of irradiation time.

4. Conclusions

In summary, a facile and economical hydrothermal synthetic method was developed to fabricate 3D hierarchical CdS with mesoporous nanosheets. The investigation shows that the amount
of ammonia, thiourea and Cd(NO₃)₂, and the reaction temperature play important roles in the formation of 3D hierarchical Cds. The as-prepared 3D hierarchical Cds exhibited a higher photocatalytic performance for the photocatalytic degradation of MO due to its specific structures. Because of the facile and economical synthesis and controlled morphology, the prepared 3D hierarchical Cds may be used as potential applications in catalysis and other fields.

Acknowledgements
This work is supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC 21201010, 21003001 and 21071006), Science and Technology Foundation of Henan Province (122102210253), China Postdoctoral Science Foundation (2012M521115).

Notes and references
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3D hierarchical Cds with mesoporous nanosheets are successfully synthesized via a simple hydrothermal approach, due to its specific 3D hierarchical structures, which exhibits good photocatalytic activity for the degradation of MO.