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# Steered polymorphic nanodomains in TiO<sub>2</sub> to boost visible-light photocatalytic oxidation†

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A breakthrough in enhancing visible-light photocatalysis of wide-bandgap semiconductors such as prototypical titania (TiO<sub>2</sub>) via cocatalyst decoration is still challenged by insufficient heterojunctions and inevitable interfacial transport issues. Herein, we report a novel TiO<sub>2</sub>-based composite material composed of *in situ* generated polymorphic nanodomains including carbon nitride (C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>) and (001)/(101)-faceted anatase nanocrystals. The introduction of ultrafine C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> results in the generation of many oxygen vacancies in the TiO<sub>2</sub> lattice, and simultaneously induces the exposure and growth of anatase TiO<sub>2</sub>(001) facets with high surface energy. The photocatalytic performance of C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> for degradation of 2,4-dichlorophenol under visible-light irradiation was tested, its apparent rate being up to  $1.49 \times 10^{-2} \text{ min}^{-1}$ , almost 3.8 times as high as that for the pure TiO<sub>2</sub> nanofibers. More significantly, even under low operation temperature and after a long-term photocatalytic process, the composite still exhibits exceptional degradation efficiency and stability. The normalized degradation efficiency and effective lifespan of the composite photocatalyst are far superior to other reported modified photocatalysts.

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## 1. Introduction

Design of suitable photocatalytic semiconductors is regarded as one of the most promising solutions to effectively utilize the sustainable solar energy to tackle the challenges of energy exhaustion and environmental destruction.<sup>1–3</sup> Titania (TiO<sub>2</sub>) has been proved as the most versatile photocatalyst among semiconductors owing to its cost-effectiveness and high stability.<sup>4</sup> However, TiO<sub>2</sub> as a photocatalyst suffers from large band gap

(>3 eV) and a lack of suitable electronic/surface structures, resulting in limited visible-light (400–700 nm) absorption ability and charge carrier separation efficiency.<sup>5–7</sup> Developing high-performance TiO<sub>2</sub> photocatalysts with visible-light response is needed in order to fully utilize and convert the visible solar light.

To overcome these bottlenecks, many strategies have been adopted to strengthen visible light absorption and realize effective conversion. The strategies involve doping/co-doping transition metal ions (*e.g.* copper, vanadium, and iron, *etc.*)<sup>8–10</sup> and/or electronegative anions (*e.g.* boron, carbon, and nitrogen, *etc.*) as well as introducing oxygen/nitrogen vacancies<sup>11–14</sup> into the lattice of photocatalysts. These approaches effectively narrow the original band gap *via* forming impurity energy levels or elevating the original valence band of oxygen.<sup>15,16</sup> However, these dopants thermodynamically and easily agglomerate and locate at the surface/interface layers: a low density of localized states is introduced into the TiO<sub>2</sub> bandgap, resulting in unsatisfactory visible-light absorption and conversion.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the above strategies, optimization of high-surface-energy defects and facets of TiO<sub>2</sub> such as anatase TiO<sub>2</sub>(001) represents an effective way for enhancing the photocatalytic activity and efficiency.<sup>17–19</sup> Compared with the dominant and thermodynamically stable TiO<sub>2</sub>(101) facet, the TiO<sub>2</sub>(001) facet exhibits a high density of unsaturated titanium atoms and surface oxygen atoms for enhanced photocatalytic activity.<sup>20–22</sup> However, according to the Wulff construction and surface energy, only 6% (001) facets can be exposed in the stable anatase TiO<sub>2</sub>.<sup>23</sup> More

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significantly, these methods have limited accommodation of adsorption of low-energy protons and restraint on recombination of electron and holes, leading to the poor visible light photocatalytic performance. Thus, there is a long-sought-after demand for further improving both the absorption and conversion of visible light for TiO<sub>2</sub> photocatalysts.

To design advanced photocatalysts should integrate three elements, that is, good photochemical properties, high photocatalytic activity, and excellent long-term stability/capacity.<sup>24,25</sup> Designing composite photocatalysts with heterogeneous junctions is an effective approach for tuning the electronic and interface structure,<sup>26,27</sup> that are beneficial for the fast charge transfer.<sup>28,29</sup> Thus far, manifold heterogenous components such as noble metal,<sup>30,31</sup> transition metal oxide/sulfide,<sup>32,33</sup> and metal-organic framework materials,<sup>34,35</sup> *etc.* have been intensively studied and demonstrated to show satisfactory improvement of visible light absorption and photochemical activity. As the most promising alternative photocatalyst to metal-based ones, carbon nitride (C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>) possesses suitable valence energy and conduction band, good chemical/thermal stability, and visible-light harvesting capability.<sup>36–38</sup> After C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-decoration, the TiO<sub>2</sub>-based composites exhibit visible-light absorption and enhanced photocatalytic activity.<sup>39,40</sup> However, the insufficient heterojunctions and inherent poor interfacial compatibility between C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and TiO<sub>2</sub> matrix inevitably lead to energy loss during the light transportation and inhibition of charge migration. Therefore, to overcome these issues, more critical efforts on TiO<sub>2</sub>-based photocatalysts that can simultaneously realize visible-light harvesting, high photocatalytic activity, and good long-term life span as well as stability are highly needed.

Nanodomains is a nanometer-sized protein found in a natural cell membrane.<sup>41</sup> Constructing suitable biomimetic nanodomains can realize the rapid transportation of ions/electrons in composite media.<sup>42,43</sup> Similarly, we report a poly-morphic TiO<sub>2</sub>-based composite material formed by *in situ* diverse nanodomains including C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and (001)/(101)-faceted anatase nanocrystals. The unique composite structure is fabricated by calcinating the nanofibrous composite precursor of thiourea and tetrabutyl titanate in the air. Induced by *in situ* formation of heterogeneous ultrafine C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> crystals, oxygen vacancy occurs in the lattice structure and high-surface-energy anatase TiO<sub>2</sub>(001) facets are exposed. The resulting composite simultaneously presents excellent photocatalytic activity and a relatively narrow bandgap. As a result, the composite exhibits excellent degradation efficiency of 2,4-dichlorophenol (2,4-DCP) and various organic dyes under visible light with high kinetic rates. Additionally, even under low operation temperature or after a long-term photocatalytic process, the composite still exhibits desirable degradation efficiency and stability.

## 2. Experimental section

### 2.1 Materials and chemicals

Tetrabutyl titanate (C<sub>16</sub>H<sub>36</sub>O<sub>4</sub>Ti, CP) was provided by Sino-pharm Chemical Reagent Co., China. The sodium hydroxide (KOH, AR), polyvinylpyrrolidone (PVP, *M<sub>w</sub>* = 1 300 000, AR), and thiourea (CN<sub>2</sub>H<sub>4</sub>S, AR), silver nitrate (AgNO<sub>3</sub>, AR),

benzoquinone (BQ, AR), tertiary butanol (TBA, AR), and ethylene diamine tetraacetic acid (EDTA, AR) were purchased from Aladdin Chemical Co., China. Tertiary butanol (TBA), *N,N*-dimethylformamide (DMF, AR) and hydrochloric acid (HCl, AR) were purchased from Sinopharm Chemical Reagent Co. (Shanghai), China. 2,4-DCP was purchased from Macklin Co., China. CR and methylene blue (MB) were bought from the National Pharmaceutical Co., China. Rhodamine-b (Rh-b) was obtained from Tianjin Tianxin Chemical Co., China. All chemicals were used without further purification.

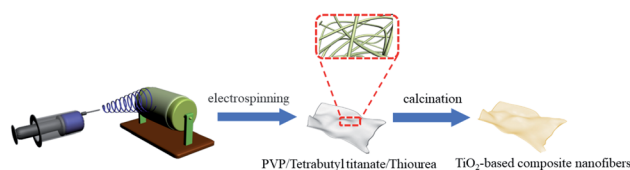
### 2.2 Preparation of C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> nanofibers and counterparts

As shown in Scheme 1, the TiO<sub>2</sub>-based composite nanofibers were prepared by an electrospinning technology and subsequent thermal treatment. The detailed synthesized method is as follows. First, 1 g of PVP was dissolved in anhydrous ethanol (4.5 mL) and *N,N* dimethylformamide (4.5 mL) to achieve a homogeneous solution. Then thiourea were added into the mixture solvent with various mass (0.1, 0.5, and 1 g), separately. Then 6 mmol tetrabutyl titanate was gradually added into the pre-solution. After full homogenization, the mixture was used as the electrospinning solution. During the electrospinning process, the precursor solution was loaded into a 20 mL plastic syringe pump and injected through a stainless-steel needle with a flow rate of 1 mL h<sup>-1</sup>. A high positive charge of 16 kV was applied between the needle tip and the collector. The receiving speed of the collector is around 400 rpm. Then, the fibrous membranes were dried at 60 °C in a vacuum oven for 12 hours and calcined in air at 500 °C with an increasing rate of 3 °C min<sup>-1</sup>. The fibrous membranes were maintained at 500 °C for 2 h to obtain C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> nanofibers. TiO<sub>2</sub> nanofibers were prepared by the same procedures above, except that thiourea was not added in the prepared electrospinning solution.

Similarly, the obtained precursor nanofibers were mixed with ethanol solution of thiourea with a mass ratio of 1 : 1. Then composite was dried at 60 °C in a vacuum oven for 12 hours and calcined in air at the temperature of 500 °C with an increasing rate of 3 °C min<sup>-1</sup> and maintain at 500 °C for 2 h. The obtained sample is denoted as the C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub>.

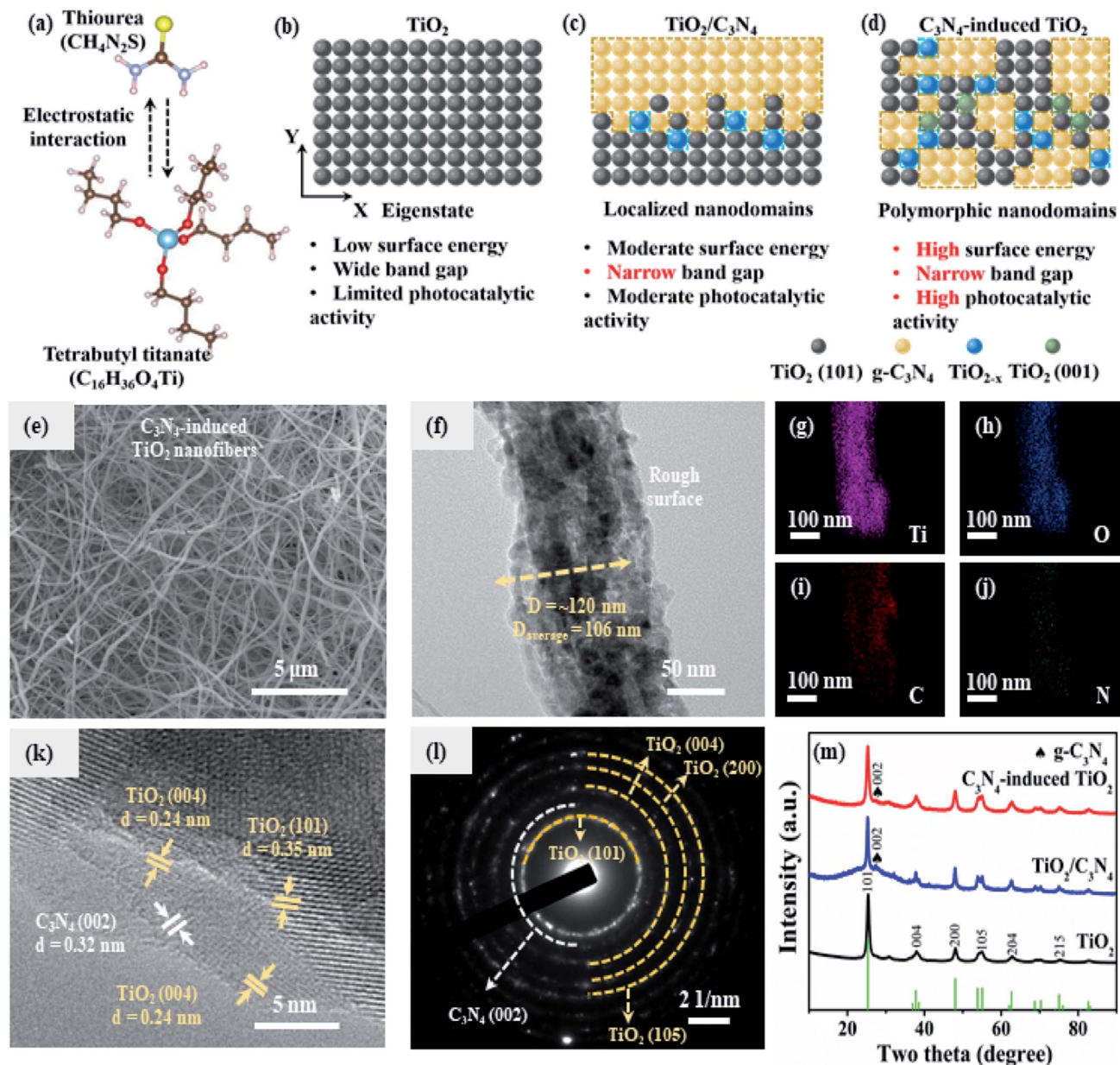
### 2.3 Surface and structure characterization

An ultra-micro balance (Mettler Toledo) with an accuracy of 10 μg was used to weigh the samples and chemicals. The microscopic architecture and chemical structure of samples were characterized by SEM (FE-SEM, Supra55, Carl Zeiss) with energy dispersive



Scheme 1 Flowchart for the synthesis of TiO<sub>2</sub>-based composite nanofibers.





**Fig. 1** Schematic illustration and morphologies of  $\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ -induced  $\text{TiO}_2$ : (a) schematic illustration of the electrostatic interaction between thiourea and tetrabutyl titanate. (b)–(d) Comparison of constituent and contribution of  $\text{TiO}_2$ ,  $\text{C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{TiO}_2$ , and  $\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ -induced  $\text{TiO}_2$ . (e) Scanning electron microscope (SEM) of  $\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ -induced  $\text{TiO}_2$  nanofibers. (f) Transmission electron microscope (TEM) images of single nanofiber. (g)–(j) Energy dispersive spectrometer (EDS) elemental mappings of partial  $\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ -induced  $\text{TiO}_2$  nanofiber. (k) High-resolution TEM image of constituents in  $\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ -induced  $\text{TiO}_2$ , and (l) selected area electron diffraction. (m) X-ray diffraction spectra of  $\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ -induced  $\text{TiO}_2$  as compared with counterparts.

X-ray (EDX) spectroscopy, a high-resolution transmission electron microscope (HR-TEM, JEM-3010, JEOL), UV-visible spectrophotometer (UV-2700, Shimadzu), Raman spectroscopy (Ar laser, wavelength: 532 nm, RM2000, Renishaw), XPS (ThermoFisher scientific), and a D8 Advance Diffractometer (Bruker) with a  $\text{Cu K}\alpha$  source. Nitrogen adsorption/desorption isotherms were collected at 77 K on a Micromeritics ASAP 2020 instrument. The specific surface area was obtained by the Brunauer–Emmett–Teller (BET) method. The pore size distribution was obtained from the density functional theory (DFT) method. The wetting behaviors were characterized by a contact angle analyzer (SL-

200KB, KINO). The tap densities of the powders were measured as follows. A certain quantity of powders was added to a dry quartz tube and was then vacuumed until the volume of the powders did not change to measure the volume of the tapped powders. Then the mass and the measured volume of the tapped powders were used to calculate the tap density.

#### 2.4 Evaluation on photocatalytic activity

The photocatalytic activity of the samples was evaluated *via* the photocatalytic degradation of Rh-b and other pollutants under



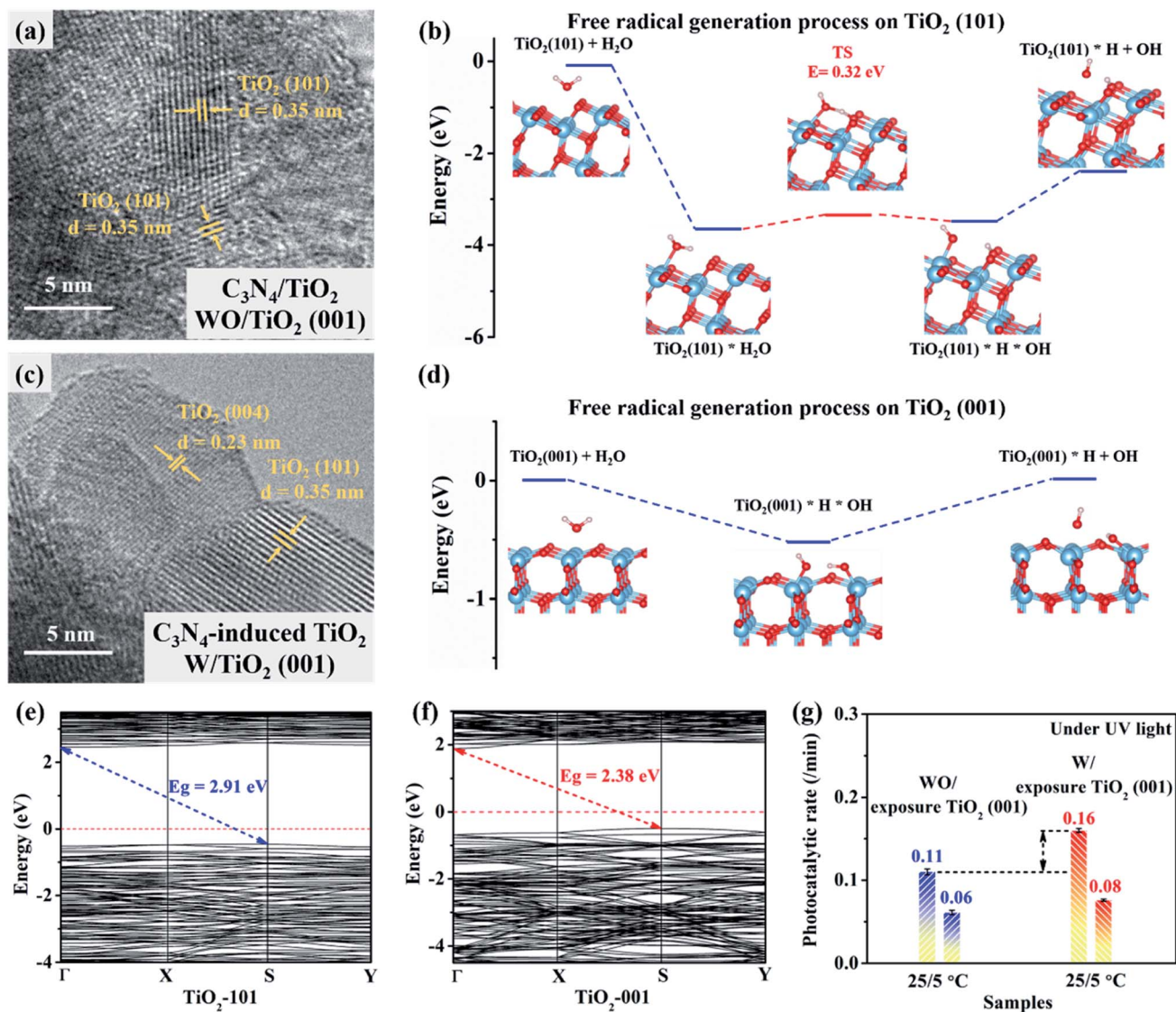


Fig. 2 Photocatalytic activity of samples with/without  $\text{TiO}_2(001)$  plane: HR-TEM images of each plane in (a)  $\text{C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{TiO}_2$  and (c)  $\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ -induced  $\text{TiO}_2$ . Simulated free radical generation process on (b)  $\text{TiO}_2(101)$  plane and (d)  $\text{TiO}_2(001)$  plane. Calculated band structures of (e)  $\text{TiO}_2(101)$  and (f)  $\text{TiO}_2(001)$  plane. (g) Comparative photocatalytic rates between  $\text{C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{TiO}_2$  and  $\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ -induced  $\text{TiO}_2$  under the UV light.

UV/visible-light irradiation. These experiments were conducted in a photocatalytic reactor. The light source was a 230 W xenon lamp with a UV-light filter from 300 to 400 nm and a visible-light filter from 420 to 780 nm, respectively. 50 mg of the photocatalytic material was added to a 50 mL pollutants reaction mixture ( $10 \text{ mg L}^{-1}$ ), including Rh-b, 2,4-DCP, CR, and MB, in a quartz tube. The pH values were controlled by the addition of sodium hydroxide and hydrochloric acid. For 2,4-DCP degradation, the photocatalyst powder and 2,4-DCP solution were mixed in a photochemical glass reactor under magnetic stirring at the room temperature and standard pressure. Prior to irradiation, the reactive system was stirred magnetically in dark for 30 min to reach the adsorption-desorption equilibrium. During the photoreaction process, 3 mL of the solution was collected every 30 min and then centrifuged for 5 min with a rate of 5000 rpm to remove the material. The concentration variation

of 2,4-DCP under the UV light was determined by High-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC, Agilent 1260). Before determination, the samples were filtered by  $0.22 \mu\text{m}$  membrane, and then the filtrates were performed using HPLC with the UV detector at 290 nm. The HPLC was equipped with a Kromasil C18 column and worked at  $25^\circ\text{C}$ . The mobile phase was 85 : 15 (v/v) methanol ( $\text{CH}_3\text{OH}$ ) and ultrapure water, and the flow rate was  $1 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ . The compounds were identified by comparing retention times with standard samples and then quantified with calibration curve method. In addition, for the photocatalytic degradation of Rh-b, CR, and MB, 3 mL of aliquots were collected and sampled at certain time interval of 10 min for subsequent analysis after centrifugation and filtration to remove the photocatalyst. The real time concentrations of dye were determined on UV-visible spectrophotometer at  $\lambda = 555 \text{ nm}$ ,  $\lambda = 497 \text{ nm}$  and  $\lambda = 664 \text{ nm}$  for Rh-b, CR and MB,



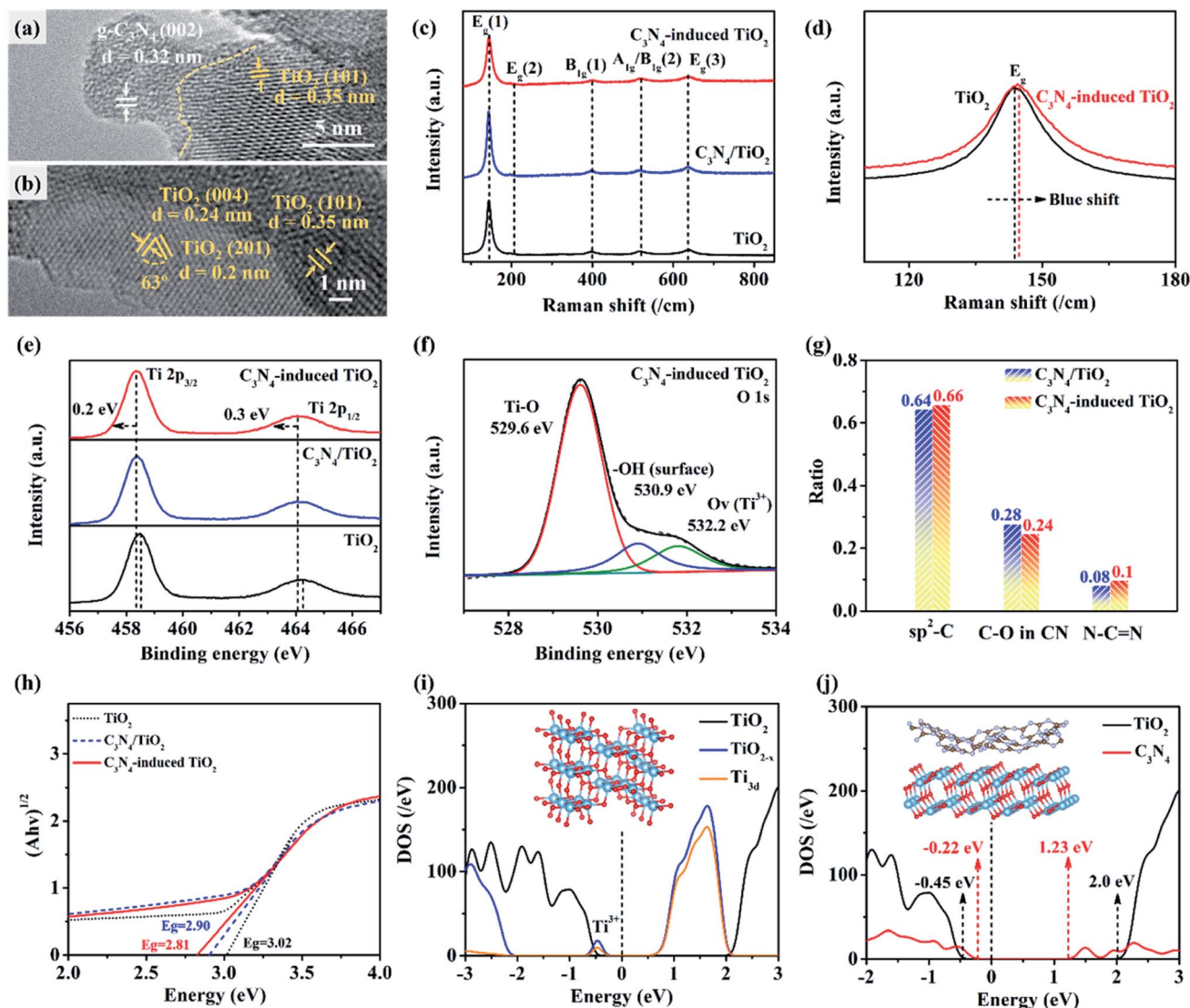


Fig. 3 Characterization on constituent and band gap of  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  as compared with counterparts: (a) and (b) are HR-TEM images of each interface in  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$ . (c) Raman spectra of  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$ ,  $C_3N_4/TiO_2$ , and  $TiO_2$ . (d) Magnified partial spectra of  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  and  $TiO_2$ . (e) XPS spectra of  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$ ,  $C_3N_4/TiO_2$ , and  $TiO_2$ . (f) XPS spectra of O 1s in  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$ . (g) Comparative carbonaceous constituents of  $C_3N_4/TiO_2$  and  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$ . (h) Kubelka–Munk-transformed reflectance of  $TiO_2$ ,  $C_3N_4/TiO_2$ , and  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$ . (i) Calculated density of states (DOS) of pure  $TiO_2$  and  $TiO_{2-x}$  in  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$ . (j) Calculated DOS of  $TiO_2$  and  $C_3N_4$  in  $C_3N_4/TiO_2$  and  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$ .

respectively. Usually, it is ascertained that the removal of pollutants by photocatalysis is related to several reactive oxygen species (ROS) including hydroxyl radical ( $\cdot OH$ ), superoxide radical ( $\cdot O_2^-$ ) and so on. In order to verify the dominated ROS of 2,4-DCP or Rh-b degradation, the radicals trapping experiments were conducted with the addition of different scavenger agents. EDTA,  $AgNO_3$ , TBA, and benzo-quinone (BQ) were adopted to quench photo-generated hole ( $h^+$ ), photo-generated electron ( $e^-$ ),  $OH^-$ , and  $O_2^-$ , respectively. Typically,  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  is added into the 2,4-DCP mixture and stirred for 0.5 h in the dark. After that, the scavengers (5 mM) are added into the liquor and irradiated under visible light for 3 h with continuous stirring.

The first-order kinetic equation during photocatalytic degradation is shown as follows:

$$\ln(C/C_0) = -K_a \times t \quad (1)$$

where  $K_a$  is the apparent rate constant,  $C_0$  is the initial concentration,  $t$  is reaction time, and  $C$  is the concentration at the corresponding time.

The normalized photocatalytic rates are calculated using the equation as follows:

$$K_n = m_1 \times \varepsilon / t \times m_2 \quad (2)$$

where  $K_n$  is the normalized photocatalytic rate,  $m_1$  is the total mass of reactant,  $\varepsilon$  is the final degradation efficiency,  $t$  is the total reaction time, and  $m_2$  is the total mass of photocatalyst.



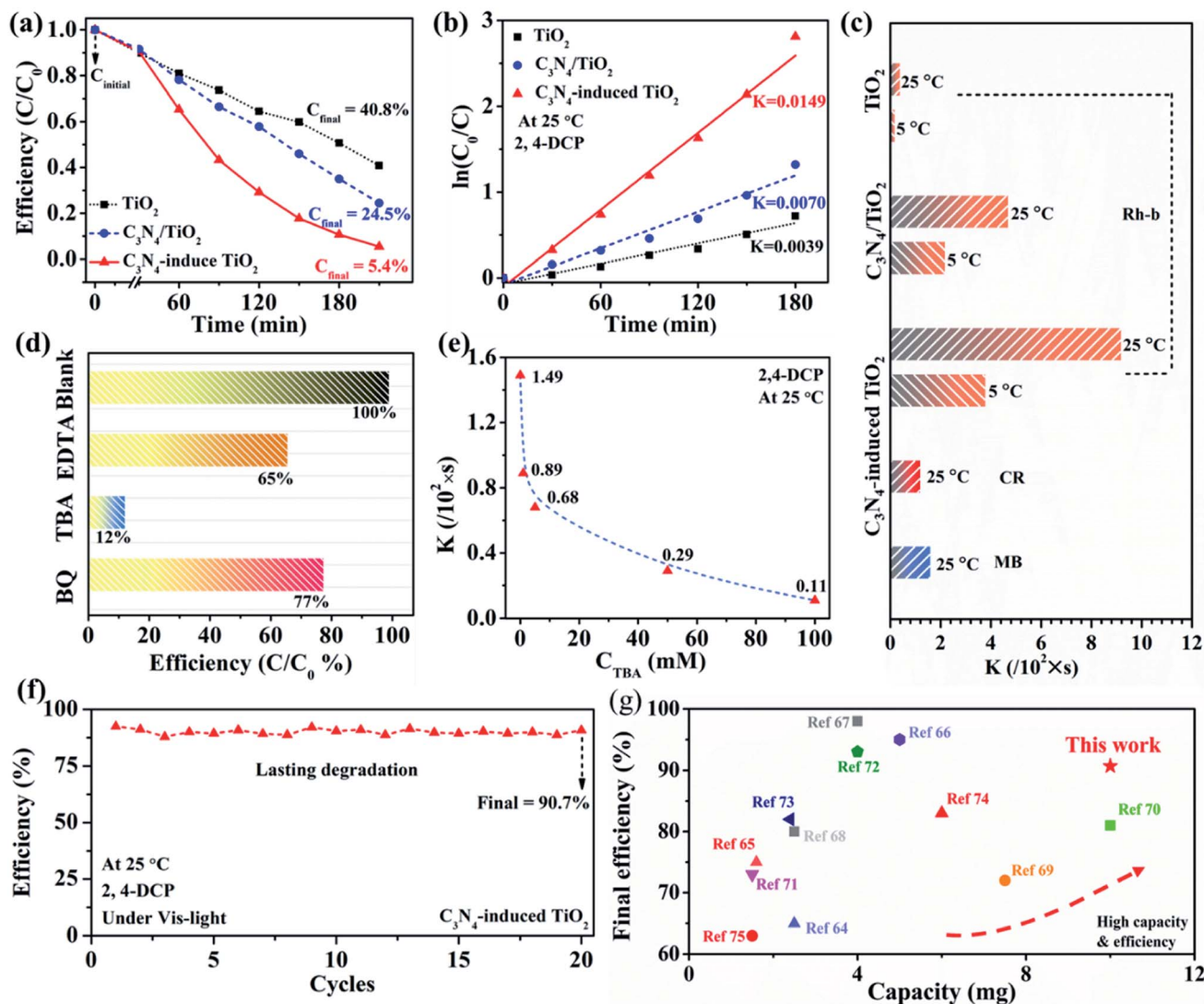


Fig. 4 Photocatalytic activity of  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  under visible light ( $\lambda > 420$  nm) as compared with counterparts: (a) photocatalytic degradation curve of 2,4-DCP. (b) Pseudo-first-order kinetics curves. (c) Photodegradation kinetic number of Rh-b at various temperatures, CR, and MB. (d) Photocatalytic degradation efficiency with the introduction of EDTA ( $h^+$ ), TBA ( $\cdot OH$ ), and BQ ( $O_2^-$ ) as scavengers during the degradation of 2,4-DCP. (e) Kinetic number of  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  with various concentrations of TBA. (f) Long-term photocatalytic degradation of  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$ . (g) Comparison of final degradation efficiency as a function of maximum degradation capacity between  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  and other reported work.

## 2.5 Calculation method

The DFT calculations were carried out using the Vienna *Ab initio* Simulation Package (VASP) with the frozen-core all-electron projector-augment-wave (PAW) method. The Perdew–Burke–Ernzerhof (PBE) of generalized gradient approximation (GGA) was adopted to describe the exchange and correlation potential. The cutoff energy for the plane-wave basis set was set to 450 eV. The geometry optimizations were performed until the forces on each ion was reduced below  $0.01$  eV  $\text{\AA}^{-1}$ . The resulting structures were then used to calculate the electronic structures. Here, we adopted DFT +  $U$  method for geometry optimization and electronic structure calculation, the effective on-site coulomb interaction parameter of 6 eV was applied to the Ti-3d electrons.

The thiourea and tetrabutyl titanate were placed in a  $20 \times 20 \times 20$   $\text{\AA}^3$  vacuum box to minimize the interactions between neighboring systems, and gamma  $k$ -point sampling of the Brillouin zone was used. The adsorption energy,  $E_{ads}$ , is calculated using the equation as follows:

$$E_{ads} = E_{thiourea+tetrabutyl-titanate} - E_{tetrabutyl-titanate} - E_{thiourea} \quad (3)$$

where  $E_{thiourea}$  is the energy of thiourea,  $E_{tetrabutyl-titanate}$  represents the energy of tetrabutyl titanate, and  $E_{thiourea+tetrabutyl-titanate}$  represents the total energy of the adsorbed system.

A vacuum region of 15  $\text{\AA}$  was added above monolayer  $TiO_2(101)$  plane ( $1 \times 3$ ) and tri-layer  $TiO_2(001)$  planes ( $3 \times 3$ ) to minimize the interactions between neighboring systems. The climbing image nudged elastic band (CI-NEB) method was



Table 1 Comparing the photocatalytic activity of C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> with selected works in detail

Sample	Light source	Rate constants (min <sup>-1</sup> )	Final efficiency (%)	Capacity (mg)	Ref.
C <sub>3</sub> N <sub>4</sub> -Induced TiO <sub>2</sub>	230 W xenon lamp (420 nm–780 nm)	0.015	90.76	10.86	This work
TiO <sub>2</sub> /FeO <sub>x</sub> /POM	150 W xenon lamp (>400 nm)	Not available	58	2.03	64
CeO <sub>2</sub> /g-C <sub>3</sub> N <sub>4</sub>	150 W xenon lamp (>420 nm)	Not available	78	1.54	65
In <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub> /ZnIn <sub>2</sub> S <sub>4</sub>	300 W xenon lamp (>420 nm)	0.0246	95.8	4.75	66
TiO <sub>2</sub> /g-C <sub>3</sub> N <sub>4</sub>	150 W xenon lamp (>400 nm)	0.012	97	3.9	67
Ag <sub>2</sub> CrO <sub>4</sub> /Ag/g-C <sub>3</sub> N <sub>4</sub>	500 W xenon lamp (>400 nm)	0.015	80	2.2	68
N-Carbon@ZnO	300 W xenon lamp (380 nm–800 nm)	0.028	72	5.7	69
SnO <sub>2</sub> /Pt/In <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>	500 W xenon lamp (>420 nm)	0.023	80	8.45	70
Ag <sub>3</sub> PO <sub>4</sub> /Fe <sub>3</sub> O <sub>4</sub>	250 W LED lamp (>420 nm)	0.056	74	1.34	71
SnO <sub>2</sub> /Ag/MoS <sub>2</sub>	150 W xenon lamp (>400 nm)	Not available	90	3.89	72
P-g-C <sub>3</sub> N <sub>4</sub>	230 W xenon lamp (420 nm–780 nm)	Not available	84	2.1	73
BiO(OH) <sub>x</sub> I <sub>1-x</sub> -AgI	150 W xenon lamp (>400 nm)	0.16	85	2.622	74
3S-BN	300 W xenon lamp (380 nm–800 nm)	Not available	63	1.12	75

adopted to calculate free radical (<sup>•</sup>OH) generation process on the TiO<sub>2</sub>(101) plane. An anatase TiO<sub>2</sub> supercell (2 × 2 × 1) was used to simulate pure TiO<sub>2</sub>, and the model of TiO<sub>2-x</sub> was built by deleting a O atom in pure anatase TiO<sub>2</sub> supercell. The structure of C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> composite was built by placing a monolayer C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> on double-layer TiO<sub>2</sub>(101) plane (2 × 3), and a vacuum region of 15 Å was also added above the C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> slab model. For geometry optimization, the bottom-layer atoms of TiO<sub>2</sub>(101) plane were fixed in their bulk positions.

### 3. Result and discussion

#### 3.1 Nanoarchitecture of C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub>

Tuning the interaction and localized homogeneity of molecules in precursors is quite significant for the construction of continuous heterogeneous interfaces in the composite photocatalytic materials.<sup>44</sup> As illustrated in Fig. 1a, there is a strong electrostatic interaction between thiourea and tetrabutyl titanate precursors. Specifically, based on the density factor calculation, the charge density differences between thiourea and tetrabutyl titanate (*e.g.* NH<sub>2</sub>-Ti and S-Ti sites) are shown in Fig. S1a and b.† The amino groups on the thiourea exhibit a lower stable distance (~2.83 Å), indicating a stronger interaction with central titanium atom on tetrabutyl titanate than that between C=S and central titanium atoms. In addition, the amino group on thiourea presents an absorption energy of ~1.86 eV (Fig. S1c†), which is much higher than that of C=S (~1.54 eV). In comparison with original TiO<sub>2</sub> (Fig. 1b), C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> composite (details in ESI†) in Fig. 1c shows a narrow bandgap and enhanced photocatalytic activity due to the introduction of localized heterogeneous nanodomains. Furthermore, *via* regulation of the precursor, C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> (Fig. 1d) displays a narrow bandgap and high photocatalytic activity, which are attributed to the heterogeneous junctions and high-surface-energy facets.

Construction of suitable nanostructures with the continuous heterogeneous interface is quite vital for charge separation and migration in composite photocatalytic materials.<sup>25</sup> Specifically, C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> materials exhibit a hierarchical nanofibrous

structure (Fig. 1e) with a uniform diameter. As shown in Fig. 1f and S2a,† C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> nanofiber exhibits a grainy surface with an ultrafine diameter of only around 120 nm. The ultrafine nanofibrous structure with the porous surface similar to the schematic illustration in Fig. S2b† is highly beneficial to light transmission, scattering, and absorption.<sup>45</sup> With increasing thiourea in the precursor, nanofibers present curved morphology and smooth surface with an average diameter increasing from 102 to 257 nm (Fig. S3†). Furthermore, the spatial distribution of each element, including Ti, C, O, and N in a single nanofiber, is investigated by energy dispersive spectrometer (EDS) elemental mapping (Fig. 1g–j). As compared with the elemental mapping images of intrinsic Ti and O elements (Fig. 1g and h), the mapping of C and N suggests the uniform distribution of both C and N dopants in the nanofiber. The homogeneous distribution of the substitutional element is highly favorable to the generation of numerous heterogeneous junctions in the nanofibers.<sup>46</sup>

Pore structure and size distribution are crucial structural parameters for spatial mass transfer. The pore structure of C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> is measured using the nitrogen-sorption isothermal analysis with the Barrett–Joyner–Halenda (BJH) model. The C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> nanofibers exhibit a similar specific surface area (22 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>) to the counterpart C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> composite (25 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>). However, C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> presents a higher tapping density (~0.11 g cm<sup>-3</sup>) (Fig. S4†), which is close to that of commercial TiO<sub>2</sub>-P25 (~0.13 g cm<sup>-3</sup>). As shown in Fig. S5a,† the nitrogen adsorption/desorption curves display a type II/IV isotherm curve, which interaction demonstrates the macropore-dominant structure.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, the pore size distribution of C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> nanofibers is characterized by the density functional theory (DFT) method. The C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> in Fig. S5b† exhibits micropores at around 1.3 nm. The developed microporous structure is highly beneficial to the absorption of small molecules for photocatalysis.

Furthermore, the polymorphic nature of C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> is confirmed by high-resolution transmission electron microscopy (HR-TEM) images (Fig. 1k). The lattice spacing of 0.35 and 0.24 nm are assigned to the stable low-index (101) facet and



high-surface-energy (004) facet of anatase TiO<sub>2</sub>, respectively.<sup>48,49</sup> Additionally, the lattice spacing of 0.32 nm is attributed to the (002) plane of C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>.<sup>50</sup> There are some disordered microregions in C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> due to the introduction of N/C heteroatoms and O vacancies. The crystalline composition of C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> can be further investigated by selected area electron diffraction (Fig. 1l). Corresponding diffraction rings of anatase TiO<sub>2</sub> and C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> can be found, demonstrating the well-crystalline structure. The crystal structures of all the three samples are further confirmed by X-ray diffraction spectra (Fig. 1m). All the three diffraction patterns show six typical and strong diffraction peaks that locate at 25.3°, 37.8°, 48.1°, 53.9°, 62.69° and 75.01°, which are corresponded to the (101), (004), (200), (105), (204) and (215) crystal planes of anatase TiO<sub>2</sub> (JCPDS no. 21-1272), respectively.<sup>51,52</sup> According to the relative (004)/(200) peak intensity ratio of in Fig. S6,† C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> exhibits a higher ratio of ~0.69 than that of TiO<sub>2</sub> (~0.65) and C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> (~0.67), indicating a better crystal orientation growth along the [001] direction.<sup>53–55</sup> Furthermore, C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> composite and C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> exhibit additional peaks at around 26.8°, which are assigned to the (002) plane of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> (JCPDS no. 87-1526) in the composite constituent.<sup>56–58</sup> Besides, as illustrated in Table S1,† according to the Debye–Scherrer formula, C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> exhibits a lower average crystallite size of 9.5 nm in comparison with that of TiO<sub>2</sub> nanofiber and C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> composite. In a word, well-connected nanosized polymorphic facets of C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and anatase TiO<sub>2</sub> are believed to promote the vectorial transfer of photogenerated electrons, thus improving the charge separation and photocatalytic efficiency.<sup>48</sup>

### 3.2 Catalytic mechanisms and performances of TiO<sub>2</sub>(101) and TiO<sub>2</sub>(001) plane

It is generally believed that oxidizing radicals in water can oxidize organic pollutants. In order to understand the differences in the photocatalytic process between TiO<sub>2</sub>(101) and TiO<sub>2</sub>(001) planes, we calculated the free radical (<sup>•</sup>OH) generation process by using DFT calculations. Specifically, the C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> composite in Fig. 2a is dominated by exposed anatase TiO<sub>2</sub>(101) with a lattice fringe of 0.35 nm.<sup>48</sup> As shown in Fig. 2b, when H<sub>2</sub>O approaches the TiO<sub>2</sub>(101) plane, the O atoms in H<sub>2</sub>O are adsorbed on 5-coordinated Ti atoms of the TiO<sub>2</sub>(101) plane. Then, one of the H atoms in adsorbed H<sub>2</sub>O splits to bridge the O atom of the TiO<sub>2</sub>(101) plane. The splitting process of H<sub>2</sub>O needs to overcome an energy barrier of 0.32 eV. Finally, the free <sup>•</sup>OH is generated after the desorption of adsorbed OH. It is found that <sup>•</sup>OH generation process on the TiO<sub>2</sub>(001) plane is much easier than that on the (101) plane. As compared with C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> in Fig. 2a, C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> in Fig. 2c displays emerging high-energy-surface anatase TiO<sub>2</sub>(004) with a lattice fringe of 0.24 nm corresponding to the low-index anatase TiO<sub>2</sub>(001) facet.<sup>49</sup> As shown in Fig. 2d, the H<sub>2</sub>O on the TiO<sub>2</sub>(001) plane is directly split into OH and H. The OH is adsorbed on 5-coordinated Ti atoms, and the H forms a new OH with the bridge O atom of the TiO<sub>2</sub>(001) plane. The desorption of OH can generate a free <sup>•</sup>OH. Therefore, the free radical generation process on the

TiO<sub>2</sub>(001) plane is more energetically favorable than that on the TiO<sub>2</sub>(101) plane.

Furthermore, the energy band structures of the TiO<sub>2</sub>(101) and TiO<sub>2</sub>(001) planes are also calculated in Fig. 2e and f. Energy zero is taken as Fermi level and displayed with a red dashed line. It is found that both TiO<sub>2</sub>(101) and TiO<sub>2</sub>(001) planes are indirect bandgap semiconductors, and their conduction band minimum (CBM) and valence band maximum (VBM) locate at *Γ* and *S* point, respectively. The calculated band gap of TiO<sub>2</sub>(001) plane is 2.38 eV, which is 0.53 eV smaller than that of TiO<sub>2</sub>(101) plane, indicating higher photocatalytic activity under the same light irradiation. Additionally, the comparison of photocatalytic activity with/without TiO<sub>2</sub>(001) facets is further demonstrated by photocatalytic degradation of Rh-b under UV light in Fig. 2g. The C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> with high-surface-energy TiO<sub>2</sub>(001) facets exhibits a high kinetic rate of 0.16 min<sup>-1</sup>, which is higher than that of C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> (~0.11 min<sup>-1</sup>). Even at a low operating temperature of 5 °C, C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> still displays a higher photocatalytic activity as compared with C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> composite. It is further established that the (001) facets of TiO<sub>2</sub> are highly favorable to the enhancement of photocatalytic activity.

### 3.3 Constituent and electronic structure of C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub>

The analysis of crystal constituents and structure is quite vital for the investigation of enhancement mechanisms of photocatalytic performance. As shown in Fig. S7a and b,† exposed (101) facets are the most stable and dominant planes in TiO<sub>2</sub> nanofibers. In contrast, the HR-TEM images of C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> indicate the coexistence of various interfaces between C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and TiO<sub>2</sub> nanocrystals as well as (101) and (001) facets of anatase TiO<sub>2</sub> (Fig. 3a and b).<sup>50</sup> Raman scattering measurements are employed to characterize the structural properties of C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> (Fig. 3c). The six Raman modes of the anatase phase were detected in both C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> and counterparts, which are assigned to the peaks of 143.6 cm<sup>-1</sup> (E<sub>g</sub>(1)), 198.1 cm<sup>-1</sup> (E<sub>g</sub>(2)), 398.1 cm<sup>-1</sup> (B<sub>1g</sub>(1)), 519.5 cm<sup>-1</sup> (A<sub>1g</sub>/B<sub>1g</sub>(2)), and 637.5 cm<sup>-1</sup> (E<sub>g</sub>(3)).<sup>59,60</sup> As compared with anatase TiO<sub>2</sub>, C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> presents a broad E<sub>g</sub>(1) at 143.6 cm<sup>-1</sup> with an obvious blueshift (Fig. 3d). The blueshift and broadening of the E<sub>g</sub> peak are attributed to the nano-sized grain (<10 nm) and/or the presence of defects such as (Ti<sup>3+</sup> and oxygen vacancy).<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) spectra are used to further demonstrate the element constituent in C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub>. As exhibited in Fig. 3e, the typical peaks of Ti 2p<sub>3/2</sub> and Ti 2p<sub>1/2</sub> in pure TiO<sub>2</sub> are located at 458.5 and 464.3 eV, respectively. Among them, Ti 2p<sub>3/2</sub> peak is used to demonstrate Ti element with different valence states by change of the binding energy. Interestingly, with the introduction of C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> into TiO<sub>2</sub>, both C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> and C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-induced TiO<sub>2</sub> exhibit the shift of the total binding energy of Ti element to the low-energy direction, indicating the existence of Ti<sup>3+</sup>. The increasing Ti<sup>3+</sup> is attributed to the electron transfer in the coordination environment of O and Ti atoms due to the incorporation of trace amounts of carbon and nitrogen.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, despite similar Ti–O (529.6 eV) and –OH (530.9 eV) peaks to



$C_3N_4/TiO_2$  (Fig. S8<sup>†</sup>),  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  shows additional oxygen vacancy ( $O_v$ ) at 532.2 eV, which is consistent with the previous result in Fig. 3d. The carbonaceous constituents in  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  and its counterpart are further illustrated in Fig. 3f. Notably, based on the fitted carbon curves in Fig. S9,<sup>†</sup>  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  shows a higher ratio of  $sp^2$ -C with lower oxygen content than that of  $C_3N_4/TiO_2$  (Fig. 3g), which is favorable for the electronic conduction and transfer in polymorphic structure.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, more nitrogen-containing functional groups are found in the carbonaceous structure of  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$ , which is beneficial to amelioration of surface polarity. Accordingly, as shown in Fig. S10,<sup>†</sup>  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  presents the improved water permeability with a two times lower contacting angle than that of pure  $TiO_2$ . The good water wettability and permeability promote the mass transfer between  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  and  $H_2O$  as well as targeted molecules, thus improving the photocatalytic efficiency.

Additionally, according to the transformed Kubelka–Munk-transformed reflectance in Fig. 3h,  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  presents a lower bandgap of 2.81 eV than that of  $TiO_2$  nanofibers ( $\sim 3.02$  eV) and  $C_3N_4/TiO_2$  composite ( $\sim 2.90$  eV), respectively. Among that, the bandgap of  $TiO_2$  nanofibers in the study is lower than the theoretical one ( $\sim 3.2$  eV) due to the presence of amorphous constituents and incorporation of trace carbon derived from precursor during calculation. To further reveal the mechanism for reduction of bandgap, the theoretical simulation and calculation in terms of DFT are operated based on previous observed crystal constituents and structure. Specifically, DFT calculated DOS of pure  $TiO_2$  and O-deficient  $TiO_2$  ( $TiO_{2-x}$ ) is shown in Fig. 3i, in which the energy zero is denoted as Fermi level with a black dashed line. It is found that the Fermi level of pure  $TiO_2$  locates above the VBM, indicating intrinsic semiconductive property. In contrast, for  $TiO_{2-x}$ , the Fermi level locates below the CBM, demonstrating n-type semiconductive characteristics.

However, there is an appearance of defect state below the CBM of  $TiO_{2-x}$ , which mainly consists of the Ti-3d orbital. The defect state is mainly caused by the reduction of  $Ti^{4+}$  to  $Ti^{3+}$  in O-deficient  $TiO_2$ . The defect state induced by O-vacancy can improve the visible-light absorption of  $TiO_{2-x}$  to some extent. However, these defects often act as recombination centers of photogenerated electron–hole pairs, which limits the further improvement of photocatalytic performance of  $TiO_{2-x}$  due to the relatively high recombination rate. Moreover, as displayed in Fig. 3j, the Fermi level (energy zero) of  $C_3N_4$  and  $TiO_2$  locate at 0.22 eV and 0.45 eV above each VBM value. Benefiting from the unique combination of Fermi level, the  $C_3N_4/TiO_2$  composite presents a bandgap of 1.45 eV as an intrinsic semiconductor, demonstrating the high potential for visible-light absorption and conversion.

### 3.4 Photocatalytic performances of $C_3N_4$ -induced $TiO_2$

The excitation processes of  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  and counterparts under visible light are demonstrated by the photocatalytic oxidation of 2,4-DCP and other various organic dyes. According to the standard plots in Fig. S11,<sup>†</sup> the concentration of 2,4-DCP

as a function of illumination intensity is plotted in Fig. 4a.  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  displays a degradation efficiency of 94.6%, which is much higher than that of  $TiO_2$  ( $\sim 59.2\%$ ) and  $C_3N_4/TiO_2$  (75.5%). Simultaneously, the corresponding plots are in accordance with the first-order kinetic eqn (1). It is found that  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  presents a  $K_a$  of  $0.015 \text{ min}^{-1}$  that is up to two times higher than that of  $TiO_2$  and  $C_3N_4/TiO_2$  (Fig. 4b), demonstrating the enhanced photocatalytic efficiency at room temperature. Furthermore, the photocatalytic activity of  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  is further demonstrated by the photodegradation of different organic dyes. According to standard plots of Rh-b in Fig. S12,<sup>†</sup> corresponding photodegradation curve and  $K_a$  at different operation temperatures are calculated and summarized in Fig. 4c. As compared with  $TiO_2$  and  $C_3N_4/TiO_2$ ,  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  exhibits a higher photodegradation kinetic rate of  $0.092 \text{ min}^{-1}$ . As known, low operation temperature has a negative effect on molecular dynamics of the reactant surface, thereby restricts the mass transfer and diffusion process during the photocatalytic reaction. However, even at a low operation temperature ( $5^\circ\text{C}$ ) in Fig. 4c,  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  still shows a higher  $K_a$  of  $0.038 \text{ min}^{-1}$  based on the degradation process (Fig. S13<sup>†</sup>) than that of counterparts. As shown in Fig. S14,<sup>†</sup> the photocatalytic efficiency of  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  decreases with increasing pH value, demonstrating good stability in acidic condition. Additionally, according to the standard plots in Fig. S15<sup>†</sup> and photocatalytic degradation curve in Fig. S16,<sup>†</sup>  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  simultaneously displays the good photodegradation ability of CR and MB, which further demonstrates its good universality in degrading various organic dyes.

To explore the main reactive species of  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  during the photodegradation of 2,4-DCP, the trapping experiments were implemented with TBA, EDTA, and BQ as the  $\cdot\text{OH}$ ,  $h^+$ , and  $\text{O}_2^{\cdot-}$  scavengers, respectively. As shown in Fig. 4d, the initial degradation efficiency of  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  is regarded as 100%. The relative photodegradation efficiency of  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  are generally decreased with introduction of scavengers into the systems, indicating all active species are all participated into the photodegradation process. But with introduction of TBA as  $\cdot\text{OH}$  scavenger,  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  exhibits a limited photodegradation efficiency of 12%. The sudden drop of photodegradation efficiency demonstrates that the key active specie is  $\cdot\text{OH}$ . With increasing of TBA concentration in Fig. 4e, the  $K_a$  of photodegradation process exhibits the nonlinear decreasing relationship, further indicating coexistence of  $\cdot\text{OH}$  as the key active specie other active species during photodegradation process. As for the degradation of organic dyes such as Rh-b,  $\cdot\text{OH}$  also plays the major role to degrade the dyes as demonstrated by Fig. S17.<sup>†</sup> Moreover, the durability and stability of  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  are further investigated by cyclic photocatalytic oxidation reactions of 2,4-DCP. After 20 cycles in Fig. 4f, the photocatalytic efficiency under visible light still retains 90.7%. Simultaneously,  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  maintains an inherent nanofibrous structure with a rough surface (Fig. S18<sup>†</sup>). In contrast to the reported modified photocatalytic materials (Fig. 4g and Table 1),  $C_3N_4$ -induced  $TiO_2$  in this study simultaneously presents a higher degradation capacity and satisfactory final efficiency. The excellent



photocatalytic performances are attributed to stable nanostructure and polymorphic nanodomains/interfaces, which facilitate electron separation and extend the lifetime of the separated electron and hole.

## 4. Conclusion

In summary, we fabricate a polymorphic TiO<sub>2</sub> composite composed of *in situ* diverse nanodomains including C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> nanocrystals and (001)-/(101)-faceted anatase. The unique structure is fabricated by calcinating the composite nanofibrous precursor of thiourea and tetrabutyl titanate in air. Induced by *in situ* formation of heterogeneous ultrafine C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> crystals, more oxygen vacancies can be generated in the TiO<sub>2</sub> lattice structure. And high-surface-energy anatase TiO<sub>2</sub>(001) facets are simultaneously exposed. The resulting composite simultaneously presents excellent photocatalytic activity and relatively narrow bandgap. The composite exhibits a degradation efficiency of 94.6% in 2 h under visible light with a high kinetic rate of 0.015 min<sup>-1</sup>. Additionally, the composite still exhibits excellent durability even under extreme conditions such as low-temperature and acidic environment, and desirable long-term stability with high degradation efficiency. More significantly, the normalized degradation rate and effective durability of the composite photocatalyst are far superior to other reported modified TiO<sub>2</sub> photocatalysts. This work not only leads to a novel TiO<sub>2</sub> composite material, but also provides a new strategy for the design of advanced photochemical semiconductors.

## Author contributions

Chunzhao Liu supervised the project. Chenfeng Ding and Yuan Liu conceived the idea, designed the experiments, and participated in the data analysis. Zeju Zhang carried out the fabrication and characterizations. Mang Niu provided support for the DFT stimulation and corresponding analysis. Wei Li, Peitao Xie, Yongxin Li, Xiaodong Yan, Xuwei Fu, Yaochun Liu, Lili Chen, Xiaodong Lan, Chunlei Liu, Jingjie Dai, Xiaofei Hong, and Dapeng Cao provided valuable suggestions for the manuscript. All authors contributed to writing the paper.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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