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# High-efficiency visible-light-driven oxidation of primary C–H bonds in toluene over a CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> perovskite supported by hierarchical TiO<sub>2</sub> nanoflakes†

 Jiayu Yi,<sup>a</sup> Sunzai Ke,<sup>a</sup> Suwei Lu,<sup>a</sup> Bo Weng,<sup>a</sup> Lijuan Shen,<sup>a</sup> Xuhui Yang,<sup>a</sup> Hun Xue,<sup>a</sup> Min-Quan Yang<sup>✉</sup> and Qingrong Qian<sup>✉</sup>

Photocatalytic oxidation of toluene to valuable fine chemicals is of great significance, yet faces challenges in the development of advanced catalysts with both high activity and selectivity for the activation of inert C(sp<sup>3</sup>)–H bonds. Halide perovskites with remarkable optoelectronic properties have shown to be prospective photoactive materials, but the bulky structure with a small surface area and severe recombination of photogenerated electron–hole pairs are obstacles to application. Here, we fabricate a hierarchical nanoflower-shaped CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> heterojunction by assembling CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles on 2D TiO<sub>2</sub> nanoflake subunits. The design significantly downsizes the size of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> from micrometers to nanometers, and forms a type II heterojunction with intimate interfacial contact between CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> and TiO<sub>2</sub> nanoflakes, thereby accelerating the separation and transfer of photogenerated charges. Moreover, the formed hierarchical heterojunction increases light absorption by refraction and scattering, offers a large surface area and enhances the adsorption of toluene molecules. Consequently, the optimized CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> exhibits a high performance (10 200 μmol g<sup>−1</sup> h<sup>−1</sup>) for photocatalytic toluene oxidation with high selectivity (85%) for benzaldehyde generation under visible light. The photoactivity is about 20 times higher than that of blank CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>, and is among the best photocatalytic performances reported for selective oxidation of toluene under visible light irradiation.

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## Introduction

The direct oxidation of toluene to high-added-value fine chemicals, such as alcohols and aldehydes, is one of the most important conversions in the chemical industry.<sup>1–4</sup> However, due to the inertness and high bond dissociation energy (89.8 kcal mol<sup>−1</sup>) of the C(sp<sup>3</sup>)–H bond,<sup>5</sup> the activation of toluene generally needs to be performed under harsh reaction conditions (high pressure and temperature) and with the assistance of specific metal complexes or aggressive oxidants, which is expensive, energy intensive and causes negative impacts on the environment.<sup>6–8</sup> Solar-driven photocatalytic aerobic oxidation using molecular O<sub>2</sub> as an oxidant represents a promising method-

ology to overcome these challenges, but the overall photocatalytic performance reported so far is still unsatisfactory due to the lack of desired photocatalysts with broad optical absorption windows, efficient charge separation, and high product selectivity.<sup>9–11</sup>

Over the past years, halide perovskite materials have triggered wide attention in photocatalysis because of their outstanding optical and electronic properties.<sup>12–16</sup> High charge carrier mobility, visible light absorption, and tunable band structures enable them to be potential competitors for photocatalytic oxidation of toluene.<sup>17,18</sup> Nevertheless, single-component halide perovskites typically evolve into bulky aggregates with a large particle size (several to tens of micrometers), which leads to severe bulk recombination of charge carriers and restricts the photoactivity.<sup>19,20</sup> To tackle this problem, the construction of a heterojunction is an effective strategy. Hybridization of the halide perovskite with preferred substrates not only can prevent the aggregation of the halide perovskite to mediate the bulk recombination of photoexcited electron–hole pairs, but also can establish an interfacial built-in electric field to further facilitate the spatial charge transfer and separation.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, the catalytic functions of photocatalysts also strongly depend on the nanostructure.<sup>22,23</sup> To realize high

<sup>a</sup>College of Environmental and Resource Sciences, College of Carbon Neutral Modern Industry, Fujian Key Laboratory of Pollution Control & Resource Reuse, Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou 350117, P.R. China. E-mail: yangmq@fjnu.edu.cn, qnqrqian@fjnu.edu.cn

<sup>b</sup>CMACS, Department of Microbial and Molecular Systems, KU Leuven, Celestijnenlaan 200F, 3001 Leuven, Belgium

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photocatalytic performance, the delicate design of a well-defined nanostructure for heterojunction composites is also critical.<sup>24–27</sup> For diverse structural configurations, 3D hierarchical flower-like nanostructures constructed using 2D nanoflake subunits have demonstrated intrinsic advantages for photocatalysis. Such hierarchical structures can strengthen the light absorption of photocatalysts by multi-light reflection and scattering within the nanoflake subunits, and prohibit the aggregation of 2D nanoflakes to afford a large surface area with abundant active sites.<sup>28,29</sup> In addition, the nanoflake subunits will greatly shorten the diffusion path of charges, thereby facilitating the separation and transfer of photogenerated charges to the surface for redox reactions.<sup>30,31</sup> Thus, the development of advanced 2D subunit-assembled hierarchical structures with a heterogeneous junction would be promising for high-efficiency photocatalytic toluene oxidation.

Here, inspired by the above considerations, we design and fabricate a hierarchical nanoflower-shaped CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> (abbreviated as CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub>) heterojunction composed of TiO<sub>2</sub> nanoflake-supported all-inorganic CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> perovskite nanoparticles. Benefiting from the composition and nanostructure engineering, the CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> heterojunction displays excellent performance for photocatalytic toluene oxidation under the irradiation of visible light. The optimized 20%CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> heterojunction composite delivers a toluene conversion rate of 10 200  $\mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$  and a high selectivity of 85% towards benzaldehyde (benzyl alcohol as the main by-product). This performance outperforms most of the state-of-the-art catalysts in the literature for visible-light-driven oxidation of toluene. This work provides a new idea by constructing a hierarchical heterojunction structure over halide perovskite materials for high-efficiency photocatalytic toluene conversion.

## Experimental section

### Materials

Cesium bromide (CsBr, 99.999%), lead bromide (PbBr<sub>2</sub>, 99.0%) and tetrahydrofuran (THF) were purchased from Macklin (Shanghai, China). *N,N*-Dimethylformamide (DMF), toluene, tetrabutyl titanate (TBOT), ethanol (EtOH), concentrated hydrochloric acid (HCl, 36%), acetic acid and glycerol were obtained from Sinopharm Chemical Reagent Co., Ltd (Shanghai, China). All chemicals and solvents were used without further purification.

### Synthesis of mesoporous hierarchical TiO<sub>2</sub> nanoflowers

Typically, 1.5 g of Pluronic F127 was dispersed in a mixed solvent of 2.4 mL of acetic acid, 3.2 mL of concentrated hydrochloric acid (HCl) and 30 mL of tetrahydrofuran (THF). After vigorously stirring for 20 min, 3.4 mL of tetrabutyl titanate (TBOT) and 0.2 mL of H<sub>2</sub>O were added subsequently to obtain a clear primrose yellow solution. After that, the solution was dried in an oven at 45 °C for 24 h to form a light-yellow gel. Then, 1.0 g of the gel was added into 25 mL of ethanol (EtOH) and 5 mL of glycerol under vigorous stirring. After 20 min, the

transparent solution was transferred to a 50 mL Teflon-lined autoclave, heated at 150 °C for 15 h, and then cooled naturally to room temperature. The precipitate was washed with ethanol and dried in an oven at 60 °C.<sup>32</sup> Finally, the precipitate was calcined in a muffle furnace at 400 °C for 5 h at a heating rate of 1 °C min<sup>-1</sup> to obtain the hierarchical TiO<sub>2</sub> nanoflowers. To synthesize the collapsed TiO<sub>2</sub> without the hierarchical nanoflower structure, the precipitate was calcined in the same muffle furnace at 400 °C for 5 h, but at a heating rate of 5 °C min<sup>-1</sup>.

### Synthesis of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> composites and blank CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>

CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> composites were synthesized according to an antisolvent precipitation method at room temperature.<sup>33</sup> Typically, 1 mmol CsBr and 1 mmol PbBr<sub>2</sub> were dissolved in 10 mL of *N,N*-dimethylformamide (DMF) by ultrasonication to form a precursor solution. Meanwhile, 100 mg of TiO<sub>2</sub> was dispersed in 10 mL of DMF and stirred to form a uniform white dispersion. Then a certain amount of the CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> precursor solution was added into the TiO<sub>2</sub> dispersion under ultrasonication. Then, the mixture was added dropwise into 50 mL of toluene and stirred vigorously for 30 min. After that, the solution was centrifuged at 8000 rpm for 3 min. The precipitate was collected and dried in a vacuum oven. A series of *x*% CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> composites were synthesized by changing the volume of the added CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> precursor solution, where *x* is the mass ratio of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> in the composite (*x* = 10, 20, 30, and 40). Blank CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> was prepared by the same procedure without the addition of TiO<sub>2</sub>.

### Characterization

Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) images were captured using a Hitachi 8100. Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) and high-resolution transmission electron microscopy (HRTEM) images were recorded using a JEM-2100F EX microscope at an accelerating voltage of 200 kV. The Brunauer–Emmett–Teller (BET) specific surface area was measured using an N<sub>2</sub> adsorption–desorption instrument (BELSORP-mini II). The X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns of the catalysts were characterized on a Bruker D8 Advance X-ray diffractometer operated at 40 kV and 40 mA with Cu K $\alpha$  radiation and  $2\theta$  ranging from 10° to 80°. The UV-vis diffuse reflectance spectra (DRS) were obtained on a CARY-100 spectrophotometer (Agilent) using 100% BaSO<sub>4</sub> powder as a standard sample. X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) spectra were recorded using an X-ray photoelectron spectrometer (Thermo Escalab 250 electron spectrometer) with Al-K $\alpha$  radiation. Raman spectra were obtained using a laser at a wavelength of 785 nm (Thermo Fisher Scientific, DXR 2xi). Photoluminescence (PL) spectra of solid samples were obtained using an RF-5301PC spectrophotometer (Shimadzu, Japan) with a 435 nm excitation wavelength.

Electron paramagnetic resonance (EPR) measurements were performed at room temperature using a Magnettech ESR5000X spectrometer. In general, 10 mg samples were dispersed in a mixed solution of 2 mL of CH<sub>3</sub>CN containing 1 mL

of toluene and 2  $\mu\text{L}$  of 5,5-dimethyl-1-pyrroline-*N*-oxide (DMPO). The suspension was then transferred into a glass capillary. The sealed glass tube was then placed in the microwave cavity of an EPR spectrometer and exposed to a 300 W Xe lamp source (CEL-PF300-T8, Beijing China Education Au-light Co., Ltd) at room temperature.

### Photoelectrochemical measurements

The photoelectrochemical analysis was carried out in a conventional three-electrode cell using a Pt plate and an Ag/AgCl electrode as the counter electrode and the reference electrode, respectively. The working electrode was prepared on fluorine-doped tin oxide (FTO) glass that was cleaned by ultrasonication in ethanol for 1 h. Typically, 5 mg of the catalyst was dispersed in 0.5 mL of isopropanol to obtain a slurry. After that, 20  $\mu\text{L}$  of the slurry was dropped onto FTO with a size of 1  $\text{cm}^2$  and dried in air. The electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) measurement was performed in an electrolyte of tetrabutylammonium hexafluorophosphate (TBAPF<sub>6</sub>) in ethyl acetate (EA). The transient photocurrent was tested in the same electrolyte and a 300 W xenon lamp (CEL-PF300-T8, Beijing China Education Au-light Co., Ltd) equipped with a 420 nm cutoff filter ( $\lambda \geq 420$  nm) was used as the light source. Mott–Schottky measurement was performed in an electrolyte of 0.1 M TBAPF<sub>6</sub> in  $\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2$ .

### Density functional theory (DFT) calculations

DFT calculations were carried out using the Vienna *ab initio* simulation package (VASP) with the projector-augmented-wave (PAW) method.<sup>34</sup> The Perdew–Burke–Ernzerhof (PBE) scheme was used for the exchange correlation function, employing the generalized gradient approximation (GGA).<sup>35</sup> The electronic wave function was expanded using a plane wave basis with an energy cutoff of 500 eV. The energy convergence criterion was set to  $1.0 \times 10^{-5}$  eV, and the force convergence criterion was set to 0.03 eV  $\text{\AA}^{-1}$  for each atom. For the CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> (110) and TiO<sub>2</sub> (101) slabs, a  $6 \times 3 \times 1$  and  $3 \times 9 \times 1$  *k*-point mesh was used, respectively. A 30  $\text{\AA}$  vacuum layer along the *z*-direction was used to prevent unintended periodic interactions between adjacent slabs. The CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> heterostructure model consists of two CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> layers and one TiO<sub>2</sub> layer, with a 20  $\text{\AA}$  vacuum space along the *z*-direction. To save computing resources, a  $1 \times 1 \times 1$  *k*-point mesh was employed for the CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> heterostructure. The van der Waals interactions between TiO<sub>2</sub> and CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> were taken into account using the DFT-D3 correction method.

### Photocatalytic activity measurements

All photocatalytic reactions were conducted in a quartz reactor. Typically, 10 mg of the photocatalyst and 1 mL of toluene (9.4 mmol) were dispersed in a reactor containing 2 mL of acetonitrile. The reactor was purged with O<sub>2</sub> for 10 min, and then irradiated with visible light ( $\lambda > 420$  nm) using a 300 W xenon lamp (CEL-PF300-T8, Beijing China Education Au-light Co., Ltd). After light irradiation for 2 h, the liquid product was analyzed by gas chromatography (GC-2030, Shimadzu, Japan,

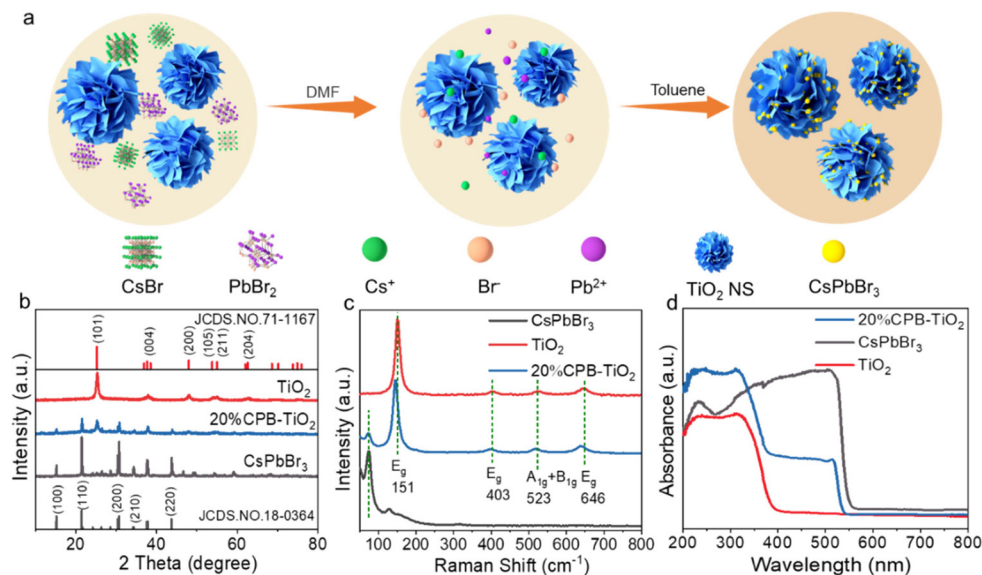
FID detector, nitrogen (N<sub>2</sub>) as the carrier gas) after centrifuging the suspension at 10 000 rpm for 3 min.

## Results and discussion

### Characterization of catalysts

The 3D hierarchical CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> heterostructure was prepared by a simple anti-solvent precipitation method with the addition of TiO<sub>2</sub> nanoflowers into the precursor solution of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>, as schematically illustrated in Fig. 1a. X-ray diffraction (XRD) was exploited to characterize the crystal structure of blank CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>, CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> composites and TiO<sub>2</sub>. As shown in Fig. 1b, the diffraction peaks at 15.1°, 21.5°, 30.7°, 34.4°, and 43.8° can be ascribed to the monoclinic CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> (100), (110), (200), (210) and (220) planes (JCPDS no. 18-0364).<sup>36–38</sup> In addition, the peaks at 25.3°, 37.7°, 48.0°, 53.8°, 55.0°, and 62.6° can be attributed to the (101), (004), (200), (105), (211), and (204) planes of anatase TiO<sub>2</sub>, respectively.<sup>32</sup> The XRD patterns of CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> composites indicate both characteristic peaks of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> and TiO<sub>2</sub>, and the peak intensity of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> increases as the CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> content increases (Fig. S1†).

Raman spectra were used to further confirm the composition of the synthesized catalysts. As shown in Fig. 1c, the peaks at 151  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  (E<sub>g</sub>), 403  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  (E<sub>g</sub>), 523  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  (A<sub>1g</sub> + B<sub>1g</sub>), and 646  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  (E<sub>g</sub>) belong to the anatase TiO<sub>2</sub> vibration modes. A new peak of 74  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  assigned to the vibrational mode of the [PbBr<sub>6</sub>]<sup>4−</sup> octahedron of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> is observed in the CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> composite.<sup>39–41</sup> The characteristic peak of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> is also enhanced with the increment of the loading amount of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> (Fig. S2†). This coincides with the XRD analysis, validating the successful preparation of the CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> composites. Notably, after the growth of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> on the TiO<sub>2</sub> nanosheets, the Raman peaks of TiO<sub>2</sub> shift to a lower wavenumber compared to that of blank TiO<sub>2</sub>. The shift indicates an increase in the bond length and a decrease in the bond energy of the Ti–O bond, which can be attributed to the strong electrostatic interaction between CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> and TiO<sub>2</sub>.<sup>42–45</sup> Fig. 1d shows the UV-vis diffuse reflectance spectroscopy (DRS) analysis of the samples, which is employed to assess the optical absorption properties. It can be seen that the light absorption edge of blank TiO<sub>2</sub> is around 390 nm, denoting its UV light response nature. After integrating with CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>, the light absorption of CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> is extended to approximately 540 nm. Meanwhile, the absorption edge of TiO<sub>2</sub> at 390 nm can also be detected. This should be ascribed to the hybridization of the high weight content of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> with the TiO<sub>2</sub> support. As such, both absorption features are present in the composite. The greatly extended light absorption enables the visible light excitation of the CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> composites, which is beneficial for promoting solar energy utilization. With the increase of the CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> content, the visible light absorption of CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> is also gradually enhanced (Fig. S3†). Moreover, in comparison with blank CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>, it is notable that the visible light absorption edge of the hybrid CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> composite is slightly blue shifted (*ca.* 14 nm). This can be attributed to the quantum size

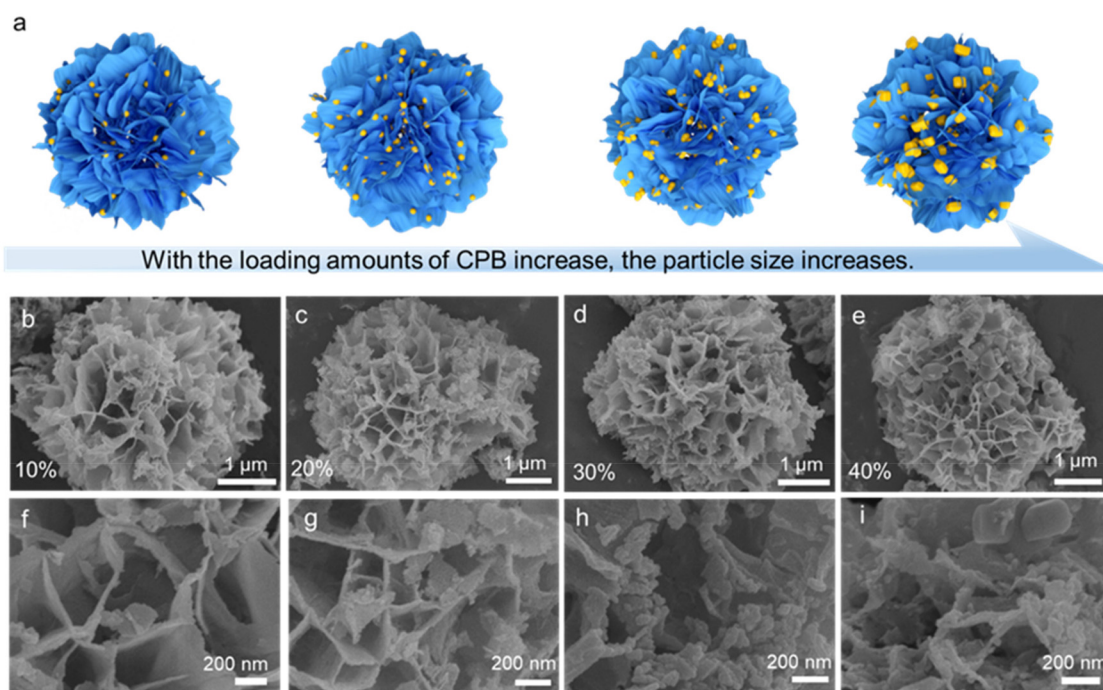


**Fig. 1** (a) Schematic diagram of the synthesis of 3D nanoflower-shaped CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> heterostructure. (b) XRD patterns, (c) Raman spectra, and (d) UV-vis DRS spectra of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>, CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> and TiO<sub>2</sub>.

effect resulting from the smaller size of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> in the composite. The inference has been demonstrated by the following scanning electron microscopy (SEM) and transmission electron microscopy (TEM) analyses.

As shown in Fig. 2, Fig. S4 and S5,<sup>†</sup> SEM is firstly utilized to characterize the morphology and microstructure of the CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub>, blank TiO<sub>2</sub> and CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> samples. The blank TiO<sub>2</sub> presents a nanoflower shape, which is assembled by vertical nano-

flakes (Fig. S4<sup>†</sup>). The surface of the nanoflake subunits is clean and smooth. For blank CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>, it shows a large particle morphology and the particle sizes range from 0.9 to 2.0 μm (Fig. S5<sup>†</sup>). After the construction of the CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> heterojunction, the TiO<sub>2</sub> nanoflower-shaped structure is maintained (Fig. 2), while the surface of the nanoflake subunits becomes rough due to the *in situ* growth of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>. From Fig. 2b–i, it can be clearly seen that for all the CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> samples, the sizes



**Fig. 2** (a) Schematic and (b–i) SEM images showing the morphology evolution of x% CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> (where x = 10, 20, 30, and 40) composites.



of the  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$  particles in the composites are much smaller than that of blank  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$ , indicating that the formation of a heterojunction is beneficial for preventing the aggregation and reducing the size of the  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$  halide perovskite. This can be ascribed to the fact that the presence of  $\text{TiO}_2$  nanoflowers with nanoflake subunits can act as heterogeneous nucleus sites to facilitate the nucleation and growth of  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$ , which generates more seeds and leads to the smaller size of the  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$  particles.<sup>20</sup> The significantly decreased particle size could greatly promote the exposure of surface active sites and inhibit the charge recombination of  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$  under light irradiation. Moreover, it is notable that with the increase of the  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$  contents from 10% to 40% in the composites, the particle sizes of  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$  are increased, as schematically illustrated in Fig. 2a. This can be attributed to the further growth of  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$  at high concentrations.

To further obtain the microscopic structural information of the samples, transmission electron microscopy (TEM) analysis is carried out. Taking 20%CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$  as an example, the TEM image of the sample (Fig. 3a and b) shows a nanoflake structure of  $\text{TiO}_2$ . The surface is rough and densely covered by small  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$  nanoparticles. Since the sample for TEM analysis is prepared by strong ultrasonication, the well-defined  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$  nanoparticles on the 2D nanoflake surface indicate intimate interfacial contact between the two components. Meanwhile, the intensive coverage of  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$  forms a large contact interface with  $\text{TiO}_2$  nanoflakes, which is conducive to the migration of charge carriers across the CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$  heterojunction.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, nanopores can be observed on the CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$ , which results from the mesoporous structure of the  $\text{TiO}_2$  nanoflakes, as demonstrated by the  $\text{N}_2$  adsorption-desorption analysis (Fig. S6†). The high-resolution TEM (HRTEM) image (Fig. 3c) shows distinct lattice fringes of 0.35 nm and 0.41 nm, corresponding to the (101) planes and (110) planes of anatase

$\text{TiO}_2$  and monoclinic  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$ , respectively. Furthermore, Fig. 3d shows the corresponding energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS) elemental mapping analysis of 20%CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$ . Cs, Pb, Br, Ti and O elements are uniformly distributed on the nanoflake structure, indicating that  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$  and  $\text{TiO}_2$  are well combined. The results further verify the formation of CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$  hybrid composite with intimate interfacial contact. Moreover, in comparison with blank  $\text{TiO}_2$ , the 20%CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$  composite displays a smaller specific surface area (Table S1†), which can be attributed to the fact that the growth of  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$  nanoparticles on the surface of  $\text{TiO}_2$  may aggregate in the  $\text{TiO}_2$  pores. Correspondingly, the total pore volume of 20%CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$  is also slightly lower than that of blank  $\text{TiO}_2$ . The result matches with the SEM measurement.

To study the surface chemical states of the samples, X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) has been performed. As shown in Fig. 4a, the presence of Cs, Pb, Br, O and Ti elements can be detected from the XPS survey spectrum of CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$ . The high-resolution spectrum of Ti 2p shows two peaks of Ti 2p<sub>3/2</sub> and Ti 2p<sub>1/2</sub> at 458.5 eV and 464.2 eV (Fig. 4b), which indicates that Ti element mainly exists as  $\text{Ti}^{4+}$  ions. For the O 1s pattern (Fig. 4c), it can be divided into two peaks, which are attributed to the lattice O (Ti–O) and hydroxyl O (–OH). Fig. S7† shows the fine-scanned Cs 3d XPS spectrum, and the two peaks with binding energies at 724.2 eV and 738.1 eV are assigned to Cs 3d<sub>5/2</sub> and Cs 3d<sub>3/2</sub>, indicating that the chemical state of the Cs in the composite is +1. The Pb 4f spectrum in Fig. 4d shows characteristic peaks at 138.0 eV and 142.9 eV, corresponding to Pb 4f<sub>7/2</sub> and Pb 4f<sub>5/2</sub> orbitals of  $\text{Pb}^{2+}$  ion. Moreover, the Br 3d is decomposed into two peaks at 67.9 eV and 68.9 eV, corresponding to the binding energies of Br 3d<sub>5/2</sub> and 3d<sub>3/2</sub>, attributed to the presence of  $\text{Br}^-$  (Fig. 4e). It is worth noting that for the CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$  composite, the Ti 2p and O

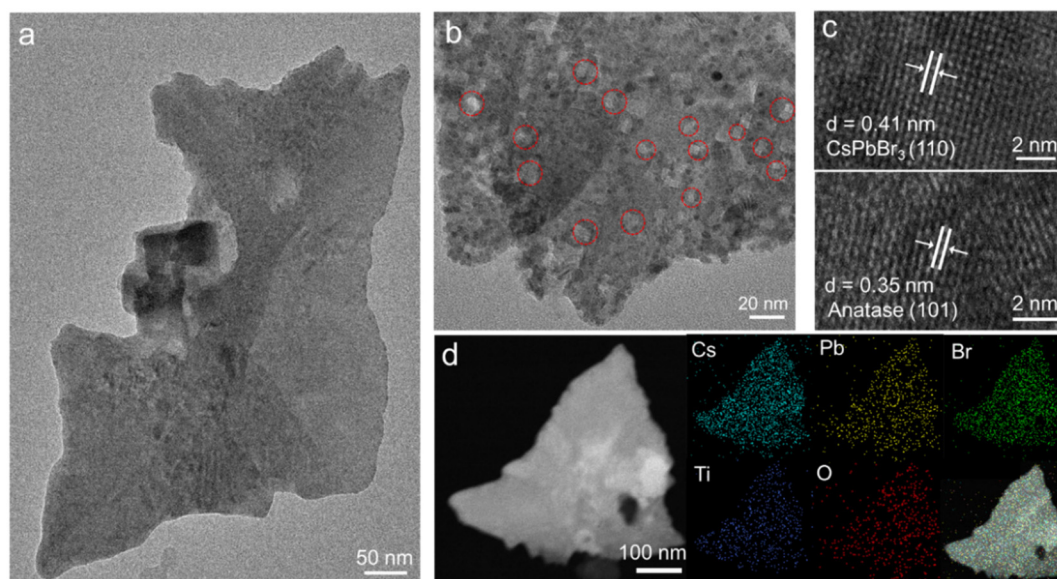


Fig. 3 (a and b) TEM images, (c) HRTEM image, and (d) corresponding EDS elemental mapping images of 20%CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$ .

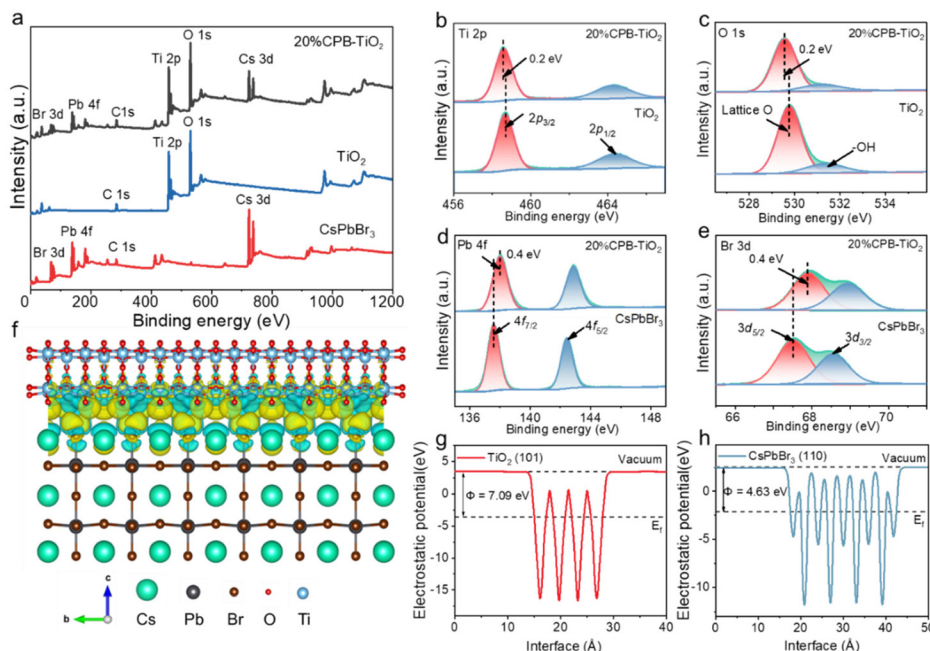


Fig. 4 XPS spectra of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>, TiO<sub>2</sub> and 20%CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub>: (a) survey, (b) Ti 2p, (c) O 1s, (d) Pb 4f and (e) Br 3d. (f) Charge density differences in the CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> composite. (g and h) The work functions of blank TiO<sub>2</sub> and CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>.

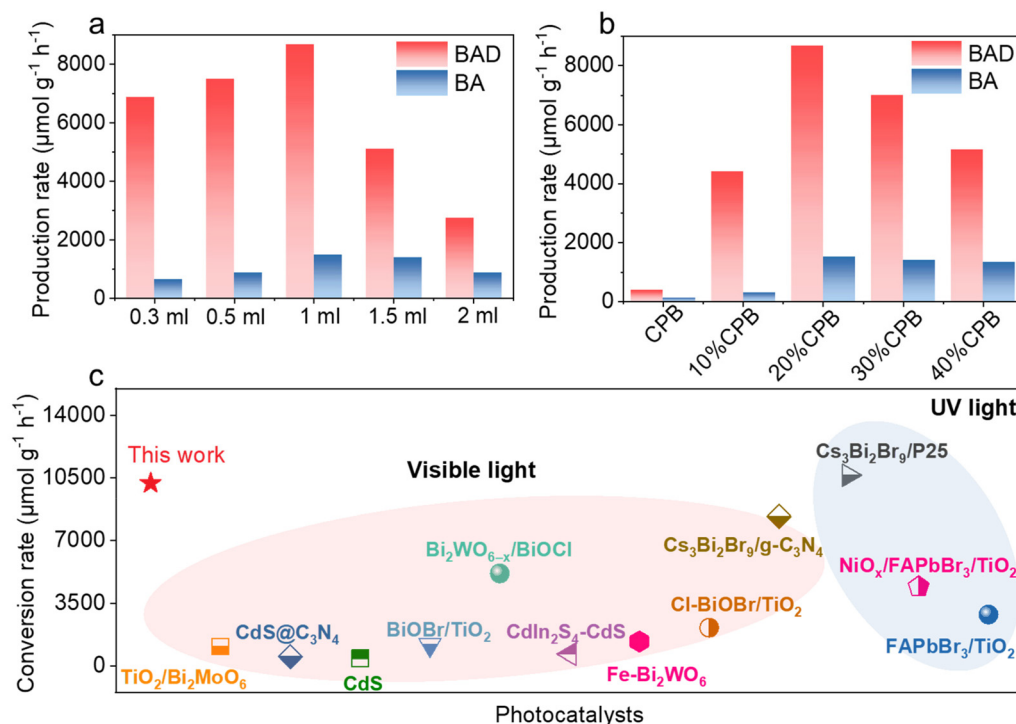
1s peaks show a negative shift of 0.2 eV in comparison with blank TiO<sub>2</sub> (Fig. 4b and c). In contrast, the binding energies of Cs 4d, Pb 4f, and Br 3d in the CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> show a positive shift (Fig. 4d and e and S7<sup>†</sup>), which are higher than those of blank CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> by 0.4 eV. The results verify the strongly interacted interface with electron transfer from the CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> to the TiO<sub>2</sub> nanosheets in the heterostructure, which is in accordance with the Raman analysis. To further clarify the interaction and electron transfer at the interface, density functional theory (DFT) calculations have been carried out. Fig. 4g and h shows the work functions of the TiO<sub>2</sub> (101) and CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> (110) slabs, which are 7.09 eV and 4.63 eV, respectively, corresponding to the Fermi levels ( $E_f$ ) of  $-3.61$  eV and  $-2.51$  eV (vs. the vacuum level). Due to the lower  $E_f$  value of TiO<sub>2</sub> than that of blank CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>, the electrons would be migrated from CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> to TiO<sub>2</sub> at the heterojunction interface until their  $E_f$  are aligned. A similar result is obtained from the calculated planar-averaged charge density difference of CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub>. As shown in Fig. 4f, the light cyan and yellow regions indicate the charge depletion and accumulation area, respectively. The calculation results reveal that the cyan region is mainly on the CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> side, while the yellow region is on the TiO<sub>2</sub> side, further validating the transfer of electrons from CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> to TiO<sub>2</sub>. This is consistent with the XPS analysis results.

### Photocatalytic performances

Collectively, the above characterization faithfully verifies the successful fabrication of CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> hybrid composites with intimate interfacial contact and strong chemical interaction. The presence of TiO<sub>2</sub> nanoflower with 2D nanoflake subunits greatly inhibits the agglomeration of the halide perovskites,

while CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> extends the light absorption range of TiO<sub>2</sub>. In view of the desired structural and optical properties, the photocatalytic oxidation of toluene over the hybrid CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> composites has been tested. A 300 W xenon lamp equipped with a 420 nm cutoff filter is utilized as a visible light source. It is well known that the solvent/reactant ratio has great influence on the oxidation of toluene,<sup>2,47</sup> and thus, the reaction condition of different acetonitrile/toluene ratio is firstly optimized using 20%CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> as an example. As shown in Fig. 5a, as the ratio of toluene increases from 0.3 to 1 mL, the photoactivity of the 20%CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> composite gradually increases. The catalyst shows the highest toluene conversion rate of  $10\,200\ \mu\text{mol g}^{-1}\text{ h}^{-1}$  when the volume ratio of acetonitrile solvent and toluene reactant is 2 : 1. The enhanced photoactivity can be attributed to the fact that the increased toluene concentration enhances the reaction possibility between the photogenerated charge carriers and the toluene molecules. However, further increase of toluene to 1.5 mL and 2 mL decreases the conversion rate. This might be ascribed to the excess adsorption of the toluene reactant on the catalyst surface, which would slow down the desorption of the BA and BAD products and suppress the oxidation activity.<sup>48</sup> Based on the result, the following photoactivity tests of all the other samples are carried out under the optimized condition with a acetonitrile/toluene ratio of 2 : 1.

Fig. 5b shows the visible-light-driven photocatalytic performances of the blank CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> and CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> composites with different ratios of CPB for the selective oxidation of toluene. The blank CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> exhibits a low activity with generation rates of  $390\ \mu\text{mol g}^{-1}\text{ h}^{-1}$  for BAD and  $130\ \mu\text{mol g}^{-1}\text{ h}^{-1}$  for BA. The unsatisfactory photocatalytic performance should



**Fig. 5** (a) Photocatalytic oxidation of toluene with different toluene amounts in acetonitrile solvent over 20%CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub>. The total volume is 3 mL. (b) Photocatalytic oxidation of toluene over blank TiO<sub>2</sub>, CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> composite and blank CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>. (c) Performance comparison with reported photocatalysts for UV and visible-light-driven selective oxidation of toluene.

be due to the severe charge recombination caused by the large particle size of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>. For blank TiO<sub>2</sub>, it presents no activity. This is reasonable since the TiO<sub>2</sub> has no visible light absorption and cannot be excited by visible light. In contrast, after the hybridization of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> with TiO<sub>2</sub>, the photocatalytic performances of all the hierarchical CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> heterojunctions are significantly improved. The best photocatalytic toluene oxidation activity is achieved over the 20%CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> composite, which shows a toluene conversion rate of 10 200 μmol g<sup>-1</sup> h<sup>-1</sup> (with a BAD production rate of 8670 μmol g<sup>-1</sup> h<sup>-1</sup> and a BA generation rate of 1530 μmol g<sup>-1</sup> h<sup>-1</sup>). The photoactivity is about 20 times higher than that of blank CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>, which is also among the top photocatalytic performances reported so far for UV and visible-light-driven selective oxidation of toluene (Fig. 5c and Table S2†). The apparent quantum efficiency (AQE) of the 20%CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> composite reaches 2.9% at λ = 420 nm for the transformation of toluene into BA and BAD (Fig. S14†). The gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS) analysis of the reaction solution after light irradiation reveals four peaks, which are ascribed to the acetonitrile solvent, toluene reactant, BAD and BA products (Fig. S8†). No other product or intermediate is detected, validating the high selectivity of the reaction. With the increase of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> loading to higher contents (30% and 40%), it results in a performance degradation. This may be ascribed to the fact that: (1) an excess of halide perovskite tends to aggregate into large particles, which will lead to longer migration distances of charge carriers and increase charge recombination; (2) the

coverage of excessive and oversized CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> on the TiO<sub>2</sub> surface will lead to the reduction of the exposed surface area, inhibiting the adsorption of toluene molecules.

Furthermore, the broad applicability of the CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> photocatalyst is investigated for the photocatalytic selective oxidation of C(sp<sup>3</sup>)-H of toluene derivatives with different substituents. As shown in Table 1, these aromatics are efficiently converted into the corresponding aldehydes and alcohols. The selectivity for the aldehyde product is higher than 70%. Notably, the substrate with electron-withdrawing substituents (-F, -Cl, and -Br) displays lower photocatalytic activity. This can be attributed to the fact that the electron-withdrawing groups on the benzene ring inhibit the abstraction of hydrogen from the methyl group.<sup>49,50</sup> In addition, *p*-xylene shows a higher toluene conversion rate (12 746 μmol g<sup>-1</sup> h<sup>-1</sup>) than its isomers of *o*-xylene (9900 μmol g<sup>-1</sup> h<sup>-1</sup>) and *m*-xylene (10 930 μmol g<sup>-1</sup> h<sup>-1</sup>), which can be attributed to the steric hindrance of the methyl groups hindering the reactant adsorption and activation on the catalyst surface.<sup>51,52</sup>

Moreover, the cycle test of the 20%CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> has been carried out. After repeating the photoactivity test for 4 cycles (Fig. S16†), the catalyst still maintains a high activity with negligible decrease in the conversion rate of toluene. In addition, the used 20%CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> has been further characterized by XRD and XPS (Fig. S17 and S18†). No obvious change in the crystal structure and surface chemical state is observed for the composite before and after the reaction. These results indicate the high stability of the CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> composite.

**Table 1** Photocatalytic oxidation of C(sp<sup>3</sup>)-H in substituted toluene over 20%CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub><sup>a</sup>

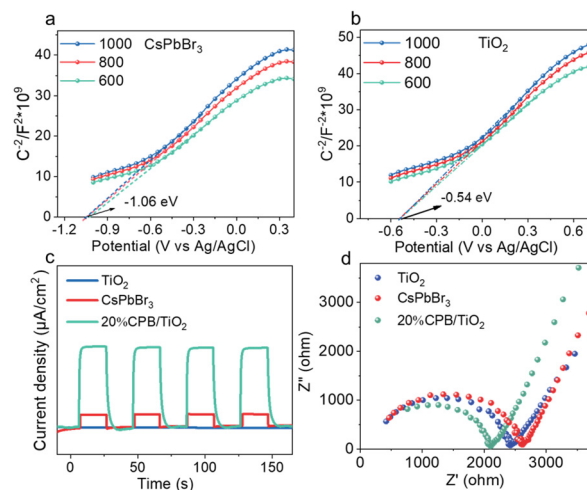
$\text{R-C}_6\text{H}_4\text{-CH}_3 + \text{O}_2 \xrightarrow[\text{photocatalytic}]{\text{visible light}} \text{R-C}_6\text{H}_4\text{-CHO (A)} + \text{R-C}_6\text{H}_4\text{-CH}_2\text{OH (B)}$				
Entry	Substrates	Conversion rate ( $\mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ )	Selectivity (%)	
			A	B
1		10 200	85	15
2		5950	83	17
3		9040	88	12
4		9770	87	13
5		9900	76	24
6		10 930	72	28
7		12 746	71	29

<sup>a</sup> Reaction conditions: catalyst (10 mg 20%CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub>), substrate (1 mL), MeCN (2 mL), 1 atm of O<sub>2</sub>, 2 h irradiation with visible light ( $\lambda > 420 \text{ nm}$ ).

### Photoelectric properties

In order to better understand the reasons for the improved photocatalytic performance, the band structures of the CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> and the TiO<sub>2</sub> are investigated using Mott-Schottky (M-S) measurements and the DRS analysis. As shown in Fig. 6a and b, the positive slopes indicate that CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> and TiO<sub>2</sub> are typical n-type semiconductors.<sup>53</sup> The flat band potentials ( $E_{\text{FB}}$ ) are calculated to be  $-0.86 \text{ V}$  and  $-0.34 \text{ V}$  (vs. NHE) for CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> and TiO<sub>2</sub>, respectively. Usually, the conduction band potential ( $E_{\text{CB}}$ ) for an n-type semiconductor is more negative of about  $0.1 \text{ eV}$  than that of  $E_{\text{FB}}$ .<sup>54</sup> Thus, the  $E_{\text{CB}}$  values of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> and TiO<sub>2</sub> are determined to be  $-0.96 \text{ V}$  and  $-0.44 \text{ V}$  (vs. NHE), respectively. In addition, the corresponding bandgaps of TiO<sub>2</sub> and CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> are estimated by Tauc plots transformed from the DRS spectra (Fig. S9†), which are  $3.20 \text{ eV}$  and  $2.28 \text{ eV}$ , respectively. Based on these, the valence band positions ( $E_{\text{VB}}$ ) of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> and TiO<sub>2</sub> are calculated to be  $1.32 \text{ V}$  and  $2.76 \text{ V}$ . As a result, a type-II heterojunction is formed between CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> and TiO<sub>2</sub> because of the staggered band structures.

To study the influence of the heterojunction structure on the transfer behavior of photogenerated charge carriers, transient photocurrent and electrochemical impedance spectra (EIS) tests are performed. As shown in Fig. 6c, under visible light irradiation, both CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> and CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> show rapid and stable photocurrent responses, while TiO<sub>2</sub> does not. This can be

**Fig. 6** (a and b) M-S plots of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> and TiO<sub>2</sub>. (c) Transient photocurrent responses, and (d) EIS Nyquist plots of blank TiO<sub>2</sub>, CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> and the CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> composite.

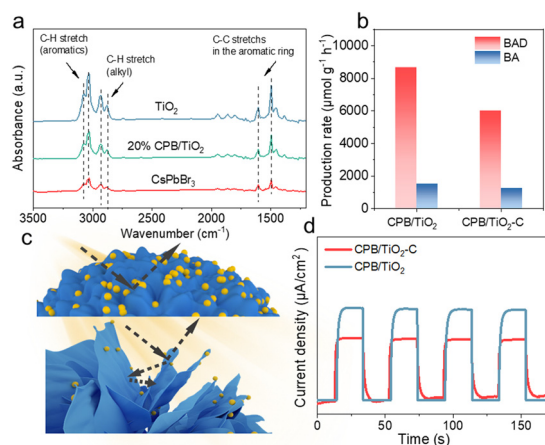
attributed to the inability of TiO<sub>2</sub> to be excited by visible light (Fig. 1d). The photocurrent intensity of blank CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> is markedly lower than that of 20% CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub>. This should be due to the agglomerated large particle size of the blank CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>, which leads to a severe recombination of photogenerated charge carriers.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, Fig. 6d shows the Nyquist plots of the samples, which is employed to investigate the interfacial charge transfer efficiency.<sup>55</sup> In general, the smaller diameter of the semicircular arc in the Nyquist plots reflects the lower electron transfer resistance. It can be found that the 20%CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> sample has the minimum arc radius, which means the best electronic conductivity and charge separation ability.<sup>56,57</sup> Furthermore, the steady-state photoluminescence (PL) spectra are also used to examine the charge separation efficiency. As shown in Fig. S19,† the 20%CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> composite shows a much lower PL intensity than that of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>, revealing that the charge recombination is significantly suppressed in the composite. In addition, the TiO<sub>2</sub> shows no obvious PL signal. This is in accordance with the photocurrent analysis that the TiO<sub>2</sub> is unable to be excited to generate charge carriers by visible light. These photoelectrochemical findings highlight that the construction of the type-II heterojunction between CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> and TiO<sub>2</sub> could effectively accelerate charge transfer, thus contributing to improving the photocatalytic performance.

Furthermore, for heterogeneous photocatalytic reactions, the effective adsorption of the reactant on the catalyst surface is another requisite for the ignition of the redox reaction.<sup>23,58–60</sup> The BET surface area and porous structure analyses of the TiO<sub>2</sub>, CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> and 20%CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> samples have shown that the introduction of TiO<sub>2</sub> nanoflower significantly improves the specific surface area and pore volume of 20% CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> in comparison with that of blank TiO<sub>2</sub> (Fig. S6 and Table S1†). Generally, a larger specific surface area and a porous structure enable better adsorption capacity, and



exposure of more active sites of catalysts. To further reveal the contribution of the heterostructure for the reactant adsorption, Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy is used to identify the adsorbed toluene species on the  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$ ,  $\text{TiO}_2$  and 20%CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$  surface. As shown in Fig. 7a, for all three samples after adsorption equilibrium, the typical absorption peaks of toluene are observed, including the C–H stretching vibration of the aromatic ring at 3083 and 3038  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ , the skeleton vibration of the aromatic ring at 1606 and 1495  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ , and the C–H symmetric and asymmetric stretching of the methylene group at 2934 and 2875  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ .<sup>61,62</sup> Notably, the signal of toluene molecules of 20%CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$  is obviously higher than that of blank  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$ , yet is lower than that of blank  $\text{TiO}_2$ . The result indicates that the introduction of  $\text{TiO}_2$  can promote the toluene adsorption capacity of CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$ , which is conducive to the catalytic conversion.

Finally, to investigate the influence of the hierarchical flower-like nanostructure constructed using 2D nanoflake sub-units on the photocatalytic performance, a collapsed 20%CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$  catalyst (marked as 20%CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$ -C) without such structure has been fabricated for comparison. As shown in Fig. 7b, the photoactivity test reveals that the 20%CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$ -C has a BAD generation rate of 6000  $\mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$  and a BA production rate of 1250  $\mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ , which is notably lower than the CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$  catalyst. Fig. S10† shows the morphology analysis of the 20%CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$ -C catalyst, which reveals a bulky grain structure with a rough surface.  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$  nanoparticles are dispersed on the surface of the massive  $\text{TiO}_2$ . The size of the  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$  particles in the composite is also much smaller than that of blank  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$ , which once again proves that  $\text{TiO}_2$  plays a critical role in inhibiting the growth of  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$ . Nevertheless, compared with 20%CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$ , the size of the  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$  particles is much larger in the 20%CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$ -C catalyst. The result indicates that the  $\text{TiO}_2$  nanoflakes are more beneficial for preventing the agglomeration of the  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$  particles.



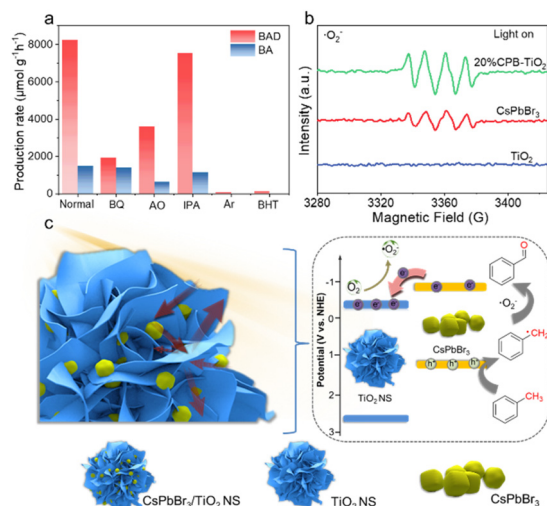
**Fig. 7** (a) FTIR spectra of 20%CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$ ,  $\text{TiO}_2$  and  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$  after adsorption of saturated toluene. (b) Photoactivity comparison between CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$  and CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$ -C. (c) Schematic diagram of light absorption over CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$  and CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$ -C. (d) Transient photocurrent responses of CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$  and CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$ -C.

In addition, UV-vis DRS is performed to study the optical absorption property of the 20%CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$ -C catalyst. The sample shows a similar absorption edge as that of 20%CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$ , but the light absorption intensity in the range of 200–550 nm is lower (Fig. S11†). The result indicates that the 3D hierarchical CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$  structure is more efficient for solar energy collection, which can be attributed to the multiple light reflection and refraction caused by the vertical nanoflakes, as schematically illustrated in Fig. 7c. Meanwhile, the transient photocurrent response test shows that the 20%CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$  catalyst exhibits a higher photocurrent density than that of CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$ -C under visible light irradiation, indicating more efficient charge transfer (Fig. 7d). This can be related to the fact that  $\text{TiO}_2$  nanoflakes facilitate the formation of smaller  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$  particle, which could shorten the charge transfer distance to the surface and promote the interfacial charge separation. Hence, to sum up, the construction of the unique hierarchical CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$  structure greatly enhances the photocatalytic performance due to the existence of  $\text{TiO}_2$  nanoflakes, which (1) greatly prohibits the aggregation of  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$ , forming much smaller perovskite particles that shorten the charge transfer distance; (2) increases light absorption by multiple reflection and scattering between the nanoflakes structure that benefits the solar energy harvesting and conversion; (3) enhances the adsorption of toluene molecules and promotes the surface reaction rates.

### Photocatalytic mechanism

To elucidate the photocatalytic mechanism of toluene oxidation over the CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$  photocatalyst, a series of control experiments have been conducted in the absence of  $\text{O}_2$  or with the addition of specific radical scavengers. As shown in Fig. 8a, toluene oxidation is almost completely suppressed when  $\text{O}_2$  is replaced by Ar, indicating that  $\text{O}_2$  is indispensable. When isopropanol (IPA) is added into the reaction system as a scavenger of hydroxyl radicals ( $\cdot\text{OH}$ ), it has almost no effect on toluene conversion, suggesting that  $\cdot\text{OH}$  is rarely involved in the reaction. In contrast, whether adding ammonium oxalate (AO) to eliminate holes ( $h^+$ ) or butylated hydroxytoluene (BHT) to capture carbon-centered radicals, the reaction rate significantly reduces. Besides, the toluene conversion is also significantly decreased when BQ is added as a superoxide free radical ( $\text{O}_2^{\cdot-}$ ) scavenger. The above results clearly indicate that  $\text{O}_2^{\cdot-}$ ,  $h^+$ , and carbon-centered radicals play key roles in the photocatalytic selective oxidation of toluene.

Subsequently, to further identify the existence of  $\text{O}_2^{\cdot-}$ , electron paramagnetic resonance (EPR) spectroscopy was employed using 5,5-dimethyl-pyrroline-*N*-oxide (DMPO) as a trapping agent. As shown in Fig. S12† and Fig. 8b, no DMPO- $\text{O}_2^{\cdot-}$  signal is detected under dark conditions. After visible light irradiation, distinct signals of DMPO- $\text{O}_2^{\cdot-}$  are observed for both  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$  and CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$ , while no signals are detected from  $\text{TiO}_2$ . The CPB/ $\text{TiO}_2$  catalyst exhibits a higher ability to generate more  $\text{O}_2^{\cdot-}$  radicals than that of pure  $\text{CsPbBr}_3$ , which is important to promote the oxidation of toluene. Moreover, no DMPO- $\cdot\text{OH}$  signal is observed under the



**Fig. 8** (a) Photocatalytic toluene oxidation in the absence or presence of various radical scavengers. (b) EPR spectra of  $\text{DMPO-O}_2^-$ . (c) Schematic illustration of the proposed mechanism of photocatalytic oxidation of toluene over the CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> composite.

same conditions, demonstrating that  $\cdot\text{OH}$  is absent in the reaction process (Fig. S13 and S15†).

Based on the above analyses, a possible photocatalytic reaction mechanism over the hierarchical CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> heterojunction is proposed. As schematically illustrated in Fig. 8c, upon photoexcitation, electrons and holes are generated in the conduction band (CB) and the valence band (VB) of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>. Due to the staggered energy bands, the photogenerated electrons in the CB of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> can efficiently migrate towards the CB of TiO<sub>2</sub> and left holes on the VB of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>, which prolongs the lifetime of the photogenerated charge carriers. After that, molecular O<sub>2</sub> can be activated by electrons on the CB of TiO<sub>2</sub>. Meanwhile, photogenerated holes oxidize the toluene to produce benzyl radicals ( $\cdot\text{CH}_2\text{-R}$ ) on the VB of CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>. Then, the  $\cdot\text{O}_2^-$  radical reacts with the benzyl radicals to produce benzaldehyde.

## Conclusions

In summary, we have designed and synthesized a hierarchical CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> heterojunction as an advanced photocatalyst for efficient visible-light-driven toluene oxidation by assembling CsPbBr<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles onto nanoflower-shaped TiO<sub>2</sub> with 2D nanoflake subunits. The formed CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> composite integrates the structural and electronical merits of the nanoflower-shaped TiO<sub>2</sub> and halide perovskite CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>, which not only enhances solar light utilization, but also enhances the adsorption of the toluene reactant, and boosts the separation and transportation of photogenerated carriers. A high toluene oxidation rate of  $10\,200\,\mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$  is achieved over the optimal CPB/TiO<sub>2</sub> composite, which is about 20-fold higher than that of blank CsPbBr<sub>3</sub>. The study demonstrates the significance of rational design of well-defined hierarchical heterojunction cat-

alysts over metal halide perovskites for efficient photocatalytic redox reactions.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

## Acknowledgements

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