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# Interfacial S–O bonds specifically boost Z-scheme charge separation in a $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ heterojunction for efficient photocatalytic activity†

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Reducing the recombination rate of photoexcited electron–hole pairs is always a great challenging work for the photocatalytic technique. In response to this issue, herein, a novel Z-scheme  $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  with interfacial S–O linkages was synthesized by a hydrothermal and subsequently annealing method. The Fourier transform infrared (FT-IR) and X-ray photoelectron spectrometer (XPS) measurements confirmed the formation of covalent S–O bonds between  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ . The quenching and electron spin resonance (ESR) tests revealed the Z-scheme transfer route of photogenerated carriers over the  $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  heterojunctions, which was further verified theoretically *via* density functional theory (DFT) calculations. As expected, the  $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  heterojunctions showed significantly boosted photocatalytic activities for lomefloxacin degradation and  $\text{Cr}(\text{vi})$  reduction under visible light illumination compared with the bare materials. Accordingly, a synergistic photocatalytic mechanism of Z-scheme heterostructures and interfacial S–O bonding was proposed, in which the S–O linkage could act as a specific bridge to modify the Z-scheme manner for accelerating the interfacial charge transmission. Furthermore, the  $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  heterojunction also exhibited excellent performance perceived in the stability and reusability tests. This work provides a new approach for designing and fabricating novel Z-scheme heterostructures with a high-efficiency charge transfer route.

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## 1. Introduction

Along with the rapid development of modern industries like the pharmaceutical, chemical and manufacturing industries, abundant concomitant pollutants like antibiotics and heavy metals have entered into the aquatic ecosystem, posing a severe threat to the environment and human health.<sup>1–3</sup> In order to alleviate these environmental issues, various water purification technologies, such as adsorption,<sup>4</sup> ion exchange,<sup>5</sup> membrane separation,<sup>6</sup> photocatalysis<sup>7</sup> and electrocatalysis,<sup>8</sup> have been studied and applied to remove the aqueous contaminants. Among them, semiconductor-based photocatalysis has become a research hotspot in water environment treatment due to its sustainable, eco-friendly and low-cost characteristics.<sup>9–11</sup> To date, multitudinous semiconductors have been developed, and typically, semiconducting metallic oxides such as  $\text{TiO}_2$ ,<sup>12</sup>  $\text{ZnO}$ <sup>13</sup> and  $\text{SnO}_2$ ,<sup>14</sup> are extensively

researched because of their excellent physical and chemical properties. Nevertheless, due to their wide band gap energies, the effective light response is normally restrained to the ultraviolet region, making them less active under visible-light. Thus, seeking an effective visible-light-responsive semiconductor is of great significance in the practical application of photocatalysis.

Indium oxide ( $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ ), as a typical n-type semiconductor, has been considered as a promising visible-light-active photocatalyst due to its relative narrow band gap ( $\sim 2.7$  eV), environmental stability and low toxicity.<sup>15,16</sup> However, a major shortcoming on the pure  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  is its high recombination rate of photoinduced charge carries, which has seriously inhibited its photocatalytic activity.<sup>17</sup> To address this drawback, combining  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  with another semiconductor to form a heterojunction has been regarded as an effective approach to favor the charge separation.<sup>18</sup> In particular, the Z-scheme heterojunction, inspired by the natural photosynthesis, has sparked great interest from researchers due to its efficient carries transfer pattern and the relative higher redox capacity in comparison with the conventional type II heterostructure.<sup>19–22</sup> For instance, Wang *et al.* fabricated a Z-scheme  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3/\text{CdS}$  photocatalyst and this heterojunction possessed outstanding degradation performance for the doxycycline hydrochloride and levofloxacin owing to the high charge separation rate.<sup>23</sup> Duan and coworkers constructed a  $\text{ZnO}/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  Z-scheme heterojunction which showed

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superior photocatalytic performance for H<sub>2</sub> production.<sup>24</sup> Recently, copper indium disulfide (CuInS<sub>2</sub>), a ternary chalcogenide semiconductor, has shown great potential in photocatalysis due to its narrow band energy (~1.8 eV) and high optical absorption coefficient ( $\alpha > 10^5 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ ).<sup>25,26</sup> Furthermore, the CuInS<sub>2</sub> possesses a theoretically suitable band structures and Fermi levels with those of In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>,<sup>27,28</sup> which makes them prospective candidates for constructing a Z-scheme heterostructure. However, to the best of our knowledge, very few reports currently focus on the assembling of such CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> composite to achieve a promoted photocatalytic activity.

In general, simple combining of hybridized semiconductors may cause interfacial resistance at their contact regions, which would impede the charge transfer and severely affect their photocatalytic performance.<sup>29</sup> To overcome this issue, heterostructures with interfacial bonds were fabricated and the formed intimate linkage was considered to be efficient to accelerate the spatial carrier transportation.<sup>30,31</sup> For example, Shehzad *et al.* reported that the chemical bonded TiO<sub>2</sub>-graphene displayed high photocatalytic activity attributing to the interfacial Ti–O–C bonds and promoted transfer of electrons.<sup>32</sup> In Chen and Jiang's report, the covalently bonded Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>/Bi<sub>2</sub>WO<sub>6</sub> composite by cosharing of the Bi–O tetrahedron showed superior photocatalytic activities for CO<sub>2</sub> reduction and degradation of RhB.<sup>33</sup> Recently, some researchers have found that calcination treatment on sulphide semiconductors could promote the production of sulfur vacancies, which could delocalize local electrons and contribute to developing the heterogeneous interfaces with chemical bonding.<sup>29,34</sup> Accordingly, for the CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> heterojunction, annealing of its precursor in the preparation process may be a prospective method to generate the interfacial chemical linkages between CuInS<sub>2</sub> and In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, which would be a key factor to boost its photocatalytic activity.

In this study, a chemically bonded CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> composite was successfully synthesized using a hydrothermal method followed by annealing treatment. The obtained heterojunction between CuInS<sub>2</sub> and In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> was formed *via* interfacial S–O linkages verified by the FT-IR and XPS. Besides, we selected lomefloxacin and Cr(vi) as the target contaminants to probe the visible-light photocatalytic performance on the prepared catalysts. Furthermore, a Z-scheme charge separation route was revealed by the quenching and ESR tests, and confirmed theoretically by DFT calculations. Finally, a synergistically enhanced photocatalytic mechanism of Z-scheme heterostructure and interfacial S–O bond on CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> was proposed and discussed.

## 2. Experimental

### 2.1 Chemical materials

Cuprous chloride (CuCl), indium chloride tetrahydrate (InCl<sub>3</sub>·4H<sub>2</sub>O), indium nitrate pentahydrate (In(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>3</sub>·5H<sub>2</sub>O), urea (CO(NH<sub>2</sub>)<sub>2</sub>), *N,N*-dimethylformamide, thioacetamide (C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>5</sub>NS), anhydrous ethanol, ammonium oxalate (AO), dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO), isopropyl alcohol (IPA), and benzoquinone (BQ) were obtained from Sinopharm Chemical Reagent Co., Ltd. (China). The lomefloxacin (LOM) was purchased from Aladdin Chemistry Co., Ltd (China). Besides, the potassium dichromate

(K<sub>2</sub>Cr<sub>2</sub>O<sub>7</sub>) was supplied by Shiyi Chemical Co., Ltd. (China). All chemicals and reagents are of analytical grade and used directly in the experiment.

### 2.2 Preparation of CuInS<sub>2</sub> sample

The bare CuInS<sub>2</sub> catalyst was synthesized by a solvothermal method. Typically, 0.3 mmol CuCl and 0.3 mmol InCl<sub>3</sub>·4H<sub>2</sub>O was dissolved and stirred in 40 mL of *N,N*-dimethylformamide to form a mixed solution. Subsequently, 3 mmol of thioacetamide was added into the above mixture under continuous stirring for another 60 min. Then, the obtained homogeneous solution was sealed in a 100 mL teflon-lined stainless autoclave and thermally treated at 180 °C for 16 h. After cooling to the ambient temperature naturally, the precipitate was harvested *via* centrifugation and washed alternately with deionized water and anhydrous ethanol for six times, and then dried in a vacuum oven at 60 °C for 24 h.

### 2.3 Preparation of CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> composites

The CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> photocatalysts with different mass ratios were prepared *via* a solvothermal and followed calcination route. In a typical procedure, 4 mmol In(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>3</sub>·5H<sub>2</sub>O and 30 mmol urea were introduced into 50 mL of deionized water with vortex stirring for 20 min, and then a predetermined amount of as-synthesized CuInS<sub>2</sub> was dispersed into the mixed solution with magnetic stirring for 90 min. Afterwards, the obtained suspension was transferred to a teflon-lined stainless autoclave (100 mL) and maintained at 140 °C for 12 h. The resultant product was separated by centrifugation and washed for several times with deionized water and anhydrous ethanol, and then dried at 80 °C for 24 h. Subsequently, the obtained power was calcined at 400 °C for 120 min in a ceramic crucible with a ramp rate of 10 °C min<sup>-1</sup> under argon atmosphere. The as-prepared CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> samples with nominal mass ratio 5%, 11%, 17% and 23% CuInS<sub>2</sub> were denoted as 5-CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, 11-CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, 17-CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, and 23-CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, respectively. For comparison, the pure In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> was prepared *via* the similar procedure only without the introduction of CuInS<sub>2</sub>.

### 2.4 Characterization and theoretical calculation

The details about characterization and theoretical calculation on the fabricated materials were provided in the ESI† SM1.

### 2.5 Photocatalytic activity evaluation

The photocatalytic performance of the synthesized catalysts were investigated through degrading lomefloxacin (LOM) and reducing Cr(vi) under visible light irradiation. The typical photocatalytic test was conducted as follows: 200 mg of each as-synthesized material was dispersed into 500 mL LOM (30 mg L<sup>-1</sup>) or Cr(vi) (50 mg L<sup>-1</sup>) aqueous solution under continuous stirring. To ensure the adsorption–desorption equilibrium, the suspension was vigorously stirred in dark for 30 min. Afterwards, the reaction system was irradiated by a 350 W Xe-lamp (CEL-HXUV500, CEAULIGHT, Beijing, China) equipped with a 420 nm cut-off filter, and 5 mL of the



suspensions were sucked out at timed intervals and immediately centrifuged for the removal of catalyst powders. The concentrations of residual LOM were determined by an UV-vis spectrophotometer (TU-1900) at a wavelength of 286 nm, and the remaining Cr(vi) concentrations were measured colorimetrically at 540 nm with the standard diphenylcarbazide method. All the experimental data were the average of three duplicate determinations.

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1 XRD analysis

The crystalline phase and purity of all prepared catalysts were characterized by XRD measurements, and the results are shown in Fig. 1. In the XRD pattern of bare  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ , the diffraction peaks at  $21.5^\circ$ ,  $30.6^\circ$ ,  $35.5^\circ$ ,  $41.8^\circ$ ,  $45.7^\circ$ ,  $51.0^\circ$  and  $60.7^\circ$  could be assigned to the (211), (222), (400), (332), (431), (440) and (622) crystal planes of cubic phase  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  (JCPDS no. 06-0416), respectively.<sup>35</sup> For bare  $\text{CuInS}_2$ , the typical peaks located at  $27.8^\circ$ ,  $32.4^\circ$ ,  $46.2^\circ$  and  $55.0^\circ$  were observed, which corresponded well to the (112), (200), (204) and (312) crystal reflections of  $\text{CuInS}_2$ , respectively (JCPDS no. 76-1461).<sup>36</sup> In regard to the  $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  samples, the characteristic peaks of both  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  and  $\text{CuInS}_2$  were identified and no other diffraction peaks of impurities could be observed. At the same time, the peak intensities of  $\text{CuInS}_2$  became correspondingly more intense with the  $\text{CuInS}_2$  content increasing, and not much difference was observed in the  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  diffraction peaks. The XRD characterization suggested that  $\text{CuInS}_2$  was successfully coupled with  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ , and their original crystal phases were remained well during the combining process.

#### 3.2 Micromorphology and element analysis

The surface morphologies of as-prepared  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ ,  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  composite were depicted by SEM and TEM. As

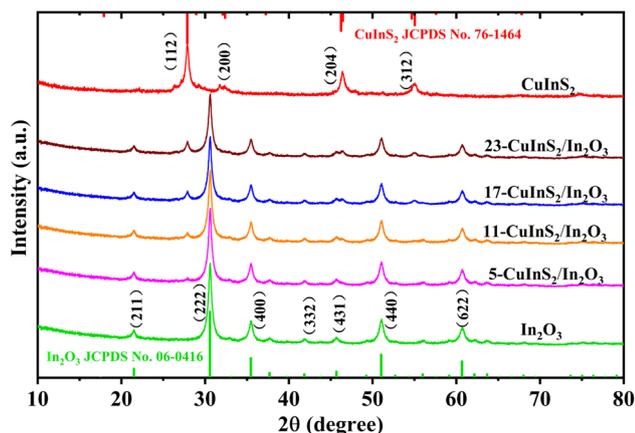


Fig. 1 XRD patterns recorded on bare  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ ,  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and  $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  composites.

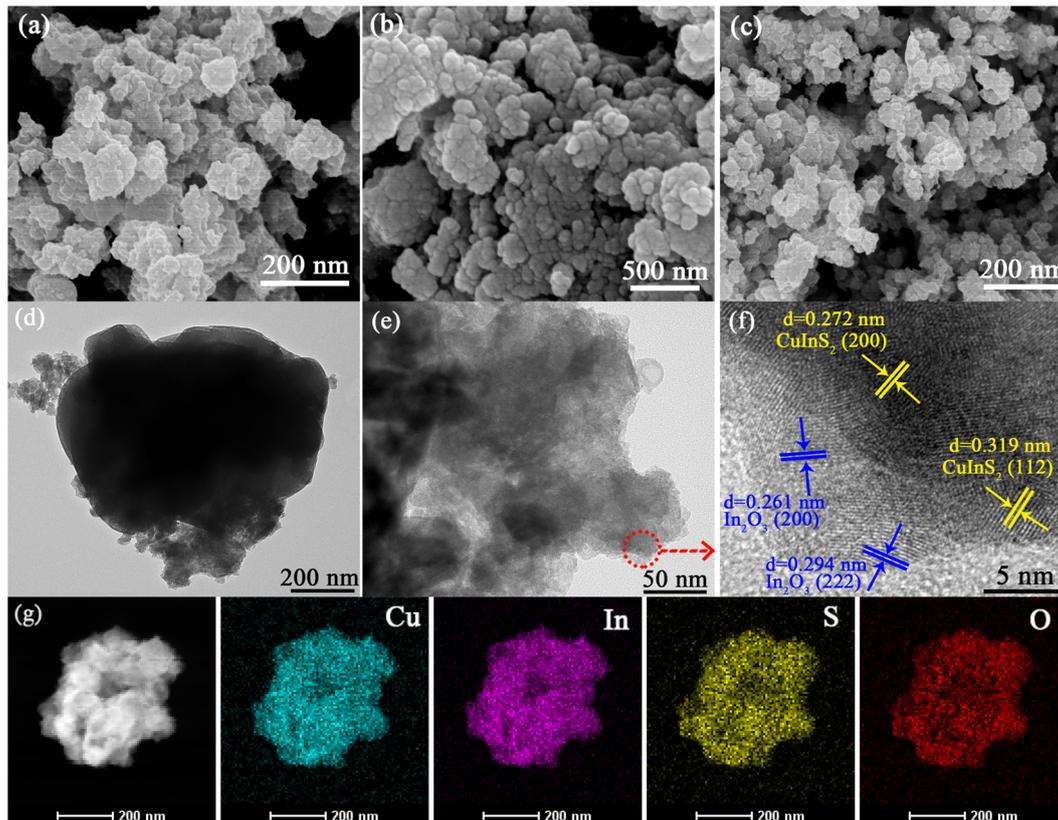


Fig. 2 SEM images of (a)  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ , (b)  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and (c) 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  sample; TEM images (d, e) and HRTEM image (f) of 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ ; (g) HAADF-STEM image and corresponding EDS elemental mappings of 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ .



displayed in Fig. 2(a), the bare  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  presented stacked small-size plate structure. In Fig. 2(b), it was observed that the pure  $\text{CuInS}_2$  was constructed by dense nanoparticles with concomitant aggregation. For 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  composite, it was found that the lamellar  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  and  $\text{CuInS}_2$  particles were both in its morphology (Fig. 2(c)). Besides, to further investigate the detailed information of the morphology and crystal structure, TEM and HRTEM analysis on 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  were carried out. As illustrated in Fig. 2(d and e), there was intimate interface contact between  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  and  $\text{CuInS}_2$ . In addition, the HRTEM image clearly showed the lattice fringes of the two substances. Among, the interplanar spacings of 0.272 and 0.319 nm corresponded to the (200) and (112) crystal planes of  $\text{CuInS}_2$ ,<sup>36,37</sup> and the spacings of the 0.261 and 294 nm were attributed to the (200) and (222) planes of  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ ,<sup>16,38</sup> respectively, which was in good agreement with the results from XRD analysis. Moreover, the high-angle annular dark field (HAADF) image and corresponding element mapping of 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  (Fig. 2(f)) demonstrated the presence of Cu, In, S and O elements, further testifying the co-existing of both  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  in this composite.

### 3.3 FT-IR and XPS analysis

The FT-IR spectra were performed to explore the structure and bond characteristics of the as-prepared samples. As observed in Fig. 3, the FT-IR spectrum recorded on bare  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  revealed the In–O stretching vibrations at 426 and 560  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  and the In–O bending vibration at 604  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ .<sup>27,35</sup> In addition, the bands centered at 3456 and 1592  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  could be ascribed to the stretching and bending vibration of –OH groups from physical adsorbed water, respectively.<sup>39</sup> In the FT-IR spectrum of bare  $\text{CuInS}_2$ , the bands at 1700 and 1449  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  belonged to the S–In and S–Cu vibrations, respectively.<sup>40,41</sup> For the composite of 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ , all the typical bands of surface bonds on  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  and  $\text{CuInS}_2$  were detected, suggesting their coexistence in this composite. Of note, a new band located at 1061  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  was observed, which could be assigned to the vibration of S–O bond.<sup>29</sup> This S–O bond might be formed *via* the reaction of the

unsaturated S vacancies in  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and O atoms in  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ , suggesting the construction of interfacial linkages in  $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  heterostructure.

The XPS determination was used to probe more details about the surface element composition and chemical states on the as-synthesized catalysts. As depicted in Fig. 4(a), the In 3d spectrum for bare  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  was divided into two symmetrical peaks at 452.2 and 444.6 eV, corresponding to In 3d<sub>3/2</sub> and 3d<sub>5/2</sub>, respectively.<sup>29</sup> The energy peaks of Cu 2p<sub>1/2</sub> and 2p<sub>3/2</sub> on bare  $\text{CuInS}_2$  were located at 950.2 and 930.8 eV,<sup>42</sup> respectively (Fig. 4(b)). While for the 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  composite, the In 3d energy positions were observed to shift to lower states (Fig. 4(a)), and meanwhile the Cu 2p states showed a positive shift (Fig. 4(b)) in comparison with the individual materials. Fig. 4(c) presents the high resolution XPS spectra of S 2p on bare  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  sample. The S 2p spectrum on bare  $\text{CuInS}_2$  could be decomposed into two peaks at 163.1 eV (S–In) and 161.9 eV (S–Cu), respectively.<sup>43</sup> In the case of 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  composite, the fitted S 2p peaks of S–In (163.6 eV) and S–Cu (162.4 eV) exhibited a positive shift, and notably, a new peak was observed at 164.6 eV associated with the S–O bonds.<sup>29,34</sup> In Fig. 4(d), the fitting curve of O 1s on bare  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  involved two peaks at 532.6 and 529.8 eV, which were ascribed to the –OH from surface adsorbed water and In–O–In bond in the structure of  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ , respectively.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, an additional peak was developed at 531.6 eV in the O 1s spectrum of 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  composite, which could corresponded to the S–O bonds.<sup>29,44</sup> According to the above fitting results, it was found that each element in 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  showed a negative or positive shift in the banding energy compared with that of bare materials as indicated in Fig. 4(a–d), and moreover, the formation of interfacial S–O bonds was testified by XPS measurement in consistency with the results from FT-IR, indicating the intimate interfacial contact between  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ .

### 3.4 UV-vis DRS analysis

UV-vis diffuse reflectance spectra (DRS) were recorded for investigating the photo-response range on the prepared photocatalysts. As displayed in Fig. 5(a), the optical absorption edge of bare  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  was found at approximate 500 nm. After combining with  $\text{CuInS}_2$ , the  $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  composites revealed gradually promoted visible light response in the range of 500–800 nm with the  $\text{CuInS}_2$  loading content increasing, which was attributed to the excellent light absorption on  $\text{CuInS}_2$ . In addition, the band gap energies of the bulk  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  was analyzed *via* the following equation:<sup>45</sup>  $\alpha h\nu = A (\hbar\nu - E_g)^{n/2}$ , in which  $\alpha$  and  $A$  represent the absorption coefficients,  $\hbar$ ,  $\nu$  and  $E_g$  stand for the Planck constant, light frequency and band gap energy, respectively, and  $n$  depends on the transition feature of electrons in the semiconductor with 1 and 4 for a direct transition and indirect transition gap one, respectively. In this case, both  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  were disclosed to reveal direct transitions.<sup>27,41</sup> Accordingly, the band gap values of  $\text{CuInS}_2$ ,  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ , 5- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ , 11- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ , 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  and 23- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  were estimated to be 1.81, 2.75, 2.73, 2.70, 2.67 and 2.62 eV, respectively (Fig. 5(b)).

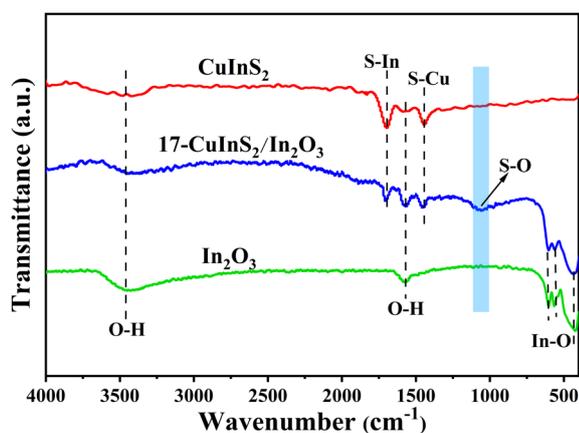


Fig. 3 FT-IR spectra of bare  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ ,  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  composite.



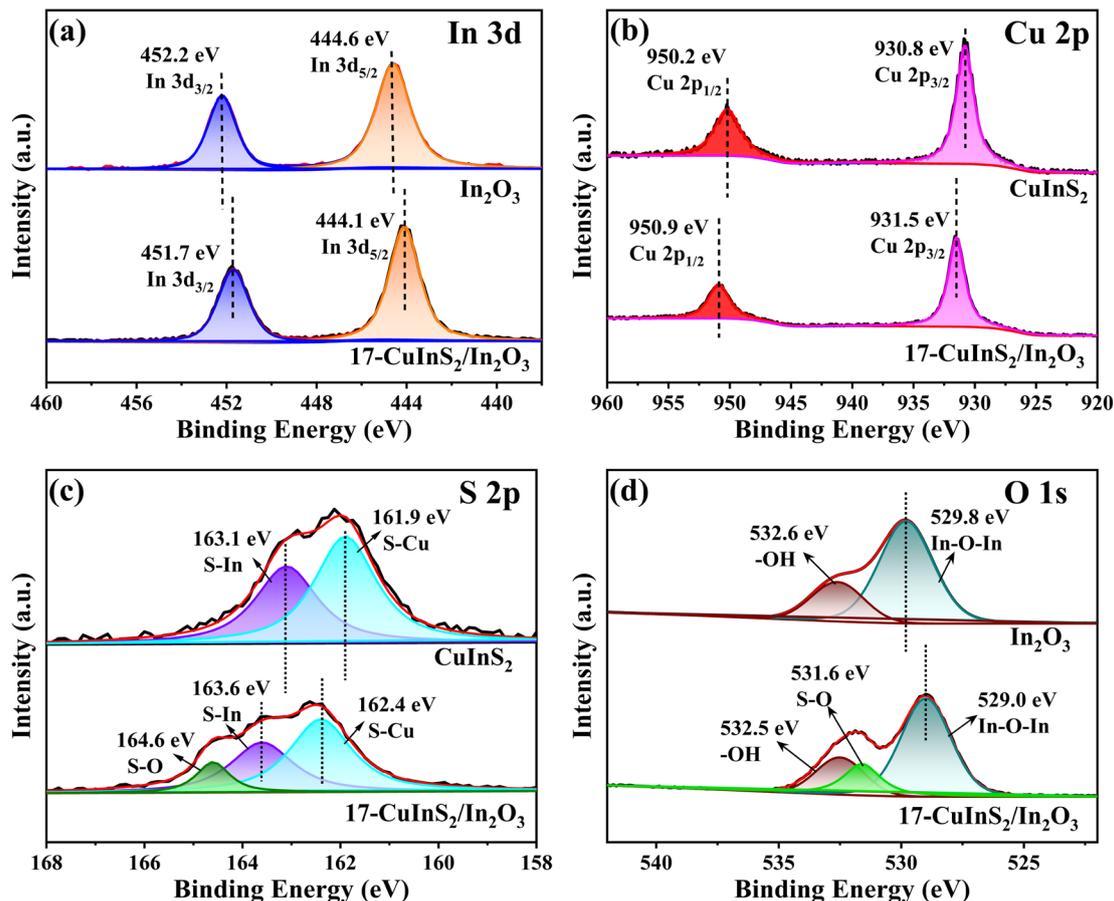


Fig. 4 High-resolution XPS spectra of (a) In 3d, (b) Cu 2p, (c) S 2p, and (d) O 1s on bare  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ ,  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  composite.

### 3.5 Photoluminescence and photocurrent analysis

The photoluminescence (PL) emission spectra were used to explore the recombination rate of photoinduced electrons and holes on the prepared photocatalysts. As illustrated in Fig. 6(a), the  $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  samples exhibited obviously declining PL emission intensities in comparison with the pure  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  and  $\text{CuInS}_2$ , indicated that the recombination of charge carriers was effectively restrained in the composites.<sup>46,47</sup> In addition, it was

found that the loading content of  $\text{CuInS}_2$  in the composites had a great influence on the PL intensity. Notably, the 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  possessed the lowest PL emission intensity, implying its highest separation efficiency of electron-hole pairs in the photocatalytic process. Furthermore, to confirm the charge separation efficiency on the obtained catalysts, photocurrent response tests were carried out and the results are shown in Fig. 6(b). Normally, the higher photocurrent intensity indicates

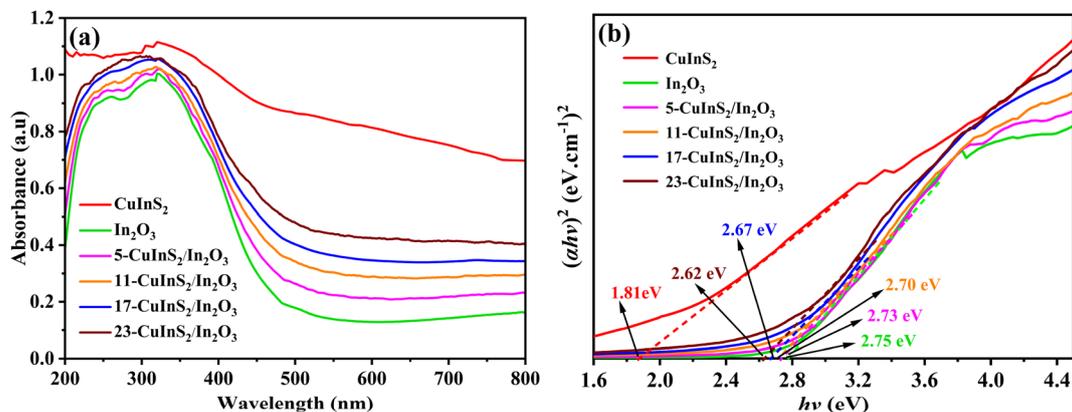


Fig. 5 (a) UV-vis DRS spectra of different samples and (b) Plots of  $(ah\nu)^2$  versus  $h\nu$  on pure  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ .



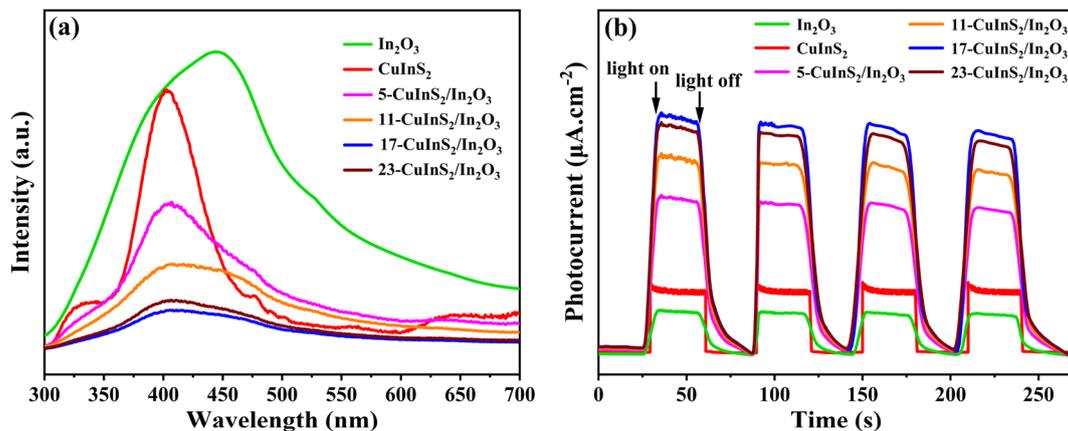


Fig. 6 Photoluminescence spectra (a) and photocurrent density curves (b) on bare  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ ,  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and  $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  composites.

the larger charge transfer and separation rate on the semiconductor.<sup>48,49</sup> It was observed that the  $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  composites displayed enhanced photocurrent response densities compared to the bare materials, and the 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  showed the strongest response density, suggesting the outstanding charge separation efficiency inside 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ . This result was kept in line with the analysis of PL

spectra, which might be due to the tight interfacial contact with covalent S–O bonds between  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ .

### 3.6 Photocatalytic activity

Photocatalytic experiments of degrading LOM and reducing  $\text{Cr}(\text{vi})$  conducted under visible light irradiation were used to evaluate the photocatalytic performance of the as-fabricated

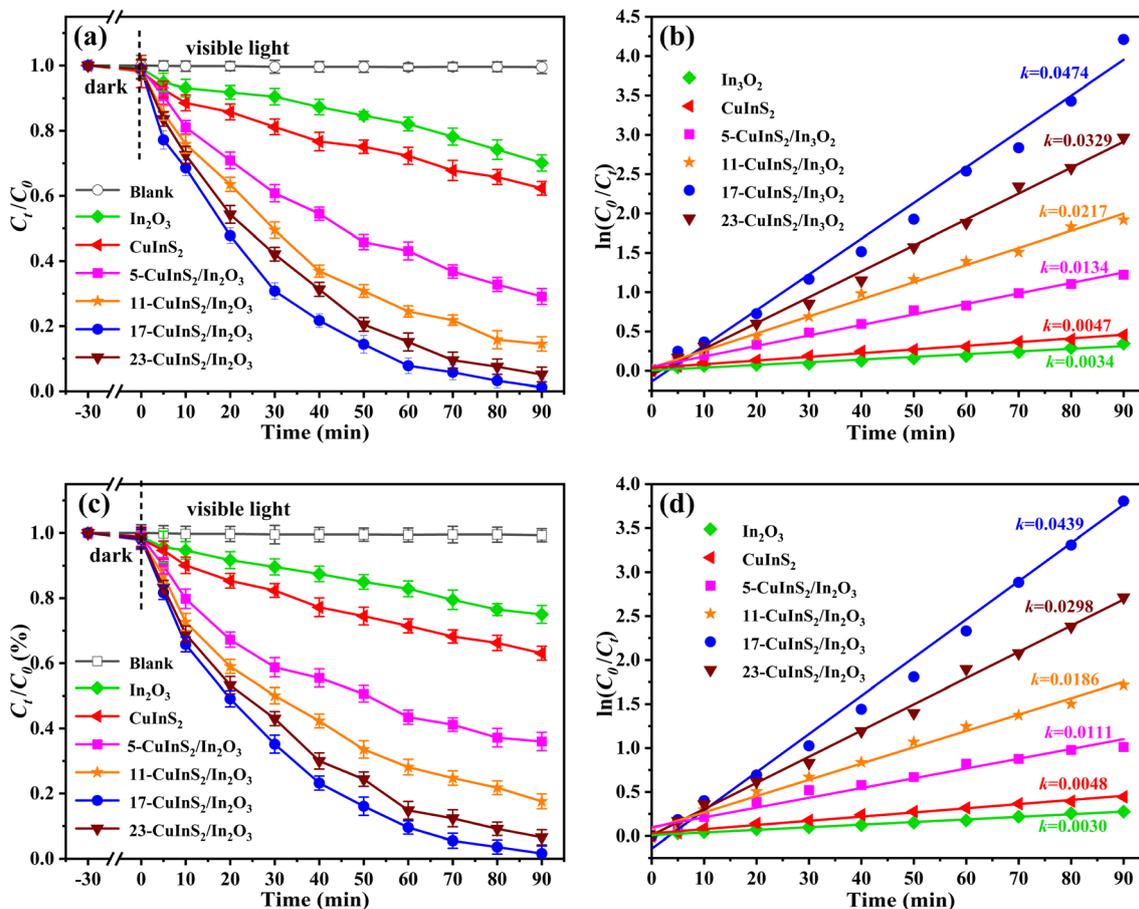


Fig. 7 Photocatalytic degradation of LOM (a) and reduction of  $\text{Cr}(\text{vi})$  (c), with (b) and (d) the corresponding pseudo-first-order kinetics on the as-prepared photocatalysts under visible light irradiation.



photocatalysts. In addition, the blank tests were also carried out to estimate the photostability of the selected pollutants under light irradiation. Fig. 7(a) presents the photo-degradation activities of different samples towards LOM solution. It could be found that there was very little degradation rate of LOM with direct photolysis (without solids), suggesting the tenacious stability of aqueous LOM. Besides, after the addition of bare  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ , only 29.9% of LOM was degraded in 90 min, and meanwhile the pure  $\text{CuInS}_2$  also displayed unsatisfactory photocatalytic performance with 37.7% LOM degradation rate. By contrast, all the  $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  composites showed boosted photocatalytic activities. Among them, the 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  possessed the highest photo-degradation rate of LOM (98.8%) after 90 min visible light irradiation, which might mainly due to its excellent separation efficiency of electron-hole pairs demonstrated by the PL and photocurrent measurements. Additionally, the photo-reaction kinetics of LOM over different catalysts were analyzed *via* the pseudo-first order kinetic formula ( $\ln(C_0/C_t) = kt$ ).<sup>50</sup> As illustrated in Fig. 7(b), the fitted curves were in good accordance with the kinetic model, and the 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  revealed the fastest rate constant ( $0.0474 \text{ min}^{-1}$ ), which was 10.1 and 13.9 times higher than that of bare  $\text{CuInS}_2$  ( $0.0047 \text{ min}^{-1}$ ) and  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  ( $0.0034 \text{ min}^{-1}$ ), respectively.

Fig. 7(c) shows the photocatalytic performance for  $\text{Cr}(\text{vi})$  reduction on the prepared catalysts. Similar to the LOM degradation, the removal rate of  $\text{Cr}(\text{vi})$  was almost negligible in the blank experiment. Besides, both bare  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  presented low catalytic performance with only 37.1% and 25.2% reduction rate of  $\text{Cr}(\text{vi})$ , respectively. However, markedly improved activities of  $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  were acquired for the removal of  $\text{Cr}(\text{vi})$ , and in line with the LOM degradation tests, the 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  also displayed the best reduction rate of  $\text{Cr}(\text{vi})$  (98.1%) in the 90 min reaction time. Furthermore, the obtained rate constants resulted from the pseudo-first order kinetic curves disclosed that the  $k$  value on the 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  ( $0.0439 \text{ min}^{-1}$ ) was 9.14 and 14.6 times higher than that of pure  $\text{CuInS}_2$  ( $0.0048 \text{ min}^{-1}$ ) and  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  ( $0.0030 \text{ min}^{-1}$ ), respectively (Fig. 7(d)). In addition, the photocatalytic activity of the 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  composite was also compared with those of other reported photocatalysts. As displayed in Table S1,<sup>†</sup> the 17-

$\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  showed a quite competitive performance in the photocatalytic removal of lomefloxacin and  $\text{Cr}(\text{vi})$ .

The cyclic stability of the 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  photocatalyst was evaluated *via* the consecutive LOM degradation and  $\text{Cr}(\text{vi})$  reduction for five times, respectively. As can be obtained from Fig. 8(a), the photocatalytic performance of 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  had no obvious deactivation with only 2.8% and 3.6% decline in LOM degradation and  $\text{Cr}(\text{vi})$  reduction after five runs, respectively, disclosing its remarkable reusability. Besides, it could be concluded from the XRD patterns (Fig. 8(b)) and S 2p and O 1s XPS spectra (Fig. S1<sup>†</sup>) of 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  before and after five cycles that its crystal structure basically remained unchanged during the reactions, which further verifying its chemical stability.

### 3.7 Mechanism analysis

In order to elucidate the photocatalytic mechanism on the as-synthesized materials, density functional theory (DFT) calculation was used to explore the electronic band structures of bulk  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ . As presented in Fig. 9(a and b), the direct band gaps of the  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  were calculated to be 1.77 and 2.71 eV, respectively, which were very close to the Tauc plot results of 1.81 eV ( $\text{CuInS}_2$ ) and 2.75 eV ( $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ ) from UV-vis DRS spectra (Fig. 5(b)). In addition, the Mott-Schottky (M-S) tests were performed to determine the band potentials of the  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ . As can be seen from the M-S plots (Fig. 9(c and d)), these two materials both belonged to the n-type semiconductors, and the flat band potentials on the  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  were obtained as  $-0.67$  and  $-0.19 \text{ V vs. Ag/AgCl}$  ( $\text{pH} = 6.8$ ), respectively, and meanwhile their flat band potentials could be converted to be  $-0.47$  and  $0.01 \text{ V vs. NHE}$  ( $E_{\text{NHE}} = E_{\text{Ag/AgCl}} + 0.2 \text{ V}$ ),<sup>51</sup> respectively. For the n-type semiconductor, the conduction band (CB) potential is normally more negative by approximately 0.1 V than the flat band potential,<sup>10</sup> thus the CB potentials of the  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  were determined to be  $-0.57$  and  $-0.09 \text{ V vs. NHE}$ , respectively. In addition, according to the formula  $E_{\text{VB}} = E_{\text{CB}} + E_{\text{g}}$ , the corresponding VB potentials were calculated to be 1.24 eV for  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and 2.66 eV for  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ , which agreed well with the results from VB-XPS spectra presented in Fig. S2.<sup>†</sup>

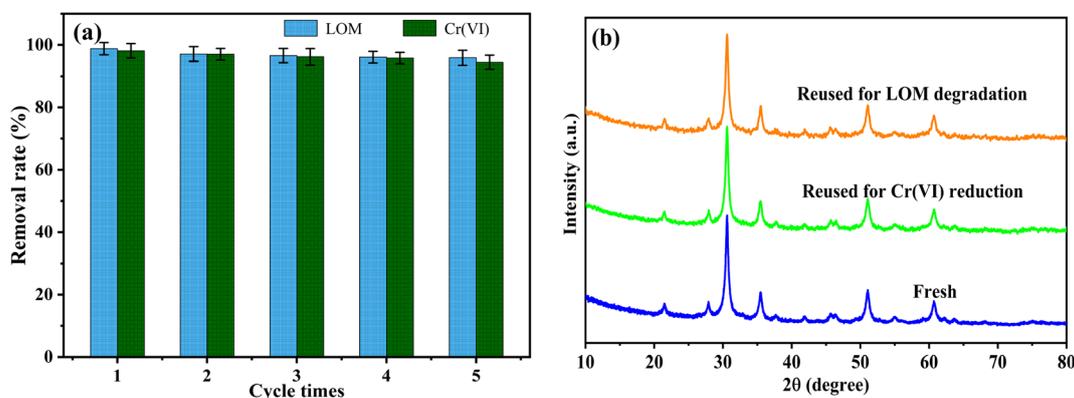


Fig. 8 (a) Recycling experiments of 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  for LOM degradation and  $\text{Cr}(\text{vi})$  reduction, (b) XRD patterns of the fresh and used 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ .



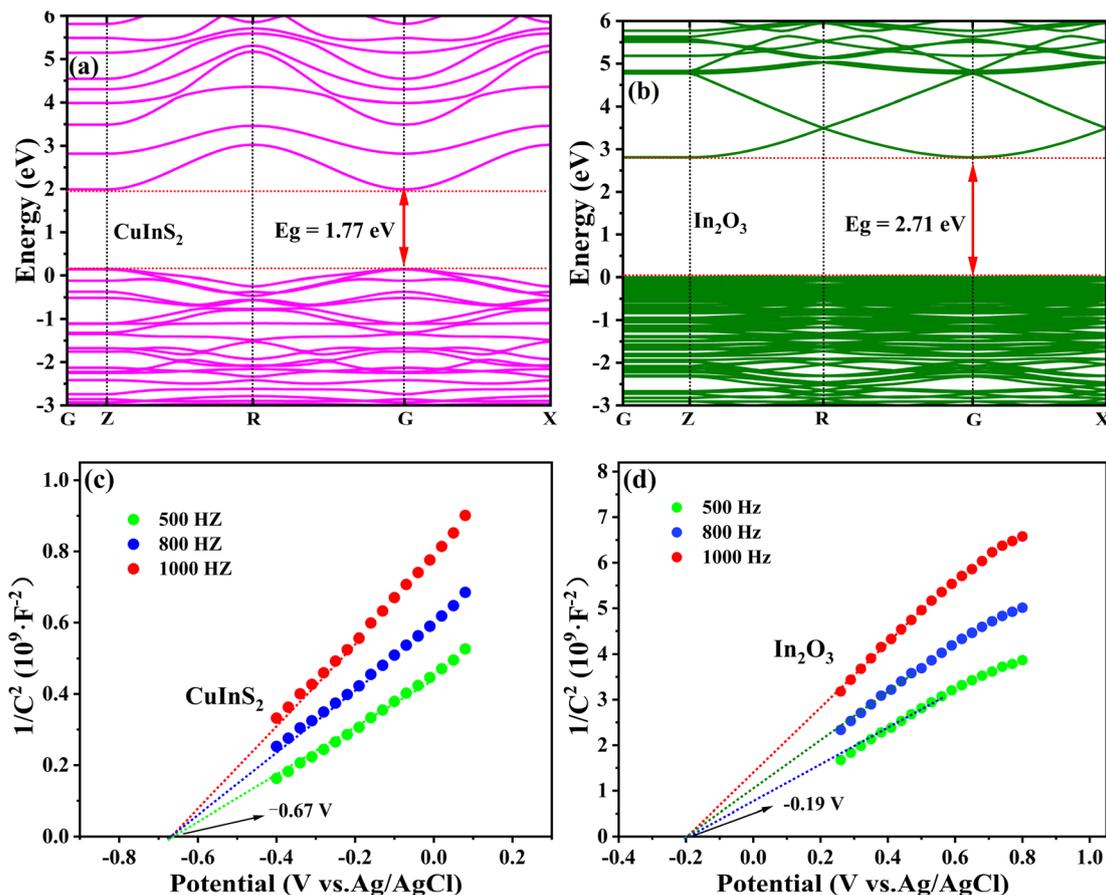


Fig. 9 DFT calculated electronic band structures (a and b) and Mott–Schottky curves (c and d) of  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ .

To clearly clarify the effect of reactive species involving the photocatalytic activity over 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ , quenching tests were carried out by adding ammonium oxalate (AO), dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO), isopropyl alcohol (IPA) and benzoquinone (BQ) as sacrificial agents for holes ( $\text{h}^+$ ), electrons ( $\text{e}^-$ ), hydroxyl radicals ( $\cdot\text{OH}$ ) and superoxide radicals ( $\cdot\text{O}_2^-$ ), respectively.<sup>52</sup> As displayed in Fig. 10(a), there was a sharp decline (from 98.8% to 18.6%) in the photo-degradation rate of LOM when the IPA was added as the scavenger, suggesting that  $\cdot\text{OH}$  played the key role in degrading LOM. Besides, the introductions of AO and BQ had apparently negative effects on LOM degradation with the degradation rates decreasing to 48.2% and 35.1%, respectively, indicating that the  $\text{h}^+$  and  $\cdot\text{O}_2^-$  species both played important roles in LOM degradation. For the trapping experiments of  $\text{Cr}(\text{vi})$  reduction, it was observed that adding DMSO could significantly restrain the reduction of  $\text{Cr}(\text{vi})$  (17.4%), revealing that the photoinduced  $\text{e}^-$  directly participated in the  $\text{Cr}(\text{vi})$  reduction and acted as the dominant role in the reaction. In addition, the  $\text{Cr}(\text{vi})$  reduction rate was greatly suppressed in the presence of BQ (30.2%), implying that  $\cdot\text{O}_2^-$  radicals also played a crucial role in  $\text{Cr}(\text{vi})$  reduction.

Additionally, ESR measurements were conducted to further examine the existence of  $\cdot\text{O}_2^-$  and  $\cdot\text{OH}$  active species generated in the photocatalytic system. As shown in Fig. 10(b), there was no distinct peak in the absence of light, and the bare  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  also

displayed no characteristic peak in its ESR spectrum for  $\text{DMPO}\cdot\text{O}_2^-$ , which could be due to that the induced  $\text{e}^-$  in the CB of  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  ( $-0.09$  eV vs. NHE) was not strong enough to reactive with  $\text{O}_2$  to generate  $\cdot\text{O}_2^-$  ( $\text{O}_2/\cdot\text{O}_2^-$ ,  $-0.33$  eV vs. NHE).<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile, four characteristic peaks of  $\text{DMPO}\cdot\text{O}_2^-$  were detected on the bare  $\text{CuInS}_2$  after 8 min visible light irradiation. Noticeably, the typical signals of  $\text{DMPO}\cdot\text{O}_2^-$  were extremely enhanced on the 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ , indicating that abundant  $\text{O}_2^-$  radicals had been produced in this catalytic system. Fig. 10(c) depicts the ESR spectra of  $\text{DMPO}\cdot\text{OH}$  performed on the as-prepared samples. It was found that no characteristic signal could be observed in dark, while four typical peaks of  $\text{DMPO}\cdot\text{OH}$  appeared in the ESR spectrum on the bare  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ , suggesting the existence of  $\cdot\text{OH}$  species in the photoreaction. As for the bare  $\text{CuInS}_2$ , no obvious peak could be perceived in its ESR curve for  $\text{DMPO}\cdot\text{OH}$ , on account of the lower oxidation ability of  $\text{h}^+$  in the VB of  $\text{CuInS}_2$  (1.24 eV vs. NHE) relative to the standard potential of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}/\cdot\text{OH}$  (2.4 eV vs. NHE).<sup>54</sup> However, the 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  exhibited a significant enhancement of  $\text{DMPO}\cdot\text{OH}$  peaks compared with bare  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ , revealing that the combination of  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  and  $\text{CuInS}_2$  could greatly promote the production of  $\cdot\text{OH}$  radicals.

Based on the above band structure analysis of  $\text{CuInS}_2$  and  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$ , it was assumed that the 17- $\text{CuInS}_2/\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  was constructed within a traditional type II band alignment, the photoexcited  $\text{e}^-$



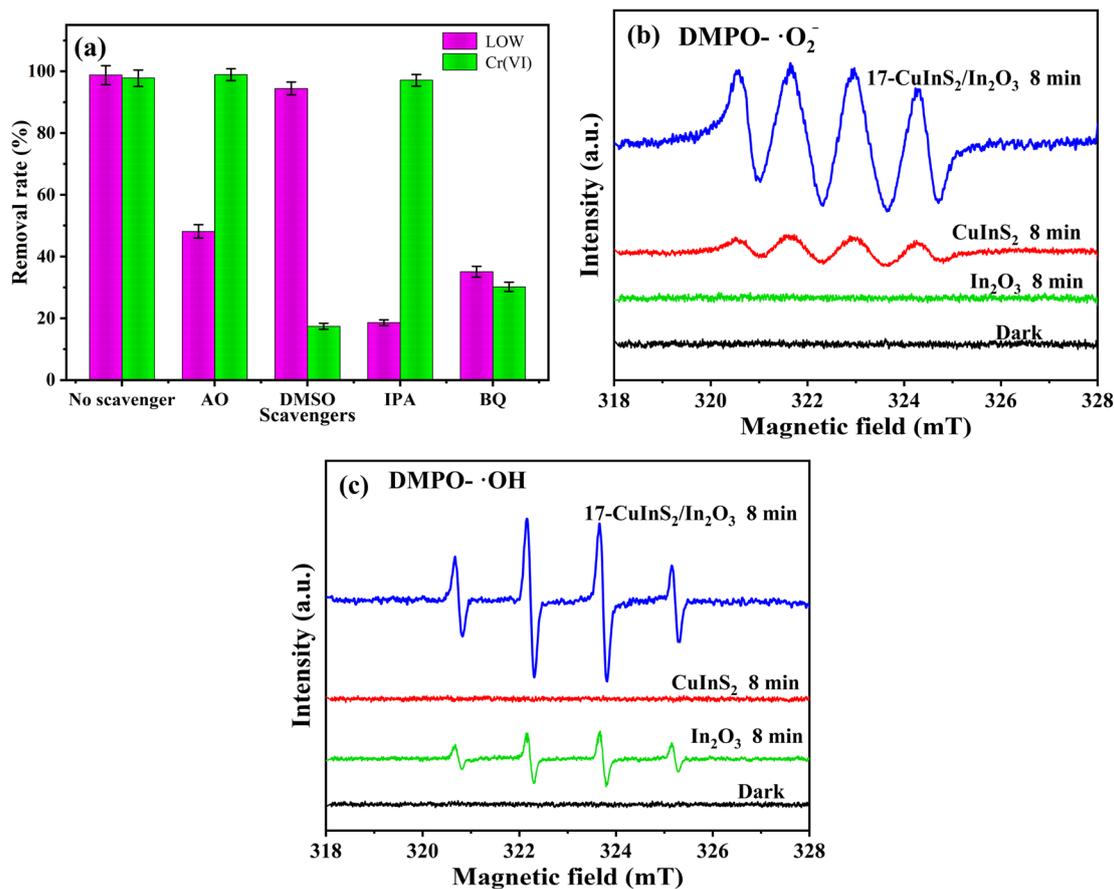


Fig. 10 Photocatalytic removal of LOM and Cr(VI) over 17-CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> with different sacrificial agents (a), ESR spectra of ·O<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> (b) and ·OH (c) radicals trapped by DMPO on 17-CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>.

in the CB of CuInS<sub>2</sub> (−0.57 eV vs. NHE) should move down to that of In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> (−0.09 eV vs. NHE), and simultaneously, the generated h<sup>+</sup> in the VB of In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> (2.66 eV vs. NHE) would transfer to that of CuInS<sub>2</sub> (1.24 eV vs. NHE). Nevertheless, in this case, neither ·O<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> nor ·OH could be produced in the photocatalytic reactions with 17-CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> composite, which be in contradiction to the results from the quenching and ESR tests.

Thereby, the charge transfer mechanism of this CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> heterojunction may belong to a Z-scheme pattern. To further testify this supposition and make certain the charge transfer model at interface, work functions of CuInS<sub>2</sub> and In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> were calculated by the DFT method. As indicated in Fig. 11, the surface work functions (Φ) of CuInS<sub>2</sub> and In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> were simulated to be 3.28 and 5.76 eV, respectively. According to the formula of

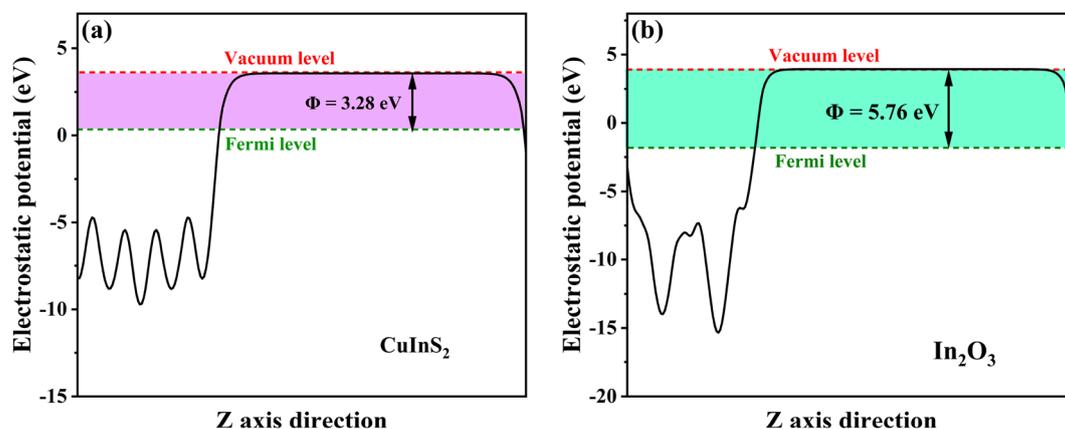


Fig. 11 Calculated work functions of (a) CuInS<sub>2</sub> and (b) In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>.



$E_f = E_{va} - \Phi$ ,<sup>55</sup> in which  $E_f$  and  $E_{va}$  stand for the Fermi level and electrostatic potential of vacuum level, respectively, the Fermi energy of CuInS<sub>2</sub> was higher than that of In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>. Thus, when CuInS<sub>2</sub> and In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> form an intimate heterostructure, the e<sup>-</sup> at the CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> interface will be rearranged with a migration from CuInS<sub>2</sub> to In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> until their Fermi energies attain an equilibrium, and as a result, the internal electric field (IEF) will be formed with the orientation from CuInS<sub>2</sub> to In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>. Thereby, due to the IEF, the photoexcited e<sup>-</sup> in In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> should transfer to CuInS<sub>2</sub> in the 17-CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> reaction system, forming the Z-scheme transfer path.

As a whole, the Z-scheme photocatalytic mechanism over CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> heterostructure is proposed and illustrated in Fig. 12. Firstly, once the CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> was irradiated by the visible light, both CuInS<sub>2</sub> and In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> were excited to yield electrons and holes in their CB and VB, respectively. Secondly, owing to the formation of IEF, it would drive the photoexcited electrons to move from the CB of In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> to the VB of CuInS<sub>2</sub> *via* interfacial S–O bonds, and then the recombination of electrons and holes occurred there. In the meantime, the electrons congregated in the CB of CuInS<sub>2</sub> could directly reduce Cr(VI) to Cr(III) or produce <sup>•</sup>O<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> *via* reacting with O<sub>2</sub>, and subsequently the generated <sup>•</sup>O<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> could not only convert Cr(VI) to Cr(III) but also oxidize LOM to smaller molecules. Besides, in the VB of In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, the accumulated holes would degrade LOM or react with H<sub>2</sub>O to produce <sup>•</sup>OH radicals, further contributing to the degradation of LOM. Based on the aforementioned reaction process, the Z-scheme heterostructure and the formed interfacial S–O bonds between CuInS<sub>2</sub> and In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> were regarded as the two synergistic factors for the enhanced photocatalytic performance on CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> heterojunctions. On the one hand, the built IEF in the Z-scheme heterostructure provided an efficient separate route for e<sup>-</sup>-h<sup>+</sup> pairs. On the other hand, the covalent S–O linkage served as a specific bridge to further accelerate the charge separation. By virtue of this synergistic effect, the recombination of e<sup>-</sup>-h<sup>+</sup> pairs was markedly suppressed on the CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> composite, thus greatly enhancing its photocatalytic performance for aqueous LOM and Cr(VI).

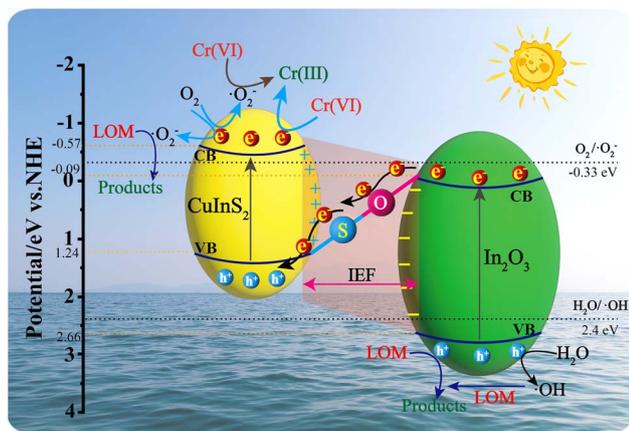


Fig. 12 Schematic representation of proposed photocatalytic mechanism on CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> for LOM degradation and Cr(VI) reduction under visible light irradiation.

## 4. Conclusions

In summary, a covalently bonded CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> composite photocatalyst was successfully prepared *via* a hydrothermal and followed annealing route. The synthesized CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> heterostructure possessed an intimate interface with covalent S–O bonds confirmed by the FT-IR and XPS characterizations. In addition, the trapping and ESR tests disclosed a Z-scheme charge transfer pattern associated with the CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> heterojunction, and this transfer model was further demonstrated theoretically *via* the DFT calculations. As a result, in comparison with the individual materials, the optimal 17-CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> composite exhibited extremely promoted photocatalytic performance in degrading LOM and reducing Cr(VI) under visible light irradiation. In this CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> system, the built IEF provided an efficient Z-scheme separation path for charge carriers, and meanwhile the formed interfacial S–O bond acted as a bridge to further boost this separation rate. Thus, the Z-scheme heterostructure and S–O linkages showed a synergistic effect for the enhanced photocatalytic activities over CuInS<sub>2</sub>/In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> composites. In addition, the fabricated heterojunctions also presented good stability and reusability in five test cycles. This work provides an innovative route to constructing high-performance Z-scheme photocatalysts for environmental pollution.

## Author contributions

Xiaofei Fu: conceptualization, validation, formal analysis, writing-original draft, writing-review & editing. Junwu Tao: formal analysis, visualization, data curation. Zizhou Zhao: formal analysis, methodology, data curation. Siwen Sun: formal analysis, visualization, data curation. Lin Zhao: formal analysis, data curation. Zuming He: investigation, supervision, writing-review & editing. Yong Gao: supervision, formal analysis, visualization, supervision. Yongmei Xia: formal analysis, writing-review & editing. All authors have approved the final version of the manuscript.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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