

Cite this: *Chem. Sci.*, 2017, 8, 5261

Surface engineering of graphitic carbon nitride polymers with cocatalysts for photocatalytic overall water splitting

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Graphitic carbon nitride based polymers, being metal-free, accessible, environmentally benign and sustainable, have been widely investigated for artificial photosynthesis in recent years for the photocatalytic splitting of water to produce hydrogen fuel. However, the photocatalytic stoichiometric splitting of pure water into H₂ and O₂ with a molecular ratio of 2 : 1 is far from easy, and is usually hindered by the huge activation energy barrier and sluggish surface redox reaction kinetics. Herein, we provide a concise overview of cocatalyst modified graphitic carbon nitride based photocatalysts, with our main focus on the modulation of the water splitting redox reaction kinetics. We believe that a timely and concise review on this promising but challenging research topic will certainly be beneficial for general readers and researchers in order to better understand the property–activity relationship towards overall water splitting, which could also trigger the development of new organic architectures for photocatalytic overall water splitting through the rational control of surface chemistry.

Received 20th April 2017

Accepted 6th June 2017

DOI: 10.1039/c7sc01747b

rsc.li/chemical-science

1. Introduction

Photocatalytic overall water splitting using nanoparticulate semiconductors is regarded as a potentially scalable and economically feasible method to convert the cost-free and earth-abundant solar energy into clean and renewable hydrogen fuel.^{1–6} Substantial research efforts have mainly focused on improving the photocatalytic activities of the semiconductors, and mostly focus on modification of the composition, structure, texture and morphology of the materials.^{7–15} However, until now, most of the materials that have been reported for water splitting reactions have been based on inorganic semiconductors,^{16,17} which are usually composed of rare elements and are not suitable for large-scale sustainable development. It is therefore reasonable to explore the use of earth-abundant materials, namely materials that are accessible, cost-affordable, and environmentally benign, and their textural and optical properties which can also be easily tailored to achieve photocatalytic water splitting with high performance.

In very recent years, organic conjugated polymers have attracted particular research interest since melon based carbon nitride polymers and crystalline graphitic carbon nitrides (both traditionally named as g-C₃N₄ for simplicity), which have been reported to be promising visible light photocatalysts, are accessible to many different researchers. They can be prepared in large amounts and can be used in studies on reactor and process design.^{18–27} Compared with traditional inorganic

semiconductors, conjugated polymers possess more advantages, including being metal-free, nontoxic and low-cost, and the fact that their composition, structure and properties can also be readily tuned by adjusting the building blocks of versatile organic protocols. Furthermore, the organic texture of carbon nitride enables it to exhibit some unique properties, such as an abundance of nitrogen lone-pair electrons and grain boundary defects, thus making it very suitable for the construction of metal/carbon nitride heterojunctions for fast charge transfer at the interface. The first publication on carbon nitride photocatalysis has been cited >3000 times since 2009, as reported by Google Scholar. This has motivated extensive research into artificial photosynthesis using polymers, and a series of conjugated polymers have been investigated as excellent organic semiconductors for photocatalytic H₂ production from water.^{18–27} In the presence of cocatalysts (*e.g.* Pt or Pd) and electron donors (*e.g.* triethanolamine or methanol), some of the conjugated polymers could achieve sufficient activities for visible light H₂ production. Until now, the apparent quantum yield (AQY) of conjugated polymers for H₂ evolution under visible light irradiation ($\lambda > 420$ nm) that could be obtained was as high as 38.8%.²⁸ However, only a few of those investigated conjugated polymers have exhibited activity towards water oxidation, due to being restrained by their weak stability and insufficient oxidation ability of the valence holes. Therefore, it is observed that only a limited number of conjugated polymers can be utilized for overall water splitting.

By virtue of their well configured band structures (CB: –1.3 V; VB: 1.4 V vs. NHE, pH = 6.8) and robust stability, both of which are normally regarded as the two prerequisites for water

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enhance the optical absorption, enlarge the surface area, and optimize the electronic and texture properties, thus improving the water splitting activities.⁶³ However, the reaction rate of the third step is confirmed to be much slower than that of the first two steps, which normally involve the use of cocatalysts to decrease the reaction activation energy and accelerate the H–O bond breaking and O–O bond formation. Evidently, the last step is the major step for kinetic control of the overall water splitting efficiency. It is thus of pivotal importance to develop suitable cocatalysts to improve the water redox reaction efficiency and reinforce the stability of the semiconductors.

In principle, as is shown in Fig. 2, the Gibbs free energy change for the decomposition of 1 mol H₂O to 1 mol H₂ and 1/2 mol O₂ under standard conditions is 237 kJ (corresponding to 1.23 eV). This reaction, despite only generating two singular molecules, is a thermodynamically uphill reaction that is non-spontaneous and usually calls for huge additional energy input (*e.g.* solar energy) to drive it.^{3–5} Furthermore, besides the additional energy input required, a huge energy barrier, *i.e.* the activation energy, usually hinders the water splitting reaction. The deposition of cocatalysts has been reported to promote photocatalytic activity.^{64,65} This is because, under light irradiation, the cocatalysts not only function as kinetic promoters to catalyse the evolution rate of the gases, but also serve as charge trap centres to extract electrons and holes from the photo-excited semiconductors. Evidently, the overall water splitting activity depends on the catalytic performance of the cocatalysts. In addition, in comparison with the water reduction half reaction, the water oxidation half reaction, which involves the transfer of four-electrons accompanied by O–H bond breaking and O–O bond formation, is usually restrained by the huge activation energy (~700 mV) and sluggish O–O bond formation kinetics.⁶⁹ Thus, the water oxidation process is usually more restrained in comparison with the water reduction half reaction and is thus regarded as the key step to achieving an efficient overall water splitting reaction.

In order to achieve overall water splitting, it is advisable to individually investigate the water reduction and water oxidation

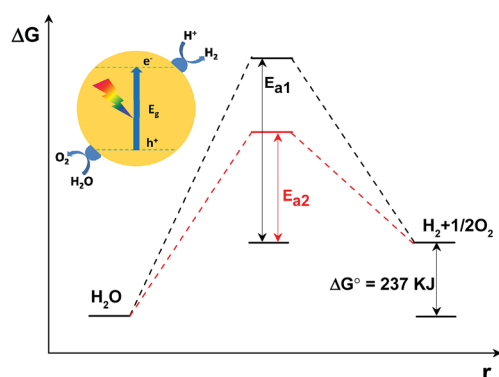


Fig. 2 Schematic description of the energy diagram of a semiconductor modified with both H₂ and O₂ evolution cocatalysts under light irradiation for non-sacrificial photocatalytic water splitting. E_{a1} : activation energy without cocatalysts; E_{a2} : activation energy with cocatalysts; ΔG : Gibbs free energy change; ΔG^0 : Gibbs free energy change under standard conditions; r : redox reaction process.

half reactions at first. After careful examination of the property–activity relationships of the cocatalysts in sacrificial H₂ or O₂ evolution reactions, it is thus reasonable to carry out an overall water splitting investigation. It should be noted that the factors dominating the quantum efficiency should not be identical for non-sacrificial water splitting accompanied by a large increase in the Gibbs energy and sacrificial hydrogen or oxygen evolution reactions. For instance, the loading technology for cocatalysts may make different contributions to the overall water splitting and sacrificial hydrogen or oxygen evolution reactions. Furthermore, the reverse reaction is always considered to be a critical issue in an overall water splitting system, while it is not taken into consideration in sacrificial H₂ or O₂ evolution systems. Nevertheless, we are able to learn of some key factors and useful experience from the sacrificial half reactions. Such knowledge is very helpful for investigations into overall water splitting. Following this line of inquiry, in this perspective we firstly investigate the water reduction and water oxidation reactions, mainly focusing on the control of the surface kinetics of g-C₃N₄ polymers. After that, we demonstrate how to achieve overall water splitting by careful surface modification of g-C₃N₄ polymers with well-designed H₂ and O₂ evolution promoters.

3. Water reduction half reaction

To investigate the water reduction half reaction, electron donors (such as TEOA, methanol, ethanol, *etc.*) are usually added into the system to accelerate the hole oxidation process (Fig. 3).^{52,55,72} In most cases, the semiconductors themselves can only act as light transducers to absorb incident photons for the excitation and generation of charge carriers. Most of them require an additional catalyst, namely a cocatalyst, to accelerate the surface reaction kinetics and promote photocatalytic activity.^{64,65} In principle, cocatalysts could extract electrons from the interfaces of semiconductors, thus prolonging the charge carrier lifetime and restraining charge carrier recombination, both of which are largely beneficial for promoting the photocatalytic activity. Furthermore, noble metals, owing to their large work functions for trapping electrons and lowest activation energy for H₂ evolution, are promising candidates for the catalysis of photocatalytic water splitting.⁶⁴ Aside from their good catalytic

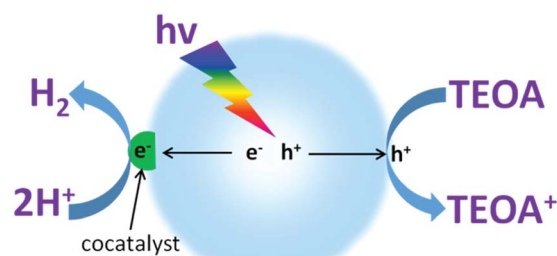


Fig. 3 Schematic illustration of photocatalytic water reduction for H₂ evolution in the presence of an electron donor driven by a semiconductor modified with H₂ evolution cocatalysts. TEOA: triethanolamine.





Fig. 5 Size distribution of Pt particles prepared by (a) photoreduction (298 K) and (b) H₂ reduction (673 K); (c) H₂ evolution activities in the presence of an electron donor. Reprinted with permission from ref. 86. Copyright 2014, Royal Society of Chemistry.

evolution activity than that of the Pt nanoparticles obtained by *in situ* photoreduction. Furthermore, the results also demonstrate good stability over the long reaction time, thus demonstrating it is promising for the promotion of photocatalytic H₂ production activity. However, the photoreduction strategy was always used in previous reports for examination of the activities of the g-C₃N₄ polymers due to the facile but effective operation process. Until now, by modifying the properties and surface reaction kinetics, the highest H₂ evolution apparent quantum yield (AQY) of the g-C₃N₄ based polymers that can be achieved is as high as 50.7% (ref. 28) at 405 nm and 38.8% (ref. 28) at 420 nm, while Pt nanoparticles are deposited *in situ* as H₂ evolution cocatalysts in the presence of TEOA as the electron donor.

Noble metals do however usually have some limitations, such as high cost, toxicity and scarcity, which largely restrict their applications when scaling up. Therefore, further investigations are desired to develop new materials that use sustainable, low-cost and environmentally benign components to promote the H₂ evolution activity of g-C₃N₄ polymers.

3.2 Transition metal based cocatalysts

Transition metals (including Fe³⁺, Co²⁺ and Ni²⁺) always demonstrate promising properties for heterogeneous catalysis

due to their versatile chemical states and good stability towards solution corrosion. These transition metals can also act as kinetic promoters to improve the catalytic activity. Recently, some transition metal compounds, such as NiO,⁷⁷ MoS₂,^{57–60} Ni(OH)₂,^{80–82} CoP,⁸³ NiS_x (ref. 87 and 88) and WS₂,^{78,79} have been reported to exhibit excellent activities for the photocatalytic H₂ evolution reaction. Depending on the composition, morphology and properties of the metal composites, they can also exhibit comparable activities to those of noble metals, thus demonstrating that they are promising candidates for a wide range of applications. In addition, compared with traditional noble metals, these transition metal complexes possess many advantages, such as low-cost, low-toxicity, abundant resources and a variety of properties. In this section, we will discuss the positive roles of different transition metals in the promotion of the photocatalytic H₂ evolution reaction, with the major purpose of developing efficient and sustainable H₂ evolution cocatalysts.

3.2.1 Transition metal dichalcogenide (TMD) based cocatalysts. The most popular noble metal-free cocatalysts are based on transition metal dichalcogenides (TMDs), such as MoS₂ and WS₂. Layered TMDs are easily fabricated and usually exhibit comparable electronic properties to those of graphene, thus making them promising candidates for electronic applications.⁸⁹ These TMDs always exhibit narrow band gaps (usually lower than 1 eV), which present favourable optical properties, and thus they can be potentially used in photocatalytic applications. For instance, when layered MoS₂ was deposited on the surface of g-C₃N₄, it greatly improved the photocatalytic H₂ evolution activity.⁵⁷ As is shown in Fig. 6, when the MoS₂ loading content was below 1.0 wt%, the H₂ evolution activities were higher than those of the Pt modified catalyst. This excellent

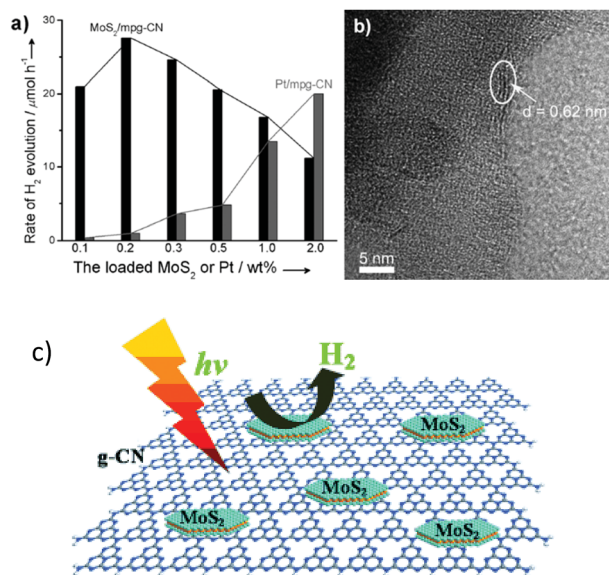


Fig. 6 (a) The rate of H₂ production over mpg-C₃N₄ loaded with different amounts of MoS₂ or Pt, (b) TEM image of MoS₂/g-C₃N₄ and (c) illustration of the deposition of layered MoS₂ on the surface of g-C₃N₄ for photocatalytic H₂ evolution. Reprinted with permission from ref. 57. Copyright 2013, Wiley-CVH.



activity may be ascribed to the similar layered geometries of MoS₂ and graphitic g-C₃N₄, which are beneficial for facilitating interface charge carrier transfer and for prolonging the charge carrier life time. After modification with MoS₂, the H₂ evolution overpotential was dramatically decreased, which could promote the H₂ evolution activity. Some other TMD based cocatalysts, *e.g.* WS₂,^{78,79} NiS_x (ref. 87 and 88) and CoS₂,^{90,91} could also serve as H₂ evolution cocatalysts to promote the photocatalytic water reduction activity of g-C₃N₄ polymers. These successful investigations provide more opportunities for the design of sustainable H₂ evolution catalysts. However, the stability and recyclability of these sulphides are a great concern. Future research is focused on advancing the stability of these materials, thus enabling their applications for scaling up.

3.2.2 Transition metal oxides or hydroxide based cocatalysts

Compared to metal sulfides, metal oxides exhibit much better stability towards solution corrosion. For instance, when a Ni@NiO core@shell nanostructure was constructed on the surface of g-C₃N₄ polymers, it demonstrated robust activity over a long reaction time.⁷⁷ The NiO shell could act as a protective layer to prevent the size accumulation of the Ni core. Furthermore, only protons could penetrate the NiO shell and adsorb on the surface of the Ni core for H₂ evolution. Other large sized species, such as O₂, could not penetrate the shell and thus the backward reaction is avoided. Evidently, this could largely decrease the H₂ evolution activation energy and promote the H₂ evolution activity.

Other than metal oxides, layered hydroxides, such as Ni(OH)₂,^{80–82} are also excellent H₂ evolution cocatalysts. For instance, Ni(OH)₂ can function as a H₂ evolution cocatalyst to combine with g-C₃N₄ for photocatalytic H₂ production in the presence of an electron donor.⁸⁰ As is shown in Fig. 7a, when Ni(OH)₂ was deposited on g-C₃N₄ the binary composite demonstrated clearly enhanced H₂ evolution activities in comparison with pure g-C₃N₄ without any cocatalyst. An adaptive interface developed between g-C₃N₄ and Ni(OH)₂; this could promote interface charge carrier transfer and decrease recombination. Evidently, this contributes to promoting H₂ evolution activity. Furthermore, the H₂ evolution activities of the binary catalysts are closely related to the Ni(OH)₂ loading amounts. Optimum activity was obtained when the loading percentage of Ni(OH)₂ was 0.5 wt%. Meanwhile, the catalyst demonstrated comparable activities to that of the noble-metal Pt modified one. Furthermore, these Ni(OH)₂ modified polymers also exhibit robust stability towards light and solution corrosion, which is necessary for practical applications. It is thus advisable to develop a noble-metal free system using all earth abundant elements for sustainable H₂ production from water. Further improvements in the photocatalytic activity could potentially be obtained by reasonable adjustments of the composition, structure, morphology and properties of the transition-metal cocatalysts.

3.2.3 Artificial molecular based cocatalysts

Recently, some metal (Co, Ni and Fe) molecular systems have been developed which mimic the active sites of natural



Fig. 7 (a) Comparison of the photocatalytic activity of samples with different amounts of Ni(OH)₂ loaded on g-C₃N₄ polymers, (b) cyclic H₂-evolution curve for the Ni0.5 sample. Reprinted with permission from ref. 80. Copyright 2013, Royal Society of Chemistry.

hydrogenases in plants, with high catalytic efficiencies for the reversible reduction of protons to molecular hydrogen.^{92,93} Being H₂ active catalysts, hydrogenases possess unique properties, such as low activation energies for H₂ evolution and a wide range of O₂ sensitivities, while using organometallic catalytic sites composed of earth-abundant elements (*e.g.* Fe, Ni, S, C, N and O). However, one of the general problems of the currently used molecular systems is their instability upon long-term irradiation due to the existence of solution sensitive chemical bonds, *i.e.* the S–S bond. To overcome this issue, semiconductors with suitable band structures and robust stabilities are desired, both of which are believed to improve their efficiency and recyclability over long reaction times.

As a prototypical example, Sun *et al.* have developed a series of Co-, Ni- and Fe-based molecular systems to combine with g-C₃N₄ for photocatalytic H₂ evolution.⁹⁴ The molecular structure of the cocatalysts and their H₂ evolution activities are shown in Fig. 8a and b. It can be seen in the figure that the Ni-based system demonstrates the best activity in comparison with the activities of the Co- and Fe-based catalysts for visible light H₂ evolution, while pure g-C₃N₄ without any cocatalyst only generates trace amounts of H₂. After adding 4 wt% of acriflavine as a photosensitizer to enhance the visible light absorption, the H₂ evolution rate further increased and the amount of the evolved H₂ gas reached 72 μmol over 8 h of irradiation, which corresponds to a TON of 106 based on Ni. This molecular catalytic system has been proven to be active towards photocatalytic H₂ evolution over more than 60 h in aqueous solution, which is much longer than that of the previously reported molecular catalytic system with organic dyes or metal-containing complexes. Another water-soluble and functional





Fig. 8 (a) Structures of Ni-, Co-, and Fe-based cocatalysts and g-C₃N₄, (b) photocatalytic H₂-evolution for different cocatalyst modified g-C₃N₄ samples. Reprinted with permission from ref. 94. Copyright 2012, Wiley-CVH.

synthetic hydrogenase, [Ni^{II}(PPh₂[NPhCH₂P(O)(OH)₂]₂)₂]Br₂ (labelled as NiP for simplification), has been developed for use as a H₂ evolution cocatalyst to combine with g-C₃N₄ for H₂ production.⁹⁵ The entirely synthetic g-C₃N₄-NiP system displays an unprecedentedly high TOF (109 h⁻¹) and TON (166) for a hybrid system made of a molecular cocatalyst with g-C₃N₄ in aqueous solution. This synthetic g-C₃N₄-NiP system was active for 3 h of light irradiation. It is very interesting to observe that this system contains all sustainable elements (C, N, P and Ni) and no noble metals and organic solutions are used as solvents or electron donors. Obviously, this represents a green strategy for sustainable H₂ production from the abundant resource of water.

However, up to now, most of the current examined molecular systems have only demonstrated limited lifetimes for reactions with long times, and are therefore not suitable for practical applications. Furthermore, the H₂ production activities are still at a relatively low level. This main issue can be attributed to the poor interface charge carrier transfer between the water soluble molecular catalytic system and the insoluble solid state light transducers. Further investigations are required to facilitate the interface charge carrier transfer and prolong the lifetime of the molecular catalytic system in order to improve the photocatalytic H₂ evolution activity.

3.3 Carbon based composite cocatalysts

Carbon-based materials, such as 0D carbon dots,⁸⁴ 1D carbon nanotubes (CNTs),⁸⁵ and 2D nanosheets,⁴⁸ always exhibit

excellent electronic properties, thus making them promising candidates for electronic applications. Recently, these carbon-based materials have also found wide applications in the field of photocatalysis.^{48,85,96} This is because carbon-based materials can exhibit comparable conductivity to that of conductors, thus enabling them to act as an electron transport “highway” in order to accelerate charge carrier transfer and prolong the charge carrier lifetime. Evidently, these play determining roles in promoting the photocatalytic H₂ evolution activity. Furthermore, carbon-based materials themselves can serve as H₂ evolution cocatalysts or couple with other H₂ evolution cocatalysts to further improve the photocatalytic H₂ production activity. For instance, 2D graphene nanosheets incorporated with g-C₃N₄ polymers can greatly decrease the charge carrier recombination rate.⁴⁸ Thus, more excited electrons are provided at the surfaces of the H₂ evolution cocatalysts, which can be used for the proton reduction reaction. The optimum activity for photocatalytic H₂ evolution was achieved when the deposition amount of graphene was determined as 1 wt%, and exceeded that of pure g-C₃N₄ by more than 3.07 times (Fig. 9a). The incorporated graphene nanosheet could quickly transfer excited electrons from the light transducer to the surface of the cocatalyst. In this case, the charge carrier recombination process is greatly decreased, which is certainly beneficial for the subsequent water redox reactions.

Very recently, Qu *et al.* developed a metal-free 3D graphitic carbon nitride/nitrogen-rich carbon nanofiber composite photocatalyst by *in situ* freeze drying fabrication.⁸⁵ The open 3D system enlarges the specific surface area and provides more

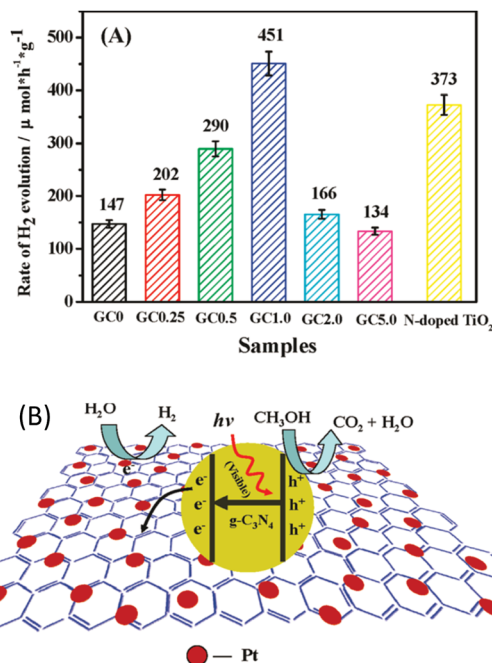


Fig. 9 (A) Comparison of the photocatalytic activities of samples with different loading amounts of graphene on g-C₃N₄ polymers, (B) proposed mechanism for the enhanced electron transfer process of the graphene/g-C₃N₄ polymers. Reprinted with permission from ref. 48. Copyright 2011, American Chemical Society.



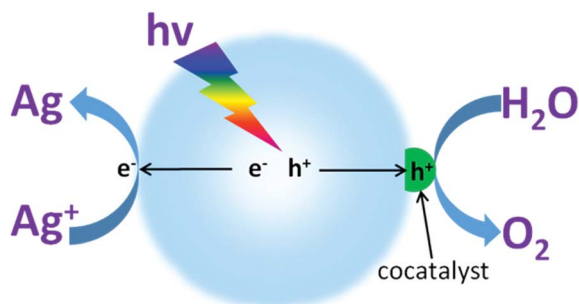


Fig. 10 Schematic illustration of photocatalytic water oxidation for O_2 evolution in the presence of an electron acceptor driven by a semiconductor modified with O_2 evolution cocatalysts.

higher water oxidation activities than those of samples modified with IrO_2 .¹⁰³ The AQY of the cobalt-modified $LaTiO_2N$ for O_2 evolution at 440 nm reached as high as $27.1 \pm 2.6\%$. This is mainly because the cobalt oxides can largely prolong the charge carrier lifetime. Consequently, more charge carriers are available for use in the subsequent photocatalytic water redox reactions. This certainly contributes to the improvement in the photocatalytic water oxidation activities. Importantly, compared with the Ru- and Ir-based noble metals, the cobalt based species possess many advantages, such as low-cost, low toxicity, abundant resources, versatile chemical states (Co^{2+} and Co^{3+}) and excellent catalytic activities. Therefore, it is advised that cobalt based materials should be utilized as water oxidation cocatalysts in order to improve the photocatalytic water oxidation activities of $g-C_3N_4$ polymers.

In principle, pure $g-C_3N_4$ without any cocatalyst modification exhibit very low photocatalytic water oxidation activity even under strong UV light irradiation.^{18,56} This is mainly because the valence band potential of $g-C_3N_4$ is not positive enough to provide a sufficient driving force for the non-spontaneous water oxidation reaction. Furthermore, pure $g-C_3N_4$ is always defined by the fast charge carrier recombination rate, which decreases the water oxidation activity.¹⁰⁴ In addition, the water oxidation process is hindered by the rather slow surface reaction kinetics, which are mainly attributed to the complex multielectron oxidation process and the huge activation energy barrier for O–O bond formation. In order to improve the photocatalytic water oxidation activities of the $g-C_3N_4$ polymers, it is advisable to deposit suitable cocatalysts on the surface of $g-C_3N_4$ to decrease the overpotential and accelerate the reaction kinetics.

As $g-C_3N_4$ has many lone-pair electrons, it can be used as an organic ligand to incorporate transition metals.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, we firstly selected different transition metal ions (e.g. Fe^{3+} , Ni^{2+} and Co^{2+}) to incorporate with $g-C_3N_4$, with the aiming of fabricating an efficient water oxidation system containing sustainable elements.¹⁰⁶ It is exciting to observe that cobalt modification could indeed improve the water oxidation activity of $g-C_3N_4$, thus indicating the positive role of cobalt in improving the water oxidation kinetics. However, the water oxidation activity of the system is closely related to the composition, structure, and properties of the cocatalysts, which are usually affected by

the preparation strategy. Therefore, the cocatalyst modification technique should be optimized to further improve the water oxidation activities of the $g-C_3N_4$ polymers.

We then investigated the effect arising from cocatalyst modification. As is shown in Fig. 11a, two different modification techniques, based on bulk doping and surface deposition, have been developed to study the property–activity relationship.¹⁰⁷ It should be noted that surface deposition with cobalt demonstrated great advantages in terms of improving the water oxidation activity in comparison with the bulk doping modification. As is shown in Fig. 11b, pure $g-C_3N_4$ exhibited low activity towards O_2 evolution ($5 \mu\text{mol h}^{-1}$) under UV light irradiation. When cobalt was doped into the framework of $g-C_3N_4$, the O_2 evolution rate increased up to a value of $46 \mu\text{mol h}^{-1}$, which is 9 times higher than that of pure $g-C_3N_4$. The O_2 evolution activity was further enhanced to $75.6 \mu\text{mol h}^{-1}$ when the same amounts of cobalt were deposited on the surface of $g-C_3N_4$. This is not difficult to understand, because more active sites would be exposed on the surfaces of the polymers, which is believed to maximize the activity. On the contrary, most of the active sites would be embedded into the bulk of the polymer framework, which decreases the interface water oxidation activity. The same enhanced water oxidation activities were also obtained when the samples were examined with visible light (Fig. 11c), thus elucidating well the huge advantage of surface deposition modification.

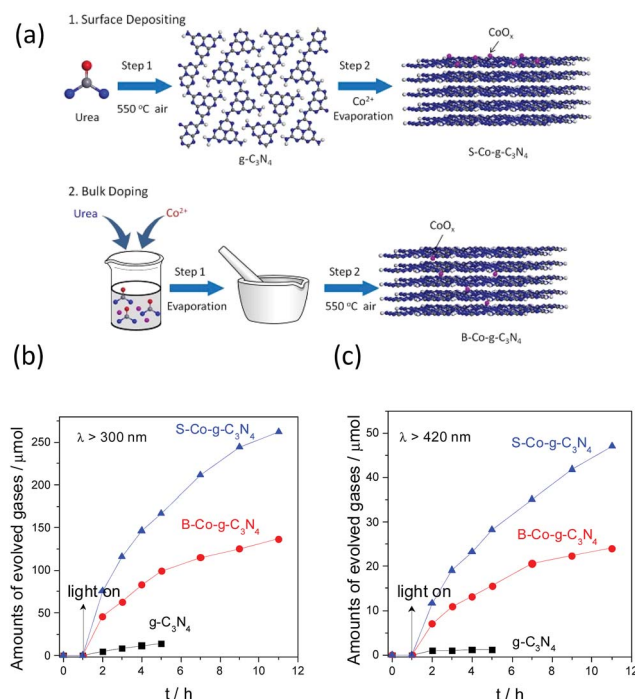


Fig. 11 (a) Schematic illustration of surface modification and bulk doping modification of $g-C_3N_4$. Photocatalytic water oxidation activities of the $g-C_3N_4$, B-Co- $g-C_3N_4$ and S-Co- $g-C_3N_4$ samples under (b) UV ($\lambda > 300 \text{ nm}$) and (c) visible light ($\lambda > 420 \text{ nm}$) irradiation. Reprinted with permission from ref. 107. Copyright 2016, American Chemical Society.





Fig. 12 (a) TEM image of Pt deposited $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ polymers prepared by *in situ* photo-reduction; (b) overall water splitting activities of $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ polymers deposited with different amounts of Pt; (c) long reaction time overall water splitting by a Pt–Co– $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ polymer; (d) overall water splitting activities with the light on and off. Reprinted with permission from ref. 110. Copyright 2016, Royal Society of Chemistry.

3 wt%. It can also be seen that the molecular ratio of H_2 and O_2 evolution is slightly lower than 2 : 1, and is in close proximity to the stoichiometric ratio of overall water splitting. However, accompanying H_2 and O_2 evolution, evident N_2 evolution was observed, which is probably due to self-oxidation of the $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ polymers by the valence band holes, and this would certainly decrease the O_2 evolution selectivity and activity. This self-oxidation of the photocatalyst indeed promotes catalyst corrosion and is harmful to the overall efficiency from the viewpoint of the atom economy, which is mainly due to the absence of efficient water oxidation cocatalysts. Despite the fact that PtO_x can promote the water oxidation reaction, it only demonstrates low efficiency and low selectivity for O_2 evolution. Thus, it should be expected that the photocatalytic overall water splitting performance, especially the O_2 evolution selectivity, could be further optimized when cobalt oxides are deposited as water oxidation cocatalysts. Actually, nearly no N_2 evolution was obtained when a small amount (1 wt%) of CoO_x was co-loaded as a water oxidation cocatalyst (Fig. 12c). A similar optimization was also observed when CoP was used as the water oxidation cocatalyst for overall water splitting.¹¹¹ Meanwhile, the simultaneous loading of Pt and Co as excellent H_2 and O_2 evolution cocatalysts would greatly benefit the stability of the $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ polymers. After 500 hours of persistent reaction, nearly no evident decrease in the activity was observed for the Pt–Co– $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ photocatalyst, thus indicating its robust stability toward solution corrosion. Finally, overall water splitting with a stoichiometric ratio of 2 : 1 for H_2 and O_2 evolution could be achieved after *in situ* modification with Pt, PtO_x and CoO_x as the H_2

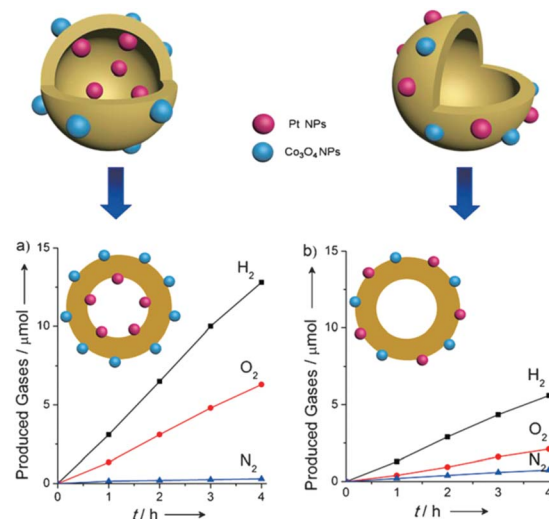


Fig. 13 Time course of the photocatalytic evolution of H_2 and O_2 using (a) $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4/\text{HCNS}/\text{Pt}$ and (b) $(\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4 + \text{Pt})/\text{HCNS}$ under UV irradiation ($\lambda > 300 \text{ nm}$). Reprinted with permission from ref. 40. Copyright 2016, Wiley-CVH.

and O_2 evolution promoters. The currently achieved AQY of the system under visible light irradiation is only 0.3%. The relatively low efficiency is probably hindered by the fast and spontaneous reverse reaction, namely water formation (Fig. 12d). This is because although noble metals such as Pt and Rh are excellent promoters for H_2 evolution, they can also function as good catalysts to promote the water formation reaction, which is thermodynamically spontaneous and is much easier to achieve than the non-spontaneous water splitting reaction. The evolved H_2 and O_2 gases immediately react on the surface of the cocatalyst to drive the water formation reaction. Therefore, further investigations based on surface nanostructure engineering of both cocatalysts and the photocatalysts to prevent the reverse reaction are believed to be an efficient route to improving the overall water splitting activity.

A prototypical example of this is a hollow sphere carbon nitride (HSCN) with a Janus interface to individually deposit Pt and Co_3O_4 nanoparticles on the inside and outside interfaces, thus spatially separating the H_2 and O_2 evolution active sites and so avoiding the reverse reaction.⁴⁰ As is shown in Fig. 13, when the Pt and Co_3O_4 nanoparticles were separately deposited on the inside and outside interfaces of HSCN, the photocatalytic H_2 and O_2 evolution activity was much higher than that with both of the cocatalysts loaded on the outside interface, thus reflecting the fact that the reverse reaction was indeed restricted.

6. Conclusions and outlook

Overall water splitting for the stoichiometric generation of H_2 and O_2 has been achieved by rational cocatalyst modification of $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ polymers to modulate the surface redox reaction kinetics. It was found that Pt and CoO_x are excellent H_2 and O_2 evolution cocatalysts that decrease the activation energy barrier



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