

Cite this: *Green Chem.*, 2020, **22**, 7552

Integrating Z-scheme heterojunction of $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4@ \alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ for efficient visible-light-driven photocatalytic CO_2 reduction†

Bing-Cai He, Chao Zhang, Pei-Pei Luo, Yu Li * and Tong-Bu Lu *

Photocatalytic CO_2 reduction coupled with water oxidation provides a fascinating approach to mitigating the issues of global warming and energy shortage. Herein, a direct Z-scheme heterojunction of $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4@ \alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ comprising a g- C_3N_4 -supported single-atomic Co site catalyst (denoted as $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$) and $\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ nanorod arrays is fabricated for efficient CO_2 reduction. A CO production rate of $14.9 \mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ with a high CO selectivity (>99%) is achieved under visible-light irradiation without any sacrificial agents other than water. Time-resolved photoluminescence (TRPL) analysis reveals that both the Z-scheme mechanism and the single-atomic Co sites contribute to the prolonged lifetime of the photo-induced excitons. Moreover, the formation of the Z-scheme heterojunction would lead to an altered charge density of the single-atomic Co sites. *In situ* diffuse reflectance infrared Fourier-transform spectroscopy and anion adsorption measurements reveal that the key intermediate CO_2^- could be efficiently stabilized by the positively charged Co sites in $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4@ \alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$, thus enhancing the CO_2 reduction performance. This work offers a new direction for the rational design of single-atomic site catalysts in artificial photosynthesis.

Received 20th August 2020,
Accepted 29th September 2020
DOI: 10.1039/d0gc02836c

rsc.li/greenchem

Introduction

The rapidly growing consumption of fossil fuels with excessive emission of CO_2 has been contributing to the severe global warming problem and the potential energy shortage.^{1,2} Utilizing solar energy to convert CO_2 into fuels provides a promising approach to solving the above problems, and scientists have devoted tremendous attention to developing various photocatalysts for CO_2 reduction.^{3–9} Recently, graphitic carbon nitride (g- C_3N_4)-supported single-atomic site catalysts have emerged as remarkable photocatalysts.^{10–13} By virtue of the lone pair electrons, the N atoms in the framework can capture various transition metal ions, thus forming single-atomic metal sites on g- C_3N_4 . In addition, the charge densities of the coordinated metal atoms would be altered by the neighboring N atoms, which may in turn change the adsorption strength and reaction barriers. Density functional theory (DFT) calculations have suggested that single-atomic Pd or Pt loaded on g- C_3N_4 can act as effective catalytic sites for photocatalytic CO_2

reduction, leading to two different preferential products, HCOOH and CH_4 , respectively.¹⁴ With the aid of triethylamine (TEA), single-atomic Co^{2+} sites on C_3N_4 with different loadings have been successfully synthesized, and the optimized sample with a cobalt loading of $0.128 \mu\text{mol mg}^{-1}$ exhibits a CO production rate of approximately $25.5 \mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ under 60 mW cm^{-2} incident light in the presence of triethanolamine (TEOA) as a sacrificial electron donor.¹⁵ Recently, we have developed an efficient photocatalyst for CO_2 reduction by implanting single titanium oxide species on g- C_3N_4 .¹⁶ In the presence of the $\text{Co}(\text{bpy})_3\text{Cl}_2$ co-catalyst and TEOA, a CO production rate of $283.9 \mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ has been achieved under visible light irradiation. These results strongly demonstrate the viability of g- C_3N_4 -supported single-atomic site catalysts for photocatalytic CO_2 reduction. However, the use of TEOA makes these catalysts less attractive since TEOA is much more expensive than CO. Therefore, it still remains a great challenge to develop low-cost and robust g- C_3N_4 -based photocatalysts with high efficiency for CO_2 conversion using water as an electron source.

Owing to the wide band gap ($\sim 2.7 \text{ eV}$), g- C_3N_4 can only utilize a marginal portion of visible light ($\lambda < 460 \text{ nm}$).¹⁷ Moreover, the water oxidation capacity of g- C_3N_4 is poor due to the high energy level of the valence band.^{18–20} In this situation, integrating g- C_3N_4 with an appropriate semiconductor possessing a narrower band gap and a more positive valence band to establish a Z-scheme heterojunction has been acknowledged

MOE International Joint Laboratory of Materials Microstructure, Institute for New Energy Materials and Low Carbon Technologies, School of Materials Science & Engineering, Tianjin University of Technology, Tianjin 300384, China. E-mail: yli@email.tjut.edu.cn, lutongbu@tjut.edu.cn
† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available. See DOI: 10.1039/d0gc02836c

as an effective strategy, because the Z-scheme heterojunction not only facilitates the spatial separation of the photo-induced electron-hole pairs, but also preserves the maximum capacities for reduction and oxidation of the composites.^{20–23}

Herein, we construct a direct Z-scheme heterojunction of $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4@\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$, which composes by single-atomic Co sites loaded on $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ ($\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$) integrated with $\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ nanorod arrays, for efficient visible-light-driven CO_2 reduction coupled with water oxidation. The light-absorption range of $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ is greatly extended to the entire visible-light region and the lifetime of photo-induced charge carriers is significantly prolonged by the successful incorporation of $\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$. Moreover, benefiting from the charge transfer induced by the different Fermi levels between $\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ and $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$, the charge density of single-atomic Co can be further regulated. The results of anion adsorption measurements imply that the stabilization of the critical intermediate CO_2^- is more efficient on the single-atomic Co sites with a higher positive charge. Compared with $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$, the constructed Z-scheme heterojunction shows a substantial improvement for photocatalytic CO_2 conversion to CO, with 2.8 times higher than that of $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ under visible light irradiation and almost 100% CO selectivity.

Experimental

Materials

$\text{FeCl}_3\cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$ (99%, AR) and $\text{CoCl}_2\cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$ (99%, AR) were purchased from Aladdin. Urea (99%, AR), NaOH (96%, AR) and Na_2SO_4 (99%, AR) were purchased from FuChen Chemical Reagent Factory. Nafion 117 solution (~5% in alcohol/water) was purchased from Sigma-Aldrich. CO_2 (99.999%) and Ar (99.999%) were purchased from Tianjin Huanyu Gas company. $^{13}\text{CO}_2$ (99%) was purchased from Sigma-Aldrich and H_2^{18}O (99%) was purchased from Energy Chemical. All chemicals were used as received without further purification. The ultra-pure water (Milli-Q water) with an electrical resistivity of 18.2 M Ω cm was used in all experiments.

Synthetic procedures

The $\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ nanorod arrays were fabricated by a modified strategy reported previously.^{24,25} In brief, a piece of fluorine-doped tin oxide (FTO) glass (1 cm \times 2.5 cm) was sonicated in acetone, ethanol and water, respectively. Then the FTO glass was leant on the inner side of a Teflon liner with the FTO side facing down. Subsequently, an aqueous solution (15 mL) containing $\text{FeCl}_3\cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$ (0.51 g) and urea (0.17 g) was added, and the liner was sealed in a stainless steel autoclave, and then heated at 100 $^\circ\text{C}$ for 4 h. The as-prepared sample was washed with water and dried by N_2 flow to remove redundant sediment. The film was annealed at 550 $^\circ\text{C}$ for 2 h and subsequently at 660 $^\circ\text{C}$ for 20 min in a muffle furnace with a ramping rate of 2 $^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$, and the $\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ nanorod arrays were finally obtained. The loading amount of the $\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ nanorod arrays was determined to be 0.3 mg by weighing the FTO glass before and after the synthesis.

The $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ -supported Co single-atom catalyst was prepared by using a two-step strategy.²⁶ Specifically, urea (15 g) was put into a crucible with a cover, and calcined at 550 $^\circ\text{C}$ for 4 h with a ramping rate of 10 $^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$. After cooling down naturally, the product was heated again at 500 $^\circ\text{C}$ for 2 h to obtain exfoliated $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$. For the synthesis of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ -supported single-atomic Co site catalyst ($\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$), $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ (10 mg) was well dispersed in water (10 mL) by vigorous sonication for 30 min. Next, an aqueous solution (500 μL) containing $\text{CoCl}_2\cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$ (0.336 mM) was dropped into the $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ suspension under magnetic stirring. Subsequently, the suspension was stirred for 12 h at 80 $^\circ\text{C}$ in an oil bath. The above mixture was then frozen by liquid nitrogen and further dried in vacuum for 48 h by using a lyophilizer. The obtained sample was placed in a porcelain boat and heated to 400 $^\circ\text{C}$ for 2 h with a ramping rate of 5 $^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ under Ar atmosphere. Similar procedures were applied for the synthesis of the $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ -supported CoO nanoparticle catalyst ($\text{CoNP-C}_3\text{N}_4$), except that the concentration of $\text{CoCl}_2\cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$ was increased to 3.36 mM.

To fabricate the Z-scheme system, a well-dispersed aqueous suspension (300 μL) of $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ (1 mg mL^{-1} , 0.3 mg in total) was first drop-coated onto the $\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ nanorod arrays under 60 $^\circ\text{C}$. To strengthen the contact between $\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ and $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$, the sample was transferred to a tube furnace and calcined at 200 $^\circ\text{C}$ for 2 h, with a ramping rate of 5 $^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ under Ar atmosphere. The obtained sample was denoted as $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4@\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$. $\text{C}_3\text{N}_4@\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ and $\text{CoNP-C}_3\text{N}_4@\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ were fabricated according to the same method as that of $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4@\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$, except that $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ was replaced by $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ and $\text{CoNP-C}_3\text{N}_4$, respectively.

Characterization

The powder X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns were recorded by using a Rigaku SmartLab 9 kW with Cu-K α radiation ($\lambda = 1.5418 \text{ \AA}$). A Thermo scientific iCAP RQ inductively coupled plasma-mass spectrometer (ICP-MS) was used to determine the Co content. Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) was performed using a FEI Verios 460L scanning electron microscope. Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) images and High-Resolution Transmission Electron Microscopy (HRTEM) images were obtained on FEI Tecnai G2 Spirit Twin and FEI Talos F200X transmission electron microscopes, respectively. Atomic-resolution aberration-corrected high-angle annular dark-field scanning transmission electron microscopy (HAADF-STEM) images and elemental mapping were obtained by using a FEI Titan Themis Cubed G2 60–300 transmission electron microscope. X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) measurements were carried out by using a Thermo Scientific ESCALAB250Xi photoelectron spectrometer equipped with Mg K α (1253.6 eV) as the X-ray source. Ultraviolet-visible (UV-vis) spectroscopic measurements were performed by using a PerkinElmer Lambda 750 UV/VIS/NIR spectrometer. A PerkinElmer Frontier Mid-IR FTIR spectrometer was employed to obtain Fourier-transform infrared spectra. The steady-state photoluminescence spectra (PL) were recorded on a Hitachi F-4600 fluorescence spectrometer. The time-resolved photo-

luminescence (TRPL) curves were recorded using a PicoQuant MicroTime 200 time-resolved confocal fluorescence instrument. The electron spin resonance (ESR) analysis was conducted on an electron paramagnetic resonance spectrometer (Bruker EMXplus-6/1) with 5,5-dimethyl-1-pyrroline *N*-oxide (DMPO) as the trapping agent at 298 K. CO₂ adsorption was tested by using a MicrotracBEL BELSORP-Max gas adsorption instrument at 298 K. A Hansatech Chlorolab-2 liquid-phase oxygen measurement system was employed to detect the oxygen evolution during the photocatalytic CO₂ reduction.

Photocatalytic CO₂ reduction measurements

Photocatalytic CO₂ reduction tests were conducted in a gas-solid setup. A piece of the sample was placed in a 35 mL quartz tube. High-purity CO₂ (99.999%) was first passed through water to carry H₂O vapor and then introduced into the quartz tube. The quartz tube was purged with the CO₂/H₂O gas mixture for 30 min and sealed by using a rubber stopper. A 300 W xenon lamp (CEL-HXF300, CEAULIGHT) with a 400 nm cutoff filter was positioned above the sample as the light source. Gaseous products (CO, CH₄, and H₂) were analysed by using a SHIMADZU GC-2014 gas chromatograph equipped with TCD and FID dual detectors. The products of the ¹³CO₂ and H₂¹⁸O isotopic experiments were analysed by using a Hiden Analytical HPR20 mass spectrometer.

Photoelectrochemical measurements

All measurements were performed on a CHI 760E electrochemical workstation with a three-electrode setup (working electrode: FTO glass-supported sample; reference electrode: Ag/AgCl electrode; counter electrode: Pt foil) in 0.1 M Na₂SO₄ aqueous solution. To measure the photo-current responses, a 300 W Xe lamp (CEL-HXF300, CEAULIGHT) with a 400 nm cutoff filter was used as the light source. A potential of 0.5 V *vs.* Ag/AgCl was applied on the sample and the light was chopped every 10 s to simulate light/dark conditions during the test. Electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) was carried out in the frequency range of 0.1 MHz to 0.1 Hz with an AC voltage amplitude of 5 mV at an open-circuit potential under visible-light irradiation with a power density of 200 mW cm⁻².

In situ DRIFTS characterization

In situ diffuse reflectance infrared Fourier-transform spectra (DRIFTS) were recorded on a Bruker IFS 66v Fourier-transform spectrometer at the Infrared Spectroscopy and Microspectroscopy Endstation (BL01B) in the National Synchrotron Radiation Laboratory (NSRL), Hefei.²⁷ The sample was placed in a Harrick diffuse reflectance reaction chamber fixed in the light path. The chamber was equipped with two ZnSe windows and two gas channels. Each spectrum was recorded by 128 scans with a resolution of 4 cm⁻¹. The spectrum recorded under Ar atmosphere was set as the background signal.

Results and discussion

The composite structure comprising α -Fe₂O₃ and Co₁-C₃N₄ was fabricated by a multi-step strategy (Fig. 1a). Co₁-C₃N₄ exhibits a two-dimensional morphology without any distinguishable clusters, as shown in Fig. 1b and Fig. S1†. The results of elemental mapping indicate the uniform dispersion of Co species on g-C₃N₄ (Fig. 1c). The XRD pattern for Co₁-C₃N₄ also shows no peaks other than those corresponding to g-C₃N₄ (Fig. S2†). The atomic dispersion of Co sites was further verified by using a HAADF-STEM image, in which the bright spots represent Co atoms and no aggregation of the bright spots was observed (Fig. 1d).²⁸ The line-scan profiles also confirm that the Co atoms are well isolated (Fig. S3†). ICP-MS was employed to determine the actual loading of Co. As listed in Table S1,† the mass loading of Co is 0.07% for Co₁-C₃N₄. A sample comprising CoO nanoparticles on g-C₃N₄ was also prepared, with a Co mass loading of 0.81% (denoted as CoNP-C₃N₄, Fig. S4†). SEM and TEM images (Fig. 1e and Fig. S5†) show that the α -Fe₂O₃ nanorods grown on fluorine-doped tin oxide (FTO) glass have an average length of ~500 nm and an average diameter of ~50 nm. The HRTEM image (Fig. 1f) displays lattice fringes with a lattice spacing of 0.25 nm, which can be assigned to the (110) planes of crystalline α -Fe₂O₃. The top view for the composite photocatalyst clearly shows that the α -Fe₂O₃ nanorod arrays are covered by highly corrugated Co₁-C₃N₄ nanosheets (Fig. S6†). Fourier-transform infrared spectrum for Co₁-C₃N₄ shows a series of characteristic peaks of g-C₃N₄ as those reported in the literature (Fig. 1g). Notably, the peak at 806 cm⁻¹, which is assigned to the breathing mode of the triazine unit in carbon nitride, is blue-shifted to 808 cm⁻¹ when Co₁-C₃N₄ is integrated with α -Fe₂O₃ nanorods.²⁹ Similar shifts are also found for the peaks at 1200 to 1650 cm⁻¹, which correspond to the stretching vibration modes characteristic of aromatic g-C₃N₄ heterocycles.³⁰ The blue shift can be attributed to the charge transfer between Co₁-C₃N₄ and α -Fe₂O₃, which strongly evidences the successful formation of heterojunctions.²¹

UV-vis diffuse reflectance spectroscopy was employed to explore the light-harvesting ability of the as-prepared photocatalysts (Fig. S7†). The absorption edge for Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃ is significantly extended to 700 nm, covering almost the entire visible region. On the basis of the Tauc plots (Fig. S8†), the band gaps of the α -Fe₂O₃ nanorod and Co₁-C₃N₄ were determined to be 2.12 eV and 2.66 eV, respectively. The energy band structures were further resolved by Mott-Schottky plots (Fig. S9†). The positive slopes of the Mott-Schottky plots indicate the n-type characteristics for both the α -Fe₂O₃ nanorod and Co₁-C₃N₄.³¹ The flat band potentials of α -Fe₂O₃ and Co₁-C₃N₄ were calculated to be 0.36 V and -0.94 V *versus* the normal hydrogen electrode (NHE), respectively. For the n-type semiconductor, the flat band potential is close to the bottom of the conduction band (CB).^{31,32} Now we are able to draw a clear band diagram for the composite structure, as shown in Fig. 2c. To validate the Z-scheme route for the photo-induced charge carriers, ESR spectroscopy was employed to detect ·OH

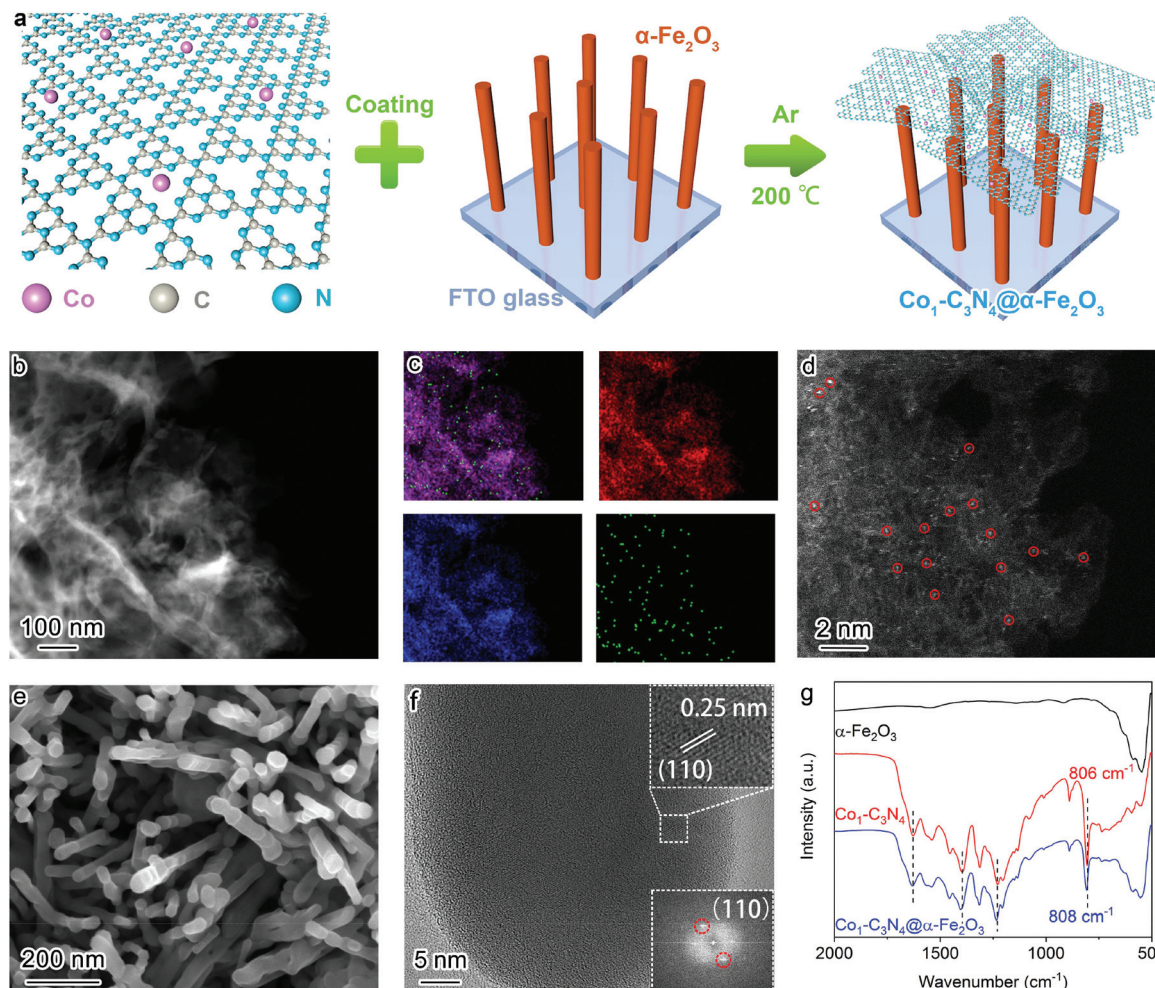


Fig. 1 (a) Schematic illustration of the fabrication strategy for $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4@\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$. (b) Low-resolution HAADF-STEM image for $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ and (c) the corresponding elemental mapping images of C (red), N (blue), and Co (green). (d) Atomic-resolution HAADF-STEM image for $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$. The atomically dispersed Co sites are marked in red circles. (e) SEM image and (f) HRTEM image for the $\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ nanorod arrays; insets: lattice fringes of a single $\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ nanorod (top) and the selected area electron diffraction (SAED) pattern (bottom). (g) Fourier-transform infrared spectra for $\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$, $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$, and $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4@\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$.

and $\cdot\text{O}_2^-$ species with DMPO as the trapping agent (Fig. 2a and b). For pristine $\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$, only a weak signal attributed to $\cdot\text{OH}$ was observed under visible-light irradiation; for pristine $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$, only the signal attributed to $\cdot\text{O}_2^-$ was detected with four identical peaks. These results are understandable by comparing the energy band positions with the reaction potentials of O_2/O_2^- and $\text{H}_2\text{O}/\cdot\text{OH}$ ($\text{OH}^-/\cdot\text{OH}$). When $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4@\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ was employed as the photocatalyst, the signals of both $\cdot\text{OH}$ and $\cdot\text{O}_2^-$ were observed with much stronger intensities than that for each single component. In addition, neither of the two species was observed for $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4@\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ under dark conditions (Fig. S10[†]), suggesting that the reactive oxygen species mentioned above were generated upon incident light. Therefore, we can conclude that the photo-induced charge carriers follow a Z-scheme mechanism rather than a Type II mechanism (Fig. 2c).^{8,33}

With the Z-scheme mechanism for $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4@\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ validated, now we are in a position to investigate the efficacy of

the composite structure in promoting photocatalytic CO_2 reduction. Fig. 3a shows the average CO evolution rates in CO_2 overall splitting for the as-prepared catalysts under visible light ($\lambda > 400$ nm). No product was detected for $\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ nanorod arrays, as the potential of the conduction band is too positive to trigger the reduction of CO_2 . The CO production rate for $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4@\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ was substantially elevated to $14.9 \mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$, 2.9 times as high as that for $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ ($5.2 \mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$) and 6.5 times as that for $\text{C}_3\text{N}_4@\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ ($2.3 \mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$). These results imply that the construction of the Z-scheme heterojunction and the introduction of Co favor the photocatalytic reduction of CO_2 under visible light. When ultraviolet light was also introduced to the photocatalytic system (by the removal of the cut-off filter), a CO production rate as high as $25.2 \mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ was achieved, demonstrating the excellent CO_2 reduction capability for $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4@\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ under full spectrum. To evaluate the utilization efficiency of the solar energy, apparent quantum efficiencies (AQEs) for CO gene-

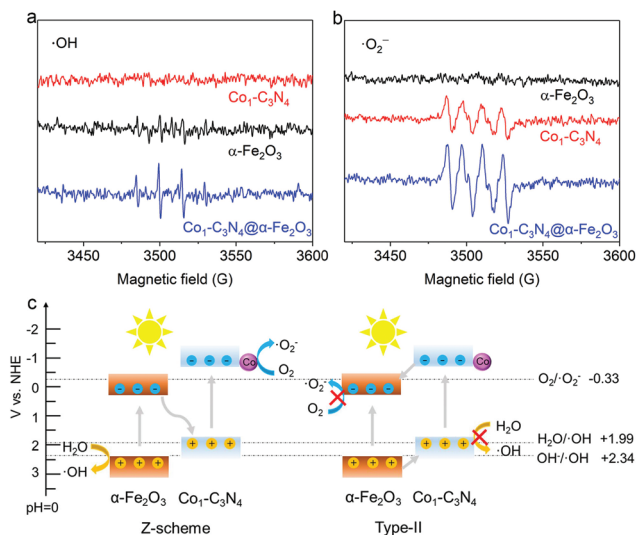


Fig. 2 (a and b) DMPO spin-trapping ESR spectra for α -Fe₂O₃, Co₁-C₃N₄, and Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃ under visible-light irradiation. (c) Schematic illustration for the validation of the Z-scheme mechanism rather than Type-II.

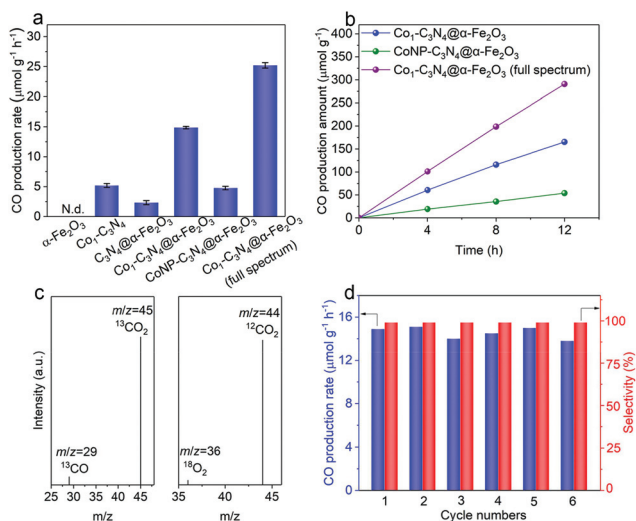


Fig. 3 (a) CO production rates of α -Fe₂O₃, Co₁-C₃N₄, C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃, Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃, and CoNP-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃; N.d.: not detected. (b) Time-dependent production of CO by CoNP-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃ and Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃. (c) Mass spectra of ¹³CO ($m/z = 29$) and ¹⁸O₂ ($m/z = 36$) produced by Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃ in the isotopic experiments. (d) Cycling production of CO for Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃ in photocatalytic CO₂ reduction with pure water.

ration were determined under different monochromatic light irradiation (Fig. S11[†]). The AQEs at 365 nm and 405 nm were determined to be 0.52% and 0.42%, respectively. In addition, it is noteworthy that neither H₂ nor CH₄ was detected in the gaseous products for a continuous 12-hour photocatalytic test, suggesting the high selectivity for CO (Fig. 3b). To the best of our knowledge, the performance of Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃ here is among the top levels in comparison with other g-C₃N₄-based

and single-atomic site catalysts in photocatalytic CO₂ coupled with water oxidation (Table S5[†]). To further examine the essentialness of the single-atomic character of Co in CO₂ reduction, CoNP-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃ was employed for comparison. The result shows that the CO production rate for CoNP-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃ is much lower (4.8 μmol g⁻¹ h⁻¹), suggesting the critical role of single-atomic Co sites in photocatalytic CO₂ reduction. A similar irradiation test under Ar atmosphere was conducted on Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃, and no CO was detected. To further identify the origin of CO, we traced the carbon source in the reduction process using a ¹³C isotopic label. Fig. 3c shows the mass spectrum of CO obtained with ¹³CO₂ as a substrate under identical photocatalytic reaction conditions; a distinct ¹³CO peak ($m/z = 29$) was observed, indicating that the CO indeed originates from CO₂. H₂¹⁸O, instead of H₂¹⁶O, was also adopted to verify the water oxidation half-reaction, and a clear ¹⁸O₂ peak ($m/z = 36$) was observed in the mass spectrum. Moreover, molecular oxygen was detected as the product by liquid-phase oxygen measurement system, further confirming that the CO₂ reduction is coupled with water oxidation (Fig. S12[†]). As shown in Fig. 3d and S13,[†] the production rate and selectivity of CO for Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃ remained almost unchanged during the six consecutive cycles (4 h each), and no aggregation of Co species appeared after the stability test, validating the excellent stability for the Z-scheme system under visible light.

Given the above results, a question naturally arises: What role does the Z-scheme play in enhancing the photocatalytic CO₂ reduction? In addition to the significantly broadened light-absorption range, the dynamic behaviors of the photo-induced charge carriers are also effectively regulated. The photocurrent responses were recorded under intermittent visible-light irradiation in 0.1 M Na₂SO₄ aqueous solution (Fig. S14[†]). The photocurrent density for Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃ is higher than those for α -Fe₂O₃ and Co₁-C₃N₄, suggesting the more efficient photo-induced electron-hole separation for improved CO₂ reduction.³⁴ Electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) was conducted to reflect the charge transfer resistance (Fig. S15[†]). The Nyquist plots reveal that Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃ has the lowest charge transfer resistance, which is beneficial for the separation and migration of the photo-induced charge carriers.^{24,35} To investigate the lifetime of the electron-hole pairs, we employed PL spectroscopy. As shown in Fig. S16,[†] the main emission peak located at 442 nm can be ascribed to the inter-band recombination of photo-induced charge carriers. The dramatically quenched PL intensity for Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃ indicates the faster electron migration and the efficient suppression of the carrier recombination.²⁹ To gain in-depth information for the carrier dynamics, TRPL decay curves for the as-prepared photocatalysts were recorded. As revealed in Fig. 4a and S17,[†] Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃ shows a significantly slower decay kinetics than α -Fe₂O₃ and Co₁-C₃N₄. The PL lifetimes are listed in Table S2.[†] The shorter lifetime τ_1 is related to the non-radiative relaxation, and the longer lifetime τ_2 is attributed to the inter-band recombination of the photo-induced excitons, which mainly contributes to the

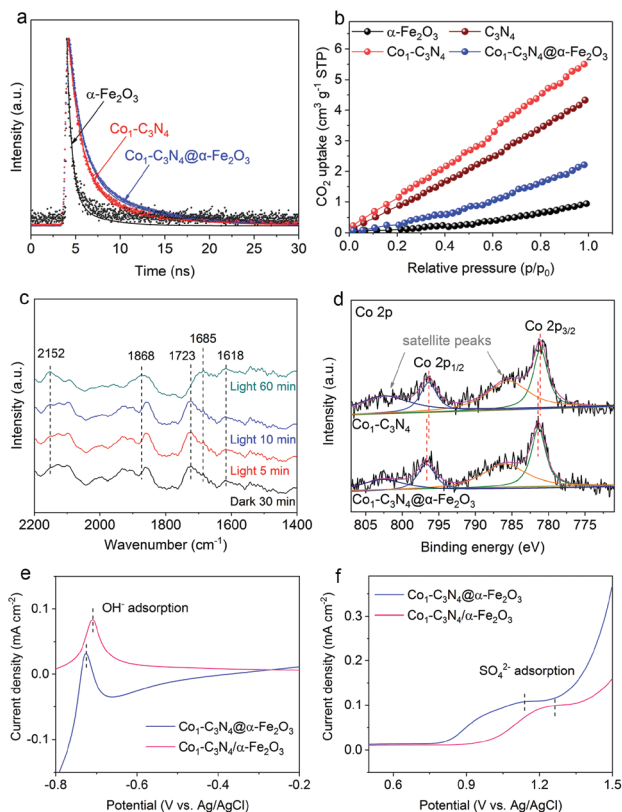


Fig. 4 (a) TRPL decay curves for α -Fe₂O₃, Co₁-C₃N₄, and Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃. (b) CO₂ adsorption isotherms for α -Fe₂O₃, g-C₃N₄, Co₁-C₃N₄, and Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃. (c) *In situ* DRIFTS spectra for Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃ under different irradiation conditions with the existence of CO₂ and H₂O. (d) X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy spectra of the Co 2p core levels for Co₁-C₃N₄ and Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃. Single oxidative LSV scans at 100 mV s⁻¹ in (e) Ar-bubbled 0.5 M NaOH and (f) Ar-bubbled 0.1 M Na₂SO₄ for Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃ and Co₁-C₃N₄/ α -Fe₂O₃, respectively.

photoluminescence.²¹ Notably, the average lifetime (τ) of Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃ is prolonged to 5.17 ns, suggesting the high efficacy of the Z-scheme heterojunction. Specifically, the photo-induced electrons in the conduction band of α -Fe₂O₃ can efficiently annihilate the holes in the valence band of Co₁-C₃N₄, thus suppressing the recombination of photo-induced excitons inside each component. As a consequence, more photo-induced electrons would be preserved on the conduction band of Co₁-C₃N₄, and more photo-induced holes would be preserved on the valence band of α -Fe₂O₃, thus leading to superior photocatalytic performances. Furthermore, the incorporation of single-atomic Co sites also results in prolonged average lifetimes with significantly altered τ_1 and τ_2 . The atomically dispersed Co can act as effective trap sites to capture the photo-induced electrons from the conduction band of g-C₃N₄, thereby inhibiting the recombination of the electrons with the VB holes.^{36,37} Therefore, for Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃, the Z-scheme structure and the single-atomic Co sites collaboratively contribute to the efficient separation of the photo-induced excitons.

To shed light on the role of single-atomic Co sites at the catalytic interface during photocatalytic CO₂ reduction, CO₂ adsorption was employed to determine the chemisorption capacities of these catalysts. As depicted in Fig. 4b, Co₁-C₃N₄ adsorbs a much larger amount of CO₂ than bare g-C₃N₄, suggesting the efficacy of the single-atomic Co sites. It is also worth pointing out that the integration of α -Fe₂O₃ significantly reduces the CO₂ uptake, which can be attributed to the poor CO₂ adsorption ability of α -Fe₂O₃ nanorod arrays. To unravel the possible reaction pathway that occurs on Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃, we carried out *in situ* DRIFTS measurements to explore the key intermediates in photocatalytic CO₂ reduction. As illustrated in Fig. 4c, the peaks at 1618 cm⁻¹, 1723 cm⁻¹, and 1868 cm⁻¹ can be assigned to bidentate carbonate (b-CO₃²⁻), chelating bridged carbonate (c-CO₃²⁻), and multi-bonded CO (m-CO) on the g-C₃N₄ substrate, respectively.^{38,39} The carbonate species are formed by the interaction of the surface O atoms of g-C₃N₄ with adsorbed CO₂.³⁸ During the 60 min irradiation, the peak intensity of b-CO₃²⁻ remained unchanged, whereas the peak intensity of c-CO₃²⁻ significantly decreased. Meanwhile, an obvious increase was observed in the m-CO peak. These results can be explained by the catalytic effect that c-CO₃²⁻ is converted into m-CO during the photocatalytic CO₂ reduction. More importantly, a peak at 2152 cm⁻¹ emerged and the intensity of the peak gradually increased with the irradiation time. This peak can be assigned to the stretching vibration of CO adsorbed on an isolated Co site.^{40,41} This result further highlights the key role of the single-atomic Co sites in CO evolution. Moreover, another peak at 1685 cm⁻¹ attributed to CO₂⁻ adsorbed on Co sites was observed, the intensity of which noticeably increased after 60 min irradiation.^{38,42} Therefore, it can be inferred that the CO₂-to-CO conversion on the isolated Co sites proceeds *via* the formation of CO₂⁻, which is generally regarded as the rate-determining step in CO₂ reduction.^{44,45} The stabilization of CO₂⁻ has a great impact on the overall performance of the photocatalytic CO₂ reduction, and largely depends on the local charge density of the active sites.⁴⁶⁻⁴⁸ In our Z-scheme heterojunction, the electrons in Co₁-C₃N₄ with a relatively high Fermi level would spontaneously migrate to α -Fe₂O₃ to eliminate the disparity between the Fermi levels,³⁴ which was verified by XPS analysis in Fig. S18† and Fig. 4c. The N 1s spectrum for Co₁-C₃N₄ can be deconvoluted into three peaks located at 398.3 eV (C-N=C), 400 eV (N-(C)₃) and 401.3 eV (C-N-H_x), respectively.^{13,49} Notably, these peaks shift to higher binding energies after assembly with α -Fe₂O₃ (Table S3†). Moreover, distinguishable shifts in similar trend were also observed for Co 2p_{3/2} peaks (Table S3†).^{13,50} In contrast, in terms of the binding energy of Fe, the Fe 2p peaks of the Z-scheme heterojunction downshift by 0.2 eV relative to those of pristine α -Fe₂O₃ (Fig. S19 and Table S4†).⁵¹ This result is indicative of a partial electron transfer from N and Co to Fe, confirming the electron migration direction between the two components.^{52,53} Accordingly, the Co species in Co₁-C₃N₄@ α -Fe₂O₃ exhibits a higher oxidation state than that in Co₁-C₃N₄. In this case, the negatively charged CO₂⁻ can be better stabilized by the electro-

static interaction with the more positively charged Co sites.⁴⁵ To confirm the superiority of $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4@\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ in CO_2^- stabilization, the adsorption of OH^- and SO_4^{2-} (as proper surrogates for CO_2^-) was conducted.^{54–56} In order to eliminate any possible disturbance, we prepared a non-heterojunction mixture comprising $\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ nanorod arrays and $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ with the assistance of Nafion solution rather than *via* the subsequent thermal treatment (denoted as $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4/\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$). The oxidative linear sweep voltammograms (LSV) in NaOH aqueous solution reveal that the potential of OH^- adsorption for $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4@\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ is 19 mV lower than that for $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4/\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ (Fig. 4e). This difference becomes more prominent in the adsorption of SO_4^{2-} . As shown in Fig. 4f, a potential of 1.14 V *vs.* Ag/AgCl is required for the adsorption of SO_4^{2-} on $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4@\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$, 120 mV lower than that on $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4/\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ (1.26 V *vs.* Ag/AgCl). Since the lower potential implies a stronger binding of the anion, these results strongly indicate that the Z-scheme $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4@\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ can efficiently stabilize the key intermediate CO_2^- , thereby facilitating CO evolution.

Conclusions

In summary, we have constructed a Z-scheme heterojunction of $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4@\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ comprising $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ and $\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ nanorod arrays for efficient visible-light-driven CO_2 reduction coupled with water oxidation. The introduction of the Z-scheme heterojunction into a single-atomic catalyst of $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ not only promotes the separation of the photo-induced charge carriers for benefiting CO_2 reduction, but also enhances the capability of water oxidation. XPS analysis reveals that the single-atomic Co sites in $\text{Co}_1\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ become more positively charged after the formation of the heterojunction, which contributes to the efficient stabilization of CO_2^- and hence facilitates the CO_2 reduction, as verified by the *in situ* DRIFTS spectra and anion adsorption test. As a result, a CO generation rate of $14.9 \mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ with over 99% CO selectivity is achieved under visible-light irradiation using water as an electron source. Our findings here underline the importance of the charge regulation on single-atomic sites by the Z-scheme heterojunction for enhancing catalytic performances, and offer a new approach to developing high-efficiency single-atomic site catalysts for artificial photosynthesis.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the National Key R&D Program of China (2017YFA0700104), the National Natural Science Foundation of China (21931007, 21905204, 21805207) and 111 Project of China (D17003). *In situ* DRIFTS measurements were performed at the Infrared Spectroscopy and Microspectroscopy

Endstation (BL01B) in the National Synchrotron Radiation Laboratory (NSRL) in Hefei, China.

References

- C. F. Shih, T. Zhang, J. Li and C. Bai, *Joule*, 2018, **2**, 1925–1949.
- O. S. Bushuyev, P. De Luna, C. T. Dinh, L. Tao, G. Saur, J. van de Lagemaat, S. O. Kelley and E. H. Sargent, *Joule*, 2018, **2**, 825–832.
- S. C. Roy, O. K. Varghese, M. Paulose and C. A. Grimes, *ACS Nano*, 2010, **4**, 1259–1278.
- S. N. Habisreutinger, L. Schmidt-Mende and J. K. Stolarczyk, *Angew. Chem., Int. Ed.*, 2013, **52**, 7372–7408.
- J. Ran, M. Jaroniec and S. Z. Qiao, *Adv. Mater.*, 2018, **30**, 1704649.
- J. Di, C. Zhu, M. Ji, M. Duan, R. Long, C. Yan, K. Gu, J. Xiong, Y. She, J. Xia, H. Li and Z. Liu, *Angew. Chem., Int. Ed.*, 2018, **57**, 14847–14851.
- X. Li, Y. Sun, J. Xu, Y. Shao, J. Wu, X. Xu, Y. Pan, H. Ju, J. Zhu and Y. Xie, *Nat. Energy*, 2019, **4**, 690–699.
- Z. Jiang, W. Wan, H. Li, S. Yuan, H. Zhao and P. K. Wong, *Adv. Mater.*, 2018, **30**, 1706108.
- Y. Jiang, J.-F. Liao, H.-Y. Chen, H.-H. Zhang, J.-Y. Li, X.-D. Wang and D.-B. Kuang, *Chem*, 2020, **6**, 766–780.
- Y. Li, Z. Wang, T. Xia, H. Ju, K. Zhang, R. Long, Q. Xu, C. Wang, L. Song, J. Zhu, J. Jiang and Y. Xiong, *Adv. Mater.*, 2016, **28**, 6959–6965.
- X. Li, W. Bi, L. Zhang, S. Tao, W. Chu, Q. Zhang, Y. Luo, C. Wu and Y. Xie, *Adv. Mater.*, 2016, **28**, 2427–2431.
- Y. Cao, S. Chen, Q. Luo, H. Yan, Y. Lin, W. Liu, L. Cao, J. Lu, J. Yang, T. Yao and S. Wei, *Angew. Chem., Int. Ed.*, 2017, **56**, 12191–12196.
- W. Liu, L. Cao, W. Cheng, Y. Cao, X. Liu, W. Zhang, X. Mou, L. Jin, X. Zheng, W. Che, Q. Liu, T. Yao and S. Wei, *Angew. Chem., Int. Ed.*, 2017, **56**, 9312–9317.
- G. Gao, Y. Jiao, E. R. Waclawik and A. Du, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 2016, **138**, 6292–6297.
- P. Huang, J. Huang, S. A. Pantovich, A. D. Carl, T. G. Fenton, C. A. Caputo, R. L. Grimm, A. I. Frenkel and G. Li, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 2018, **140**, 16042–16047.
- S. Tang, X. Yin, G. Wang, X. Lu and T. Lu, *Nano Res.*, 2019, **12**, 457–462.
- X. Wang, K. Maeda, A. Thomas, K. Takanebe, G. Xin, J. M. Carlsson, K. Domen and M. Antonietti, *Nat. Mater.*, 2009, **8**, 76–80.
- J. Zhang, X. Chen, K. Takanebe, K. Maeda, K. Domen, J. D. Epping, X. Fu, M. Antonietti and X. Wang, *Angew. Chem., Int. Ed.*, 2010, **49**, 441–444.
- J. Zhang, J. Sun, K. Maeda, K. Domen, P. Liu, M. Antonietti, X. Fu and X. Wang, *Energy Environ. Sci.*, 2011, **4**, 675–678.
- W.-J. Ong, L.-L. Tan, Y. H. Ng, S.-T. Yong and S.-P. Chai, *Chem. Rev.*, 2016, **116**, 7159–7329.

- 21 Z. Zhang, J. Huang, Y. Fang, M. Zhang, K. Liu and B. Dong, *Adv. Mater.*, 2017, **29**, 1606688.
- 22 Y. Wang, H. Suzuki, J. Xie, O. Tomita, D. J. Martin, M. Higashi, D. Kong, R. Abe and J. Tang, *Chem. Rev.*, 2018, **118**, 5201–5241.
- 23 Y.-F. Mu, W. Zhang, G.-X. Dong, K. Su, M. Zhang and T.-B. Lu, *Small*, 2020, **16**, 2002140.
- 24 P. Kuang, L. Zhang, B. Cheng and J. Yu, *Appl. Catal., B*, 2017, **218**, 570–580.
- 25 S.-S. Yi, J.-M. Yan and Q. Jiang, *J. Mater. Chem. A*, 2018, **6**, 9839–9845.
- 26 S. Cao, H. Li, T. Tong, H.-C. Chen, A. Yu, J. Yu and H. M. Chen, *Adv. Funct. Mater.*, 2018, **28**, 1802169.
- 27 C. Hu, X. Wang, Z. Qi and C. Li, *Infrared Phys. Technol.*, 2020, **105**, 103200.
- 28 P. Huang, M. Cheng, H. Zhang, M. Zuo, C. Xiao and Y. Xie, *Nano Energy*, 2019, **61**, 428–434.
- 29 X. She, J. Wu, H. Xu, J. Zhong, Y. Wang, Y. Song, K. Nie, Y. Liu, Y. Yang, M.-T. F. Rodrigues, R. Vajtai, J. Lou, D. Du, H. Li and P. M. Ajayan, *Adv. Energy Mater.*, 2017, **7**, 1700025.
- 30 M. J. Bojdys, J.-O. Müller, M. Antonietti and A. Thomas, *Chem. – Eur. J.*, 2008, **14**, 8177–8182.
- 31 M. Shi, G. Li, J. Li, X. Jin, X. Tao, B. Zeng, E. A. Pidko, R. Li and C. Li, *Angew. Chem.*, 2020, **59**, 6590–6595.
- 32 Y. Zhou, L. Zhang and W. Wang, *Nat. Commun.*, 2019, **10**, 506.
- 33 S. Cao, J. Low, J. Yu and M. Jaroniec, *Adv. Mater.*, 2015, **27**, 2150–2176.
- 34 S. Bai, J. Jiang, Q. Zhang and Y. Xiong, *Chem. Soc. Rev.*, 2015, **44**, 2893–2939.
- 35 Y. Li, S. Chen, D. Xi, Y. Bo, R. Long, C. Wang, L. Song and Y. Xiong, *Small*, 2018, **14**, 1702109.
- 36 Y. Yang, F. Li, J. Chen, J. Fan and Q. Xiang, *ChemSusChem*, 2020, **13**, 1979–1985.
- 37 S. Ji, Y. Qu, T. Wang, Y. Chen, G. Wang, X. Li, J. Dong, Q. Chen, W. Zhang, Z. Zhang, S. Liang, R. Yu, Y. Wang, D. Wang and Y. Li, *Angew. Chem.*, 2020, **59**, 10651–10657.
- 38 L. Liu, Y. Jiang, H. Zhao, J. Chen, J. Cheng, K. Yang and Y. Li, *ACS Catal.*, 2016, **6**, 1097–1108.
- 39 Q.-S. Chen, S.-G. Sun, Z.-Y. Zhou, Y.-X. Chen and S.-B. Deng, *Phys. Chem. Chem. Phys.*, 2008, **10**, 3645–3654.
- 40 J. Jansson, A. E. C. Palmqvist, E. Fridell, M. Skoglundh, L. Österlund, P. Thormählen and V. Langer, *J. Catal.*, 2002, **211**, 387–397.
- 41 H.-K. Lin, C.-B. Wang, H.-C. Chiu and S.-H. Chien, *Catal. Lett.*, 2003, **86**, 63–68.
- 42 X. Zu, X. Li, W. Liu, Y. Sun, J. Xu, T. Yao, W. Yan, S. Gao, C. Wang, S. Wei and Y. Xie, *Adv. Mater.*, 2019, **31**, e1808135.
- 43 Y. Chen, C. W. Li and M. W. Kanan, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 2012, **134**, 19969–19972.
- 44 Ş. Neaţu, J. A. Maciá-Agulló, P. Concepción and H. Garcia, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 2014, **136**, 15969–15976.
- 45 A. Wuttig, M. Yaguchi, K. Motobayashi, M. Osawa and Y. Surendranath, *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U. S. A.*, 2016, **113**, E4585–E4593.
- 46 I. V. Chernyshova, P. Somasundaran and S. Ponnuram, *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U. S. A.*, 2018, **115**, E9261–E9270.
- 47 Y. Hori, H. Wakebe, T. Tsukamoto and O. Koga, *Electrochim. Acta*, 1994, **39**, 1833–1839.
- 48 M. R. Singh, J. D. Goodpaster, A. Z. Weber, M. Head-Gordon and A. T. Bell, *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U. S. A.*, 2017, **114**, E8812–E8821.
- 49 J. Liu, H. Shi, Q. Shen, C. Guo and G. Zhao, *Green Chem.*, 2017, **19**, 5900–5910.
- 50 Q. Song, J. Li, L. Wang, Y. Qin, L. Pang and H. Liu, *J. Catal.*, 2019, **370**, 176–185.
- 51 Q. Xu, B. Zhu, C. Jiang, B. Cheng and J. Yu, *Sol. RRL*, 2018, **2**, 1800006.
- 52 Y.-X. Liu, H.-H. Wang, T.-J. Zhao, B. Zhang, H. Su, Z.-H. Xue, X.-H. Li and J.-S. Chen, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 2018, **141**, 38–41.
- 53 B. Jiang, X.-G. Zhang, K. Jiang, D.-Y. Wu and W.-B. Cai, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 2018, **140**, 2880–2889.
- 54 A. Salehi-Khojin, H.-R. M. Jhong, B. A. Rosen, W. Zhu, S. Ma, P. J. A. Kenis and R. I. Masel, *J. Phys. Chem. C*, 2013, **117**, 1627–1632.
- 55 F. Lei, W. Liu, Y. Sun, J. Xu, K. Liu, L. Liang, T. Yao, B. Pan, S. Wei and Y. Xie, *Nat. Commun.*, 2016, **7**, 12697.
- 56 X. Wang, Z. Chen, X. Zhao, T. Yao, W. Chen, R. You, C. Zhao, G. Wu, J. Wang, W. Huang, J. Yang, X. Hong, S. Wei, Y. Wu and Y. Li, *Angew. Chem., Int. Ed.*, 2018, **57**, 1944–1948.