

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Cite this: *Inorg. Chem. Front.*, 2022, **9**, 3047Accelerating hydrazine-assisted hydrogen production kinetics with Mn dopant modulated CoS<sub>2</sub> nanowire arrays†Junrong Hou,<sup>‡a,b</sup> Xianyun Peng,<sup>\*,‡c,d</sup> Jiaqiang Sun,<sup>id e</sup> Shusheng Zhang,<sup>id f</sup> Qian Liu,<sup>g</sup> Xinzhong Wang,<sup>\*,a</sup> Jun Luo<sup>b</sup> and Xijun Liu<sup>id \*h</sup>

Electrochemical H<sub>2</sub> production from water splitting is an environmentally sustainable technique but remains a great challenge due to the sluggish anodic oxygen evolution reaction (OER). Replacing the OER with the thermodynamically more favorable electrocatalytic oxidation process is an effective strategy for highly efficient H<sub>2</sub> generation. Herein, Mn-doped CoS<sub>2</sub> has predicted an excellent bifunctional electrocatalyst for the hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) and the hydrazine oxidation reaction (HzOR). With the introduction of Mn, the Gibbs free energy of the adsorbed H\* and the potential rate-limiting step (the dehydrogenation of \*NH<sub>2</sub>NH<sub>2</sub> to \*NHNH<sub>2</sub>) for the HzOR process of the catalyst can be significantly reduced. As expected, the Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> catalyst exhibited excellent catalytic activity and robust long-term stability for the HER and HzOR. In detail, the Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> catalyst only acquired potentials of 46 and 77 mV *versus* the reversible hydrogen electrode for achieving a current density of 10 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> for the cathodic HER and anodic HzOR, respectively. In addition, the Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> electrode only needs a cell voltage of 447 mV to output 200 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> in the overall hydrazine splitting system as well as exhibits a robust long-term H<sub>2</sub> production. This work provides theoretical guidance for the design of advanced bifunctional electrocatalysts and promotes high efficiency and energy-saving H<sub>2</sub> production technology.

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## Introduction

With the increasing depletion of fossil fuels, serious energy shortage, and environmental problems, clean and renewable energy sources have attracted much attention.<sup>1,2</sup> Hydrogen energy is deemed as one of the most potential alternatives for a sustainable energy system due to its highest energy density (142 MJ kg<sup>-1</sup>).<sup>3–5</sup> Nevertheless, the current industrial method for H<sub>2</sub> production, natural gas reforming, is an energy-intensive and non-clean process. It consumes considerable amounts of fossil fuel and produces a vast amount of carbon dioxide.<sup>6</sup> Electrochemical hydrogen (H<sub>2</sub>) production with high purity *via* the hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) on the water-splitting cathodic electrode has been emerging as a sustainable, cost-effective, and viable way.<sup>7–13</sup> Currently, the major obstacles that restricted the development of H<sub>2</sub> production are the lack of high-activity and low-cost electrocatalysts with low overpotential requirements in HER processes.<sup>14</sup> Although H<sub>2</sub> can be obtained based on the state-of-the-art pH-universal Pt-based electrocatalysts, their wide commercial application is severely limited by their scarcity and high cost.<sup>15–17</sup> Therefore, the development of low-cost metal-free or abundant transition metal electrocatalysts toward high-efficient H<sub>2</sub> generation to meet the global hydrogen economy is highly desirable yet key challenging.<sup>15,18</sup>

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Ongoing research efforts have been devoted to developing cost-effective electrocatalysts with high activity for the HER process, many potential nanomaterials (such as transition metal phosphides,<sup>19–22</sup> sulfides,<sup>23–26</sup> and nitrides<sup>27,28</sup>) have been widely put forward and investigated in detail. Among these catalysts, Co-based nanomaterials, especially for the cobalt disulfide (CoS<sub>2</sub>), have been regarded as promising HER electrocatalysts due to their high conductivity and unique configuration. Despite achieving significant progress, the HER catalytic activities of Co-based catalysts are also still far less than the Pt-based catalyst. In this regard, more attention has been paid to the modulation of the electronic structure and the optimization of chemical compositions, aiming to adjust the energy band structure as well as the electronic conductivity and thermodynamic H<sup>\*</sup> adsorption/desorption state. The doping strategy with transition metal ions has been proved to play a significant role in optimizing the Gibbs free energy of the adsorbed H ( $\Delta G_{H^*}$ ) for hydrogen adsorption of HER electrocatalysts.<sup>29–35</sup> It has been demonstrated that the HER electrocatalytic activity of Co-based catalysts can be efficiently triggered by varied transition-metal dopants.<sup>36,37</sup> In particular, the volcano plot based on a density functional theory (DFT) revealed that elemental Mn is the best candidate dopant to tune the adsorption behavior of H atoms on adjacent Co atoms, the dopant itself, and consequently the HER activity.<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, the anodic oxygen evolution reaction (OER) is identified as the bottleneck of water splitting. The OER suffered from a high overpotential and sluggish kinetics, which greatly limit the practical application of H<sub>2</sub> production.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, apart from optimizing catalysts, the electrochemical H<sub>2</sub> production can be improved and accelerated by replacing the OER with a thermodynamically more favorable electrocatalytic oxidation process. For instance, the oxidation of hydrazine, 5-hydroxymethylfurfural (HMF),<sup>40</sup> and urea<sup>41</sup> have been coupled with cathodic H<sub>2</sub>O reduction to effectively reduce energy consumption toward high-purity H<sub>2</sub> generation. Among them, hydrazine (N<sub>2</sub>H<sub>4</sub>) oxidation is the most potential candidate due to its much lower oxidation potential of  $-0.33$  V *versus* reversible hydrogen electrode (*vs.* RHE) than that of the OER ( $1.23$  V *vs.* RHE).<sup>42–44</sup> Moreover, inert N<sub>2</sub> is the anodic oxidation product of N<sub>2</sub>H<sub>4</sub>, which can well solve the potential security issues of O<sub>2</sub> + H<sub>2</sub> mixture gases in membrane-free overall water splitting. In addition, with the assistance of Earth-abundant electrocatalysts, substituted anodic hydrazine oxidation could reduce the cost and overpotential of the entire water electrolysis, resulting in high-efficiency H<sub>2</sub> production.

Herein, taking the representative CoS<sub>2</sub> as a model electrocatalyst for the HER, we adopted a doping strategy with an Mn atom to accelerate H<sub>2</sub> production with the assistance of anodic N<sub>2</sub>H<sub>4</sub> oxidation by rationally modulating the electronic structure. DFT calculations demonstrated that Mn atoms can optimize the Gibbs free energy and enhance the intrinsic activity and tremendously accelerate the kinetic process. Inspired by the theoretical analysis, we successfully prepared Mn-doped CoS<sub>2</sub> nanotubes supported on nickel foam (Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub>). As expected, the Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> electrocatalyst exhibited excellent electrochemical

performance with a much lower overpotential of  $46$  mV at a current density of  $10\text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  and a small Tafel slope of  $63.1\text{ mV dec}^{-1}$  for the HER in  $0.1\text{ M KOH}$  aqueous solution. Meanwhile, as for the anodic hydrazine oxidation reaction (HzOR), Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> only needs a small working potential of  $77\text{ mV vs. RHE}$  to generate a current density of  $10\text{ mA cm}^{-2}$ .

## Experimental methods

### Computational details

All the geometric optimization and single-point energy calculations were performed using spin-polarized density-functional theory (DFT) implemented in the DMol<sup>3</sup> code. Exchange–correlation functions are taken as generalized gradient approximation (GGA) with Perdew–Burke–Ernzerhof (PBE). The band structure and the corresponding DOS result were conducted by DS-PAW package, and the Device Studio program was used for performing visualization, modeling and simulation<sup>45,46</sup>. The double numerical plus polarization (DNP) was chosen as the atomic orbital basis set, and the smearing was set to  $0.005\text{ Ha}$  to achieve precise electronic convergence. The convergence tolerances of energy, maximum force, and displacement were set to  $2 \times 10^{-5}\text{ Ha}$ ,  $0.004\text{ Ha Å}^{-1}$ , and  $0.005\text{ Å}$ , respectively, and a basis set a cut-off of  $4.4\text{ Å}$  was employed to ensure high-quality computational results. The reciprocal space was sampled using a  $3 \times 3 \times 1$  *k*-point grid for geometry optimizations. A  $2 \times 2 \times 1$  supercell was used to calculate the electronic property and hydrogen evolution activity. For Mn-doped CoS<sub>2</sub>, we used one Mn atom to replace one Co atom. To prevent interaction between two neighboring surfaces, a vacuum slab of  $15\text{ Å}$  was employed in the (001) direction of CoS<sub>2</sub> for the calculations of hydrogen evolution activity. The free energy diagram for the HER was obtained by calculating the change of the free energy with a hydrogen atom adsorbed on the surface. The activity of the hydrogen evolution reaction was reflected by Gibb's free energy change ( $\Delta G_{H^*}$ ) and the values of  $\Delta G_{H^*}$  are obtained using the following formula:

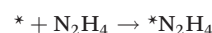
$$\Delta G_{H^*} = \Delta E_{H^*} + \Delta E_{ZPE} - T\Delta S$$

$$\Delta E_{H^*} = E_{\text{surface}/H^*} - E_{\text{surface}} - 1/2E_{H_2}$$

where the  $E_{\text{surface}/H^*}$  is the total energy of the surface model,  $E_{\text{surface}}$  is the total energy of the surface model with H<sup>\*</sup> adsorption,  $E_{H_2}$  is the energy of a single H<sub>2</sub> molecule isolated in a vacuum.  $\Delta E_{ZPE}$  is the zero-point energy change, which can be obtained from vibrational frequency calculation as implemented in DFT.  $T\Delta S$  is estimated to be  $0.24\text{ eV}$  to consider the entropy change at room temperature.

The oxidation of hydrazine to nitrogen and hydrogen occurs in the following six consecutive elementary steps:

(1)



(2)



(3)



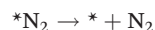
(4)



(5)



(6)



where the asterisk (\*) represents the reaction surface of  $\text{CoS}_2(001)$  and  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2(001)$ . “ $^*\text{N}_2\text{H}_4$ ”, “ $\text{N}_2\text{H}_3$ ”, “ $\text{N}_2\text{H}_2$ ”, “ $\text{N}_2\text{H}$ ”, and “ $^*\text{N}_2$ ” denote the models with the corresponding chemisorbed species residing in the reaction surfaces. Among these six steps, steps (1) and (6) are the adsorption of  $\text{N}_2\text{H}_4$  and desorption of  $\text{N}_2$ , respectively. The other four steps involve the generation of one proton and one electron.

### Clean nickel foam

Nickel foam with a three-dimensional skeleton was selected as a substrate for the growth of  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  nanotubes. Before use, nickel foam was carefully cleaned with a dilute hydrochloric acid aqueous solution in an ultrasound bath for several minutes to remove the surface oxide layer. Subsequently, the nickel foam was washed successively with deionized water, acetone, and absolute ethanol. Finally, the cleaned nickel foam was obtained by drying at 60 °C overnight under vacuum conditions.

### Synthesis of Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub>

$\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  was prepared by a facile hydrothermal reaction and sulfuration method. Typically,  $\text{Co}(\text{NO}_3)_2 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$  (1.5 mM),  $\text{NH}_4\text{F}$  (3 mM), urea (7.5 mM), and  $\text{MnCl}_2 \cdot 4\text{H}_2\text{O}$  (0.075 mM) were dissolved in 40 mL of deionized water and magnetically stirred for 60 min to form a homogeneous solution. After that, the obtained solution was transferred into a 50 mL Teflon-lined stainless steel autoclave with one piece of clean nickel foam (approximately 1 cm × 2 cm), which was sealed and maintained at 110 °C for 5 h in an oven and was naturally cooled down to room temperature. After cooling to room temperature, the nickel foam with the growth precursor was taken out, washed with water and ethanol, and dried in an oven at 60 °C for 12 h under vacuum conditions.

After that, the as-prepared precursor was put into a ceramic boat and placed in a tube furnace. Another ceramic boat containing 0.5 g of sublimed sulfur was put on the upstream side. After vacuum treatment and filling with high-purity Ar, the furnace was heated to 300 °C for 2 h with a heating rate of 1 °C min<sup>-1</sup> with a continuous Ar flow with a flow rate of 100 sccm. After the tube furnace was naturally cooled to ambient temperature,  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  was obtained. For comparison,  $\text{CoS}_2$  was also prepared by a similar approach except without the addition of  $\text{MnCl}_2 \cdot 4\text{H}_2\text{O}$ . The areal loadings of the  $\text{CoS}_2$  and  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  cata-

lyst on the nickel foam were confirmed to be 2.7 and 2.9 mg cm<sup>-2</sup>, respectively. The  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  catalyst with various Mn contents was optimized by adjusting the additive amount of precursor. All the chemicals were directly used after purchase without further purification.

### Materials characterization

The crystallographic structure was analyzed by X-ray diffraction (XRD) using an X-ray diffractometer (SmartLab 9 kW) with  $\text{Cu K}\alpha$  radiation ( $\lambda = 0.154598$  nm) at a scan rate of 10° min<sup>-1</sup> in the 2 $\theta$  range from 30° to 70°. The morphology and structure of the prepared sample were characterized using a scanning electron microscope (SEM, Verios 460L) operated at 20 kV and a transmission electron microscope (TEM, Talos F200X) operated at 200 kV equipped with an energy-dispersive X-ray spectrometer (EDS). XPS (ESCALAB 250Xi from Thermo Scientific) was employed for elemental mapping using a monochromatic Al  $\text{K}\alpha$  radiation source at a background pressure of 10<sup>-9</sup> Torr. The binding energy calibration was performed by referencing the C 1s main peak at 284.8 eV. Inductively coupled plasma atomic emission spectroscopy (ICP-OES) analysis was recorded on a Thermo iCAP RQ instrument.

### Electrochemical measurements

Electrochemical measurements were carried out with a typical three-electrode system by using an electrochemical workstation (CHI Instruments 760E) at room temperature. A graphite rod and Ag/AgCl electrode were used as the counter and reference electrodes, respectively. The as-prepared catalysts were indirectly used as working electrodes. 0.1 M KOH and 1 M KOH containing 0.5 M  $\text{N}_2\text{H}_4$  aqueous solution were used as electrolytes for the HER and HzOR, respectively.

Firstly, the HER and HzOR activity of the catalysts was investigated by linear scan voltammogram (LSV) with a scan rate of 10 mA s<sup>-1</sup>. For comparison, the commercial noble metal Pt/C catalyst was measured under the same conditions. A stability test was performed using the chronopotentiometry-time and continuous cyclic voltammetry measurement technology in 0.1 M KOH. For hydrazine-assisted water electrolysis, a symmetrical full electrolyzer was assembled by directly using  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  as the cathode and anode. LSV was measured at a scan rate of 10 mV s<sup>-1</sup> in 1.0 M KOH with 0.5 M  $\text{N}_2\text{H}_4$  or 1 M  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  with 0.5 M  $\text{N}_2\text{H}_4$ . For comparison, the commercial Pt/C catalyst coated nickel foam was measured under the same conditions. All the electrocatalytic current density was normalized to the geometric area of the nickel foam (1 × 1 cm<sup>2</sup>) and all potentials were given *versus* reversible hydrogen electrode according to the equation:  $E_{\text{RHE}} = E_{\text{Ag/AgCl}} + 0.0591\text{pH} + 0.197$ .

Electrochemical impedance spectra (EIS) were recorded at an open-circuit potential in a frequency ranging from 100 kHz to 10 mHz with an AC voltage amplitude of 5 mV. To determine the corresponding electrochemical surface area (ECSA), the double-layer capacitance ( $C_{\text{dl}}$ ) of all the materials was measured in a 0.1 M KOH aqueous solution. A potential range where no apparent Faradaic process occurred was determined first using cyclic voltammetry (CV) with different scan rates of

2, 4, 6, and 8 mV s<sup>-1</sup>. The value of  $C_{dl}$  was then obtained from the linear curve *versus* scan rate.

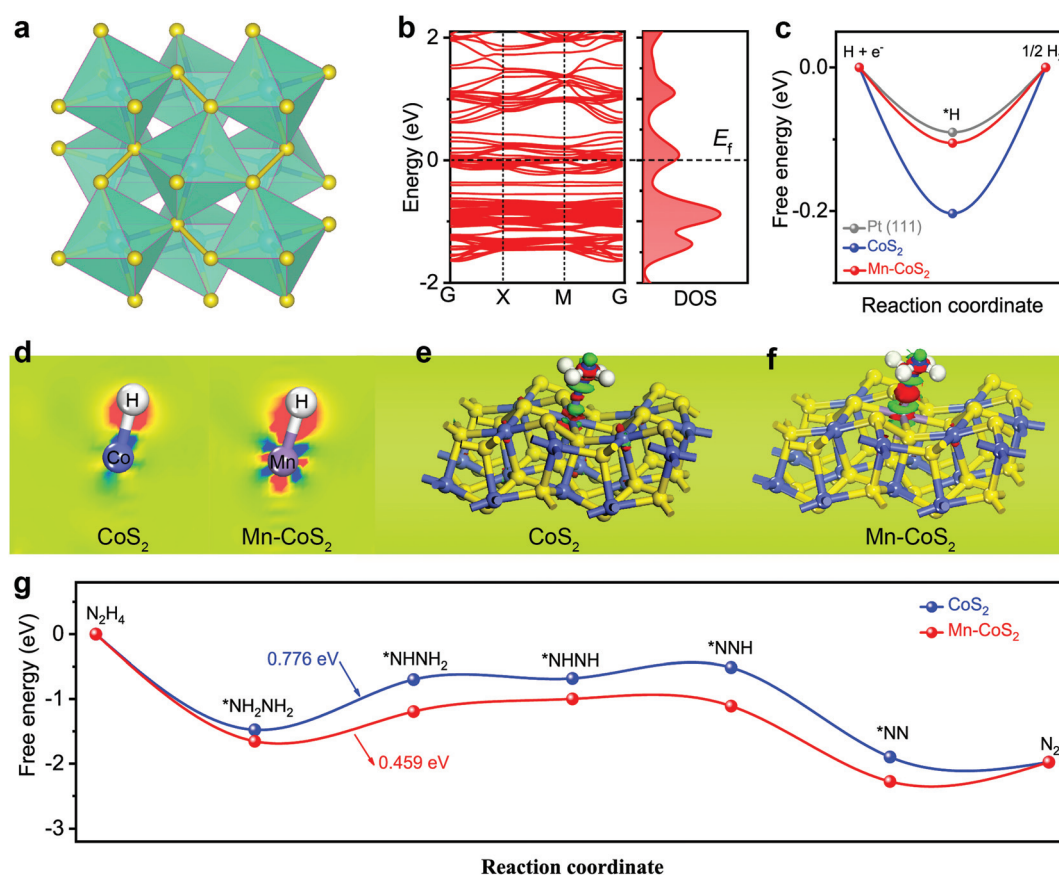
## Results and discussion

To clarify the underlying origins between the catalytic activity and the hybrid structure, DFT calculations were applied to predict both HER and HzOR processes. Firstly, the stable (001) surface of the cubic CoS<sub>2</sub> model was built. As shown in Fig. 1a, the structural analysis reveals that CoS<sub>2</sub> has a unique crystal structure, where each Co is coordinated with six S atoms to form a slightly distorted octahedron, and the distorted octahedrons are connected by S–S covalent bonds. In the case of the Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> catalyst, one Mn atom instead of one Co atom of CoS<sub>2</sub>(001) is the theoretical calculation model (Fig. S1†).

Firstly, the electronic band structures of CoS<sub>2</sub> and Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> are investigated. As shown in Fig. 1b, Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> maintains the metallic nature as pristine CoS<sub>2</sub> (Fig. S2†), which would favor the electron transfer process in the electrochemical catalysis process.<sup>47</sup> It is well known that the free

energy changes of hydrogen adsorption ( $\Delta G_{H^*}$ ) are an effective descriptor for evaluating the HER activity of electrocatalysts. The catalysts with  $\Delta G_{H^*}$  close to zero are considered promising candidates for the HER. As shown in Fig. 1c, the pristine CoS<sub>2</sub> exhibits a  $\Delta G_{H^*}$  value of  $-2.03$  eV, indicating the strong adsorption of H\* on the CoS<sub>2</sub> surface with a bond length (Co–H) of 1.471 Å (Fig. S3†). After Mn doping, the bond length of Mn–H is extended to 1.552 Å, resulting in the  $\Delta G_{H^*}$  value of Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> decreasing to  $-1.05$  eV, which is much close to Pt(111), indicating its excellent thermoneutrality for the HER process.

To further analyze the change in the electron distribution of the Co–H region and Mn–H region for CoS<sub>2</sub> and Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub>, the charge density difference (CDD) of the catalyst absorbed H\* was studied as shown in Fig. 1d, where the red and blue colors represent the accumulation and depletion of electrons, respectively. As the CDD contour plots shown in Fig. 1d, much more electrons from the Mn atom are transferred to the adsorbed H\* in Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> than that of Co in CoS<sub>2</sub>. In detail, the electrons around the H atom in Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> are much more than that in CoS<sub>2</sub> due to the increased electron transfer, and the Mn site in Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> is a relatively electron-rich state compared



**Fig. 1** DFT calculation results: (a) crystal structure of CoS<sub>2</sub>; (b) the calculated electronic band structure and the corresponding DOS results of Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub>; (c) the free energy profiles of HER pathways for CoS<sub>2</sub> and Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub>; (d) the charge density difference contour plot of Co–H and Mn–H regions, the red and blue colors represent the accumulation and depletion of electrons, respectively; (e and f) the side-view of the three-dimensional charge density difference of the H-adsorbed configuration at different sites over the catalyst surface, the pink and green region representing charge depletion and accumulation in the space, respectively; (g) the free energy profiles of the HzOR reaction pathways for CoS<sub>2</sub> and Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub>.

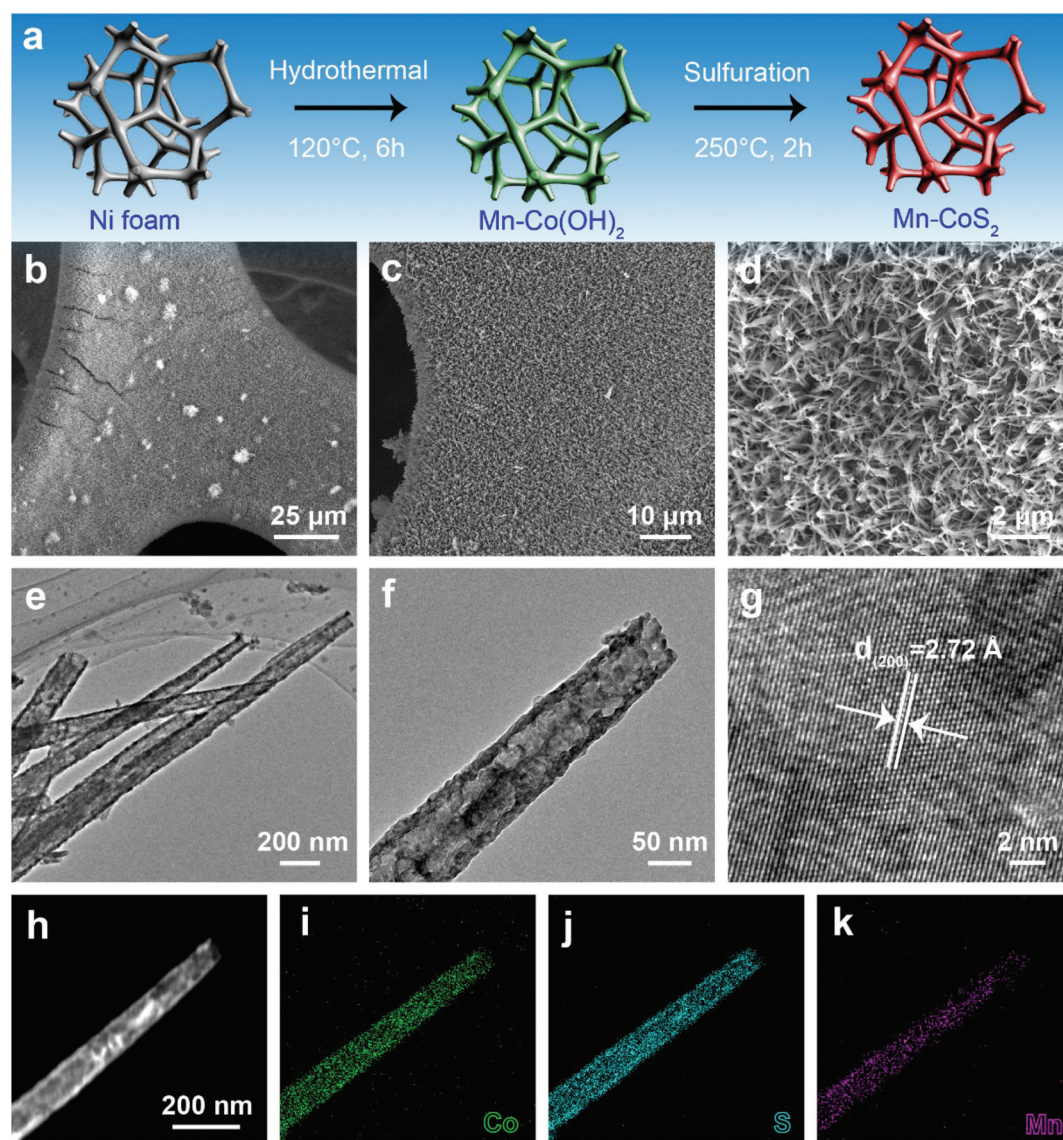


with the Co site in  $\text{CoS}_2$ , which is probably due to the electronic interaction between Mn and the surrounding atoms (Fig. S4†). These results indicate that the modulation of the electronic structure caused by Mn doping would synergistically promote the water adsorption strength and optimize the adsorption free energy of  $\text{H}^*$ , which can facilitate the electrochemical HER process.<sup>31</sup>

Apart from the investigation of HER activity, the HzOR process over  $\text{CoS}_2$  and  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  surfaces was also explored using first-principles calculations. Firstly, the atomic structure adsorbed  $\text{N}_2\text{H}_4$  molecule over the Co site of  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  and Co site of  $\text{CoS}_2$  was optimized. As shown in Fig. S5,†  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  displays the strongest  $\text{N}_2\text{H}_4$  adsorption with a more negative binding energy of  $-1.65$  eV than that of  $\text{CoS}_2$  ( $-1.48$  eV). Furthermore, the charge density difference was also calculated.

As the charge density difference contour plot is shown in Fig. 1e and f, it can be seen that much more electrons were transferred from the Mn site to adsorbed  $\text{N}_2\text{H}_4$  and the charge redistribution was dominantly restricted around the Mn site, proving the strong adsorption of  $\text{N}_2\text{H}_4$  on  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$ . This electron localization behavior of the  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  catalyst upon Mn doping could contribute to the enhanced catalytic activity.<sup>43,48,49</sup>

The HzOR pathway on the catalyst is further studied. As shown in Fig. 1g, it can be found that adsorption of  $\text{N}_2\text{H}_4$  on the Mn site of the  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  surface is exothermic by  $-1.65$  eV, lower than that of the Co site of the  $\text{CoS}_2$  surface ( $-1.48$  eV), indicating that the electron-deficient Mn species on  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  would facilitate the adsorption of the  $\text{N}_2\text{H}_4$  molecule.<sup>50,51</sup> Moreover, it has been revealed that the dehydrogenation process of  $^*\text{NH}_2\text{NH}_2$  to  $^*\text{NHNH}_2$  is the potential rate-limiting



**Fig. 2** Morphology and structural characterization of  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$ : (a) schematic illustration of the synthesized process of  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$ ; (b–d) SEM images; (e and f) low-magnification TEM images; (g) high-magnification TEM image; (h–k) HAADF-STEM image and the corresponding EDS mapping.

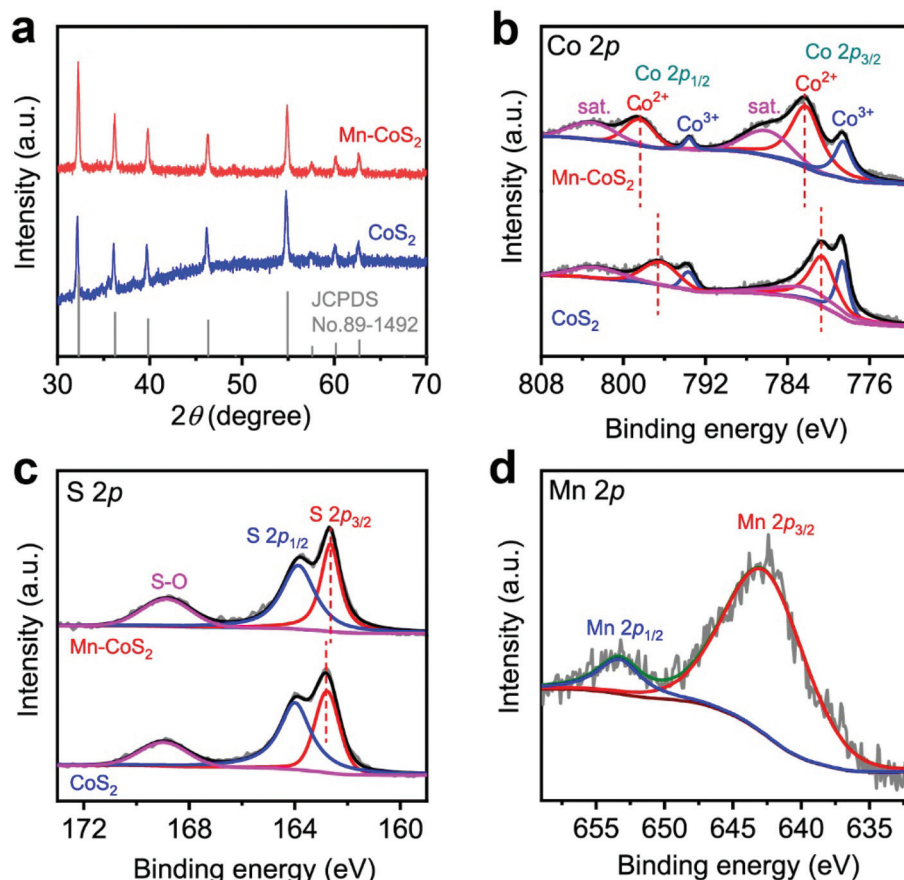
step (PLS) of the HzOR on the  $\text{CoS}_2$  and  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  surfaces, and the PDS barrier of  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  (0.459 eV) is lower than that of  $\text{CoS}_2$  (0.776 eV). Therefore, the  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  catalyst is preferred for propelling the electrochemical HzOR process than  $\text{CoS}_2$ .

Motivated by the above promising prediction, we successfully synthesized Mn-doped  $\text{CoS}_2$  nanotube supported nickel foam ( $\text{Mn-CoS}_2/\text{NF}$ ). Fig. 2a illustrates the synthesis schematics of the  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2/\text{NF}$ . Before the growth of  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$ , the commercial NF was cleaned with acid to remove the oxide layer. Then, the cleaned NF serves as the three-dimensional skeleton for the uniform growth of  $\text{Mn-Co(OH)}_2$  nanoarrays by a facile hydrothermal synthesis at 200 °C for 6 h. Finally, the  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  nanotubes were obtained by the sulfuration of  $\text{Mn-Co(OH)}_2$  with sublimed sulfur as a S source at 250 °C for 2 h (please see the Experimental section for more details). For comparison,  $\text{CoS}_2$  nanoarrays were also fabricated by a similar method except without the addition of a Mn precursor.

Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) images show that the whole surface of NF is completely covered by interconnected  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  nanoarrays (Fig. 2b–d). The as-prepared  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  sample displays a nanotube morphology with a few hundred microns in length and a diameter of about 100 nanometers, as confirmed by transmission electron microscopy (TEM) (Fig. 2e

and f). A high-resolution TEM image shows the visible lattice fringes with an equal interplanar distance of 2.72 Å that corresponds to the (200) plane of cubic  $\text{CoS}_2$ , revealing the high crystallization feature of the  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  nanotubes (Fig. 2g). Furthermore, this nanotube structure is further explored by the elemental mapping images of the energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS) analysis. As shown in Fig. 2h–k, the Mn signals uniformly overlap with the Co and S signals in the as-prepared  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  catalyst.

The crystallographic structures of the as-prepared  $\text{CoS}_2$  and  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  catalysts are also characterized by X-ray diffraction (XRD). As the XRD pattern is shown in Fig. 3a, the as-prepared  $\text{CoS}_2$  and  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$  exhibit similar XRD diffraction peak positions. In detail, the diffraction peaks at 32.2°, 36.2°, 39.78°, 46.31°, 54.88°, 57.53°, 60.22°, and 62.6°, which correspond to the (200), (210), (211), (220), (311), (222), (023), and (321) planes of cubic  $\text{CoS}_2$  (JCPDS no. 89-1492). In detail, it can be observed that the XRD diffraction peaks are shifted to a high angle relative to that of  $\text{CoS}_2$  (Fig. S6†), which is caused by the incorporation of Mn atoms with a smaller atomic radius into the lattice of  $\text{CoS}_2$  by replacing partial of Co atoms, confirming the successfully doping of Mn atoms into  $\text{CoS}_2$ .<sup>44</sup> Importantly, no Mn-related phase could be detected within the XRD detec-

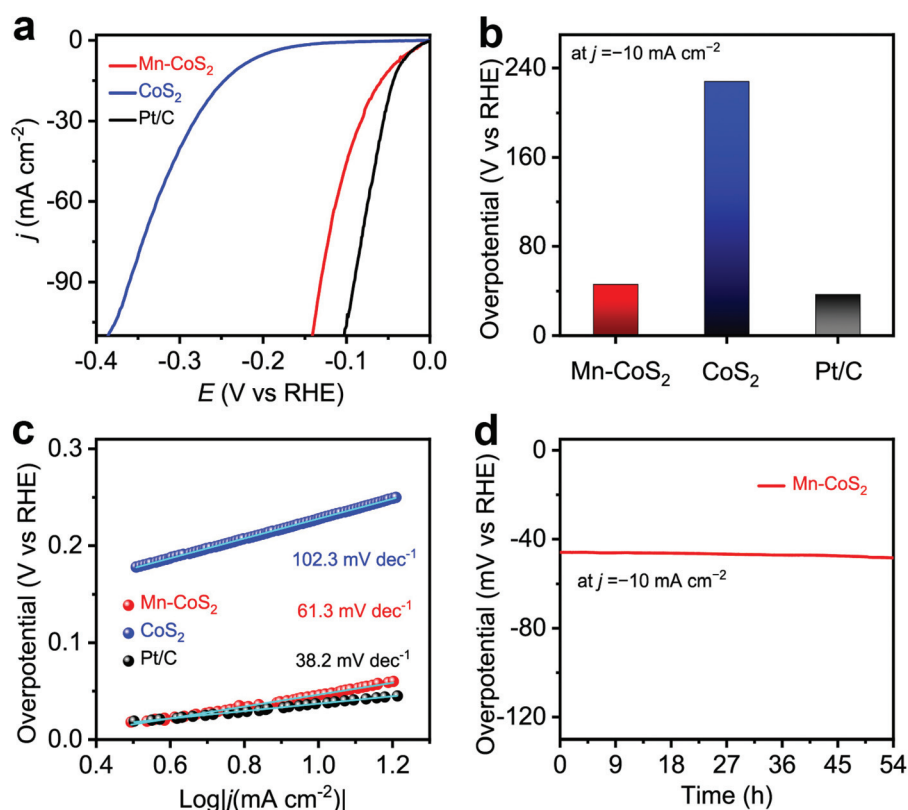


**Fig. 3** Structural characterization of the as-prepared  $\text{CoS}_2$  and  $\text{Mn-CoS}_2$ : (a) XRD patterns; high-resolution XPS (b) Co 2p, (c) S 2p, and (d) Mn 2p spectra.

tion range, indicating that a Mn-source was completely inserted in the  $\text{CoS}_2$  lattice. The Mn-doping level is determined to be 2.1wt% by inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (ICP-MS) analysis. Furthermore, X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) measurements are employed to investigate the chemical state of the as-prepared catalysts. As shown in Fig. 3b and c, it can be found that  $\text{CoS}_2$  and Mn- $\text{CoS}_2$  have similar high-resolution Co 2p and S 2p spectra, revealing that Mn doping does not affect the valence states of Co and S. In detail, as for the Co 2p spectra of Mn- $\text{CoS}_2$ , the core-level peaks at binding energies of 778.7 eV, 782.3 eV, 793.6 eV and 798.6 eV correspond to  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  2p<sub>3/2</sub>,  $\text{Co}^{2+}$  2p<sub>3/2</sub>,  $\text{Co}^{3+}$  2p<sub>1/2</sub>, and  $\text{Co}^{2+}$  2p<sub>1/2</sub>, respectively.<sup>26,52</sup> Concerning the S region of Mn- $\text{CoS}_2$  (Fig. 3c), the signals at 162.6 and 163.9 eV are attributed to the binding energies of S 2p<sub>3/2</sub> and S 2p<sub>1/2</sub>, respectively, which belong to the typical metal-sulfur bonds.<sup>26,52</sup> The peak at the binding energy of 168.7 eV could represent the S-O bond arising from surface air exposure.<sup>53</sup> Impressively, the  $\text{Co}^{2+}$  3d<sub>3/2</sub> doublet of Mn- $\text{CoS}_2$  is shifted by  $\approx 1.6$  eV toward a higher binding energy relative to that of pristine  $\text{CoS}_2$ , whereas S 2p<sub>3/2</sub> is shifted by  $\approx 0.3$  eV toward a higher binding energy. These shifts might be attributed to that the Mn dopant can provide more electrons to S than Co after Mn doping. Moreover, the high-resolution Mn 2p XPS spectrum (Fig. 2c)

displays two representative XPS characteristic peaks at 643.1 and 653.4 eV corresponding to the Mn 2p<sub>3/2</sub> and Mn 2p<sub>1/2</sub> with an  $\text{Mn}^{4+}$  oxidation state in Mn- $\text{CoS}_2$ , respectively. Based on the above XRD and XPS analysis, it can be concluded that the Mn- $\text{CoS}_2$  catalyst was successfully synthesized.

To demonstrate the facilitation of catalytic reactions that arise from Mn-doping, the as-prepared Mn- $\text{CoS}_2$  catalyst was evaluated for the HER with a three-electrode configuration in 0.1 M KOH electrolytes, where Mn- $\text{CoS}_2$  supported on NF was directly used as the working electrode, and the reference electrode and counter electrode were the Ag/AgCl electrode (filled with saturated KCl) and the carbon rod, respectively. Firstly, electrochemical HER catalytic activity was evaluated using linear scan voltammogram (LSV) with a scan rate of  $10 \text{ mA s}^{-1}$ . As the polarization curves are shown in Fig. 4a, the Mn- $\text{CoS}_2$  catalyst exhibits a negligible onset potential of 7 mV vs. RHE at a current density of  $-1 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  near the thermodynamic potential of the HER. Moreover, Mn- $\text{CoS}_2$  achieved a much lower overpotential of 46 mV at a current density of  $-10 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$ , which is much better than that of pristine  $\text{CoS}_2$  (228 mV) and comparable to those of 20 wt% commercial Pt/C catalysts (Fig. 4b), Mn- $\text{CoS}_2$  with different Mn contents (Fig. S7†), and previously reported HER catalysts (Table S1†). Furthermore, Tafel plots were derived from the polarization



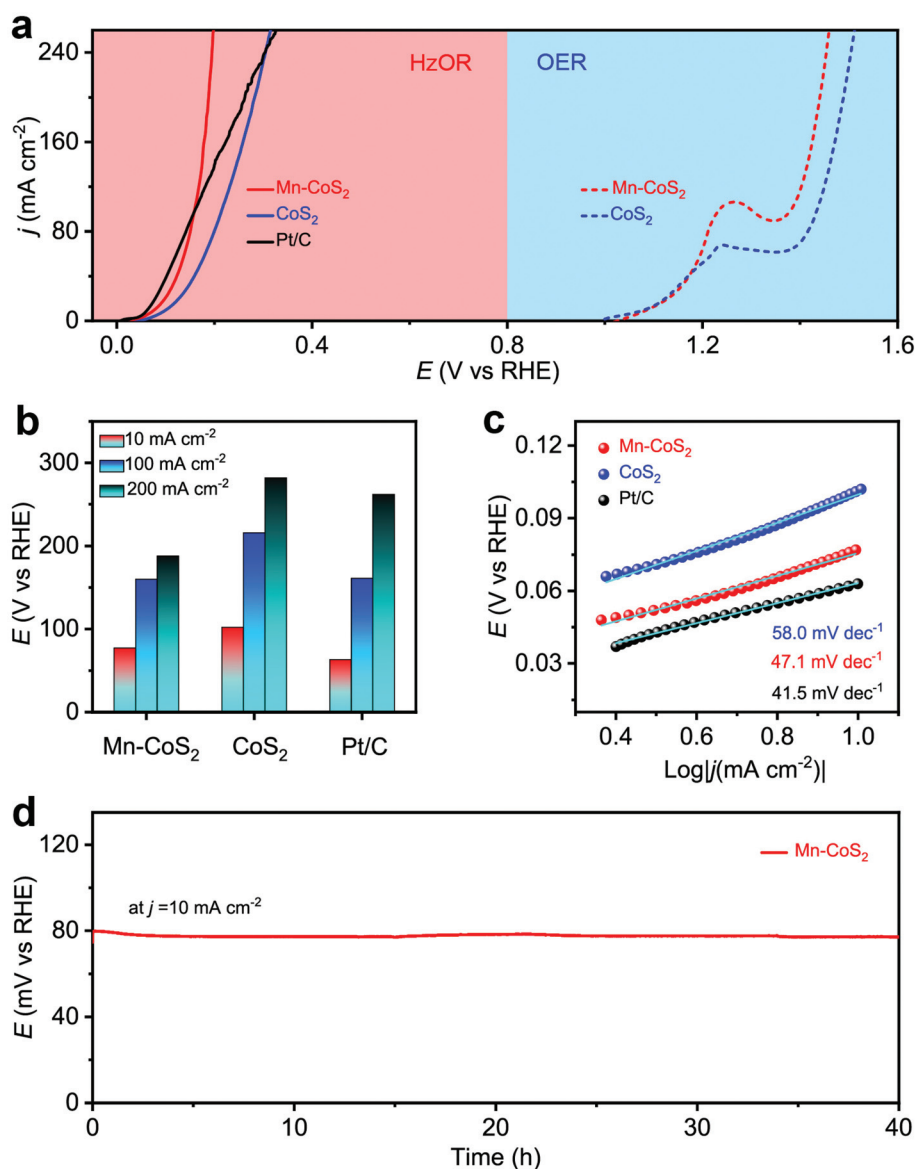
**Fig. 4** HER performance measurements in 0.1 M KOH aqueous solution: (a) polarization curves of Mn- $\text{CoS}_2$  in comparison with  $\text{CoS}_2$  and commercial Pt/C (20 wt%); (b) the activity of the Mn- $\text{CoS}_2$  catalyst at a current density of  $-10 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  with respect to the reference catalysts. (c) Tafel plots derived from the corresponding polarization curves. (d) The time-dependent overpotential curve of the Mn- $\text{CoS}_2$  electrode obtained at a constant current density of  $-10 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  for 54 h under alkaline conditions.



curves to provide a deeper insight into the detailed mechanism of the HER of the as-prepared Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> catalyst. As shown in Fig. 4c, a Tafel slope of 63.1 mV dec<sup>-1</sup> for the Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> catalyst is close to that of Pt/C (38.2 mV dec<sup>-1</sup>).

Furthermore, to gain insights into the interfacial charge transfer kinetics on the catalytic surface during the HER process, electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) was conducted. Fig. S8† shows the Nyquist plots of the CoS<sub>2</sub> and Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> electrodes with a frequency from 100 kHz to 10 mHz. It can be found that the Nyquist plots present a typical semi-circle in the high-frequency region and a straight line in the low-frequency region profiles, which can be ascribed to the charge-transfer resistance of the electrochemical H<sup>+</sup> reaction at

the electrode–electrolyte interface and the diffusion-controlled impedance, respectively.<sup>54,55</sup> Obviously, the Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> electrode exhibits an enhanced electron transfer rate and faster catalytic kinetics during the HER process, eventually leading to the enhanced activity for the HER. To explore the enhanced HER activity of Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> relative to CoS<sub>2</sub>, electrochemical double-layer capacitances (*C*<sub>dl</sub>) were measured. As shown in Fig. S9,† the cyclic voltammograms (CVs) of Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> and CoS<sub>2</sub> at scan rates of 2, 4, 6, and 8 mV s<sup>-1</sup>, respectively. The Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> electrode achieved a *C*<sub>dl</sub> value of 82.5 mF cm<sup>-2</sup>, which is 4.12 times larger than that of CoS<sub>2</sub> (20.5 mF cm<sup>-2</sup>), implying a higher surface area and more exposed active sites for Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub>, which is beneficial for enhancing the HER activity.<sup>56,57</sup>



**Fig. 5** HzOR and OER measurements: (a) HzOR polarization curves of Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> in comparison with CoS<sub>2</sub> and commercial Pt/C (20 wt%) in 1 M KOH + 0.5 M N<sub>2</sub>H<sub>4</sub> aqueous solutions and the OER–HzOR polarization curves in 1.0 M KOH aqueous solutions; (b) the activity of the Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> catalyst at various current densities with respect to the reference catalysts; (c) HzOR Tafel plots derived from the corresponding HzOR polarization curves; (d) the time-dependent working potential curve of the Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> electrode obtained at a constant current density of 10 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> for 40 h.

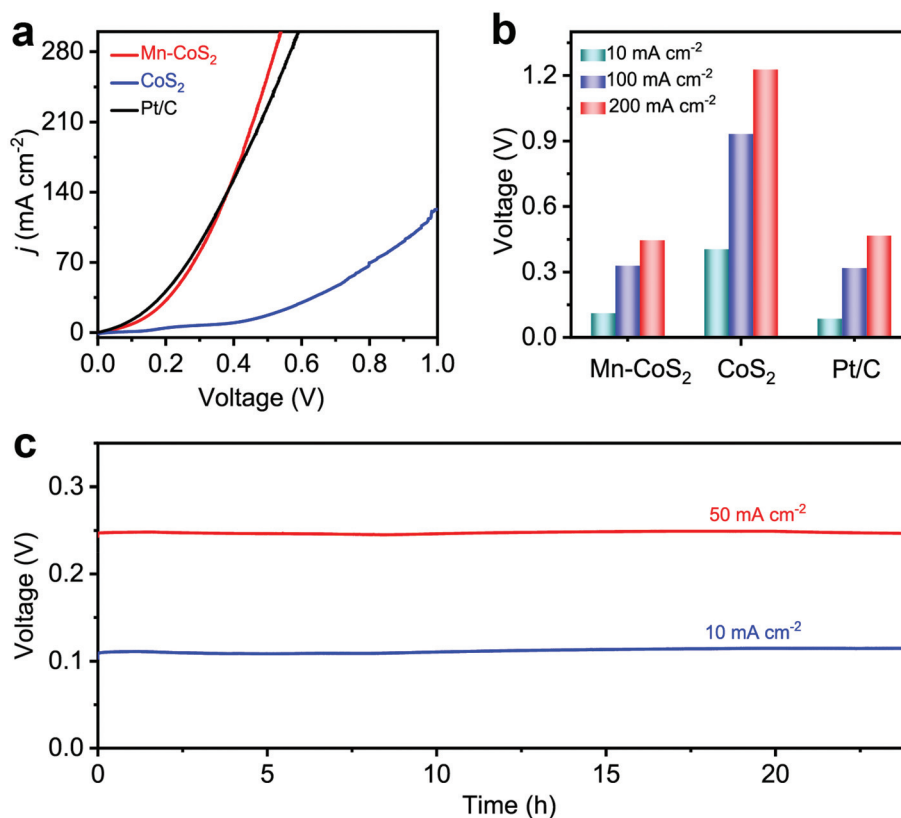


To assess the durability of the Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> catalyst, the chrono-potentiometry–time measurement technology was employed. As shown in Fig. 4d, it can be seen that the Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> electrode can maintain a high stable overpotential at a current density of  $-10\text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  for 54 hours with a negligible increase (Fig. 3e). Moreover, the long-term cycling stability of Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> was investigated by performing continuous cyclic voltammetry (CV) at a scan rate of  $100\text{ mV s}^{-1}$  in  $0.1\text{ M KOH}$ . As shown in Fig. S10,† the HER polarization curves showed a negligible difference between the curves at the initial and after 1000 cycles, implying the superior stability of Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> in the long-term electrochemical process. Besides, the Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> catalyst after the long-term measurement was further characterized by XRD, SEM, and TEM. As shown in Fig. S11,† the crystalline structure and morphology were well preserved after the long-term electrolysis, demonstrating the robust stability of Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> in alkaline electrolytes.

Next, the electrochemical HzOR performances of the as-prepared catalyst were evaluated in  $1.0\text{ M KOH} + 0.5\text{ M N}_2\text{H}_4$  aqueous solutions. Meanwhile, the OER performance was also tested in a  $1.0\text{ M KOH}$  aqueous solution. Firstly, the HzOR and OER catalytic activity was measured (Fig. 5a and Fig. S12†). As shown, the Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> electrode exhibits a rapid increase in the HzOR activity in the alkaline electrolyte than that of the acidic one. The comparative polarization curves of the HzOR and

OER suggest a dramatic improvement of activity after the addition of  $\text{N}_2\text{H}_4$ , indicating a great thermodynamic advantage of the HzOR. In detail, it only needs a working potential of  $77\text{ mV vs. RHE}$  to achieve a current density of  $10\text{ mA cm}^{-2}$ , which is much lower than that of the CoS<sub>2</sub> electrode ( $102\text{ mV vs. RHE}$ ). In particular, the Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> electrode possesses large current densities of  $100$  and  $200\text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  and only requires the potentials of  $160$  and  $188\text{ mV vs. RHE}$ , which is much larger than CoS<sub>2</sub> ( $216$  and  $282\text{ mV vs. RHE}$ ) and even better than the commercial Pt/C catalyst ( $161$  and  $262\text{ mV vs. RHE}$ ), indicating that the outstanding HzOR activity of the Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> electrode makes it a superior HzOR electrocatalyst, which is highly comparable to previously reported HzOR electrocatalysts (Table S2†). Fast charge transfer kinetics is further demonstrated by a small Tafel slope of  $47.1\text{ mV dec}^{-1}$ , which is much smaller than that of CoS<sub>2</sub> ( $58\text{ mV dec}^{-1}$ ) and much closer to that of Pt/C ( $41.5\text{ mV dec}^{-1}$ ). In addition, the current density of  $10\text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  just changes slightly during a long-term test for  $40\text{ h}$  (Fig. 5d) and the HzOR polarization curves showed a slight change between the curves at the initial and after 1000 cycles (Fig. S13†), demonstrating the high stability of the Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> electrode in the HzOR for practical applications.

Considering the intrinsic activities of the Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> catalyst, we envisioned that it could realize energy-saving  $\text{H}_2$  pro-



**Fig. 6** OHZS measurements: (a) OHZS polarization curves of Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> in comparison with CoS<sub>2</sub> and commercial Pt/C (20 wt%) in  $1\text{ M KOH} + 0.5\text{ M N}_2\text{H}_4$  aqueous solutions; (b) the OHZS activity of the catalysts at various current densities; (c) the time-dependent working potential curve of the Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> electrode for OHZS obtained at various current densities for 24 h.

duction by utilizing Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> as a bifunctional electrocatalyst toward the HER and HzOR. Fig. 6a shows the comparative LSV curves of overall hydrazine splitting (OH<sub>2</sub>S), in which significantly enhanced energy efficiency can be intuitively seen using hydrazine oxidation-assisted H<sub>2</sub> production. Specifically, the OH<sub>2</sub>S cell using Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> as both the anode and cathode only demands 111, 329, and 447 mV to drive current densities of 10, 100, and 200 mA cm<sup>-2</sup>, respectively (Fig. 6b), which are much lower than the overall water-splitting theoretical value of 1230 mV. By contrast, CoS<sub>2</sub> (405, 933, and 1227 mV) and commercial Pt/C (86, 319, and 467 mV) catalysts require a higher voltage to reach up to the current densities of 10, 100, and 200 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> (Fig. 6b). Besides, the bifunctional Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> catalyst in the OH<sub>2</sub>S system can maintain higher voltage stability at various current densities (10 and 50 mA cm<sup>-2</sup>) during a continuous 24 h test (Fig. 6c). Moreover, the OH<sub>2</sub>S stability test of the Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> electrode was also performed for 24 h at a cell potential of 111 mV. As shown in Fig. 6, the current density retention can be determined to be 96.5%. The Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> electrode is highly comparable to previously reported state-of-the-art OH<sub>2</sub>S electrocatalysts (Table S3†). These results demonstrate that the Earth-abundant Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> catalyst as a bifunctional electrode for the HER and HzOR can efficiently save energy for H<sub>2</sub> production by water-assisted electrolysis.

## Conclusions

In summary, we designed and prepared highly active Mn-doped CoS<sub>2</sub> nanotubes supported nickel foam for boosting the electrochemical H<sub>2</sub> evolution reaction by replacing the sluggish OER with a thermodynamically more favorable HzOR. DFT calculations manifest that the incorporation of Mn into the CoS<sub>2</sub> lattice realizes the modulation of the electronic structure and charge distribution on the catalyst, which significantly decrease the hydrogen adsorption Gibbs free energy for the HER and the potential rate-limiting step for the HzOR process. The experimental results demonstrated that the Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> catalyst exhibited excellent catalytic activity, which can achieve 10 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> at a overpotential of 46 mV *vs.* RHE for the HER and 77 mV *vs.* RHE for the anodic HzOR, respectively. In addition, the Mn-CoS<sub>2</sub> electrode only needs a cell voltage of only 447 mV to output 200 mA cm<sup>-1</sup> in the OH<sub>2</sub>S system and exhibits robust long-term H<sub>2</sub> production. It is expected that this work can extend the pathway of the design for high-efficiency electrochemical H<sub>2</sub> evolution catalysts.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

## Acknowledgements

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