

# Tunable Nanostructure of TiO<sub>2</sub>/Reduced Graphene Oxide Composite for High Photocatalysis

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In this study TiO<sub>2</sub>/reduced graphene oxide (TiO<sub>2</sub>/rGO) bipyramid with tunable nanostructure was fabricated by two-step solvothermal process and subsequent heat-treatment in air. The as-synthesized anatase TiO<sub>2</sub> nanocrystals possessed morphological bipyramid with exposed dominantly by (101) facets. Polyethylenimine was utilized during the combination of TiO<sub>2</sub> and graphene oxide (GO) to tune the surface charge, hindering the restack of graphene during solvothermal process and resulting in 1 to 5 layers of rGO wrapped on TiO<sub>2</sub> surface. After a further calcination, a portion of carbon quantum dots (CQDs) with a diameter about 2 nm were produced owing to the oxidizing and cutting of rGO on TiO<sub>2</sub>. The as-prepared TiO<sub>2</sub>/rGO hybrid showed a highly photocatalytic activity, which is about 3.2 and 7.7 times enhancement for photodegradation of methyl orange with compared to pure TiO<sub>2</sub> and P25, respectively. We assume that the improvement of photocatalysis is attributed to the chemical bonding between rGO/CQDs and TiO<sub>2</sub> that accelerates photogenerated electron-hole pair separation, as well as enhances light harvest.

**Key Words:** TiO<sub>2</sub>, Graphene wrapping, Carbon quantum dots, Photodegradation

## INTRODUCTION

Among many intensive studied semiconductor photocatalysis, TiO<sub>2</sub> is still the most promising candidate for its strong oxidative power, high chemical and photocatalytic stability, abundant storage, low cost and environment friendly (Cargnello et al., 2014; Fattakhova-Rohlfing et al., 2014; Wang & Sasaki, 2014). But two major limits confine its wide application, *ca.* large band gap (about 3.2 eV for anatase) and high recombination rate of electron-hole pairs, resulting in that it is only sensitive to light below 387 nm in ultraviolet (UV) range and relatively lower photocatalytic performance since the photocatalytic activity is strongly dependent on the separation of photogenerated carriers (Chen et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2014). Numerous efforts, such as doping, have been used to handle these problems, which could tune conduction band and/or valence band to shorten band gap

but it faces weak redox ability or thermal instability. Coupling TiO<sub>2</sub> with other conductor is an effective way to facilitate charge separation. Graphene, as a two-dimensional sp<sup>2</sup> carbon network arranged in a honeycomb structure, is one of the hottest materials in recent years owing to its unique electronic, optical, mechanical and catalytic properties (Cao et al., 2010; Li et al., 2011, 2013; Wang et al., 2009). Graphene-contained composite materials may exhibit enhanced photocatalytic activity due to the excellent conductivity (5,000 Wm<sup>-1</sup> K<sup>-1</sup>) allowing an excellent mobility of excited-state electrons and hindering electron-hole recombination, high theoretical specific surface area (2,600 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>) which can provide more active sites and intense light absorption extend to visible light region (Allen et al., 2009). Zhang et al. (2014) fabricated TiO<sub>2</sub> nanotube (NT) modified by graphene showed a photocurrent density of 1.44 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> at 1.23 V vs. reversible hydrogen electrode, which is notably increased by ~140% compared

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to the bare  $\text{TiO}_2$  NTs under standard reporting conditions. Zhang et al. (2009) fabricated P25-graphene composite which showed higher photodegradation rate than pure P25 for both UV and visible light conditions.

It is well known that Fermi levels of  $\text{TiO}_2$  and graphene are different which allow the charge transfer from  $\text{TiO}_2$  to graphene and extend light absorption to visible light region when they contact. However, graphene-based composites usually show the particles-on-a-sheet geometry, which is of point-to-surface contact. Kim et al. (2012) prepared a nanosized graphene oxide (GO)-coated  $\text{TiO}_2$  core/shell structure by a two-step oxidation process, indicating a surface-to-surface contact between reduced graphene oxide (rGO) and  $\text{TiO}_2$ , which exhibited better interfacial electron transfer. In this study, we adopt a solvothermal-calcination approach to reduce GO and fabricate core-shell type of  $\text{TiO}_2$ /rGO composite. By the use of electrostatic interactions between  $\text{TiO}_2$  and GO owing to its surface charge difference, we adopt polyethylenimine (PEI) as the surface charge modulator to combine  $\text{TiO}_2$  and graphene and to form flocculation. As a result, the  $\text{TiO}_2$  particles are uniformly distributed on graphene sheets, resulting in 1 to 5 layers of graphene sheets entirely wrapped on  $\text{TiO}_2$  surface. After a heat treatment in air, some carbon quantum dots (CQDs) are produced from the decomposition of graphene. Compared to pure  $\text{TiO}_2$ ,  $\text{TiO}_2$ /rGO composite exhibits higher photocatalytic activity caused by the intimate contact between  $\text{TiO}_2$  and rGO/CQDs.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Chemicals and Materials

N, N-dimethylformamide (DMF,  $\geq 99.5\%$ ) and acetic acid (HAc,  $\geq 99.5\%$ ) were purchased from Beijing Chemical Works (China), respectively. Titanium (IV) n-butoxide (TBOT,  $\geq 99\%$ ) and PEI (99%) were purchased from Alfa Aesar (China), Graphene oxide was purchased from Nanjing XFNANO Tech. Co. (China). All chemicals were used as received without further purification.

### Methods

#### Preparation of $\text{TiO}_2$

Anatase  $\text{TiO}_2$  bipyr amid nanoparticles were prepared by solvothermal process according to the previous report (Wu et al., 2012). In a typical synthesis procedure, 6 mL of DMF and 4 mL of HAc were thoroughly stirred for 30 minutes, then 2 mL of TBOT were added drop by drop, after stirring for 1 hour the solution was transferred into a Teflon-lined stainless steel autoclave and kept at  $200^\circ\text{C}$  for 24 hours. After cooling to the room temperature, the product was collected and washed with ethanol for several times, thoroughly dried in an oven at  $60^\circ\text{C}$  and finally heated at  $350^\circ\text{C}$  for 2 hours in air.

#### Synthesis of $\text{TiO}_2$ /rGO

One hundred milligram of the as-prepared  $\text{TiO}_2$  was added into 400 mL water and stirred for 30 minutes, 2 mL (1 mg/mL) GO was dropped into  $\text{TiO}_2$  aqueous suspension, then 0.6 mL PEI (0.2 mg/mL) was added and stirred overnight. The mixed solution was centrifuged, the collected sample was dispersed with 10 mL ethanol and transferred into a Teflon-lined stainless steel autoclave and then kept at  $130^\circ\text{C}$  for 24 hours which is denoted as  $\text{TiO}_2$ /rGO. Finally, the  $\text{TiO}_2$ /rGO was collected and washed thoroughly with ethanol for three times, dried in an oven at  $60^\circ\text{C}$  overnight and heated in muffle furnace at  $320^\circ\text{C}$  for 8 hours, denoted as  $\text{TiO}_2$ /rGO-320.

### Characterizations

The composites were characterized using a X-ray diffraction (Shimadzu XRD-7000, operating at 40 kV, 40 mA for Cu K $\alpha$  radiation,  $\lambda=0.15418$  nm; Shimadzu, Japan). Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) and high-resolution TEM (HRTEM) characterizations were performed with a JEM-2010 (JEOL, Japan) operated at 200 kV. Nitrogen adsorption-desorption isotherm measurements were conducted at 77 K using an ASAP 2020 (Micromeritics Instrument, USA). Before analysis, all samples were pretreated by degassing at  $150^\circ\text{C}$  for 8 hours to remove any adsorbed species. UV-Vis absorption spectra were recorded with a Shimadzu-3600 Plus UV-Vis spectrophotometer (Shimadzu) using  $\text{BaSO}_4$  as the background. X-ray photoelectron spectra (XPS) of the samples were measured using a PHI 5300 ESCA system (PerkinElmer, USA) with an Al K X-ray photoelectron spectrometer at 150 W. Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy (Frontier; PerkinElmer) with a resolution of  $1\text{ cm}^{-1}$  between 4,000 and  $450\text{ cm}^{-1}$  at room temperature under air atmosphere.

### Photocatalytic Activity Test

Photocatalytic activity was evaluated by measuring the degradation rate of methyl orange (MO) in aqueous solution under UV light irradiation. The reaction solution contained 50 mg photocatalyst mixed with 50 mL aqueous solution of 10 mg/L MO in an 80 mL cylindrical quartz photochemical reactor with water circulation facility. The pH value of the above solution was adjusted to 2.9 to 3.0 using  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  solution to ensure its characteristic wavelength max unchanged during measurement. The photocatalytic test was conducted by low intensity irradiation with light emitting diode lamps (3 W $\times$ 4,370~375 nm, about  $1.5\text{ mW}/\text{cm}^2$ ), which was located at 5 cm away from the surface of reaction solution. The concentration of MO during the degradation was tested using a UV-Vis spectrometer. Prior to irradiation, the suspension was continuously stirred in darkness for 1 hour to ensure the achievement of an adsorption-desorption equilibrium. At a given time interval (30 seconds), 2 mL suspension were

sampled and separated through centrifugation at 10,000 rpm. The supernatants were extracted to examine the degradation of MO at 501 nm on a UV-Vis spectrophotometer.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Morphology and Structure Characterization

X-ray diffraction measurements were performed to investigate the crystalline structure and phase composition information, as shown in Fig. 1. Both pure TiO<sub>2</sub> and TiO<sub>2</sub>/rGO-320 exhibited typical diffraction peaks of anatase phase (tetragonal,  $I4_1/amd$ , JCPDS, No. 21-1272) (Yang et al., 2009) with high crystallinity. This result demonstrates that the solvothermal and heat process did not have obvious impact on TiO<sub>2</sub> phase. A peak starts from 24.3° and overlap with (101) peak of anatase, indicating the reduction of GO to rGO. However, the peak intensity is weak due to the low percentage of GO in the total composite (2 wt%) (Li et al., 2013; Tang et al., 2010; Zou et al., 2015). No peak shift is detected, indirectly demonstrating that rGO only exist on TiO<sub>2</sub> surface without doping into TiO<sub>2</sub> lattice.

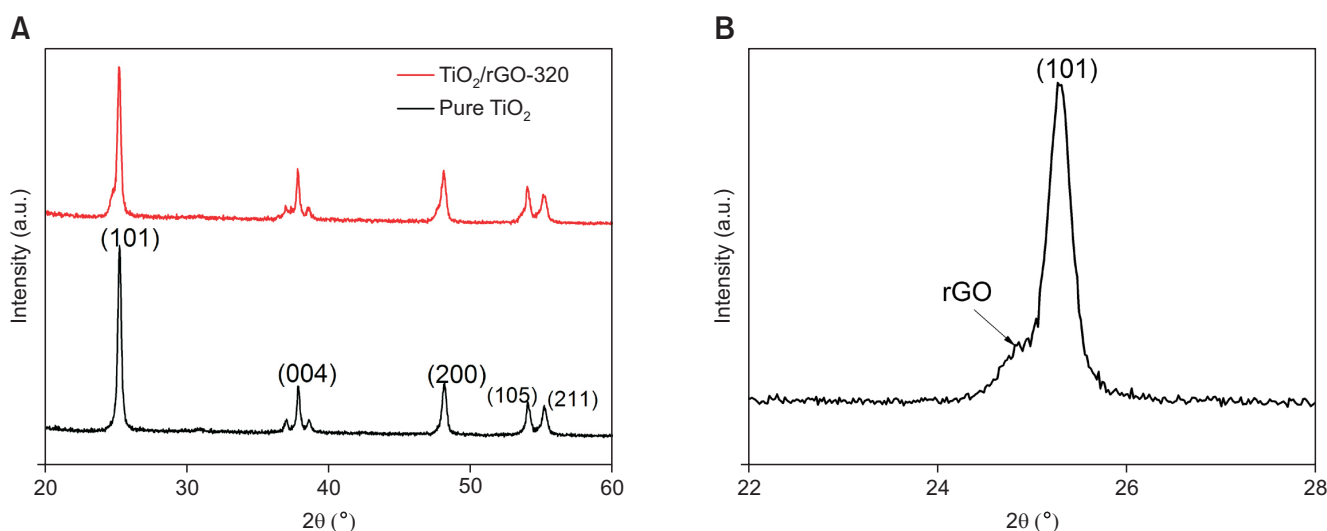
Fig. 2A and B show the scanning electron microscopy images of TiO<sub>2</sub>/rGO and TiO<sub>2</sub>/rGO-320. Both TiO<sub>2</sub>/rGO and TiO<sub>2</sub>/rGO-320 have the same bipyramid-shape, similar to pure anatase TiO<sub>2</sub> (Fig. 2C), indicating that the heat treatments did not have impact on morphology. Interestingly, no obvious rGO sheets were found, even though we changed randomly to different locations, suggesting partially altered structure of particles-on-a-sheet geometry. This is consistent with TEM observations (Fig. 2C and D). Fig. 2C and the insert selected area electron diffraction pattern show a single-crystal structure with an interfacial angle  $\sim 68.3^\circ$  of two adjacent faces which is the same as the theoretical value for the angle

between the (001) and (101) planes of anatase (Liu et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2008). The TiO<sub>2</sub> in TiO<sub>2</sub>/rGO shows high exposure of (101) facets as shown in the HRTEM images (Fig. 2E). Notedly, most TiO<sub>2</sub> is wrapped by 1 to 5 layers of graphene sheets and form heterojunction interface. Due to the assistance of PEI, it ensures an intense contact between TiO<sub>2</sub> and GO and prevents GO from aggregation. Additionally, after a calcination procedure in air, as shown in Fig. 2F, some CQDs (about 2 nm in diameter) were produced. We assume these CQDs come from the cutting of rGO during the heat process and are fixed on TiO<sub>2</sub>.

Fig. 3 shows the nitrogen adsorption-desorption isotherm and pore size distribution curve (inset), the physical properties are summarized in Table 1. All the tested pure TiO<sub>2</sub> and TiO<sub>2</sub>/rGO-320 hybrids demonstrate type IV isotherm with a H3-type hysteresis loops, and the highest adsorption at the high relative pressure ( $P/P_0$ ) approaches 1. Additionally, the peak located at about 50 to 80 nm from the pore distribution curve (inset in Fig. 3) demonstrates the presence of macropores which are originated from connection of adjacent particles (Li et al., 2015a), which could also be observed from TEM images. The specific surface area of TiO<sub>2</sub>/rGO-320 is slightly decreased with compared to the pure TiO<sub>2</sub>. This might be caused by the long time calcinations in air. The as obtained CQDs and rGO sheet are expected to improve the penetration and adsorption of pollutants and to allow quick transport of reaction species onto the active sites.

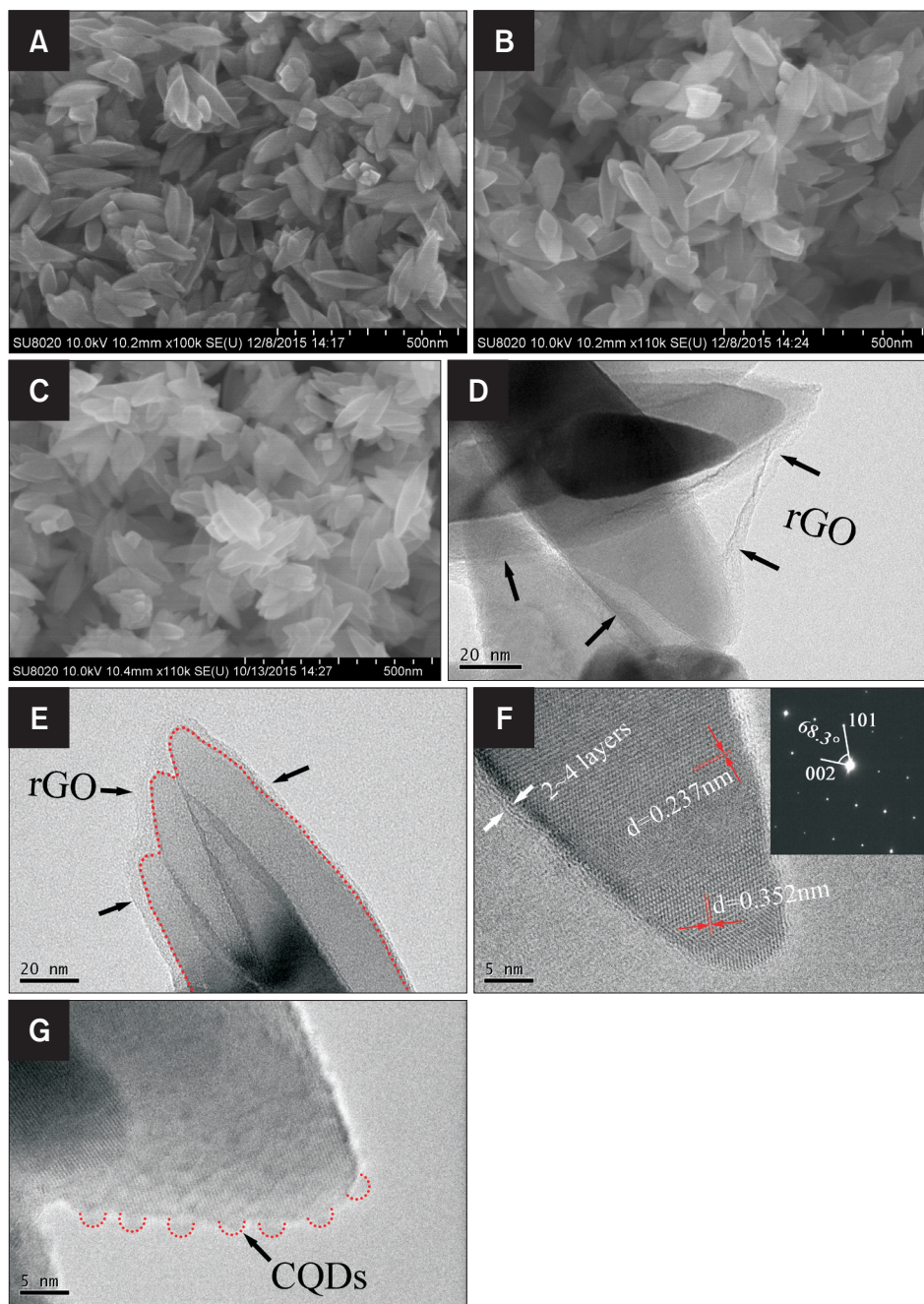
### Optical Properties

Fig. 4A shows the UV-Vis absorption spectroscopy of pure TiO<sub>2</sub> and TiO<sub>2</sub>/rGO-320. The absorption edge of the hybrid does not change. In addition, the enhanced UV light absorption shows a flat but evident absorption over the test



**Fig. 1.** X-ray diffraction patterns of TiO<sub>2</sub> and TiO<sub>2</sub>/rGO-320 (A) and local magnification of TiO<sub>2</sub>/rGO-320 (B). rGO, reduced graphene oxide.





**Fig. 2.** Scanning electron microscope images of  $\text{TiO}_2/\text{rGO}$  (A),  $\text{TiO}_2/\text{rGO-320}$  (B), and pure  $\text{TiO}_2$  (C). Transmission electron microscopy images of  $\text{TiO}_2/\text{rGO}$  after solvothermal process (D-F) and  $\text{TiO}_2/\text{rGO-320}$  (G). rGO, reduced graphene oxide; CQDs, carbon quantum dots.

range of wavelengths, which demonstrates the hybrid may be able to absorb more light and thus favor the catalysis. Fig. 4B shows FTIR spectra of  $\text{TiO}_2/\text{rGO-320}$  and GO. Peak located at  $1737\text{ cm}^{-1}$  can be assigned to C=O stretching of the residual COOH groups (Thakur & Karak, 2012),  $1051\text{ cm}^{-1}$  for C-O stretching,  $1207\text{ cm}^{-1}$  for C-O-C stretching. The almost disappeared C=O bond and these relative weakened C-O/C-O-C indicate the partially reduction of GO. The broad infrared (IR) band at  $500$  to  $900\text{ cm}^{-1}$  corresponds to the Ti-O-Ti stretching vibration modes in crystalline  $\text{TiO}_2$  and peak

at  $799\text{ cm}^{-1}$  is assigned to Ti-O-C bond (Jiang et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2009). These broad IR bands with high intensity demonstrate the strongly chemical interaction between rGO and  $\text{TiO}_2$ . The peak at  $1609\text{ cm}^{-1}$  originates from skeletal vibrations of graphitic domains (Li et al., 2015b).

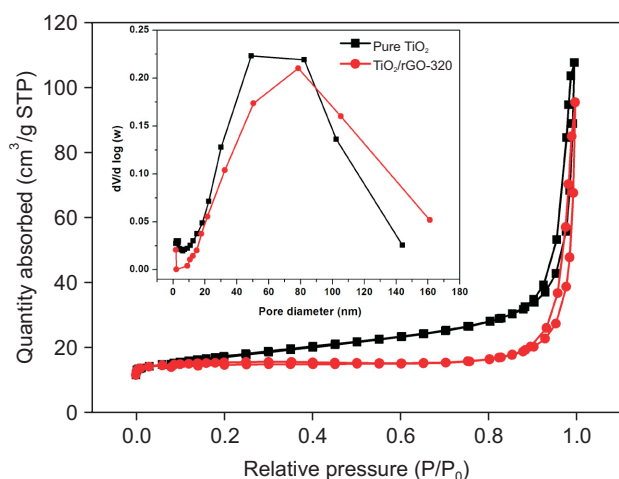
XPS analysis is employed to identify the surface structure information. The chemical states of Ti atoms in  $\text{TiO}_2/\text{rGO-320}$  were studied through the Ti 2p XPS spectra in Fig. 5A. Two main peaks located at  $458.5\text{ eV}$  and  $464.1\text{ eV}$  are assigned to the Ti (2p  $3/2$ ) and Ti (2p  $1/2$ ) in the  $\text{Ti}^{4+}$  oxidation state (Ma

et al., 2010; Yu et al., 2013). The O1s spectra is demonstrated in Fig. 5B. The peak at 530.6 eV can be assigned to hydroxyl groups which comes from the physically or chemically adsorbed water on TiO<sub>2</sub> surface, and the peak at 529.7 eV corresponds to lattice oxygen in TiO<sub>2</sub> (Tu et al., 2013). There are five peaks in the C1s spectra, where the highest peak of C-C bond at 284.8 eV and C=C at 283.6 eV are originated from the graphitic sp<sup>2</sup> carbon atoms, which represents the excellent restoration of the sp<sup>2</sup>-hybridized carbon by the solvothermal reduction procedure (Xiu et al., 2015; Xu et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2011). C-O-C bond at 286.3 eV and C=O bond (carboxylate impurities) at 288.7 eV are rather low demonstrating the removal of most oxygen-containing functional groups (Dey et al., 2012; Paredes et al., 2009; Tu et

al., 2013). Peak at 288.1 eV can be ascribed to Ti-O-C bond which agrees well with the FTIR results (Qiu et al., 2015; Zhang & Pan, 2011).

### Photocatalytic Activities

The photocatalytic activities of the samples were evaluated by degradation of MO under UV light irradiation. Fig. 6A shows the time profiles of  $(C/C_0)$ , where  $C_0$  represents the concentration at the adsorption-desorption equilibrium of the photocatalyst before illumination and  $C$  is the concentration at the illumination time. Compared to P25, the kinetic constants of pure TiO<sub>2</sub> and TiO<sub>2</sub>/rGO-320 for degradation of MO increase by almost 2.3 and 7.7 times, respectively. TiO<sub>2</sub>/rGO-320 shows the highest degradation efficiency ( $k=0.7898$ ), about 3.3 times higher than pure TiO<sub>2</sub>. We attribute this high photocatalytic activity to the following three points: i) enhanced electron-hole pairs separation, matching and overlapping of d-orbital of TiO<sub>2</sub> and  $\pi$ -orbital of graphene in energy levels to form d- $\pi$  electron orbital (Jiang et al., 2011). Additionally, PEI polymerize and form direct chemical bonding interactions, thus the electron excited from TiO<sub>2</sub> under UV light can be shuttled freely into graphene network, accelerating electron transport and inhibiting e-h recombination. As TiO<sub>2</sub> shows a characteristic of single

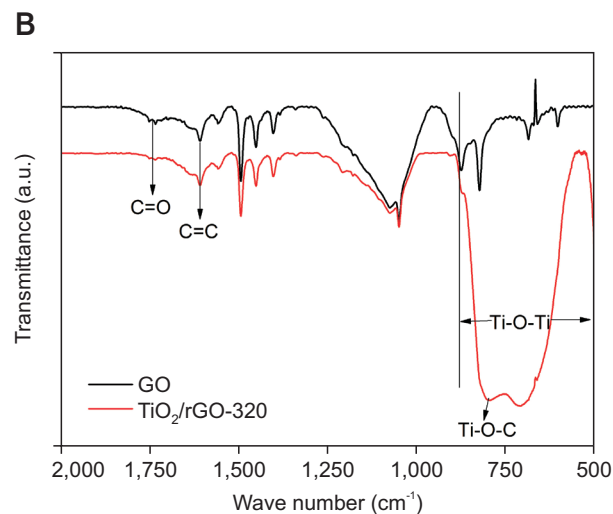
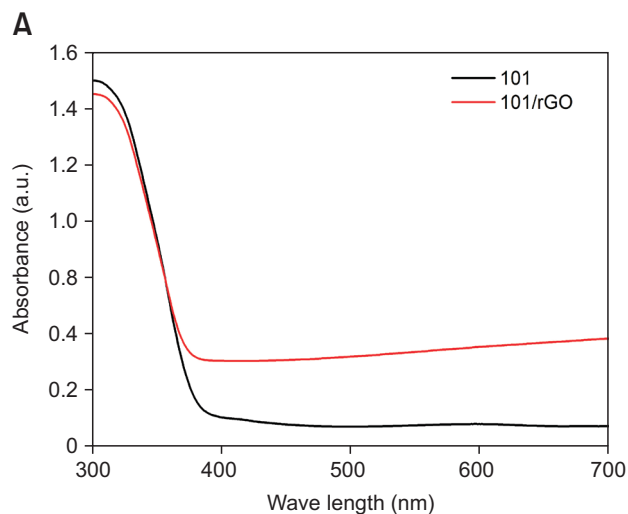


**Fig. 3.** N<sub>2</sub> adsorption-desorption isotherms. Inset is the poresize distribution. rGO, reduced graphene oxide; STP, standard temperature and pressure.

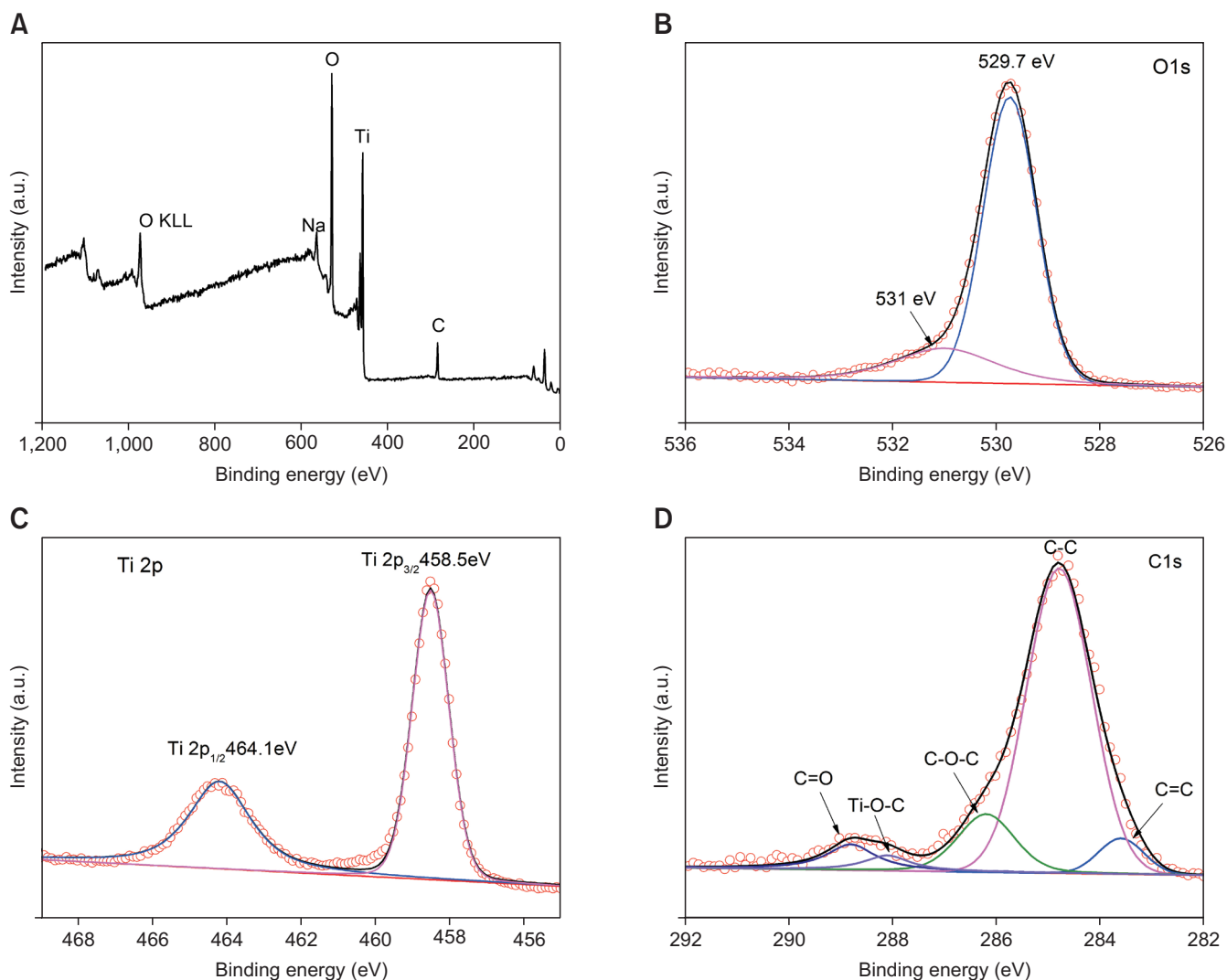
**Table 1.** Physical parameters of BET specific surface area, pore diameter, pore volume of TiO<sub>2</sub> and TiO<sub>2</sub>/rGO-320

Sample	$S_{\text{BET}}$ (m <sup>2</sup> /g)	Pore size (nm)	Pore volume (cm <sup>3</sup> /g)
P25	50	19	0.21
Pure TiO <sub>2</sub>	33	18	0.16
TiO <sub>2</sub> /rGO-320	22	25	0.14

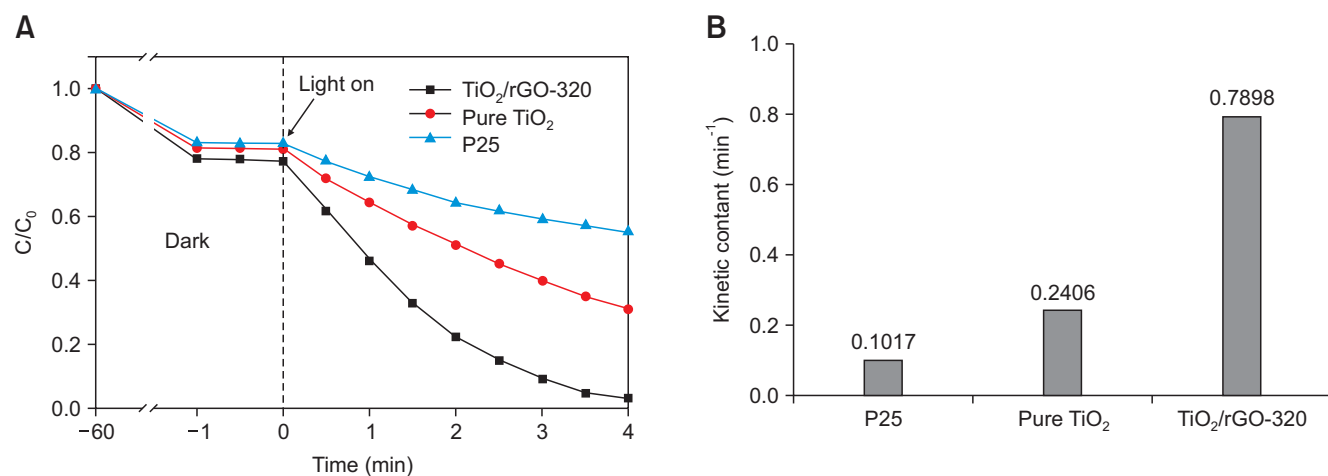
BET, Brunauer-Emmet-Teller; rGO, reduced graphene oxide.



**Fig. 4.** UV-Vis spectra of TiO<sub>2</sub> and TiO<sub>2</sub>/rGO-320 (A) and Fourier transform infrared spectra of GO and TiO<sub>2</sub>/rGO-320 (B). rGO, reduced graphene oxide; GO, graphene oxide.



**Fig. 5.** (A) X-ray photoelectron spectra (XPS) wide spectra and XPS spectra of  $\text{O}1s$  (B),  $\text{Ti } 2p$  (C), and  $\text{C}1s$  (D). The open circles are the raw data of the XPS spectra.



**Fig. 6.** Photodegradation of methyl orange under ultraviolet light irradiation (A) and kinetic constants of P25,  $\text{TiO}_2$ ,  $\text{TiO}_2/\text{rGO}-320$  (B). rGO, reduced graphene oxide.

crystal, the disappearance of grain boundaries also restrict the formation of recombination centers and potential barriers (K et al., 2015). ii) Enhanced light absorption over the range of wavelengths favors photocatalysis. iii) Although TiO<sub>2</sub>/rGO has a lower specific surface area, it shows the highest degradation rate since the reduction of GO into rGO is favorable for eliminating most oxygen-containing functional groups, leading to strong adsorption of MO on TiO<sub>2</sub>/rGO-320 and offering more active sites for MO molecules to be oxidized.

## CONCLUSIONS

Through utilizing PEI to modulate the surface charges of TiO<sub>2</sub> and GO, we successfully synthesize TiO<sub>2</sub>/rGO hybrids. By an ethonal-solvothermal process, GO is reduced into rGO and most oxygen-containing functional groups are removed.

Especially, TiO<sub>2</sub> wrapped by graphene and CQDs is produced, resulting larger contact area and active sites after heat treatment in air. The hybrid shows excellent photocatalytic performance with a higher degradation rate about 3.3 and 7.7 times compared to the pure anatase TiO<sub>2</sub> bipyramids and P25, respectively. In this system, rGO and CQDs serve as an acceptor of the photogenerated electrons and minimize charge recombination rate, and enable more electrons transfer to TiO<sub>2</sub> surface and react with MO.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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