Sulfur impregnation in polypyrrole-modified MnO2 nanotubes: efficient polysulfide adsorption for improved lithium–sulfur battery performance†

Pengcheng Du,†*a Wenli Wei,†,b Yuman Dong,†a Dong Liu,a Qi Wang,a Yi Peng,b Shaowei Chen,†a,b and Peng Liu,†a

Rechargeable lithium–sulfur batteries have emerged as a viable technology for next generation electrochemical energy storage, and the sulfur cathode plays a critical role in determining the device performance. In this study, we prepared functional composites based on polypyrrole-coated MnO2 nanotubes as a highly efficient sulfur host (sulfur mass loading 63.5%). The hollow interior of the MnO2 nanotubes not only allowed for accommodation of volumetric changes of sulfur particles during the cycling process, but also confined the diffusion of lithium polysulfides by physical restriction and chemical adsorption, which minimized the loss of polysulfide species. In addition, the polypyrrole outer layer effectively enhanced the electrical conductivity of the cathode to facilitate ion and electron transport. The as-prepared MnO2–PPy–S composite delivered an initial specific capacity of 1469 mA h g⁻¹ and maintained an extremely stable cycling performance, with a small capacity decay of merely 0.07% per cycle at 0.2C within 500 cycles, a high average coulombic efficiency of 95.7% and an excellent rate capability at 470 mA h g⁻¹ at the current density of 3C.

1. Introduction

Lithium sulfur batteries (LSB) have been attracting extensive interest as a promising next-generation high energy storage technology, due to the high theoretical specific capacity, low costs and environmental friendliness of the electrode materials.1−4 Sulfur has been known to undergo multi-electron reactions with Li ions and exhibit a high theoretical specific capacity of 1672 mA h g⁻¹.4 Ideally, the cathode materials for LSB should include a high surface area and large pore volume to accommodate a high loading of sulfur particles, strong polar absorption for soluble reactive intermediates, and highly conductive network for rapid transport of ions and electrons.5 However, the performance of LSB has been limited by several challenging obstacles, such as fast capacity decay, low coulombic efficiency and poor rate capability, which greatly hinder the practical applications.3,4 These issues are mainly ascribed to the low electrical conductivity of the active materials (e.g., sulfur, Li2S, and Li2S3), diffusion (and loss) of soluble polysulfide intermediates, and large volumetric changes of the cathode materials during the charge–discharge process.6

These issues may be mitigated by the development of new, effective sulfur hosts,7,8 modification of membrane surfaces,9−11 and/or addition of electrolyte additives.12,13 In a number of studies, conductive matrices, such as carbon materials and conductive polymers, have been employed to encapsulate sulfur, improve electrical conductivity of the cathode as well as minimize the loss of lithium polysulfides.14,15 In particular, carbon materials with a high specific surface area and large pore volume have been used rather extensively, such as meso/microporous carbons,16 graphene,7,17−19 hollow carbon nanofibers,20 hollow carbon nanospheres,21 and carbon nanotubes.22,23 In addition, conductive polymers, such as polypyrrole (PPy),24 polyaniline (PANI)25 and poly(3,4-ethylenedioxythiophene) (PEDOT),26 have also been used to host sulfur particles. The resulting sulfur-encapsulated nanocomposites typically exhibit enhanced specific capacity and good cycling performance during the initial cycles. But the coulombic efficiency in general remains low, and rapid capacity loss occurs during long-term cycling, as the non-polar carbon/polymer hosts cannot efficiently entrap the polar lithium polysulfide species because of weak interactions with sulfur.

Polar host materials, such as metal oxides of TiO2,27 MnO2,28 γ-Fe2O3,29 V2O5,30 MgO,31 metal hydroxides of Ni(OH)2,32 and metal–organic frameworks (MOFs),33,34 have
been found to form strong chemical bonds with lithium polysulfides, which can significantly improve the long-term cycling performance of LSB.\textsuperscript{25,26} Of these, MnO₂-based nanocomposites with a uniform structure and large surface area have been attracting particular attention.\textsuperscript{37} For instance, Nazar and coworkers dispersed sulfur onto the surface of MnO₂ nanosheets\textsuperscript{38} to improve the electrochemical performance. In another study, Chen’s group decorated hollow sulfur nanospheres with MnO₂ nanosheets.\textsuperscript{39} Diao and coworkers synthesized unique sulfur/γ-MnO₂ core–shell nanocomposites.\textsuperscript{40} However, the electrical conductivity of these metal–oxide materials is typically low, in comparison with carbon and conductive polymers, which compromises the rate capability and specific capacity of LSB. Consequently, conductive additives are generally added to the cathode materials.\textsuperscript{41} This inevitably reduces the mass loading of active sulfur.

Therefore, it can be envisaged that nanocomposites based on the combination of conductive matrices and polar metal oxides may serve as effective host materials of sulfur. For instance, Lou and coworkers fabricated carbon layer encapsulated titanium monoxide\textsuperscript{42} and hollow carbon nanofibers filled with MnO₂ nanosheets to host sulfur nanoparticles,\textsuperscript{13} the carbon modified metal oxides composites improved the electric conductivity of sulfur for high capacity and which were effectively to tie the lithium-polysulfides for prolonged cycle life. Kong’s group used hollow MnO₂ nanospheres with a PPy shell to encapsulate sulfur, which exhibited an excellent cycling performance.\textsuperscript{44} Yu’s group also synthesized PPy-MnO₂ nanotubes as a sulfur host for high-performance lithium sulfur batteries.\textsuperscript{45}

In this work, we prepared PPy-modified MnO₂ nanotubes for effective encapsulation of sulfur nanoparticles. The MnO₂ nanotubes were synthesized through a facile hydrothermal method and the PPy layer was formed \textit{in situ} by using the MnO₂ as the oxidant. Sulfur nanoparticles were then melted and diffused into the nanotubes. The resulting ternary structure exhibited at least two advantages. First, the hollow interior of the MnO₂ nanotubes provided a large space for the loading of sulfur particles, and the strong chemical interactions with polysulfides intermediates helped minimize the loss of the active species. Second, the PPy shells efficiently enhanced the electrical conductivity of the cathode materials. These led to a remarkable performance as a LSB cathode material.

## 2. Experimental section

### 2.1 Materials and reagents

Pyrole was used after purification by distillation. Concentrated sulfuric acid (H₂SO₄) and hydrochloric acid (HCl) were purchased from Baiyin Liangyou Chemical Reagents Co., Ltd. Potassium permanganate (KMnO₄) were purchased from Guangfu Chemical Reagents Co. Sublimed sulfur (99.95%) was obtained from Aladdin Industrial Corporation.

### 2.2 Fabrication of PPy-modified MnO₂ nanotube-sulfur composites

As shown in Scheme 1, MnO₂ nanotubes were first prepared by a facile hydrothermal method.\textsuperscript{46,47} In brief, 0.658 g of KMnO₄ was dissolved in 75 mL of deionized water. Then 1.5 mL of concentrated HCl was added into the solution under magnetic stirring for 15 min at ambient temperature. The solution was then transferred to a 100 mL Teflon-lined stainless autoclave, and heated at 150 °C for 12 h. After being cooled down to room temperature, brown precipitates (MnO₂ nanotubes) were filtered and washed with deionized water and ethanol, and then dried at 60 °C in an oven.

MnO₂-PPy nanotubes were then prepared by using the obtained MnO₂ nanotubes as reactive templates. Experimentally, 0.2 g of the as-prepared MnO₂ nanotubes was dispersed in 1 M HCl solution (50 mL) under sonication. After magnetic stirring for 30 min in an ice bath, pyrrole (79.8 μL or 160 μL) was added to the suspension, and the polymerization was carried out in the ice bath for 12 h. Black precipitates were obtained by centrifugation, washed with deionized water and ethanol several times, and then dried at 60 °C, the obtained samples was named MnO₂-PPy and MnO₂-PPy-1, respectively.

The obtained MnO₂-PPy nanotubes were then homogeneously blended with sulfur as a mass ratio of 3:7, and the mixture was heated at 155 °C for 24 h in a nitrogen atmosphere, such that sulfur was melted and infiltrate the hollow interiors of the MnO₂-PPy nanotubes. To remove sulfur on the outside surface of the MnO₂-PPy nanotubes, the sample was heated at 200 °C for 2 h. The resulting sample was referred to as MnO₂-PPy-S.

### 2.3 Characterization

The surface morphology of the as-prepared nanocomposites was examined with a scanning electron microscope (SEM,

![Scheme 1 Schematic illustration of the fabrication of PPy modified MnO₂ nanotube-sulfur composites.](image-url)
Hitachi S-4800, Japan) equipped with energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDX), and a high-resolution transmission electron microscope (HR-TEM, JEOL TEM-2010). The sample crystallinity was characterized by using an X-ray diffractometer (XRD, Shimadzu Corp., Kyoto, Japan) with Cu Kα radiation. Thermogravimetric analysis (TGA) (TA Instruments, New Castle, DE) was carried out under a N₂ atmosphere at the heating rate of 10 °C min⁻¹.

2.4 Electrochemical measurement

To prepare working cathodes, the active material obtained above was blended with acetylene black as a conductive agent and polyvinylidenediuroide (PVDF) as binders, at the mass ratio of 8:1:1, in N-methyl-2-pyrrolidone (NMP) to form a uniform slurry. The slurry was cast onto an Al foil current collector and dried at 40 °C for 12 h in a vacuum oven. CR3032 half coin cells were assembled in a glove box filled with argon. Lithium foils were employed as both the counter and reference electrodes, the active material as the cathode and a Celgard 2400 membrane as the separator. The liquid electrolyte was composed of 1 M bis(trifluoromethane) sulfonimide lithium salt (LiTFSI) dissolved in a mixture of 1.3-dioxolane (DOL) and dimethoxy methane (DME) (1:1 v:v) with 1% LiNO₃ additive. Electrochemical performance was tested at various current densities within the voltage range of 1.7 to 2.8 V versus Li⁺/Li using a CT2001A battery testing system (LAND Electronic Co.). The electrodes were cycled with a CHI 660E electrochemical workstation in the potential window of 1.7 to 2.8 V versus Li⁺/Li at the scan rate of 0.1 mV s⁻¹.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Structural characterization

The MnO₂ nanotube was fabricated and the structure was characterized by SEM and TEM (Fig. 1a, b and Fig. S1†). Obviously, the MnO₂ nanotubes exhibited a smooth surface morphology with an outer diameter of about 85 nm (Fig. S1a†), and clearly hollow tubular interior with an inner diameter of about 50 nm (Fig. 1a and b). The length ranges of

![TEM images of (a, b) MnO₂ nanotubes, (c, d) MnO₂-PPy nanotubes, and (e, f) MnO₂-PPy-S.](image-url)
MnO$_2$ nanotube was from several hundreds nanometers to several micrometers characterized by TEM and SEM (Fig. 1a and Fig. S1a†). After the coating of PPy layer, the deposition of PPy nanoparticles rendered the MnO$_2$ nanotube surfaces drastically roughened, as shown in Fig. S1b and c† and Fig. 1c and d. The formation of this rather compact PPy layer was likely due to the MnO$_2$ nanotubes that served both as a supporting scaffold and an oxidizing agent for pyrrole polymerization.48 One can see that in the MnO$_2$-PPy samples, the hollow nanotube structure was retained, which may be exploited for the loading of sulfur. This can be clearly seen in TEM studies (Fig. 1e and f), whereas no obvious sulfur particles were found on the exterior of the MnO$_2$-PPy nanotubes (Fig. S1d–f†), suggesting efficient confinement of sulfur within the MnO$_2$ nanotubes. Indeed, EDS mapping analysis (Fig. 2) shows that the elements of carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, sulfur and manganese were uniformly distributed throughout the sample, indicating the successful and homogeneous loading of PPy and sulfur into the MnO$_2$ nanotubes. Furthermore, XPS was used to evaluate the change of the samples in the fabrication process. The survey XPS spectra of MnO$_2$ nanotubes, MnO$_2$-PPy nanotubes and MnO$_2$-PPy-S were presented in Fig. S2.† After coating with the PPy, the disappearance of peaks of MnO$_2$ (Mn$_{2p3/2}$ and Mn$_{2p1/2}$) indicates the introducing of PPy layer. Interestingly, the diffraction patterns of the MnO$_2$-PPy-S composite were dominated by those of sulfur, likely because of the high loading of sulfur.

Consistent results were obtained in FT-IR measurements. From Fig. S4,† it is obvious that MnO$_2$-PPy exhibited a spectral profile consistent with that of PPy, indicating that the MnO$_2$ nanotubes were well coated with PPy layers. The characteristic bands at 1550 cm$^{-1}$ and 1458 cm$^{-1}$ can be ascribed to the fundamental vibrations of the polypyrrole ring, the bands at 1290 cm$^{-1}$ and 1045 cm$^{-1}$ are due to the C–H in-plane vibrations, and the band at 1180 cm$^{-1}$ arises from the C–N stretching vibration of the polypyrrole chain.48,50 Interestingly, after sulfur loading, these vibrational features became less well-defined for the MnO$_2$-PPy-S sample.51

The loading of sulfur in the MnO$_2$-PPy-S composite was then quantitatively evaluated by TGA measurements. From Fig. 3, one can see that the weight loss of the MnO$_2$-PPy-S sample commenced at ca. 180 °C, and the sample weight remained virtually unchanged at temperatures over ca. 310 °C. This profile is very similar to that of pure sulfur, whereas PPy was rather stable within this temperature range. The total weight loss for MnO$_2$-PPy-S was estimated to be 63.5%. That is, sulfur accounts for about 63.5% of the MnO$_2$-PPy-S sample weight. The MnO$_2$ content of MnO$_2$-PPy nanotube was determined to be 16.9% by TGA curve in air atmosphere (Fig. S5†). The adsorption ability of MnO$_2$-PPy nanotube and MnO$_2$ nanotube was tested by adding 30 mg of these samples in 2 mL of 0.5 mM Li$_2$S$_6$ solution (dioxolane/dimethoxyethane, 1 : 1 in volume). Photos of Li$_2$S$_6$ adsorption test were presented in Fig. 3b. Obviously, the solution became completely colorless indicating that the MnO$_2$ nanotube showed excellent adsorption ability for polysulfides. In addition, a very light yellow color in the solution also demonstrated the remarkable polysulfide adsorption ability of MnO$_2$-PPy nanotube.

N$_2$ adsorption–desorption measurements were then carried out to quantify the specific surface area and pore structure of the MnO$_2$-PPy and MnO$_2$-PPy-S nanocomposites. From Fig. 4a, it can be seen that all samples exhibited type IV adsorption isotherms, indicative of the formation of mesoporous structures. The BET surface area of the MnO$_2$ nanotube was calculated to be 21.70 m$^2$ g$^{-1}$. However, the BET surface area of MnO$_2$-PPy increased to be 111.51 m$^2$ g$^{-1}$ because of the inside diameter enlargement resulted by removal of part of MnO$_2$ and the rough structure of polypyrrole. The value diminished markedly to 21.46 m$^2$ g$^{-1}$ for MnO$_2$-PPy-S as sulfur impreg-
nated the MnO2 hollow tubes. The mesoporous size distributions of the samples were also affected and the results were presented in Fig. 4b. The MnO2 nanotube exhibited a pore volume of 0.07 cm2 g−1 with an average pore size of 11.61 nm. The MnO2-PPy showed a pore volume of 0.44 cm2 g−1 with an average pore size of 13.87 nm, while after sulfur loading, the MnO2-PPy-S sample displayed a substantial decrease of the pore volume to 0.13 cm2 g−1, whereas the average pore size increased to 19.16 nm, likely because smaller pores were easier to fill up with sulfur impregnation.

3.2 Electrochemical performance

The performance of the MnO2-PPy-S composite as a cathode material for LSB was then evaluated electrochemically. Fig. 5a shows the charging–discharging cycling performance of the sample at different current densities. The electrode was first cycled at a low current density of 0.05C for activation and then charged and discharged at the current density of 0.2C and 0.5C, respectively. After activation for three cycles, the cathode delivered a specific capacity of 973.8 mA h g−1 at 0.2C, and then decreased slowly to 708.0 mA h g−1 at 0.5C, 615.3 mA h g−1 at 1C, 542.0 mA h g−1 at 2C, and 470.0 mA h g−1 at 3C. More importantly, the electrode was able to deliver a specific capacity of 726.6 mA h g−1 when the current density was re-increased to 0.2C, more than 90% retention as compared to the initial specific capacity. This suggests high reversibility of the operation.

The durability of the MnO2-PPy-S electrode was further examined by charging and discharging at the current density of 0.2C for 500 cycles. From Fig. 5b (left y axis), one can see that during the initial activation at 0.05C, the electrode delivered a specific capacity of 1469.2 mA h g−1 in the first cycle. Then as the current density increased to 0.2C, the specific discharge capacity diminished to 973.8 mA h g−1 in the 4th cycle. In the following cycles, the discharge capacity declined much more slowly to 734.6 mA h g−1 in the 100th cycle, 694.8 mA h g−1 in the 200th cycle, 671.9 mA h g−1 in the 300th cycle, and 632.1 mA h g−1 in the 400th cycle and remained almost invariant at around 586 mA h g−1 after the 500th cycle. This means that on average there was only 0.07% capacity decay per cycle during this discharge–charge process (Fig. 5b). Consistent behaviors can be observed with the corresponding coulombic efficiency (Fig. 5b, right y axis), where the MnO2-PPy-S electrode can be seen to demonstrate an outstanding coulombic efficiency of 95.7% on average. As shown in Fig. 5c, the durability of the MnO2-PPy-S,
MnO₂-PPy-1-S (14.5% MnO₂ content), and MnO₂-S electrodes were further investigated by charging and discharging at the current density of 0.625 C for 700 cycles. Obviously, the MnO₂-PPy-S electrode exhibited optimal performance, and possessed the highest specific discharge capacity at 748.1 mA h g⁻¹. Then, the discharge capacity declined much more slowly to about 286 mA h g⁻¹ after the 700th cycle. As a result, there was only 0.088% capacity decay per cycle during the discharge–charge process, and the corresponding coulombic efficiency was about 93.4% on average. Compared to the MnO₂-PPy-S electrode, the MnO₂-S achieved very low specific discharge capacity (154 mA h g⁻¹) due to the low conductivity of MnO₂ material. The introduction of PPy layer can improve the electric conductivity of sulfur for high capacity.

In order to investigate the influence of cycling process on the MnO₂-PPy-S cathode, the morphology of MnO₂-PPy-S electrodes before and after 100 cycles at 0.5 C-rate were characterized by SEM and TEM (Fig. 6). After 100 cycles, the sulfur remained wrapped in inner of the MnO₂-PPy, and no significant sulfur agglomerates existed on the surface of MnO₂-PPy (Fig. 6a and c), the morphology of the MnO₂-PPy-S after 100 cycles also remained the similar structure with the MnO₂-PPy-S before cycles (Fig. 6b and d).

To evaluate the electrochemical reaction mechanism, the MnO₂-PPy-S cathode was tested by cyclic voltammetric measurements at the scan rate of 0.1 mV s⁻¹ from 1.7 V to 2.8 V for 5 cycles. From Fig. 7a, the electrode was swept from open circuit voltage (OCV) to 1.7 V, where element sulfur was reduced to Li₂S₂/Li₂S. Notably, the Li₂S₂/Li₂S species were not oxidized back to element sulfur during the charging process. Two well-defined cathodic peaks appeared at ca. 2.3 V (peak i) and 2.1 V (peak ii), which might be ascribed to the reduction...
of high-order lithium polysulfides (e.g., Li$_x$S$_8$) to the low-order species (Li$_x$S$_8$, $4 \leq x \leq 8$), and the transformation of soluble lithium polysulfides to solid Li$_2$S$_2$/Li$_3$S, respectively.$^{24,44}$ In the corresponding anodic scan, two adjacent peaks can be identified at 2.3 V (peak iii) and 2.4 V (peak iv), likely due to the conversion of the Li$_2$S$_2$/Li$_3$S to low-order lithium polysulfides and then to high-order polysulfides, respectively.$^{40}$ In the following four cycles, the voltammograms overlapped with each other, demonstrating good cycling stability of the electrode.

Electrochemical impedance measurements of the MnO$_2$-PPy-S electrode were then performed to examine the reaction dynamics for lithium insertion and extraction during the cycling tests. The Nyquist plots are depicted in Fig. 7b. It can be seen that the sample exhibited two depressed semicircles in the high and middle frequency domains and a short inclined line in the low frequency domain. The semicircle in the high frequency region can be ascribed to the interfacial charge transfer while the semicircle in the middle frequency region is
likely caused by mass transport for the formation of solid polysulfides (Li$_2$S and Li$_2$S$_2$), which disappeared in the subsequent cycles as the Li$_2$S$_2$/Li$_2$S were not converted back to element sulfur, consistent with results from the CV measurements (Fig. 7a). Meanwhile, the typical Nyquist plots after 100 cycles exhibited a depressed semicircle in the high frequency region and an inclined line in the low frequency region, which likely reflected the charge-transfer resistance of the interface between the electrolyte and sulfur electrode and the lithium ion semi-infinite diffusion, respectively.

In addition, the resulting MnO$_2$-PPy cathodes demonstrated a remarkable long cycling stability (586 mA h g$^{-1}$ after 500 cycles), rate capability (470 mA h g$^{-1}$ at 3C) and coulombic efficiency (average 95.7%) due to the fine structural combination of metal oxides (MnO$_2$) and conducting polymer (PPy) which accommodate the volumetric changes and confine the soluble polysulfides. The electrode performance was higher than leading results reported in recent literature (Table 1).

| Table 1 | Electrochemical performance of MnO$_2$/S cathodes of lithium sulfur batteries |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Cathode material | Sulfur content | Cycling stability | Ref. |
| Hollow PPy-MnO$_2$-S | 74.25% | 714 mA h g$^{-1}$ at 0.2C after 200 cycles | 44 |
| PPy-MnO$_2$-S | 70% | 985 mA h g$^{-1}$ at 0.2C after 200 cycles | 45 |
| rGO-MnO$_2$/S aerogel | 67% | 886.7 mA h g$^{-1}$ at 0.2C after 200 cycles | 53 |
| Hollow carbon nanoboxes-MnO$_2$-S | 67.9% | 496 mA h g$^{-1}$ at 4 A g$^{-1}$ after 200 cycles | 54 |
| MnO$_2$/CMK-S | 73.4% | 600 mA h g$^{-1}$ at 0.1C after 100 cycles | 55 |
| Carbon nanofibers-$\delta$MnO$_2$-S | 70% | 856.1 mA h g$^{-1}$ at 0.5C after 200 cycles | 56 |
| $\delta$MnO$_2$/GO | 52% | 502 mA h g$^{-1}$ at 0.6 A g$^{-1}$ after 400 cycles | 57 |
| PPy-MnO$_2$ nanotubes-S | 63.5% | 586 mA h g$^{-1}$ at 0.2C after 500 cycles | This work |

4. Conclusion

In this study, a functional nanocomposite was prepared where polypyrrole modified MnO$_2$ nanotubes were used as a host scaffold for the impregnation of sulfur. The resulting composites showed a high-performance as the cathode material for lithium sulfur batteries, featuring high specific capacity, excellent cycling stability and good rate capabilities. This was ascribed to the hollow interior of the MnO$_2$ nanotubes that accommodated the high loading and large volumetric expansion of sulfur particles, and the polypyrrole layer that facilitated charge transfer during the charging-discharging processes.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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Notes and references