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Preparation of Blue TiO$_2$ for Visible-Light-Driven Photocatalysis

Jianmin Yu, Chau Thi Kim Nguyen and Hyoyoung Lee

Abstract

Titanium dioxide (TiO$_2$), which is regarded as a semiconductor photocatalyst, has drawn attention in the applications of photocatalysis, including hydrogen evolution reaction, carbon dioxide reduction, pollutant degradation, and biocatalytic or dye-sensitized solar cells due to its low toxicity, superior photocatalytic activity, and good chemical stability. However, there are still some disadvantages such as too large energy bandgap (~3.34 eV and ~3.01 eV for anatase and rutile phases, respectively) in the absorbance of all ranges of lights, which limits the photoelectrochemical performance of TiO$_2$. Herein, we like to introduce photocatalytic blue TiO$_2$ that is obtained by the reduction of TiO$_2$. The blue TiO$_2$ consists of Ti$^3+$ state with high oxygen defect density that can absorb the visible and infrared as well as ultraviolet light due to its low energy bandgap, leading to enhance a photocatalytic activity. This chapter covers the structure and properties of blue TiO$_2$, its possible applications in visible-light-driven photocatalysis, and mainly various synthetic methods even including phase-selective room-temperature solution process under atmospheric pressure.

Keywords: blue titanium dioxide, black titanium, synthesis method, photocatalysis, visible light

1. Introduction

TiO$_2$ is an extraordinarily versatile material. In 1964, Kato et al. used a TiO$_2$ suspension for the photocatalytic oxidation of tetralin (1,2,3,4-tetrahydronaphthalene) [1]. In 1972, the “Honda-Fujishima Effect” first described by Fujishima and Honda intensively promoted the photocatalytic field [2]. This discovery led to a new application of TiO$_2$ in water splitting using solar energy as the driving force of the process as well as solar energy conversion.
To date, TiO$_2$ nanomaterials have attracted the interest of many scientists. The focus is to modify TiO$_2$ structural properties or to combine supportive materials to demonstrate that TiO$_2$ nanomaterials are excellent photocatalysts, which can be used as dopants in novel metal-TiO$_2$ systems such as Pt-doped TiO$_2$ [3], Au-doped TiO$_2$ or graphene/TiO$_2$/carbon dot composites developed as visible light photocatalysts [3, 4].

In this chapter, we focus on blue TiO$_2$ as a visible-light-driven photocatalyst and its preparation methods. The blue TiO$_2$ nanomaterial contains Ti$^{3+}$ with an abundant oxygen vacancy, which can absorb visible and infrared light as well as UV light, producing more electrons and holes and also facilitating better electrical conductivity than pristine TiO$_2$ [5]. In the future, we would like to further address the beneficial applications in clean energy storage media and protecting the environment, including the hydrogen evolution reaction, carbon dioxide reduction, and degradation of pollutants by using noble blue TiO$_2$ under visible light.

2. General structure and properties of TiO$_2$

TiO$_2$ belongs to the transition metal oxide family. There are four different polymorphs of TiO$_2$ found in nature such as anatase (tetragonal), rutile (tetragonal), brookite (orthorhombic), and TiO$_2$ (B) (monoclinic) [6], the most important of which are anatase and rutile. With calcination at high temperatures exceeding ~600°C, the brookite and anatase polymorphs will transform into the thermodynamically stable rutile polymorph [5].

The tetragonal anatase bulk unit cell has dimensions of $a=b=0.3733$ nm and $c=0.9570$ nm, and the rutile bulk unit cell has dimensions of $a=b=0.4584$ nm, and $c=0.2953$ nm (Table 1). In both structures, the octahedral distortions create the basic building units [7, 8]. The lengths and angles of octahedral coordinated Ti atoms, therefore, dictate stacking in both structures, as shown in Figure 1.

3. The advanced structure and properties of blue TiO$_2$

Zhang et al. [9] discovered that the color and crystalline phase of white P$_{25}$ (70% anatase and 30% rutile) changed into blue color by the treatment of lithium in an ethylenediamine (Li-EDA) solution, which is the first achievement in making blue TiO$_2$ under atmospheric

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Table 1. Crystal structure data for TiO$_2$. Copyright (2014), Elsevier [15].
pressure at room temperature in solution and also the phase-selective reduction between anatase and rutile TiO$_2$ phases. They showed that the white anatase TiO$_2$ phase was not changed, while the rutile TiO$_2$ phase changed into black color. In the case of P$_{25}$ TiO$_2$, the blue colored TiO$_2$ appeared as a result of the combination of white and black colors (Figure 2) [9].

The unit cell parameters and nanocrystalline size profiles of white P$_{25}$ and blue TiO$_2$ are shown in Table 2. These results show that a slight change occurred along the a and b directions, but there was significant expansion in the c direction, and as a result, the unit cell volume expanded significantly as well [10].

Figure 1. Bulk structures of anatase and rutile TiO$_2$. Copyright (2003), Elsevier [18].

Figure 2. Schematics of TiO$_2$ (white P$_{25}$) (left) and blue TiO$_2$ crystals (right). The black color corresponds to the visual color of the reduced rutile TiO$_2$. Copyright (2016), Royal Society of Chemistry [9].
Figure 3. XRD patterns of different shapes. Experimental (thick black lines) and simulated (thin colored lines) plots for TiO$_2$ nanocrystals. The insets showed accurate percentages of the {001} and {101} facets of atomistic models. Copyright (2012), American Chemical Society [12].

Table 2. Unit cell parameters of TiO$_2$ (white P$_{25}$) and blue TiO$_2$. Copyright (2014), American Chemical Society [10].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>samples</th>
<th>cell parameter $a$, $b$/Å ($a = b$)</th>
<th>cell parameter $c$/Å</th>
<th>cell volume/Å$^3$</th>
<th>crystalline size (nm)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>white TiO$_2$</td>
<td>4.612 30</td>
<td>2.952 47</td>
<td>62.8088</td>
<td>8.774</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blue TiO$_2$</td>
<td>4.611 07</td>
<td>2.971 47</td>
<td>63.1793</td>
<td>7.650</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4. Color change of white P$_{25}$ (left) to blue TiO$_2$ (right) and UV-vis absorption spectra of pristine TiO$_2$ (P-TiO$_2$) and reduced anatase TiO$_2$ (R-TiO$_2$). Copyright (2017), American Chemical Society [14].

Recent publications showed that the morphology of TiO$_2$ materials resulted in differences of the enhanced photocatalytic activity for the production of hydrogen between the {101} and {001} facets of anatase tetragonal bipyramidal nanocrystals [11–13]. Based on the XRD simulation,
the length and width of the peaks were calculated to confirm the percentages of the [101] and [001] facets (Figure 3). Their research well defined the optimum nanosize as well as the shape of TiO$_2$ crystals, suggesting that the [101] facets are more photocatalytically active than the [001] facets for the evolution of H$_2$ (up to 2.1 mmol h$^{-1}$ g$^{-1}$) under simulated solar illumination, while the blue coloration results from oxygen vacancies in the TiO$_2$ lattice [12].

The blue TiO$_2$ has excellent absorption over a much wider spectral range than white TiO$_2$ due to the excitation of conduction band electrons. Therefore, it should exhibit much better photocatalytic activity under visible light or the full spectrum of solar irradiation (Figure 4) [9, 14].

4. Electronic properties of blue TiO$_2$ in photocatalysis

Semiconductor materials, TiO$_2$ in particular, are widely used in the applications of photocatalysis. As shown in Figure 5, the reduction potential of photogenerated electrons is defined by the energy level at the bottom of the conduction band (CB), while the oxidizing ability is the energy level at the top of the valence band (VB). Because the CB energy level of TiO$_2$ is higher than the reduction potential levels of NHE references, semiconductors as well as TiO$_2$ nanomaterials can be used as a catalyst for hydrogen evolution, CO$_2$ conversion, or pollutant degradation [15].

Photocatalytic reactions occur as a material interacts with light, which provides higher energy than the bandgap of the semiconductor to create reactive oxidizing species, leading to the photocatalytic transformation of a compound.

The basics of the photocatalytic process can be summarized as follows:

(1) TiO$_2$ absorption of photons with sufficient energy and generation of electron-hole pairs.

(2) Separation and transport of electron-hole pairs with electrons excited from the valence band (VB) to CB.

(3) Chemical reaction on the surface-active sites with charge carriers.

Figure 5. Bandgap of TiO$_2$ and some photocatalysts with respect to the redox potential (vs. NHE) values of different chemical species measured at a pH of 7. Copyright (2014), Elsevier [11, 15, 16].
Meanwhile, electron-hole recombination is also possible depending on the competition between these processes.

Blue TiO$_2$ nanomaterials can overcome the limitations to enhance the photocatalytic performance due to the formation of oxygen vacancies (supports many free carriers charges). The oxygen vacancy is a positive charge. Then, Ti$^{3+}$ from the center shifts away from the oxygen vacancy position, leading to an advanced sublevel electric state and excellently trapped holes, preventing the recombination of electrons and holes, even with the lower energy bandgap irradiation (~2.7 eV) compared to P$_{25}$ (3.2 eV). Blue TiO$_2$ could generate electrons in the wide open region of irradiation such as solar light, which contains most visible and infrared wavelengths as well as UV light [17, 19] (Figure 6).

5. Synthesis of blue TiO$_2$ nanomaterials for photocatalysis

5.1. Hydrogenation synthesis

H$_2$ is the most common reagent used for the hydrogenation of TiO$_2$, which can react with the lattice oxygen, leading to the formation of abundant oxygen vacancies and Ti$^{3+}$ in TiO$_2$ due to its facile activation by thermal or electromagnetic energy [4, 19]. The annealing time changes with the annealing temperature, where the blue color was maintained up to a longer time at 500°C. It readily changed to pale gray at 600°C due to the high concentration of Ti$^{3+}$ in the bulk at the early stage of hydrogenation, which may absorb oxygen molecules and lead to O$^-$ as a major species on the surface after prolonged hydrogenation (Figure 7) [20, 21]. In addition, hydrogenation processes require harsh synthetic conditions and/or a dangerous production process [4, 10, 19, 21–25]. Therefore, H$_2$ is introduced using different reducing agents such as NaBH$_4$ and TiH$_2$ [4, 26, 27] instead of an external dose of hydrogen gas. TiH$_2$ as a solid solution of hydrogen in Ti and P$_{25}$ was mixed and sealed in a quartz tube and calcined at 450°C for 10 h. After discarding most of the unreacted TiH$_2$ sediments, HCl and H$_2$O$_2$ solutions were then introduced to completely remove the residual TiH$_2$, during which the TiH$_2$ dissolved and a yellow solution was formed. After centrifugation and thorough
washing, TiH, was completely removed, and a well-crystallized bluish sample (TiO$_2$−x·H) was obtained [4]. Qiu et al. found that the TiO$_2$−x·H can efficiently enhance the visible- and infrared-light absorption and improve photocatalytic degradation of methyl orange (MO) and hydrogen production via water splitting by H doped into the well-crystallized lattice, which means that might be localized states in the bandgap was offered and has a relatively low recombination rate of electrons and holes. Moreover, we should note that the low concentration of hydrogen atoms in hydrogenated titania was found to be a unfavorable factor affecting the photocatalytic activity [21].

5.2. Hydro(solvo)thermal method

Hydrothermal and solvothermal methods have received some attention due to their simple and low-cost production routes and are suitable for large-scale production [28, 29]. Zhu et al. reported the synthesis of novel blue colored TiO$_2$ with abundant defects through a one-step solvothermal method using TiCl$_3$ and TiF$_4$ as precursors. The introduction of Ti$^{4+}$ in the reaction system inhibits the oxidation of Ti$^{3+}$ during the solvothermal treatment.

\[
\text{Ti}^{3+} + \text{oxygen species} \rightleftharpoons \text{Ti}^{4+} \quad (1)
\]

This process is governed by the Le Chatelier’s principle. The oxygen vacancy formation dominantly resulting from Ti$^{3+}$ will not be completely oxidized during the solvothermal process. Moreover, leaving behind a high concentration of bulk Ti$^{3+}$ defects is very favorable for visible light photocatalytic reactions [29]. In addition, Fang et al. synthesized a variety of reduced TiO$_2$ samples by using Zn powder as the reducing agent and HF as the solvent for the stabilization of the formed Ti$^{3+}$ species and oxygen vacancies in a simple one-pot hydrothermal process. At the same time, it should be noted that the Ti$^{3+}$ introduced by Zn reduction is not stable and is likely to be oxidized in air [28].
5.3. Electrochemical reduction synthesis

Zhang et al. demonstrated that electrochemical reduction method is a facile and effective strategy to induce in situ self-doping of Ti$^{3+}$ into TiO$_2$ and the self-doped TiO$_2$ photoelectrodes showed remarkably improved and very stable water splitting performance [30]. The hierarchical TiO$_2$ NTs were fabricated by a two-step anodization process. In the first step of anodization, the as-prepared Ti sheet as an anode was anodized at 60 V for 30 min in electrolytes consisted of 0.5 wt% NH$_4$F in EG solution with 2 vol% water and a Pt mesh (Aldrich, 100 mesh) as a cathode, respectively. After the as-grown nanotube layer was ultrasonically removed in DI water, the second step of anodization was performed at 80 V for 5 min. Then, the prepared TiO$_2$ NT samples were cleaned and annealed in air at 450 degree for 1 h with a heating rate of 5 degree min$^{-1}$ [30]. In the electrochemical reduction processes, the TiO$_2$ NTs as the working electrode with an AgCl electrode and a Pt mesh formed a typical three-electrode system under a negative potential (0.4 V vs. the reversible hydrogen electrode (RHE)) in the supporting electrolyte of 1 M Na$_2$SO$_4$ for 30 min [30]. The electronic transition from the valence band to the Ti$^{3+}$ induced interbands and/or from the energy band levels to the conduction band was considered to contribute to enhance the absorption in the visible region in the self-doped TiO$_2$, which helps explaining the observed color change from the prime white of the TiO$_2$ NTs to the light blue of the ECR-TiO$_2$ NTs [30].

5.4. Metal reduction method

Zheng et al. proposed an approach to synthesize blue TiO$_2$ nanoparticles with abundant oxygen deficiencies/Ti$^{3+}$ species through Al reduction of TiO$_2$ nanosheets at 500$^\circ$C [31]. Zhang et al. developed a reduction method to synthesize a series of TiO$_{2-x}$ samples with their color changing from white to dark blue, which possess a much higher surface area and visible light absorption compared to pristine TiO$_2$ (Figure 8) [32]. In a typical reduction process, crystalline...
\( \text{TiO}_2 \) was milled with Na/NaCl fine powders with different weight ratio at a series of milling rates such as 80, 120, 150, and 180 rpm at room temperature under argon atmosphere for 0.25–4 h. After the Na and NaCl was removed, the obtained \( \text{TiO}_{2-x} \) products were dispersed in a small amount of deionized water and then vacuum-dried at room temperature to obtain \( \text{TiO}_{2-x} \) powders [32]. Moreover, the obtained \( \text{TiO}_{2-x} \) with a high surface area can be employed as an effective support for Ru particles and the Ru/\( \text{TiO}_{2-x} \) catalyst exhibited superior activity in the catalytic hydrogenation of N-methylpyrrole [32].

5.5. Phase-selective room-temperature solution processing

Until now, numerous methods to prepare blue \( \text{TiO}_2 \) have been reported, but all of them require high-temperature processing. Due to high-temperature processing, a phase-selective reduction between the anatase and rutile \( \text{TiO}_2 \) phases is almost impossible. For the first time, phase-selective “disorder engineered” Degussa P25 \( \text{TiO}_2 \) nanoparticles using simple room temperature solution processing was demonstrated as a very effective method to prepare modulatory \( \text{TiO}_2 \) [9]. The blue-colored \( \text{TiO}_2 \) nanoparticles were obtained by using a strong reducing agent consists of lithium in ethylenediamine (Li-EDA), which can disorder only the white rutile phase of P25 while well maintaining white anatase \( \text{TiO}_2 \) [9]. Firstly, 14 mg metallic Li foil was dissolved in 20 ml ethanediamine to form a 1 mmol/ml solvated electron solution. Two hundred milligram of Degussa P25 (anatase, size: \( \sim 25 \) nm, rutile, size: \( \sim 140 \) nm, P25, size: \( 20–40 \) nm) was prepared after thorough drying and then added into the abovementioned solution and stirred for several days depending on the application. After sufficient reaction, the excess electrons and formed Li salts were quenched by slowly adding HCl into the mixture. Finally, the blue-colored \( \text{TiO}_2 \) nanoparticles were thoroughly rinsed by deionized water several times and dried at room temperature in a vacuum oven [9].

In their study, the blue \( \text{TiO}_2 \) showed drastically enhanced visible and near-infrared light absorption by induced abundant order/disorder junctions at the surface from selective disorder engineering, which means that it has well charge separation efficiency through type-II bandgap alignment and can effectively promote strong hydrogen evolution surface reaction [9]. Therefore, when the phase-selective disorder engineering of P25 \( \text{TiO}_2 \) nanoparticles as photocatalysts were used, they exhibited high stability and a high hydrogen evolution rate of 13.89 mmol h\(^{-1}\) g\(^{-1}\) using 0.5 wt% Pt (cocatalyst) and 3.46 mmol h\(^{-1}\) g\(^{-1}\) without using any cocatalyst under simulated solar light (Figure 9) [9].

5.6. Other methods

5.6.1. Sol-gelation hydrothermal technique and subsequent reduction treatment method

\( \text{Ti}^{3+} \) self-doped blue \( \text{TiO}_2 \) (B) single-crystalline nanorods (b-TR) were synthesized via three steps, in which the titanium dioxide powder was prepared via the sol-gelation approach followed by hydrothermal treatment. Blue \( \text{TiO}_2 \) (B) single-crystalline nanorods were obtained by further annealing at 350°C in Ar [33]. Under visible light illumination, the degradation rate of RhB reached 97.01% by b-TR and the photocatalytic hydrogen evolution rate was as high as 149.2 \( \mu \)mol h\(^{-1}\) g\(^{-1}\) under AM 1.5 irradiation [33]. The mechanistic
Figure 10. Diagrammatic sketch for the formation of blue TiO$_2$ (B) single-crystalline nanorod. Copyright (2016) American Chemical Society [33].

Figure 9. (a) Comparison of the hydrogen generation and cycling performance of 0.5 wt% platinized P$_{25}$, nonplatinized P$_{25}$, and nonplatinized blue P$_{25}$ after 1 day of continuous reaction using methanol as a sacrificial agent. A simulated full solar spectrum was used as the excitation source, which produced approximately 100 mW cm$^{-2}$ in the samples, which consisted of various TiO$_2$ nanocrystals in a 100 mL quartz reactor filled with 70 mL of solution. (b) Proposed mechanism for charge separation and H$_2$ generation in blue P$_{25}$ (green part: ordered TiO$_2$, gray part: disordered TiO$_2$). Copyright (2016), Royal Society of Chemistry [9].

Analysis and characterization results showed that the synergetic action of the special TiO$_2$ (B) phase, Ti$^{3+}$ self-doping, and the 1D rod-shaped single-crystalline nanostructure resulted in a narrowed bandgap of 2.61 eV, which enhanced the photocatalytic and photoelectrochemical performances [33] (Figure 10).

5.6.2. Ice-water quenching

Liu et al. applied ice-water quenching as a facile strategy for the synthesis of blue color of Ti$^{3+}$ self-doped TiO$_2$ [23]. In the typical process, commercial P$_{25}$ materials were quenched in...
ice-water after pre-annealing at a high temperature. Then, the obtained powders were filtered and dried at 80°C for 12 h for further use [23]. Digital pictures of q-TiO$_2$ (quenched TiO$_2$) show that the color changed to pale blue when subjected to a temperature higher than 900°C, which confirmed the presence of Ti$^{3+}$ in TiO$_2$ after ice-water quenching (Figure 11), implying that the d-d might be a transition from Ti$^{3+}$ band gap states to their resonant excited states and extended light absorption together with near-IR absorption [23]. In addition, the surface distortion and the associated oxygen defects were considered to be contributed to the substantially enhanced photocatalytic activity [23]. It should be pointed out that the quenched TiO$_2$ cannot absorb much visible light, which means that the photoexcited electrons at the Ti$^{3+}$ defect level cannot transfer outside [23].

6. Conclusions and development

In this chapter, blue TiO$_2$ that has a low energy bandgap is introduced as an advanced semiconducting material for possible applications in the visible-light-driven photocatalysis. A variety of preparation methods for blue TiO$_2$ photocatalysts with Ti$^{3+}$ states of a high oxygen defect density have been successfully introduced. For the synthesis of the blue TiO$_2$ in the applications of photocatalysis, hydrogenation method using TiO$_2$ with hydrogen at 500°C or with hydride reducing agent at 450°C, hydrothermal method using Ti precursors or Zn powder reducing agent under HF solvent, electrochemical reduction method using anodizing TiO$_2$ at 60 and 80 V and then annealing at 450°C, and metal reduction method using Al at 500°C, Na and NaCl solid milling, or Li-EDA solution at room temperature and atmospheric pressure. For the preparation of blue TiO$_2$, the most recently developed metal solution room temperature method can give phase-selective reduction between the anatase and rutile TiO$_2$ phases. For the first time, the phase selective “disordered rutile and crystalline anatase” P$_{25}$ TiO$_2$ nanoparticles are reported, which turns out that it is a very effective photocatalyst for hydrogen evolution reaction and removal of algae under solar irradiation. However, how to quantitatively control surface defects and the properties of the interface between the order and disorder surface layer still remain as important challenges to understand the true physicochemical properties of blue TiO$_2$. 

Figure 11. (A) Digital pictures of q-TiO$_2$ and n-TiO$_2$ samples prepared from the commercial P$_{25}$ powders after being subjected to pre-annealing at different temperatures. (B) Digital picture of just-quenched TiO$_2$ sample on filter paper, which shows the blue color in the inner side of the sample [23]. Copyright (2017) American Chemical Society.
As mentioned in the introduction, in the near future, we would like to further address beneficial applications in clean energy conversion and storage media and protecting the environment, including the hydrogen evolution reaction, carbon dioxide reduction, and degradation of pollutants by using noble blue TiO$_2$ under visible light.

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