

A facile method for *in-situ* synthesis of SnO₂/graphene as a high performance anode material for lithium-ion batteries



Guiliang Wu^a, Mingbo Wu^{a,*}, Ding Wang^b, Linghong Yin^a, Jiashun Ye^a, Shenzhen Deng^a, Zhiyuan Zhu^a, Wenjun Ye^a, Zhongtao Li^{a,*}

^a State Key Laboratory of Heavy Oil Processing, China University of Petroleum, Qingdao 266580, China

^b School of Materials Science and Engineering, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai 200093, China

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ABSTRACT

A facile, moderate, and environment-friendly method for *in-situ* preparation of SnO₂/graphene nanocomposites (SnO₂/GNs) was proposed. The structures and morphology as well as electrochemical behaviors of SnO₂/GNs with varied proportions of SnO₂ and graphene were characterized by X-ray diffraction, Fourier transform infrared spectrometry, transmission electron microscopy and relevant electrochemical property tests. The results reveal that the ratios of SnO₂ to graphene have a significant effect on the structures and properties of SnO₂/GNs. SnO₂/GN-50 containing 50% SnO₂ delivers a high specific capacity of 540 mAh g⁻¹ even after 90 cycles at a current density of 100 mA g⁻¹, which is attributed to the synergistic effect of a unique combination of SnO₂ nanoparticles and graphene sheets, indicating that SnO₂/GNs might have a promising future as anode material in Li-ion batteries.

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1. Introduction

Lithium ion batteries (LIBs) as one series of important energy storage devices have been widely used in modern electronic equipment and electric/hybrid vehicles [1,2]. The theoretical capacity of graphite anode is merely 372 mAh g⁻¹, which is unable to satisfy the increasing requirement for LIBs with higher capacity. Therefore, many alternative anode materials such as metal oxide, metal sulfide, and nonmetal with larger specific capacity are explored to substitute graphite [3–7]. Tin dioxide (SnO₂) is regarded as one of most promising anode materials for the next-generation LIBs due to its high theoretical capacity (782 mAh g⁻¹), low cost and nontoxicity [8–10]. However, SnO₂ suffers from severe volume change during Li⁺ insertion/extraction process, which has been the biggest challenge for SnO₂ as LIBs anode in practical applications [11,12]. Designing SnO₂ nanostructures, such as core-shell structures [13,14], hollow structures [15], nanotubes [16], nanowires [17], and nanorods [18], is an effective way to mitigate the volume expansion. Hybridizing SnO₂ with buffer materials (such as carbon or other conductive materials) is another strategy to accommodate volume variation [19–21]. Nonetheless, the above mentioned preparation processes are usually complicated

and time-consuming. Therefore, it is in urgently need of a facile and efficient method to synthesize SnO₂-based anode materials.

Graphene (GN) with superior electronic conductivity, high surface area, and chemical and physical stabilities [22,23] has been served as functional substrate to hybridize with SnO₂ for improving capacity and cyclic stability of the anode materials [9,24–26]. Herein, SnO₂/GN composites with different morphology and structure have been synthesized by various techniques. Yao et al. prepared SnO₂/GN composites via a reflux approach in an oil bath at 120 °C and calcined at 300 °C for 10 h subsequently [24]. The obtained sample exhibits a reversible capacity of 520 mAh g⁻¹ after 100 cycles at a rate of 55 mA g⁻¹. Liang et al. synthesized the SnO₂/GN nanocomposites by a reflux method at 180 °C for 10 h [25]. The as-prepared sample followed by calcination at 400 °C shows a capacity of 430 mAh g⁻¹ after 20 cycles at a current density of 100 mA g⁻¹. Park and co-workers developed a hydrothermal method to prepare SnO₂/GN materials [27]. Although the as-made sample prepared at 160 °C for 12 h in hydrazine monohydrate delivers a high reversible capacity of 626 mAh g⁻¹ after 50 cycles at a rate of 100 mA g⁻¹, its preparation process is generally complex, harsh, and time-consuming.

To solve the above problems, we propose a facile, moderate, and efficient method for *in-situ* preparation of SnO₂/GNs without adding any toxic chemicals. The effects of the ratios of SnO₂ to graphene on the structures as well as electrochemical behaviors are also systematically investigated.

* Corresponding authors. Tel.: +86 532 8698 3452.

E-mail addresses: wumb@upc.edu.cn (M. Wu), liztao@upc.edu.cn (Z. Li).

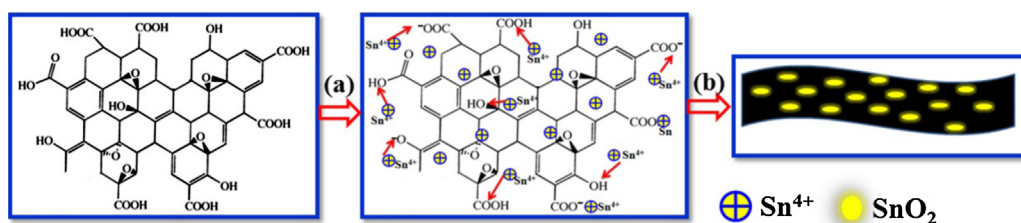


Fig. 1. Synthetic procedure of SnO_2/GNs . (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of the article.)

2. Experimental

2.1. Chemical reagents and materials

Graphite powder (325 mesh, with purity >99.99%) was obtained from Alfa Aesar. All the other chemicals (AR, Sinopharm Chemical Reagent Co., Ltd.) in our experiment were directly used without further purification.

2.2. Synthesis of SnO_2/GNs

Graphene oxide (GO) was gained from graphite powder by a modified Hummers' method [28], followed by sonication (700 W) for 4 h in distilled water. Different amounts of $\text{SnCl}_4 \cdot 5\text{H}_2\text{O}$ were dissolved in 200 mL GO suspension (1 mg mL^{-1}) along with vigorously stirring. Afterwards, its pH value was adjusted among 9–10 by injecting ammonia (25.0–38.0 wt%). The mixture was stirred sufficiently in a water bath for 2 h at 85°C , leading to a light black suspension solution. The resultant solid products were separated by filtration, washed with distilled water, and dried in vacuum at 60°C . Finally, the products were obtained after calcining at 500°C for 2 h in N_2 atmosphere and remarked as SnO_2/GNs . The contents of SnO_2 in different samples are estimated by the following formula:

$$\text{SnO}_2\% = \frac{m_{\text{SnO}_2}}{(m_{\text{GO}} + m_{\text{SnO}_2})} \quad (1)$$

According to the formula, $\text{SnO}_2\%$ of $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-30}$, $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-50}$ and $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-70}$ are 30%, 50% and 70%, respectively.

2.3. Samples characterization

The structure and morphology of obtained SnO_2/GNs were analyzed by X-ray diffraction (XRD, X'Pert PRO MPD, Holland), and transmission electron microscopy (TEM, JEM-2100UHR, Japan). The functional groups in samples were characterized by Fourier transform infrared spectrometry (FT-IR, Thermo Nicolet NEXUS 670, USA). The contents of SnO_2 in samples were quantitatively determined by thermogravimetric analysis (TGA, STA 409 PC Luxx, Germany). Raman analysis was performed with a Jobin Yvon HR800 Raman spectrometer. Brunauer–Emmet–Teller (BET) specific surface area was determined from nitrogen adsorption/desorption isotherms using automatic specific surface area measuring equipment (ASAP 2020, America).

2.4. Electrochemical measurements

Working electrodes were prepared from SnO_2/GNs , carbon black and poly(vinylidene fluoride) (8:1:1 in weight ratio) in *N*-methyl-2-pyrrolidinone. The slurry was coated onto a current collector made from copper foil and then was dried under vacuum at 100°C for 10 h. The cells were assembled inside an argon-filled glove box using a lithium-metal foil as the counter electrode and microporous polypropylene as the separator. The organic electrolyte was composed of 1 mol L^{-1} LiPF_6 in ethylene carbonate

and diethyl carbonate (EC/DMC, 1:1 vol). The cells were galvanostatically charged and discharged in the voltage range from 0.005 to 2.5 V vs. Li/Li^+ at the current density of 100 mA g^{-1} on a Land CT2001A cyler. Cyclic voltammetry (CV) curves were collected at 0.25 mV s^{-1} with in the range of 0.005–2.5 V using an Ametek PARSTAT4000 electrochemistry workstation. Electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) tests were also measured on Ametek PARSTAT4000 electrochemistry workstation in the frequency range of 100 kHz to 10 mHz with AC voltage amplitude of 10 mV.

3. Results and discussion

Fig. 1 reveals the overall *in-situ* synthesis of SnO_2/GNs . The abundant functional groups on the surface of GO, such as epoxy, hydroxyl, and carboxyl groups [29], can act as anchoring sites for Sn^{4+} through electrostatic interactions. When $\text{SnCl}_4 \cdot 5\text{H}_2\text{O}$ was added into GO solution, Sn^{4+} was regularly combined with the oxygenated groups by electrostatic attraction (*cf. red arrows*). The bonded Sn^{4+} could quickly move to active sites on GO planes under violently stirring at 85°C and then *in situ* convert into $\text{Sn}(\text{OH})_4$ on the GO sheets as soon as ammonia was injected into reaction system. After reacted at 85°C for 2 h, the mixture became light black, which could be attributed to the partial reduction of GO under this reaction temperature by ammonia. Finally, $\text{Sn}(\text{OH})_4$ deposited on GO sheets was converted to SnO_2 particles (*cf. yellow dots*) after calcining at 500°C for 2 h in N_2 . Simultaneously, GO was further reduced to graphene. SnO_2 nanoparticles (NPs) uniformly disperse on graphene sheets and finally form the final SnO_2/GNs .

XRD patterns of SnO_2/GNs are shown in Fig. 2. The peak around 11° , a characteristic diffraction peak of graphite oxide, cannot be observed in SnO_2/GN samples, indicating that graphite oxide has been well exfoliated. In addition, the peak of SnO_2 (110) plane around 26° is asymmetric, which is ascribed to the overlapping

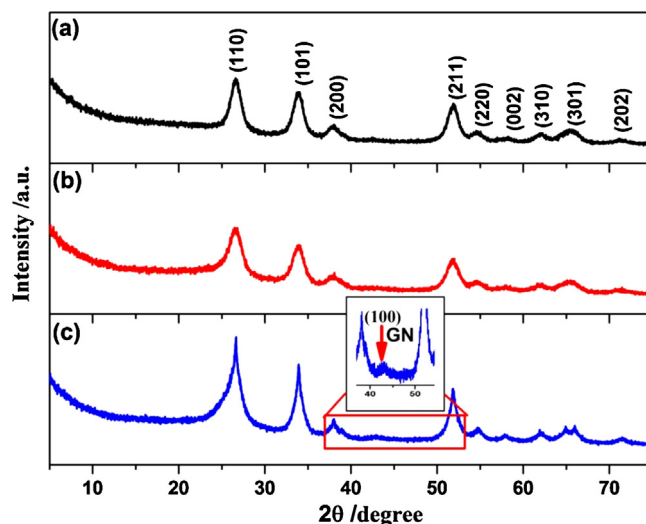


Fig. 2. XRD patterns of SnO_2/GNs .

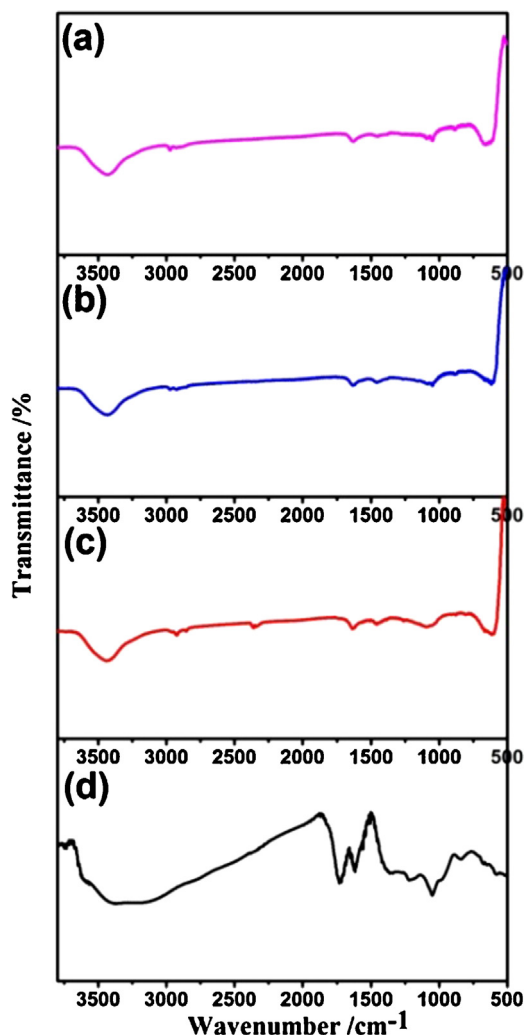


Fig. 3. FT-IR spectra of SnO₂/GNs and GO.

of the reduced graphene sheets reflection with the most intense (1 1 0) reflection of the cassiterite structure. As we can see, all three SnO₂/GN samples exhibit four distinct diffraction peaks (1 1 0), (1 0 1), (2 1 1), and (3 0 1), which are attributed to the tetragonal rutile SnO₂ phase (Cassiterite, JCPDS card No. 41-1445). These broad peaks of SnO₂/GNs indicate that the SnO₂ NPs in SnO₂/GNs are very small in size [9,27]. Based on the Scherrer's formula, the average crystallite sizes for SnO₂/GN-30, SnO₂/GN-50 and SnO₂/GN-70 are 4.5, 8.1, 13.5 nm, respectively. With the increasing content of SnO₂, the estimated size of SnO₂ NPs in SnO₂/GN samples becomes much larger, which also has been approved by TEM (in Fig. 6). It should be noted that a weak diffraction peak around 43° can be detected only in SnO₂/GN-30, as shown in the inset of Fig. 2(c), indicating that more graphene sheets (*ca.*70% according to the equation (1)) in SnO₂/GN-30 stack with each other and form into multilayers by the van der Waals forces. However, the relevant diffraction peaks are not found in SnO₂/GN-50 and SnO₂/GN-70, revealing that the higher amounts of SnO₂ NPs deposited on graphene sheets can prevent the latter from stacking into multilayers [30].

To make sure the reduction of GO during the preparation of SnO₂/GNs, FT-IR spectra of SnO₂/GNs and GO were measured, as revealed in Fig. 3. Many oxygen-containing groups including C–OH (3390 cm⁻¹), C–O–C (1230 cm⁻¹), and C=O (1735 cm⁻¹) in COOH can be detected on the FT-IR spectrum of GO (Fig. 3(d)). The spectrum of GO also shows the O–H deformation peak at 1401 cm⁻¹, the C–O stretching peak at 1055 cm⁻¹, and the O–C=O

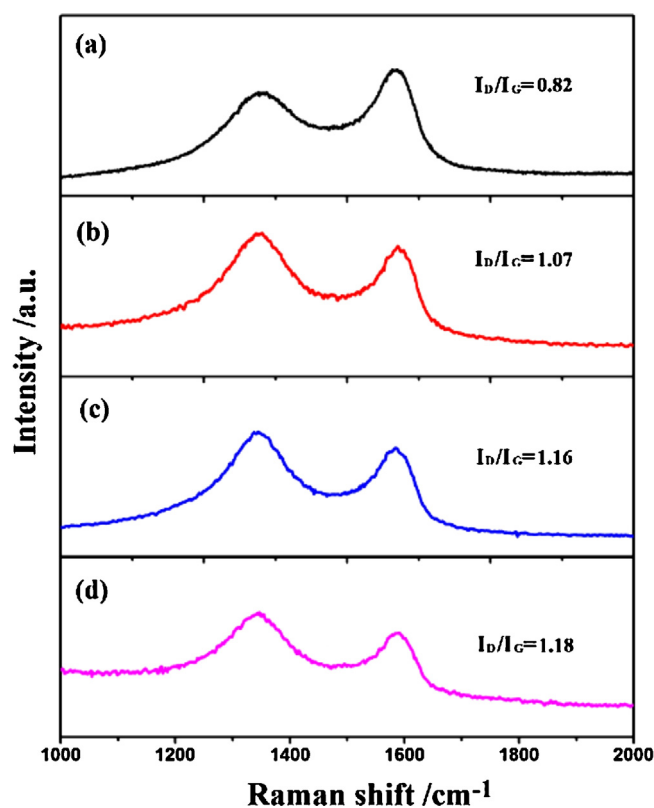


Fig. 4. Raman spectra of SnO₂/GNs and GO.

at 830 cm⁻¹. In addition, a peak at 1620 cm⁻¹ can be attributed to the remaining sp² domains [31]. The FT-IR spectra of SnO₂/GN-70, SnO₂/GN-50, and SnO₂/GN-30 exhibit a similar trend: most of the peaks of oxygen-containing groups, such as COOH peaks (1735 cm⁻¹), C–O stretching vibrations (1055 cm⁻¹), O–H deformation peak (1401 cm⁻¹), and O–C=O peak (830 cm⁻¹), are eliminated after calcination at 500 °C. Furthermore, the peaks of C–OH at 3390 cm⁻¹ of all three SnO₂/GN samples are much weaker compared with GO, and the new strong peaks at 600 cm⁻¹ assigned to Sn–O are appeared. All these results prove that most GO has been reduced to graphene and Sn⁴⁺ has been transformed into SnO₂.

Raman spectroscopy measurement was carried out to characterize GO and SnO₂/GNs. As shown in Fig. 4(a), the Raman spectrum of GO contains both G (1580 cm⁻¹) and D (1350 cm⁻¹) bands, corresponding to sp² hybridized carbon and the disordered carbon, respectively [32]. All three SnO₂/GN samples also exhibit the two bands in Raman spectra. However, the intensity ratios of the D to the G band (I_D/I_G) of SnO₂/GN samples (1.07, 1.16, and 1.18 for SnO₂/GN-30, SnO₂/GN-50, and SnO₂/GN-70, respectively) are higher than 0.82 of GO, and the value becomes larger with the increasing Sn⁴⁺/GO ratio, which is due to the decreasing amount of exfoliated GO [9,33], as well as the increasing amount of SnO₂ NPs deposited on the graphene sheets [34].

The contents of SnO₂ in SnO₂/GNs were estimated by the thermogravimetric analysis in air, as revealed in Fig. 5. For all SnO₂/GN samples, the major weight loss steps in the range of 200–650 °C can be easily seen, which are attributed to the gradually oxidation of graphene in air. Based on the TGA curves, the mass percent of SnO₂ is 77.6, 56.0, and 40.8% in SnO₂/GN-70, SnO₂/GN-50, and SnO₂/GN-30, respectively. The final contents of SnO₂ in above three samples are relatively higher than 70, 50, 30% of theoretical values according to formula (1), which is caused by the removal of oxygen-containing groups in GO during the calcining processes.

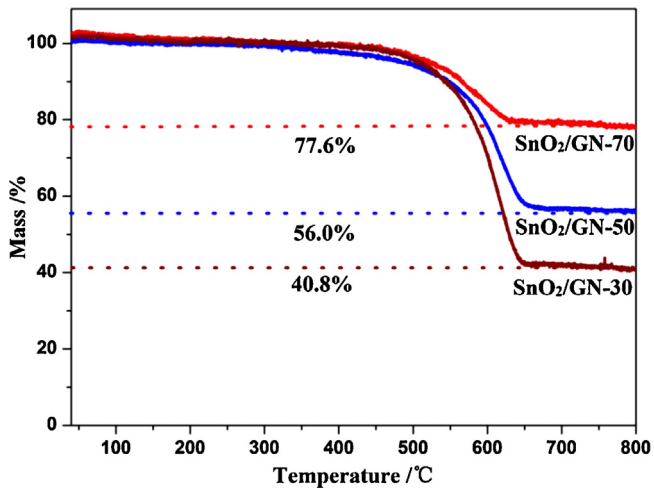


Fig. 5. TGA curves of SnO₂/GNs in air.

The morphology and structural features of SnO₂/GNs were characterized by TEM. As shown in Fig. 6, the SnO₂ NPs distributed on the surface of graphene planes can be clearly observed in all SnO₂/GN samples. The difference is that SnO₂ NPs in SnO₂/GN-50 (Fig. 6(b)) are uniformly distributed. However, SnO₂ NPs in SnO₂/GN-30 (Fig. 6(a)) are sporadically dispersed, and those in SnO₂/GN-70 are obviously aggregated into larger particles as shown in Fig. 6(d). The corresponding selected-area electron diffraction (SAED) pattern (inset of Fig. 6(b)) exhibits distinct diffraction rings indexed to tetragonal rutile SnO₂ nanocrystal phase. Furthermore, the lattice fringes of SnO₂ NPs are clearly observed in Fig. 6(c) and its insets. The interlayer spacings are about 0.334 nm and 0.264 nm, corresponding to (1 1 0) and (1 0 1) planes

of SnO₂, respectively. As we all know, the monolayer graphene looks like a wrinkled or crumpled thin paper-like structure with a lot of folds at the edge due to its intrinsic properties [35]. Interestingly, the surface of graphene in SnO₂/GN-30 is relatively smooth compared with other two samples. It is presumed that GO exfoliated by sonication in SnO₂/GN-30 reassemble into multilayer graphene during the preparation process.

High-resolution (HR) TEM images of all three SnO₂/GN samples were further performed, as depicted in Fig. 7. The layer amount of stacking graphene in SnO₂/GN-30 are 8–10 layers, which can be approximately counted from the number of strips as marked with arrows in Fig. 7(a). The layers of graphene in SnO₂/GN-50 and SnO₂/GN-70 are distinguished by the same means, which are 2–3 and 3–5 layers, respectively. As shown in the pictures, the graphene sheets can effectively prevent the aggregation of SnO₂ NPs, thereby form a well dispersed SnO₂ NPs in SnO₂/GNs. Meanwhile, the SnO₂ NPs deposited on graphene sheets can also restrain graphene sheets from stacking into multilayers [30]. The more stacking of graphene sheets in SnO₂/GN-30 rather than those in SnO₂/GN-50 and SnO₂/GN-70 is due to the poor loading of SnO₂ NPs (*ca.* 40%), which is in accordance with the results of XRD. The morphology and structure of SnO₂/GN nanocomposites seem to be highly related with the ratio of Sn⁴⁺/GO.

The nitrogen adsorption/desorption isotherms of SnO₂/GNs together with the pore size distribution are shown in Fig. 8. All three samples exhibit the typical type IV isotherm with an obvious hysteresis loop, suggesting that a certain amount of mesopores actually exist in SnO₂/GNs [36]. The specific surface area of SnO₂/GN-30, SnO₂/GN-50, and SnO₂/GN-70 is 89.7, 97.4, and 124.6 m² g⁻¹, respectively. Although SnO₂/GN-70 possesses the largest surface area, however, SnO₂/GN-70 does not show the best electrochemical properties (see Fig. 10), which could be attributed that the aggregated SnO₂ NPs in SnO₂/GN-70 (see Fig. 6(d)) are not beneficial for the fast Li-ion diffusion.

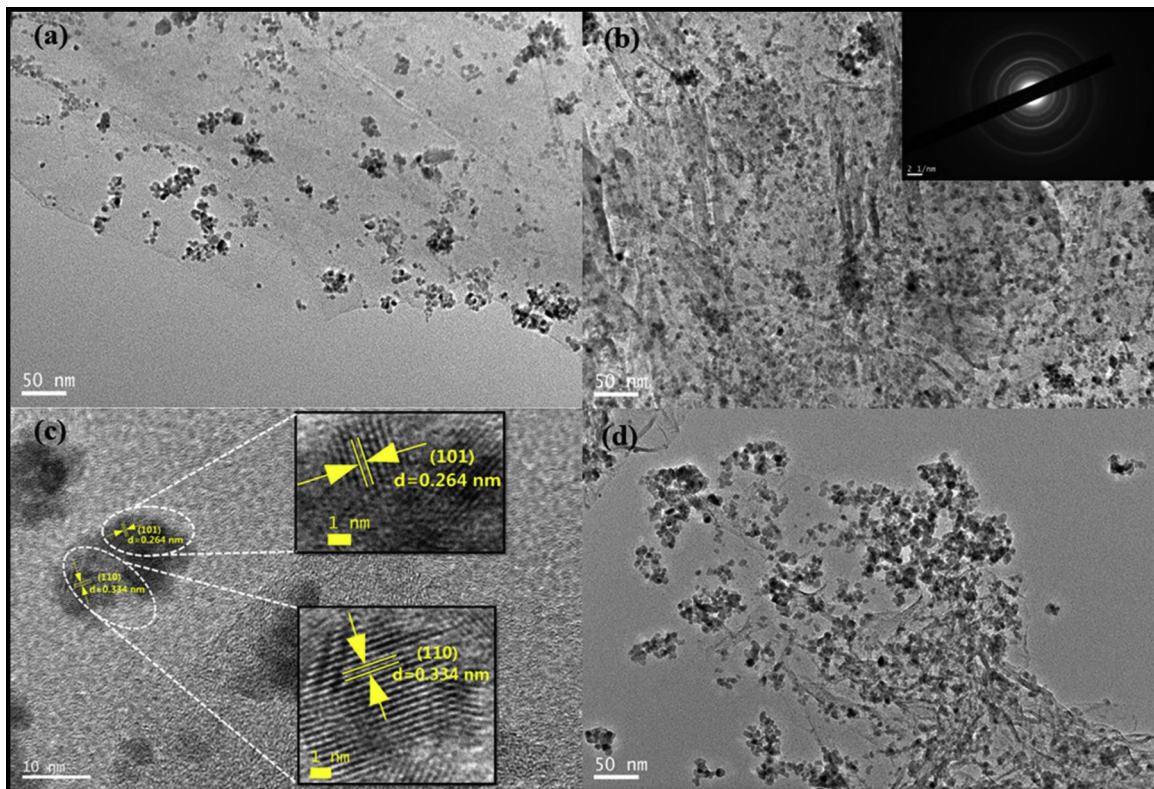


Fig. 6. TEM images of SnO₂/GNs.

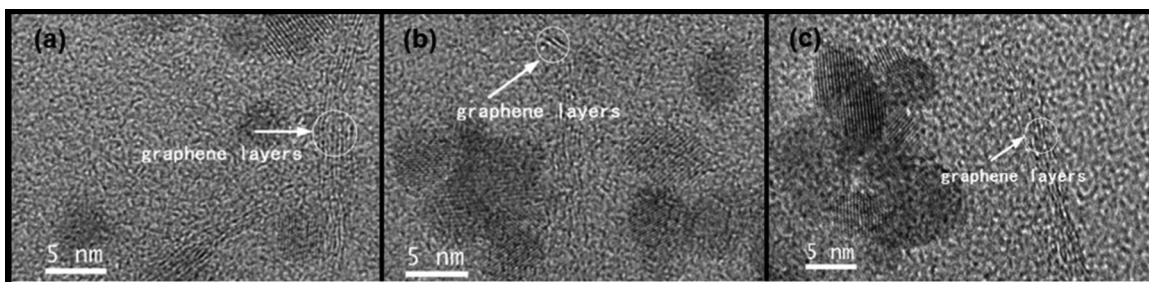


Fig. 7. HRTEM images of SnO₂/GNs.

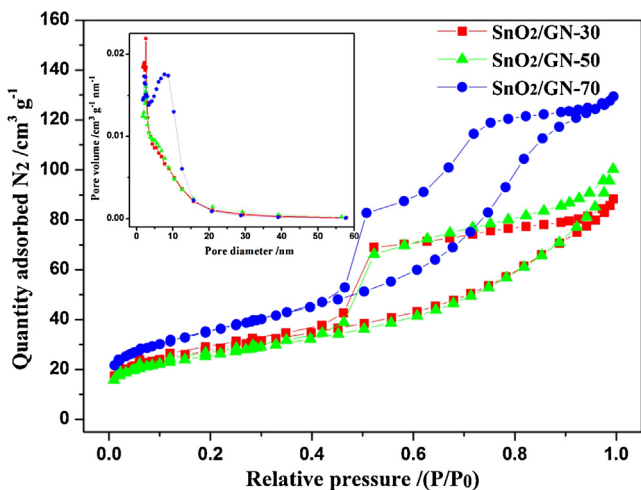


Fig. 8. Nitrogen adsorption/desorption isotherms of SnO₂/GNs.

The electrochemical performance of SnO₂/GNs as anodes of LIBs shown in Figs. 9 and 10 were investigated by galvanostatic discharge/charge tests in the voltage range of 0.005–2.5 V (vs. Li/Li⁺) at a current density of 100 mA g⁻¹. For comparison, discharge/charge cycling of pure SnO₂ was carried out in the same conditions. Fig. 9(a) shows the discharge/charge voltage profiles of SnO₂/GN-50 for the 1st, 2nd, and 10th cycles. A classical plateau around 0.8 V can

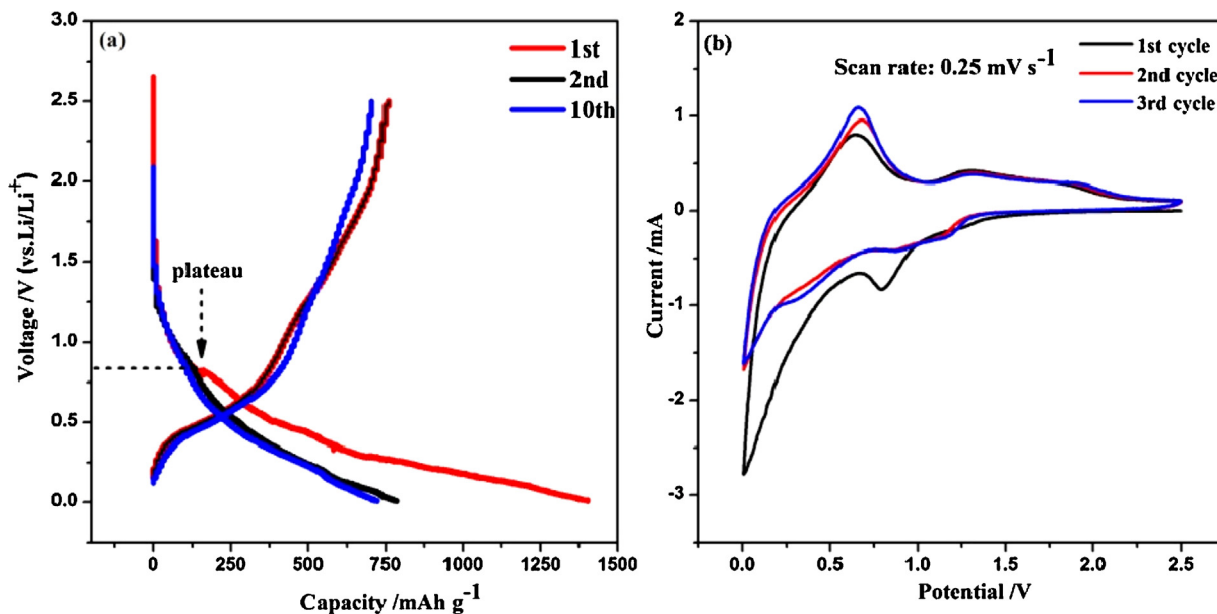


Fig. 9. (a) Charge/discharge profiles and (b) the cyclic voltammogram of SnO₂/GN-50.

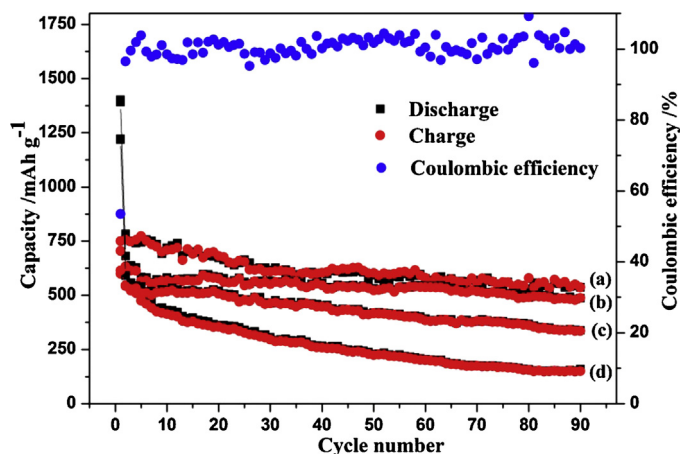
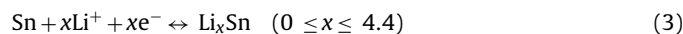
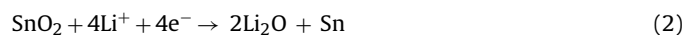


Fig. 10. The cyclic performances of SnO₂/GNs.

be found only in the first cycle, corresponding to the reaction of SnO₂ with lithium to form amorphous lithium oxide (Li₂O) and the formation of a solid electrolyte interface (SEI) layer [24,37]. SnO₂/GN-50 exhibits a discharge capacity of 1402 mAh g⁻¹ and a reversible capacity of 750 mAh g⁻¹ in first cycle. The initial coulombic efficiency is low (about 54%), indicating the larger irreversible capacity loss due to the formation of Li₂O and SEI film. To better illustrate the mechanism of the electrochemical reaction happened in SnO₂/GNs, the cyclic voltammogram (CV) of SnO₂/GN-50 was

performed at a scan rate of 0.25 mV s^{-1} in the voltage range of 0.005–2.5 V, as shown in Fig. 9(b). A dominant irreversible reduction peak at 0.8 V in the initial cycle is observed, corresponding to the reduction of SnO_2 to Li_2O and Sn (Eq. (2)) and the formation of SEI layer. The clearly cathodic peak around 0.02 V and the anodic peak around 0.68 V are related to the reversible alloying/de-alloying reactions between Sn and Li (Eq. (3)) [10]. From the second cycle, the new cathodic peaks appeared at 0.45 V and 1.0–1.2 V could be attributed to the formation of different phases of Li–Sn alloy such as $\text{Li}_{13}\text{Sn}_5$, Li_5Sn_2 and LiSn [38,39]. Meanwhile, the anodic peak at 1.3 V could correspond to the de-alloying process of certain phases of Li_xSn [38,39].



The cycling performances of $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-30}$, $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-50}$, $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-70}$ and pure SnO_2 are shown in Fig. 10. As expected, all three SnO_2/GN samples present good cycling stabilities, and the discharge capacities are 417, 603, and 522 mAh g^{-1} after 50 cycles for $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-30}$, $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-50}$, and $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-70}$, respectively. However, the pure SnO_2 capacity quickly drops to 224 mAh g^{-1} after 50 cycles due to the large volume expansion during the cycling. These results indicate that the method of depositing SnO_2 on the graphene sheets can effectively alleviate the volume variation, and improve their electrochemical properties.

It is worth noting that $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-50}$ still delivers a higher discharge capacity than $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-30}$ and $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-70}$, which can keep a stable capacity of 540 mAh g^{-1} even after 90 cycles for $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-50}$. In addition, the relevant coulombic efficiencies of $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-50}$ stay around 100% after several cycles, indicating the good electrochemical reversibility of $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-50}$. The superior electrochemical performance of $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-50}$ can be ascribed to the synergistic effect of a unique combination of SnO_2 NPs and graphene sheets, *i.e.* the SnO_2 NPs dispersed on the graphene sheets can effectively relieve the volume changes as well as the aggregation of SnO_2 NPs during cycling process. Meanwhile, the SnO_2 NPs deposited on graphene sheets can also keep them from stacking back to the multilayer. $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-30}$ with less SnO_2 NPs shows an inferior electrochemical performance due to the re-stacking of graphene sheets. In contrast, the cycling stability of $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-70}$ with more deposited SnO_2 is also poor, which is due to the aggregation of SnO_2 NPs on the graphene surfaces. In conclusion, the proportions of SnO_2 and graphene have a significant effect on the structures as well as electrochemical behaviors of synthesized SnO_2/GNs . Therefore, to obtain SnO_2/GNs with best electrochemical performance, the Sn^{4+}/GO ratio should be fine-tuned in appropriate range.

Fig. 11(a) shows the rate capability of $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-50}$ at the current densities of 100, 200, and 400 mA g^{-1} . $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-50}$ delivers a high capacity of 402 mAh g^{-1} even at a high rate of 400 mA g^{-1} , which is still much higher than 372 mAh g^{-1} of graphite. Moreover, the capacity of $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-50}$ rebounds back to near 500 mAh g^{-1} when the current density swings back to 100 mA g^{-1} , indicating that $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-50}$ possesses better rate performance.

To further evaluate the electrochemical performances of SnO_2/GNs and SnO_2 , electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) tests were performed. Nyquist plots of pure SnO_2 and SnO_2/GNs in Fig. 11(b) present a depressed semicircle in high-middle frequency and an inclined line in low frequency, corresponding to the charge transfer resistance and the Warburg impedance, respectively [34]. The semicircle diameters of SnO_2/GNs , especially for $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-50}$, are smaller than that of pure SnO_2 , indicating enhanced electron and lithium ion transfer rates. The quick charge transfer in SnO_2/GNs leads to their superior electrochemical performances.

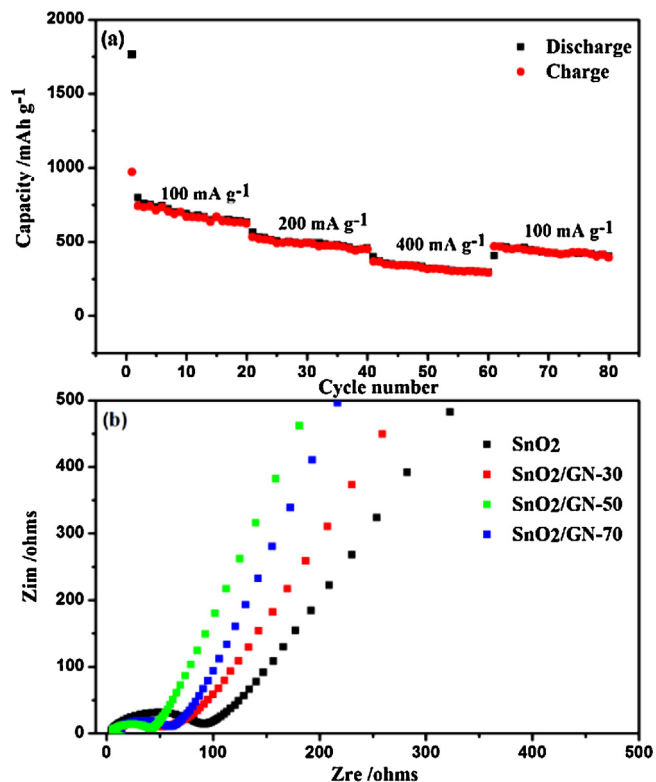


Fig. 11. (a) Rate performance of $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-50}$ and (b) electrochemical impedance spectra of SnO_2/GNs .

4. Conclusion

In this work, a facile hydrothermal technique for *in-situ* synthesis of SnO_2/GNs is proposed. Generally speaking, the preparation process of SnO_2/GNs is moderate, time-saving and toxic free. The ratio of Sn^{4+} to GO is found playing an important role on the SnO_2/GNs structures as well as the electrochemical behaviors. $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-50}$ exhibits a stable capacity of 540 mAh g^{-1} and almost 100% of coulombic efficiency even after 90 cycles. The excellent electrochemical performance of $\text{SnO}_2/\text{GN-50}$ can be explained to the synergistic effect of a unique combination of SnO_2 NPs and graphene sheets. The graphene sheets can effectively accommodate volume variation as well as the aggregation of SnO_2 NPs, and the SnO_2 NPs deposited on graphene sheets can also restrain the graphene sheets from stacking back the multilayer. The method described in this paper may provide a simple, economic and environment-friendly technique for the preparation of metal oxide/graphene nanocomposites.

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