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Tailoring Optical Properties of Atomically-Thin WS₂ via Ion Irradiation

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Two-dimensional transition metal dichalcogenides (TMDCs) exhibit excellent optoelectronic properties. However, the large band gaps in many semiconducting TMDCs make optical absorption in the near-infrared (NIR) wavelength regime impossible, which prevents applications of these materials in optical communications. In this work, we demonstrate that Ar⁺ ion irradiation is a powerful post-synthesis technique to tailor the optical properties of the semiconducting tungsten disulfide (WS₂) by creating S vacancies and thus controlling material stoichiometry. First-principles calculations reveal that the S-vacancies give rise to deep states in the band gap, which determine the NIR optical absorption of the WS₂ monolayer. As the density of the S-vacancies increases, the enhanced NIR linear and saturable absorption of WS₂ is observed, which is explained by the results of first-principles calculations. We further demonstrate that by using the irradiated WS₂ as a saturable absorber in a waveguide system, the passively Q-switched laser operations can be optimized, opening thus new avenues for tailoring the optical response of TMDCs by defect-engineering through ion irradiation.

Introduction

Two-dimensional (2D) transition metal dichalcogenides (TMDCs) have attracted large amount of attention due to their unique optoelectronic and electrocatalytic properties.^{1–8} Unlike semi-metallic graphene, many members of the TMDC family have band gaps, which leads to a broad and strong absorption in spectrum range from ultra-violet to visible (UV-Vis).^{9–11} This feature indicates the great potential of TMDCs for photocatalysis, solar cells and high-responsivity UV-Vis photodetector applications.^{12–16} Pristine WS₂ has little absorption in the NIR region due to its large band gap^{17–20}, limiting its application in optical communications. One of the effective solutions to overcome this difficulty is to implement defect engineering in TMDCs, by which defect-associated states or even narrow bands may be produced in the band gap if the concentration of defects is high enough.

When S-vacancies are present, WS₂ exhibits significantly

enhanced NIR optical absorption responses in comparison to graphene under similar excitation condition.^{21–25} Vacancies and other defects in the WS₂ monolayer can be produced during the fabrication process, but it is rather difficult to control the density of defects. Ion irradiation is a well-established method to create atomic-scale defects in 2D materials.^{26–32} During the irradiation process, the incident energetic ions collide with the atoms in WS₂, leading to their displacements. Motivated by the requirements for possible optical applications in the NIR regime, we study how the irradiation-induced atomic-scale defects affect optical properties of WS₂. By combining NIR, XPS and Raman spectroscopy with first-principles calculations, we show that S-vacancy concentration and optical properties of WS₂ can be modified in a controllable way via ion irradiation. The NIR saturable absorption of the WS₂ monolayer is enhanced after ion irradiation due to the intermediate states induced by S-vacancies. We have also used the irradiated WS₂ monolayer as a successful saturable absorber in a waveguide system to obtain optimized Q-switching lasing.

Results and discussion

WS₂ stoichiometry tailored by ion irradiation.

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† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available: Here, you will find XPS spectra of as-prepared and irradiated WS₂, TEM images of as-prepared and irradiated WS₂, Q-switched lasing based on Yb:YAG waveguide cavity, Measurement of the imaginary refractive index of WS₂. See DOI: 10.1039/x0xx00000x

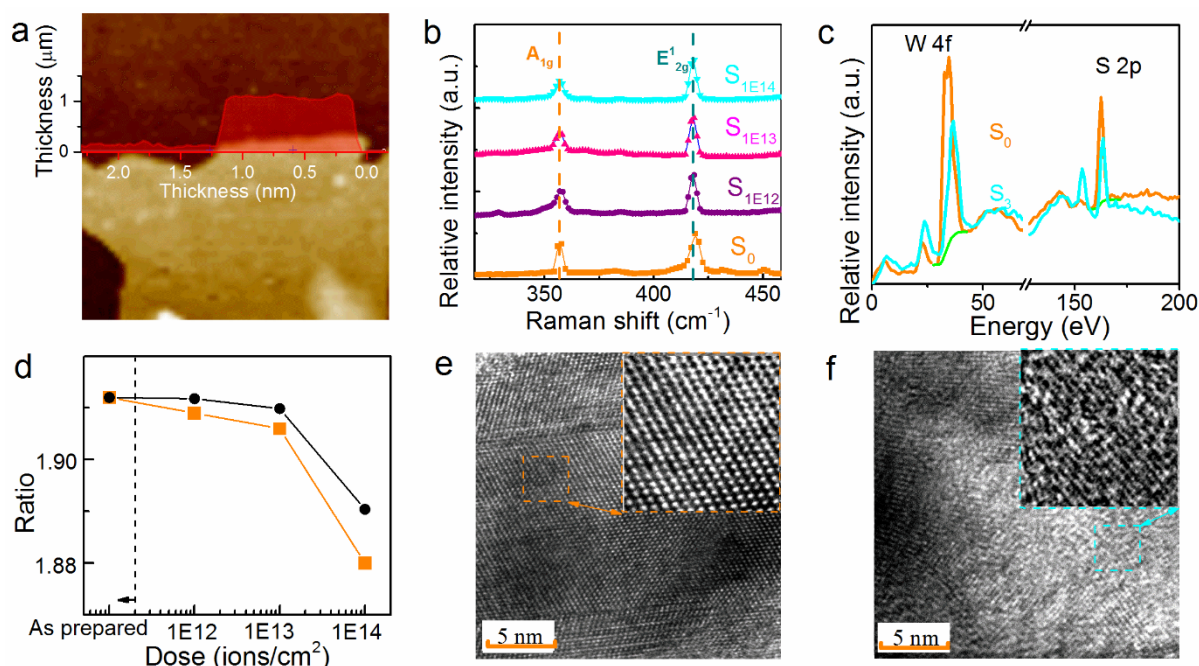


Fig. 1 (a) Morphology of the as-prepared WS₂ monolayer captured by the AFM. And the thickness of the WS₂ along the Red line in (a). (b) The Raman spectra of the as-prepared (S₀) and the irradiated (S_{1E12}, S_{1E13}, S_{1E14}) WS₂ monolayers. (c) The XPS spectra of the S₀ and S_{1E14}. (d) The measured (orange squares) and calculated (black circles) variation of the atomic ratio (S/W) as a function of irradiation dose. TEM image of the as-prepared (e) and the irradiated (f) WS₂ monolayer.

The WS₂ monolayer samples used in this work were prepared on the Al₂O₃ wafer by the chemical vapor deposition (CVD) method. We ascertained the monolayer nature of our samples by atomic force microscopy (AFM) and Raman measurements. As shown in Fig. 1a, the AFM measurements reveal the height of ~0.8 nm corresponding to the thickness of a single unit cell. WS₂ monolayers are irradiated by Ar⁺ ion beam at energy of 60 keV with controlled dose/fluence (S_{1E12} = 1 × 10¹² ions/cm²; S_{1E13} = 1 × 10¹³ ions/cm² and S_{1E14} = 1 × 10¹⁴ ions/cm²) to create different densities of point defects. The Raman spectra of the as-prepared monolayer (S₀) and the irradiated ones (with doses S_{1E12}, S_{1E13} and S_{1E14}) are displayed in Fig. 1b. The two characteristic peaks corresponding to the E_{2g}¹ mode (in-plane vibration of tungsten and sulfur atoms) and the A_{1g} mode (the out-of-plane vibrations of the sulfur atoms) are observed in all films. The peak positions of A_{1g} and E_{2g}¹ are 356.7 and 418.45 cm⁻¹, respectively, which agree with other reports.³³ Moving from the as-prepared monolayer (S₀) to the irradiated ones (S_{1E12}, S_{1E13}, S_{1E14}), the intensity ratio of A_{1g}/E_{2g}¹ of the WS₂ monolayer gradually decreases from 0.76 to 0.50 with increasing the dose of the incident ion beam. It means that the out-of-plane vibrations of the S atoms (the A_{1g} mode) are changed by ion irradiation. The chemical states of the S atoms in the monolayers are further investigated by X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS), with the results being shown in Fig. 1c (see Part I in supplement). The evolution of the atomic ratio is presented in Fig. 1d (orange squares). The as-prepared WS₂ has the stoichiometric ratio of S:W ~1.92, which suggests that the atomic structure of the as-prepared WS₂ is not perfect. After ion irradiation, the S:W atomic ratio decreases to 1.88. It implies that the incident ion beam creates

S-vacancies in the WS₂ monolayer, and the ratio of the S and W atoms can be controlled by the dose of the incident ion beams. The transmission electron microscope images of the as-prepared and irradiated (S_{1E14}) WS₂ monolayer are shown in Fig. 1e and 1f, which demonstrate that the deficiency of S atoms gives rise to the vacancies, but not to the appearance of mirror twin boundaries, as reported for MoSe₂.³⁴

In order to provide an accurate and detailed description of ion impacts onto WS₂, we have performed classical molecular dynamics (MD) simulations of ion irradiation of WS₂ monolayers. The simulation setup is illustrated in Fig. 2a. We consider low-dose irradiation, in which the incremental effects of the impacts into the same lattice area are negligible. The simulations have been carried out for 32 energies ranging from 10 eV to 1 MeV. Similar to the behaviour of other 2D materials, e.g., graphene³⁵ and MoS₂³⁶ under ion bombardment, the sputtering yield first increases with energy up to a peak value (~530 eV) and then drops with ion energy due to a smaller cross section for ballistic energy transfer at high energies (see Fig. 2b). In order to assess the effects of substrate corrugation (and thus possible off-normal incidence of the ion beam on the WS₂ monolayer) on defect production in WS₂, we have also studied the sputtering yield as a function of incident angle (θ). The results show that the sputtering yield is almost invariant at small incident angles, i.e. θ < 10°, as shown in Fig. 2c. Therefore, we expect no significant changes in the results due to the roughness of the monolayer. We stress that the substrate may affect defect production, as compared to the free-standing system considered in our simulations.³⁷ As, on the one hand, the substrate can decrease forward sputtering yield and increase defect annealing, while on the other hand

the free-standing monolayer is not damaged by the backscattered ions and sputtered substrate atoms, we assume that, to the first order, the effects of substrate cancel each other, and the results for the freestanding monolayer are qualitatively correct for the supported system.

(1)

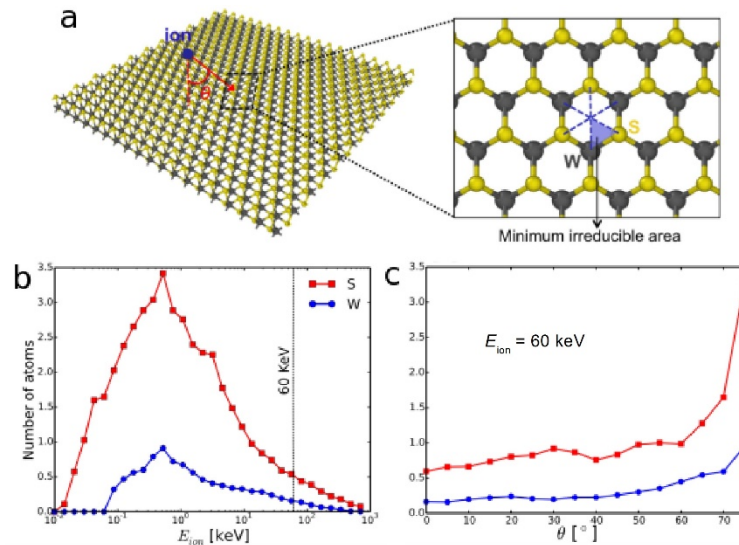
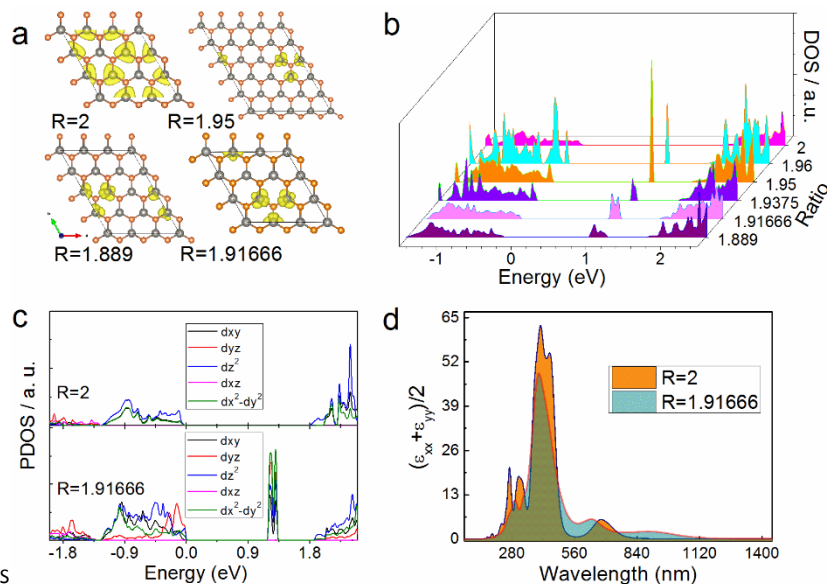


Fig. 2 (a) Left: Schematic representation of the setup used for ion irradiation simulations of WS₂ monolayer. The incident angle has been indicated by θ . Tungsten and sulfur atoms are shown in gray and yellow, respectively. Right: The blue triangle represents the minimum irreducible area for ion impacts. (b) Average numbers of sputtered atoms in WS₂ monolayer as functions of ion energy and (c) incident angle for Ar⁺ ion beams.

In this work, energetic Ar ions are normally incident ($\theta = 0$) onto the WS₂ monolayer with the energy of 60 keV. As shown in Fig. 2b, every ten incident Ar ions sputter 5 S ions and 1 W ion off the WS₂ monolayer. The loss of S ions is faster than W ions, demonstrating the decreasing of the atomic ratio (S:W). We calculated the variation of the atomic ratio of the WS₂ monolayer after ion irradiation (R_n , n corresponding to the subscript of S_{1E12} , S_{1E13} and S_{1E14}) using a simple empirical formula:

$$R_n = \frac{\frac{D}{R_0 + 1} - F \times 0.5}{\frac{R_0 \times D}{R_0 + 1} - F \times 0.1}$$

where D is the atomic density of the WS₂ monolayer (4.312×10^{15} atoms/cm²), F is the dose of Ar ion beam, R_0 is the S:W atomic ratio in the as-prepared sample. Fig. 1d (black circles) shows the variation of the atomic ratio of monolayer WS₂ as a function of the ion dose. The atomic ratio is changed from 1.92 to 1.89 with increasing ion dose. As compared to the experimental results shown in Fig. 1d, the variation trend of the estimated ratio is in a good agreement with the measurement.



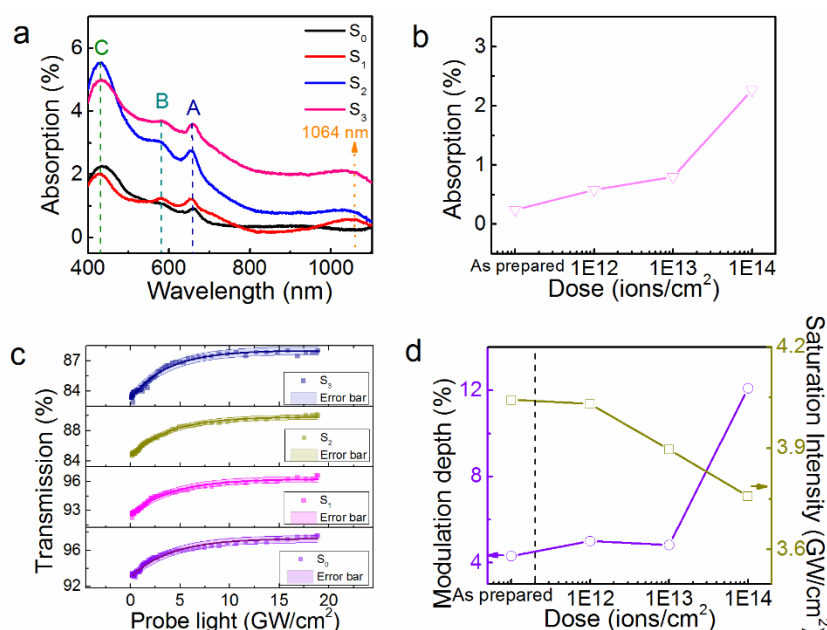


Fig. 4 (a) Linear absorption spectra of the as-prepared (S_0) and the irradiated (S_{1E12} , S_{1E13} , S_{1E14}) WS_2 monolayers. (b) Variation of the linear absorption at 1064 nm as a function of irradiation dose. (c) Nonlinear transmission of the WS_2 monolayers. Solid lines are fitted curves. (d) The evolution of the modulation depth and the saturation intensity along with increasing irradiation dose.

To understand the relationship between the S-vacancy density and the electronic structure of WS_2 , first-principles calculations were carried out. As displayed in Fig. 3a, the atomic ratios (R: the ratio of S and W atoms) in the WS_2 monolayer were set to be 2, 1.96, 1.96, 1.9375, 1.91666 and 1.889, respectively by choosing the appropriate size of the supercell with vacancies. Fig. 3b shows the densities of states (DOS) of WS_2 with different concentrations of S-vacancies. In the pristine material (R=2), the band gap of the WS_2 is 1.87 eV. After introducing S-vacancies into the monolayer (R=1.91666), the mid-gap states appear. Fig. 3c shows the atomic orbital-resolved electron density of states with (R=1.91666) and without S-vacancies. This indicates that the mid-gap states in the WS_2 monolayer are attributed to the d(xy) and d(x^2-y^2) atomic orbitals of the transition metal atoms.

Upon changing atom ratios between 2 and 1.899, the position of the adsorption peak is shifted from 1.87 eV to 1.01 eV. This allows for the optical absorption of WS_2 in the NIR region. In order to assess how the presence of S vacancies affects optical absorption, we calculate the complex dielectric function ϵ of the WS_2 monolayer with S-vacancies, which can be expressed as

$$\epsilon(\omega) = \epsilon_1(\omega) + i\epsilon_{\alpha\beta}(\omega) \quad (2)$$

$$\epsilon_{\alpha\beta}(\omega) = \frac{4\pi^2 e^2}{\Omega} \lim_{q \rightarrow 0} \frac{1}{q^2} \sum_{c,v,k} 2w_k - \delta(\epsilon_{ck} - \epsilon_{vk} - \omega) \times \langle u_{\vec{c}k+\beta\vec{q}} | u_{v,\vec{k}} \rangle \langle u_{\vec{c}k+\alpha\vec{q}} | u_{v,\vec{k}} \rangle \quad (3)$$

where $\epsilon_{\alpha\beta}$ is the imaginary part; α and β represent the x, y, or z coordinates; c and v refer to the conduction and valence band states, respectively; $u_{c,k}$ corresponds to the cell periodic part of the wave functions at the k-point. According to the electric

field polarization (along or perpendicular to the z-direction), $\epsilon_{\alpha\beta}(\omega)$ is decomposed into $\epsilon_{zz}(\omega)$ and $(\epsilon_{xx}(\omega) + \epsilon_{yy}(\omega))/2$. As light passing through the WS_2 monolayer has a transverse wave with a polarization parallel to the monolayer, we only consider $(\epsilon_{xx}(\omega) + \epsilon_{yy}(\omega))/2$ in this work. Fig. 3d shows the imaginary part $(\epsilon_{xx}(\omega) + \epsilon_{yy}(\omega))/2$ for the monolayer WS_2 with and without S-vacancy (R=1.91666). As compared to the pristine monolayer, WS_2 with S-vacancies has additional optical absorption in the near-infrared range, being attributed to the presence of mid-gap states.

Tailored optical properties of the monolayer WS_2 .

Fig. 4a shows the evolution of the linear absorption spectrum of the WS_2 monolayer with increasing irradiation dose. The positions of A and B exciton peaks at ~ 658 and ~ 581 nm do not change, but a large increase in absorption is observed in the NIR wavelength range in the irradiated monolayers. The enhanced absorption agrees with the results of the electronic structure calculation presented in Fig. 3d. S-vacancies created by the irradiation increase the density of mid-gap states, which induces the absorption of the NIR light. Fig. 4b displays the variation of the linear absorption at the wavelength of 1064 nm as a function of ion dose, which has an obvious increasing. The linear optical absorption of the WS_2 in the NIR region can be well tailored by ion irradiation.

The nonlinear absorption of the WS_2 monolayers is detected by the Z-scan technology at the wavelength of 1064 nm. Measured nonlinear transmissions are shown in Fig. 4c. The modulation depth (ΔT) and the saturable intensity (I_{sat}) of WS_2 monolayers are quantitatively determined by the equation below:

$$T(I) = 1 - \Delta T \times e^{-\frac{I}{I_{sat}}} - T_N \quad (4)$$

where T_N is the non-saturable absorbance, T and I are the transmission and the excitation energy, respectively. Fitted values of ΔT and I_{sat} are shown in Fig. 4d as a function of the dose. With increasing ion dose, the modulation depth increases and the saturable intensity decreases. These changes demonstrate two advantages of the irradiated WS₂ monolayer: 1) For the Q-switched pulsed laser, the pulse duration of the laser is inversely proportional to the modulation depth. The increased modulation depth allows for the application potential for a shorter pulsed laser. 2) The saturation intensity of the WS₂ is decreased after irradiation. Therefore, a lower energy of the excitation laser is required for the pulsed lasing.

Q-switched pulses

TAs shown in the above-mentioned section, the saturable absorption of WS₂ can be quantitatively modified by ion

calculate the modulation depth of the as-prepared WS₂ monolayer by the following equation³⁸:

$$\tau_p \approx \frac{3.53T_R}{\Delta R} \quad (5)$$

where ΔR is the modulation depth, τ_p is the pulse duration, and T_R is the cavity round-trip time. The evolution of the modulation depth is shown in Fig. 5e. The maximum modulation depth of the irradiated WS₂ monolayer is calculated to be 0.42%, corresponding to the pulse duration of 265 ns.

Using the irradiated (S_{1E13} , S_{1E14}) WS₂ monolayer as the saturable absorber, the pulsed laser emission is also observed at the wavelength of 1064 nm. The output power, the pulse train, pulse duration and modulation depth of the pulsed laser are illuminated in Fig. 5b, 5c, 5d and 5e, respectively. The lasing threshold of the pulsed laser is decreased (88 mW S_{1E13} ,

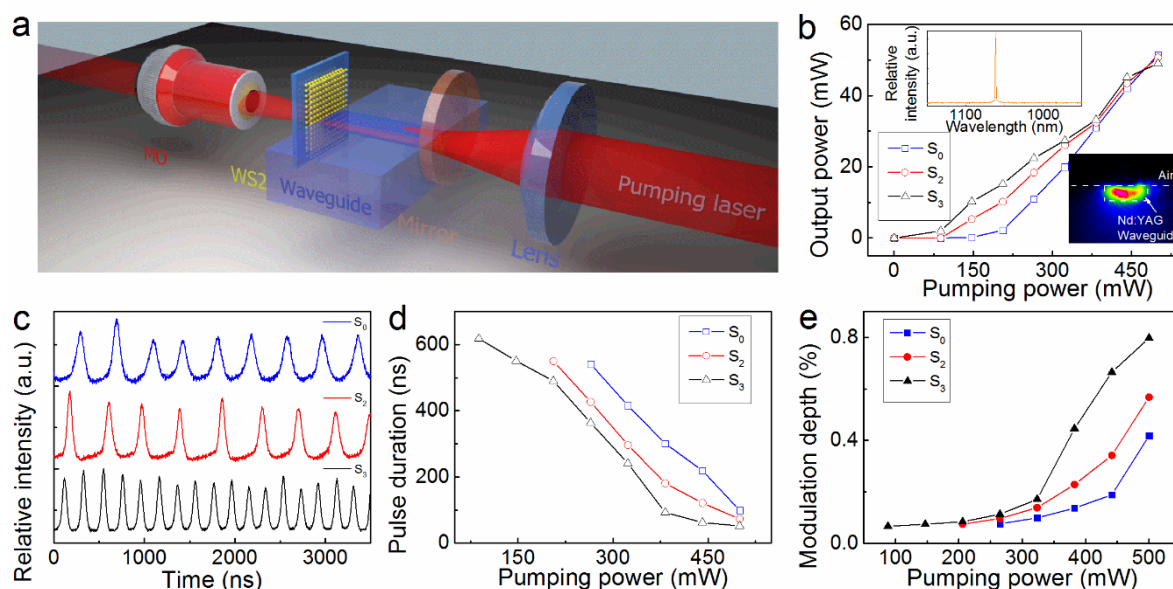


Fig. 5 (a) Experimental setup for the Q-switched pulsed waveguide lasing. The output power (b), pulse trains (c), pulse duration (d) and modulation depth (e) of the output laser modulated by the as-prepared (S_0) or irradiated (S_{1E13} , S_{1E14}) WS₂ monolayer. MO: Microscope objective.

irradiation. Here, we demonstrate how to utilize the irradiated WS₂ monolayer as a saturable absorber to optimize the Q-switched pulses. For this purpose, the as-prepared and the irradiated WS₂ wafers are used as the saturable absorbers in a waveguide laser cavity, respectively. The experimental setup for the passively Q-switched laser emission is shown in Fig. 5a. Utilizing the as-prepared (S_0) WS₂ as a saturable absorber, the pulsed laser emission at the wavelength of 1064 nm is observed (inset in Fig. 5b) corresponding to the laser threshold of 120 mW. The average output power as a function of the incident pumping power is illustrated in Fig. 5b. The output power has a linear variation along with the increasing of the pumping power with a maximum output power of 52 mW. Fig. 5c illustrates the evolution of the pulse duration as a function of the pumping power. By increasing the pumping power, the pulse duration of the output laser gradually decreases from 500 ns to 265 ns. Based on the measured pulse duration, we

70 mW S_{1E14}), and the maximum output power is around 50 mW. The minimum pulse duration gradually is decreased (72.9 ns S_{1E13} , 52 ns S_{1E14}) with the increasing of dose. The maximum modulation depth is 0.8 %. Compared with the as-prepared WS₂, two conclusions can be deduced: 1) The pulsed laser modulated by the irradiated WS₂ has a lower laser threshold. 2) The modulation depth of the irradiated WS₂ monolayer is higher than that of the as-prepared one. The function of the pulsed waveguide laser can be optimized on demand by using the irradiated WS₂ monolayer as the saturable absorber.

Conclusions

We have demonstrated that ion irradiation is a powerful technique to tailor optical properties of the atom-thin WS₂ monolayers. S-vacancies in the WS₂ monolayer create mid-gap states, resulting in the enhanced saturable absorption in the NIR region. In general, S-vacancies can be produced via the

hydrolysis reaction with water during the fabrication process, such as $\text{S}^{2-} + 2\text{H}_2\text{O} \rightarrow \text{H}_2\text{S} + 2\text{OH}^-$. However, the concentration of the S-vacancies in WS_2 monolayers can hardly be controlled via this reaction, contrary to ion beam irradiation, which makes it possible to tailor optical properties. Using the irradiated WS_2 monolayer as a saturable absorber, we have fabricated a Q-switched pulsed laser from a Nb:YAG ceramic waveguide. Compared with the as-prepared WS_2 , the performance of the Q-switched laser was enhanced considerably. This work demonstrates that 2D materials can be efficiently modified by ion irradiation, therefore creating a new dimensionality for photonic applications.

Methods

Ion irradiation

Four pieces of WS_2 monolayers were prepared for this work under the same fabrication conditions. Three of them were irradiated by Ar^+ ions at the energy of 60 keV at doses of 1×10^{12} ions/cm², 1×10^{13} ions/cm² and of 1×10^{14} ions/cm² (labelled as $\text{S}_{1\text{E}12}$, $\text{S}_{1\text{E}13}$ and $\text{S}_{1\text{E}14}$), respectively.

Z-scan measurement

The nonlinear absorption of the WS_2 monolayer was measured by the single-beam Z-scan technology. During the measurement, a 1064-nm laser with a 4-ns pulse duration and an energy of 1 μJ was focused by a lens (a focal distance of 400 mm). The beam waist of the detecting light was ~ 24.5 μm . A large-aperture lens was used to collect the transmitted laser light. Translating the samples around the focal point, the power of the transmitted light was measured as a function of the distance from the focal point.

First principles calculations

We carried out the ab initio calculations of the WS_2 monolayer using density-functional theory (DFT) with a projector augmented wave method and the Perdew-Burke-Ernzerhof (PBE) type generalized gradient approximation as implemented in the Vienna ab initio simulation package (VASP). The energy precision of the plane waves was set to be 1×10^{-6} eV, with the kinetic energy cutoff of 700 eV. The Brillouin zone was sampled using Γ -centered Monkhorst–Pack grids with $11 \times 11 \times 1$. We optimized the atomic positions and the lattice vectors by the conjugate gradient (CG) scheme without any symmetric restriction until the maximum force on each atom less than 0.001 eVÅ⁻¹. Although DFT calculations with local and semilocal exchange and correlation functions are known to underestimate the fundamental band gap and affect the positions of defect-associated levels in the electronic spectrum, electronic structure calculations for large supercells with defects using more rigorous GW approximation are beyond our reach due to high computational cost and memory requirements of such calculations. For that same reason, we did not explicitly account for exciton binding energies. Although they can be large in freestanding 2D systems^{39–41}, the presence of the substrate reduces binding energy due to

additional screening^{40,42}, so that our calculations should provide at least qualitatively correct picture.

Molecular dynamic simulations

All the molecular dynamic simulations have been carried out using the large-scale atomic/molecular massive parallel simulator (LAMMPS) code.⁴³ Periodic boundary conditions are applied to the 2D plane of WS_2 . Atomic interactions through the WS_2 monolayer were described by Stillinger-Weber (SW) potential⁴⁴ and the interaction between Ar and the monolayer atoms was described by the Ziegler-Biersack-Littmark (ZBL) universal repulsive potential⁴⁵. To accurately model the interaction between S and W atoms in the collisional cascades, we smoothly joined the SW and ZBL potentials at small separations, as done previously⁴⁶. We note that the SW potential was originally developed for MoS_2 , but taking into account the very similar physical and chemical properties of these two systems, we used it for WS_2 by simply changing the atom mass of metal atoms. The ion irradiation simulations were performed using a rectangular supercell containing 1254 atoms. Impact points were uniformly selected via 325 sites within the minimum irreducible area of the lattice. In order to properly simulate the evolution of the atomic structure and distribution of energy after the impact, the temperature of the irradiated sample was quenched after ion impact to about 1 K during a time period of 8 ps using a Nosé-Hoover thermostat. The results were obtained by analysing statistics over 10400 independent simulations for each incidence angle.

Q-switched lasing in the waveguide cavity

The Q-switched lasing with ion irradiated WS_2 as saturable absorber was implemented in a waveguide system.⁴⁷ A neodymium doped yttrium aluminium garnet (Nb:YAG) ceramic waveguide produced by ion irradiation was used as the gain medium. The detailed information about the Nb:YAG waveguide has been reported in Ref.[48]. The input and output facets of the waveguide were covered by a mirror (high reflectivity at 1064 nm and a high transmission at 810 nm) and the WS_2 monolayer, respectively. The mirror, the waveguide and the WS_2 monolayer constituted a typical Fabry-Perot resonator for the laser oscillation. A continuous-wave laser at the wavelength of 810 nm was utilized as the pumping laser. Focused by a lens (focal length = 20 mm), the pumping laser was coupled into the waveguide. The output light from the waveguide was collected by a long-working-distance microscope objective ($\times 20$) and detected by a fast photodetector (DET10A/M, Thorlabs, Inc., USA).

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