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**Constructing Mono-/Di-/Tri-Types of Active Sites in MoS₂
Film toward Understand Their Electrocatalytic Activity for
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Constructing Mono-/Di-/Tri-Types of Active Sites in MoS₂ Film toward Understand Their Electrocatalytic Activity for the Hydrogen Evolution

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ABSTRACT

The availability and catalytic activity of the cost-efficient electrocatalysts are the dominant factors for the hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) performance in the renewable hydrogen economy. Extensive efforts have been devoted to maximize the amount of various active sites in non-noble metal electrocatalysts for HER. This work reported a physically-sputtering strategy to construct porous and ordered 2H-MoS₂ films with mono-/di-/tri-types of active sites *via* controlling the film thickness (from ~15 nm to 3050 nm) in the energetic plasma. As the pure (2H-) MoS₂ for HER electrocatalyst, the as-fabricated 3050 nm additive-free columnar film electrode shows a stable electrochemical activity for HER (an overpotential of 204 mV at a current density of -10 mA/cm²). Interestingly, the MoS₂ film with controllable thickness can serve as an innovative platform to study the electrocatalytic activity of the customized different active sites (the exposed active edge of sheets (*eE*), stepped-termination surfaces (*sS*) and terrace on the basal planes (*tB*)) and the dependence of electrocatalytic efficiency of the vertically-aligned MoS₂ *eE* active sites on their distance to the current collector. The results firstly revealed that the *tB* active sites possessed almost the same electrocatalytic activity as that of the *eE* active sites but higher than *sS* active sites. The electrocatalytic efficiency of the *eE* active sites decreased as their distances to the current collector were gradually increasing, due to the limited conductivity of the semi-conductive 2H-MoS₂ sheets. This work proposes and evaluates a facile

strategy for replying the question on how to investigate the electrocatalytic activities of various active sites in the electrocatalysts.

KEYWORDS: MoS₂, physically-sputtering strategy, various active sites, electrocatalytic activity, hydrogen evolution reaction

1. INTRODUCTION

In view of the forthcoming fossil fuel exhaustion, rapid global population growth and environmental issues, the immediate deployment and development of renewable energy resources become paramount. Hydrogen fuel is considered to be one of the most promising sustainable and clean energy sources since the raw material for the hydrogen production is water.¹⁻⁴ Solar energy is a rival source but with some issues due to the intermittent nature. By comparison, hydrogen fuel can be produced by simply splitting water driven by electrocatalyst and the production process is paralleled. The low abundance and high cost feature of Pt has limited its wide adoption for the hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) even though Pt based electrocatalyst are demonstrated to have the most effective catalysis performance.⁴⁻⁷ Currently, one challenge is to develop a low cost but high efficiency electrocatalyst, as an alternative to the earth-rare Pt for HER.

The race was started to improve the HER performance of non-noble-metal candidate materials (carbide: W₂C, Mo₂C, etc.;^{8,9} phosphide: MoP, Ni_xCo_yP, etc.;^{10,11} nitride: Ni₃N, WN, etc.;^{12,13} oxide: Co₃O₄,¹⁴ transition metal dichalcogenides (TMDs)^{6,7,15,16}) since the natures of their active sites for electrocatalytic activity had been identified. One of the main strategies was to create more active sites per unit area, and the other was to improve the electric conductivity to further enhance the electrocatalytic activities of the existing active sites. Among the aforementioned candidates, the TMDs have been widely studied due to their promising high activity and high stability in many strong acids. Up to now, extensive efforts have been devoted to developing the TMDs (MoS₂, WS₂, MoSe₂, WSe₂,

1 MoTe₂, NbSe₂, etc.)^{7,15,17,18-26} and tailoring their nanostructure (the ratio of effective atoms at the
2 surface and subsurface) to maximize the amount of active sites to ultimately enhance HER performance.
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4 The efficient strategy to increase the density of active sites included (i) reduction of the TMDs' size to
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6 enlarge the ratio of the exposed active edge of sheets (*eE*),^{21,27-29} and (ii) induction of the heterogeneous
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8 growth of TMDs crystals to fabricate the stepped-termination surface (*sS*),^{7,15,30} and (iii) activating the
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10 inert basal plane by creating the active terraces (*tB*),^{21,24,31-35} and (iv) switching the semi-conductive *2H*
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12 phase to the metallic and active *1T'* phase TMDs.^{7,36-39} Grain boundary was also known as another
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14 type of active site but it had lower electrocatalytic activity than *eE*, *sS* and *tB*.⁴⁰ Thus, additive
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16 manufacturing of more active sites in MoS₂ electrode held broad interests and significances to fully
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18 accelerate the HER kinetics. Hu et al have simply pointed out that the more loading mass of porous
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20 active material in electrode film, the higher hydrogen yield.^{17,18} Nevertheless, it was still unclear of the
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22 contribution of the high-loading mass active material on the enhanced hydrogen production. The key
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24 challenge was in lack of the understanding of the contributions of different active sites on the HER
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26 kinetics. David et al have used porous MoS₂ electrodes with various thicknesses as model to identify
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28 the dominant factors of active sites for HER activity.^{38,41-43} However, it was real no way to define the
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30 contribution of the electrocatalysis active sites in the randomly restacked MoS₂ electrode on HER
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32 performance by weight, because their relative proportion was unknown and their electrocatalytic
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34 activities were also unclear. In fact, the explicit definition of the electrocatalytic activities of various
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36 active sites for HER is essential to design the well-defined structure for further enhancing their
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38 electrocatalytic performance.
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48 Recently, the novel physical approach is triggering interests in manufacturing the additive-free
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50 vertically-aligned active materials on current collector to explore the enhanced electrochemical
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52 performances.⁴⁴⁻⁴⁷ This stimulates us to explore a straightforward physically-sputtering strategy to
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54 directly synthesize the porous and ordered TMDs film on the current collector to define electrocatalytic
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activities of active sites for HER. There will be no any interference of re-stacking or aggregating by the binder or conductive agents. Considering the MoS₂ as the representative of TMDs, we propose a physical vapour deposition (PVD) strategy to synthesize the ordered MoS₂ films with various thickness (~15 nm to 3050 nm) *via* precisely controlling the sputtering plasma conditions: the ultra-thin 2H-MoS₂ film with terrace on the basal plane (*tB*), the thin MoS₂ film with exposed stepped-termination surface (*sS*), the vertically-aligned MoS₂ film with abundant exposed active edge (*eE*). The current collector is cleaned carbon fibre (CF). Moreover, in this study, we aim to develop a new approach to reveal the electrocatalytic activities of various active sites in the MoS₂ electrocatalyst for HER performance.

2. EXPERIMENTAL DETAILS

2.1 MoS₂ film electrode deposition

The MoS₂ films were directly fabricated on the CF substrate without any additives by using a magnetron sputtering strategy in the Ar plasma. The source material was 99.99% MoS₂ target with diameter of 75 mm. The maximum fabrication area of film depends on the target size. Before the deposition, the CF substrate was cleaned by acetone for 10 minutes, alcohol for 10 minutes and deionized water (DI) for 5 minutes. The deposition conditions were under Ar pressure of 0.65 Pa, sputtering power of 275 W and CF substrate bias voltage of -30 V. The deposition time of the MoS₂ films with thickness of ~15 nm, ~35 nm, 76 nm, 880 nm and 3050 nm was 40 seconds, 1 minute 30 seconds, 3 minutes, 28 minutes and 100 minutes, respectively.

2.2 Structure characterization

The phase structure of the MoS₂ films was characterized by grazing incidence X-ray diffraction (GIXRD, Philips X'Pert) using Cu K_α radiation under an incident beam angle of 1°, and Raman microscopy (Thermo Scientific, DRX) with an excitation wavelength of 532 nm. The surface and cross-sectional morphologies of MoS₂ films were analysed by field emission scanning electron

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2 microscopy (FESEM, Hitachi SU8230). The cross-sectional structure of representative 3050 MoS₂ film
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4 was observed by a high-resolution transmission electron microscope (HRTEM, FEI Titan Themis
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6 Cubed 300) and the chemical component was analysed by the attached energy dispersive X-ray
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8 spectroscopy (EDS). The Pt/Ir layers were deposited on the as-deposited 3050 nm MoS₂ film to protect
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10 the original film structure from any damage by the high energetic focused ion beam (FIB) in the
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12 preparation process of cross-sectional TEM sample. The X-ray photoelectron (XPS) spectrum was
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14 collected using an XPS (Thermo UK) equipped with mono-chromated Al K_α radiation to further
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16 analyse the detailed chemical composition of film.
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21 2.3 Electrochemical measurements

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24 All electrochemical measurements were performed with a standard three-electrode electrochemical
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26 cell in 0.5 M H₂SO₄ solution. The Ag/AgCl (3 mol/L KCl), Pt/C rod and as-deposited pure MoS₂ films
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28 coated CF electrode were used as the reference, counter and working electrode, respectively. The
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30 Ag/AgCl reference electrode was properly calibrated. All potentials reported in this paper were
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32 converted to the reversible hydrogen electrode (RHE) by adding a value of (205+59×pH) mV.
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34 Polarization curves were acquired by sweeping the potential from 0 to -500 mV vs. RHE at a sweep
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36 rate of 2 mV/s. Tafel slopes were determined by replotting the polarization curves. Electrochemical
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38 impedance spectroscopy (EIS) was performed with frequency from 100,000 Hz to 0.01 Hz and an
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40 amplitude of 10 mV under the overpotential of 200 mV vs. RHE, and spectra were appraised through
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42 the Levenberg-Marquardt minimization procedure. iR_s compensation (current times internal resistance)
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44 was applied in all sweep running experiments to account for the voltage drop between the reference and
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46 working electrodes, where R_s is the solution resistance extracted from the fitted EIS data. Cyclic
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48 Voltammetry (CV) for double layer capacitance measurements was taken in a potential window
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50 between 0.1 to 0.2 V (vs. RHE) at scan rates of 10, 30, 50, 70, 90, 110 mV/s. The total current density
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2 obtained from the current density difference ($\Delta j = j_a - j_c$) at 0.15 V (vs. RHE) was plotted against the scan
3 rate, where the double layer capacitance (C_{dl}) is equivalent to the slope of the fitted line. The
4 rate, where the double layer capacitance (C_{dl}) is equivalent to the slope of the fitted line. The
5 electrochemical surface area (ECSA) of a catalyst can be calculated according equation: $ECAS = C_{dl}/C_s$,
6 where C_s is the capacitance of the sample with an atomically-smooth planar surface material. The
7 overpotential-time responses were detected for 10 hours by chronoamperometric measurements under
8 the current density of -10 mA/cm².
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16 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

17 3.1 Characterization of MoS₂ film electrode

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20 To verify the feasibility of fabricating the porous and ordered MoS₂ film *via* physically-sputtering
21 approach, the structure characterization of the as-prepared film was investigated by the FESEM and
22 focused ion beam (FIB)-HRTEM. **Figure 1(a)** shows the FESEM image of the 3050 nm MoS₂ film on
23 CF. The MoS₂ film covers the top surface of the CF substrate. The FESEM image of as-prepared FIB-
24 TEM sample is shown in **Figure S1**. The cross-sectional TEM images and EDS mapping of the
25 representative 3050 nm MoS₂ film are presented in **Figure 1(b)-(f)**. From **Figure 1(b)**, it can be seen
26 that the ordered and vertically-aligned columnar MoS₂ platelet film is monolithic, and the porous
27 feature is obvious as well. The seamless connection between film and the CF substrate suggests a good
28 adhesion. The morphologies of MoS₂ films with thicknesses of ~15 nm, ~35 nm, 76 nm, 880 nm and
29 3050 nm were characterized by FESEM, and the cross-sectional and surface morphologies are shown
30 in **Figure 2(a)**. The ~15 nm and ~35 nm MoS₂ films exhibit typical cluster characterization and other
31 films show columnar structure. The later films present the porous surface morphologies. The typical
32 different zones in 3050 nm columnar MoS₂ film (*Zone I*: basal orientation crystal at MoS₂/fibre
33 interface, *Zone II*: the stepped-termination surface and *Zone III*: the continuous columns above the
34 basal crystal) were further characterized and the HRTEM images are presented in **Figures 1(c)-(e)**. It
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2 could be seen that the dense MoS₂ layers with ~20 nm thickness are robustly bonded to the substrate
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4 surface. The layer-to-layer spacing of 0.65 nm in the S-Mo-S layers clarifies the basal plane of MoS₂
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6 crystals (as shown in **Figure 1(c)**). The terrace stages can decorate the exposed basal crystal plane
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8 (*Zone I*) if the film thickness was below ~20 nm, such as the ~15 nm ultrathin MoS₂ film in this study.
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10 As the basal crystals grew up (thicker than ~20 nm), they would be blocked by the growing grain
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12 crystals.⁴⁸ Thus, the growth direction of edge orientation crystals can switch from being parallel to
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14 current collector to being perpendicular to it at the intersection boundaries of crystals. Ultimately the
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16 continuous columnar MoS₂ platelets with edge orientation crystal structure can be formed, as shown in
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18 **Figure 1(d)**. The length of columnar MoS₂ platelets can be easily controlled *via* simply adjusting the
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20 sputtering time (see the **Figure 2(a)**). **Figure S2** shows the corresponding selected area electron
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22 diffraction (SAED) patterns with strong rings of (100), (103) and (110) MoS₂ crystal planes in the
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24 representative columnar MoS₂ platelet zones. It verifies that the edge orientation structure of the entire
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26 columnar platelet (*Zone III*) is homogenous in MoS₂ film. The edge of the MoS₂ columnar platelets are
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28 always decorated by abundant active edge sites, as previously reported.^{21,27,28,48}
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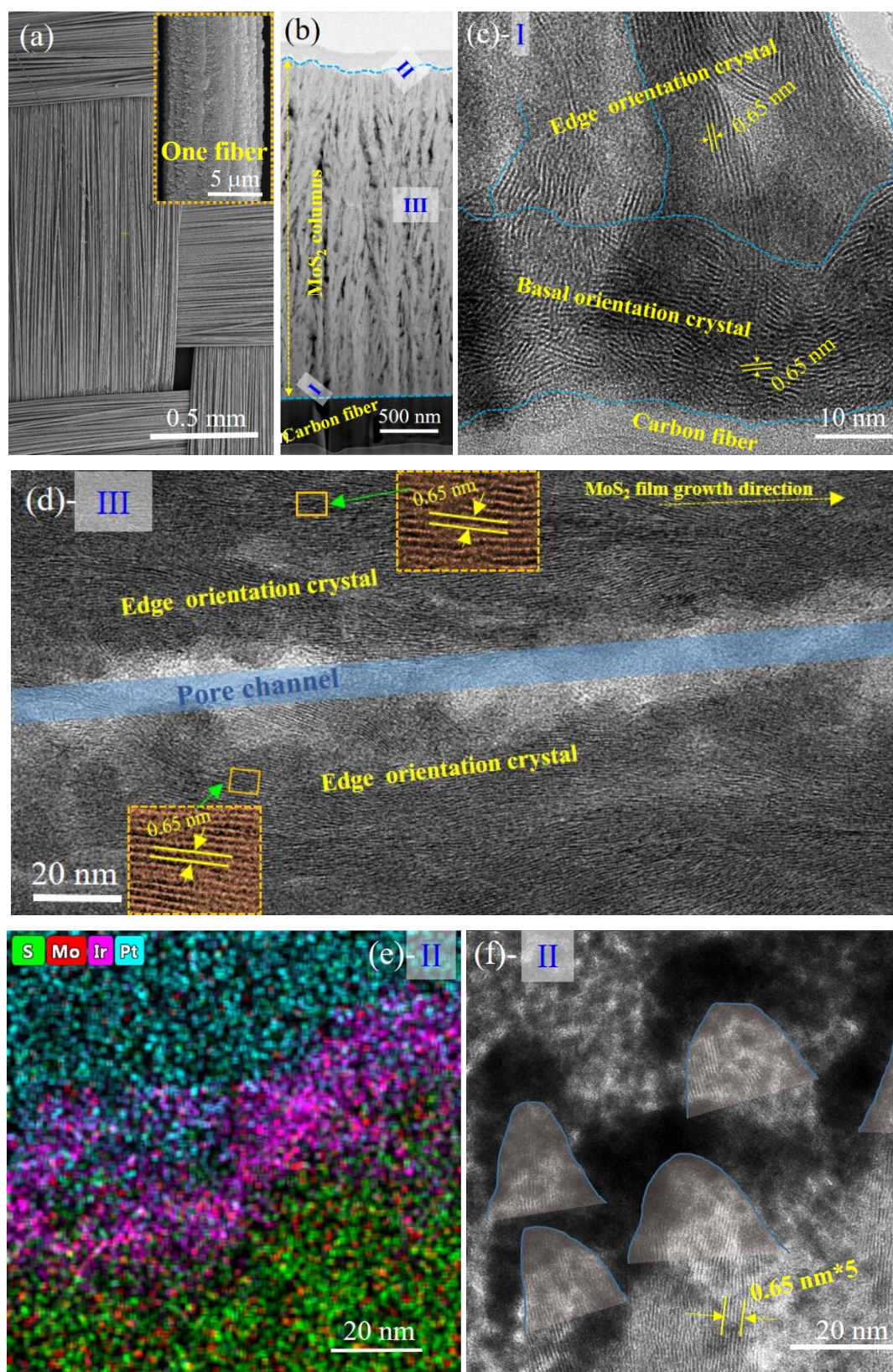


Figure 1. (a) The FESEM image of 3050 nm MoS₂ film on CF substrate (the inset is one fibre), (b) cross-sectional HAADF image of 3050 nm MoS₂ film on CF, cross-sectional HRTEM images of Zones

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2 I (c) and III (d) in panel (b), and the combined EDS elemental mapping (e) and cross-sectional HRTEM
3 image (f) of Zone II in panel (b).
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6 The Pt/Ir layers were initially utilized to protect the original film surface structure of FIB sample. As
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8 shown in **Figure 1(e)**, the wavy distribution of coated Ir element on the top of 3050 nm MoS₂ film
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10 suggested the top surface (*Zone II*) was very rough. The marked stepped-termination surfaces of each
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12 columnar MoS₂ platelet are shown in **Figure 1(f)** and **Figure S3(a),(b)**. They are another type of active
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14 sites for the outstanding HER performance, as previously reported.^{7,15} The height of the formed
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16 stepped-termination surfaces of each columnar MoS₂ platelet was 15~20 nm, as shown in **Figure 1(f)**.
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20 The chemical composition and structure of the *2H*-MoS₂ phase were further investigated by XPS and
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22 Raman microscope, respectively, and the results of representative 3050 nm MoS₂ film are presented in
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24 **Figure 2(b)-(d)**. The XPS spectra were calibrated by a carbon 1s peak located at 284.8 eV. The Mo⁴⁺
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26 3d_{5/2} and 3d_{3/2} peaks, the S²⁻ 2p_{3/2} and 2p_{1/2} peaks in XPS spectra were located at 229.0, 232.2, 161.8
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28 and 163.0 eV, respectively, (**Figure 2 (b),(c)**) representing the *2H* structure of the as-fabricated MoS₂
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30 in this study.^{38,49,50} As shown in the Raman spectrum in **Figure 2(d)**, it is consisted of two main Raman
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32 modes of E_{12g} and A_{1g}, and the distinct J₁, J₂ and J₃ peaks for 1T'-MoS₂ phase are absent, indicating
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34 that pure *2H*-MoS₂ phase was ultimately formed by the physically-sputtering strategy in this study.
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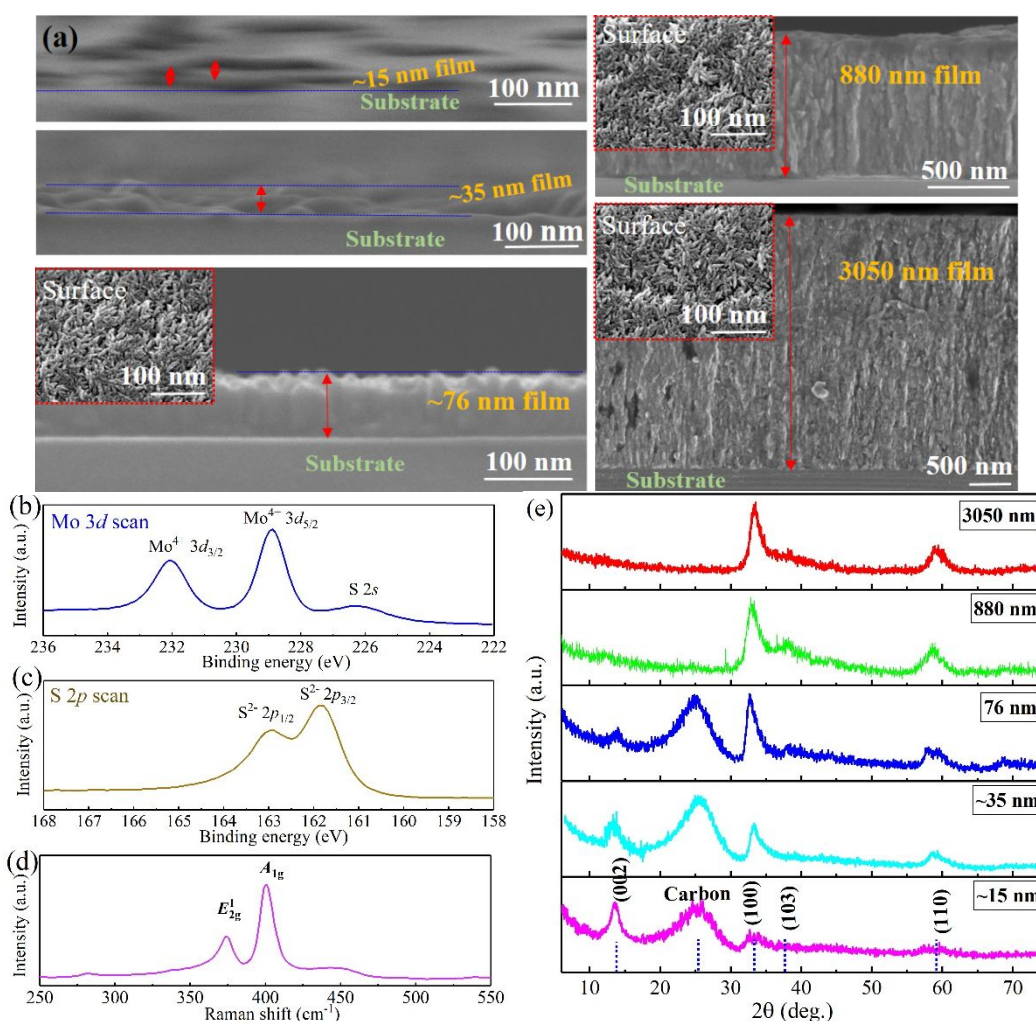


Figure 2. (a) The FESEM images of the cross-sectional and surface morphology of MoS₂ films with thickness of ~15 nm, ~35 nm, 76 nm, 880 nm and 3050 nm, respectively. The high resolution XPS scans of (b) Mo 3d and (c) S 2p and (d) Raman spectrum of the 3050 nm MoS₂ film. (e) GIXRD spectra of MoS₂ films on CF.

Here, we aim to evaluate the electrocatalytic activity of various active sites in MoS₂ electrode. To identify typical crystal characterization of the MoS₂ films which are decorated by different active sites, the GIXRD measurement of films was performed and the pattern spectra are shown in **Figure 2(e)**. Apart from the diffraction peak from the carbon fibre (CF) substrate located at 25.8°, the peaks associated with (002), (100), (103) and (110) orientation of the 2H-MoS₂ crystal are observed.^{7,38} The strongest (002) diffraction peak of the ~15 nm MoS₂ film indicated that the deposited MoS₂ crystal clusters were the dominant basal orientation. In the ~35 nm MoS₂ film, the intensity ratio of $I_{(100)}/I_{(002)}$

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2 rose. It should be due to the switch of orientated-growth from the dominant (002) plane to (100) plane
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4 as the maximum thickness of basal planes reached up to ~ 20 nm (as shown in **Figure 1(c)**). The
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6 morphological feature of $2H$ -MoS₂ (100) plane is columnar. With further growth of the MoS₂ columnar
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8 platelets (76 nm thickness), the diffraction signal of the (002) plane was further weakened due to the
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10 shielding of the formed thick (100) and (110) crystals with columnar morphology. As the thickness of
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12 column-dominated MoS₂ film was up to 880 nm, the (002) crystal plane and CF disappeared
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14 accompanied by the significant rising of the MoS₂ (100) and (110) crystal planes with edge orientation.
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16 The diffraction patterns of 880 nm and 3050 nm MoS₂ films are almost same, indicating that the
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18 structure of the MoS₂ columnar platelets was independent on the platelets' length. All the column-
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20 dominated MoS₂ films are decorated by the stepped-termination edges at their top surfaces (shown in
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22 **Figure 1(f)**).
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28 Therefore, it can be stated that the exposed different active sites of the MoS₂ film can be additively
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30 manufactured by this on-step physically-sputtering approach *via* controlling the film thickness. This
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32 physically-sputtering strategy should be scalable to fabricate the large area of films on diverse substrate
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34 surface and the maximum loading area depends on the volume of the sputtering chamber. The pure
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36 mass of 3050 nm MoS₂ film per area is about $0.96 \text{ mg}\cdot\text{cm}^{-2}$ and the density is found to be $3.15 \text{ g}\cdot\text{cm}^{-3}$.
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38 The calculated porosity is 37.7 % (taking the MoS₂ density to be $5.06 \text{ g}\cdot\text{cm}^{-3}$). The columnar pores are
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40 expected to provide free access channels for the electrolyte to the internal active sites of the columnar
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42 MoS₂ film. Theoretically, the immature basal plane-dominated MoS₂ film (~ 15 nm) was in abundance
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44 of exposed ***tB*** active sites, the infantile columns on the matured basal planes of the MoS₂ film (~ 35 nm)
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46 was in abundance of ***sS*** active sites and the column-dominated MoS₂ films (76 nm, 880 nm and 3050
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48 nm) were rich of two kinds of ***eE*** and ***sS*** active sites.
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54 3.2 Fundamental Theory of the MoS₂ film growth in plasma

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2 Numerous density functional theory (DFT) calculation and experimental investigation results have
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4 determined that the terraces on the MoS₂ basal plane (*tB*), the exposed active edge sites (*eE*), and the
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6 stepped-termination surface (*sS*) of MoS₂ sheets facilitated not only the adsorption of H⁺ from
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8 intermediate but also the desorption of hydrogen product for the high HER performance.^{7,15,31,51-54} The
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10 schematic illustration of physically-sputtering strategy and the distribution of the various formed active
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12 sites (*eE*, *sS* and *tB*) along MoS₂ film growth direction is shown in **Figure 3**. On basis of the classic
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14 Thornton model and aforementioned analysis of as-fabricated MoS₂ films, the growth mechanism of
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16 MoS₂ film consists of two main steps: (i) the initial formation of thin basal orientated MoS₂ crystal
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18 planes on substrate (CF), and (ii) the following formation of the edge orientated MoS₂ crystal platelets,
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20 in which various active sites were speculated to distribute in different height zones of MoS₂ film.^{55,56}
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22 Precisely-tailoring the MoS₂ target power density is essential to create kinetic Mo and S atoms for their
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24 indispensable migration in plasma and adsorption on the growing surface to ultimately fabricate the
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26 structure controllable MoS₂ film.^{57,58} During the film growth process, in comparison to the low surface
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28 energy (~250 mJ·m⁻²) and high activation energy (~120 kJ·mol⁻¹) of sulphur (002) basal plane, the high
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30 surface energy ((100) plane of ~250,000 mJ·m⁻²) and low activation energy of ((100) plane of 95
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32 kJ·mol⁻¹) surface diffusion edge plane could prevent the desorption of incident Mo and S ions and
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34 promote the growth of edge plane.^{59,60-62} In other words, the interfacial energy between the MoS₂ basal
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36 plane and substrate is much higher than that between the edge plane and substrate.
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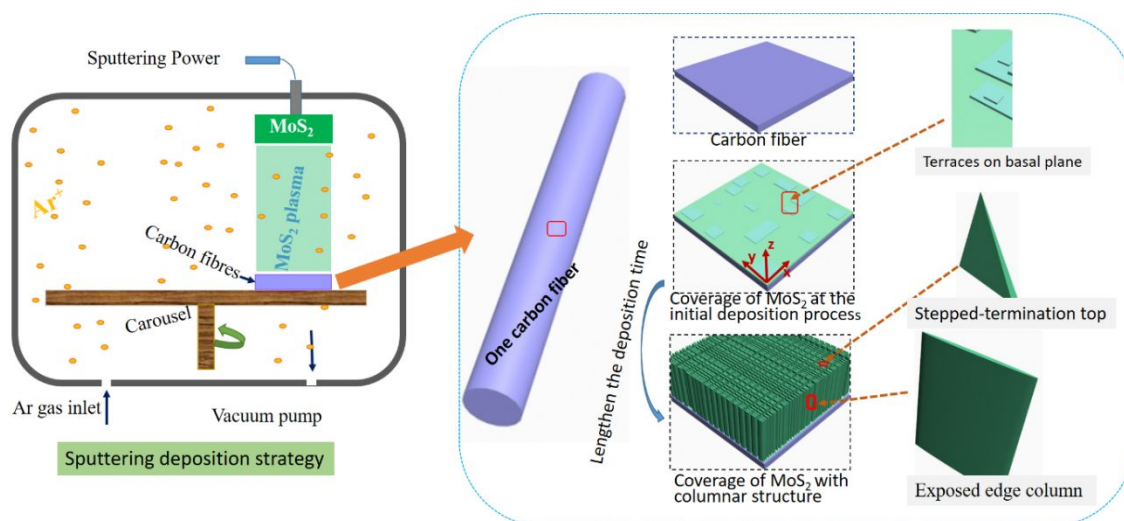


Figure 3. The fabrication strategy of MoS₂ films with various active sites on the carbon fibre.

In the initial growth stage, the abundant absorbed MoS₂ atoms on rough surface could promote 2D nucleation and the rapid growth of MoS₂ edge planes parallel to substrate surface. Meanwhile, the growth of MoS₂ edge planes perpendicular to substrate surface was limited. Thus, the MoS₂ basal orientated growth and rapid extension of edge plane parallel to the substrate surface were synchronous, and ultimately the polycrystalline MoS₂ with basal orientation was formed in the thin MoS₂ film (~15 nm MoS₂ in this study). The abundant terrace (*tB*) was formed on the immature basal planes before they grow up (~15 nm MoS₂ in this study). The basal plane nuclei would bond with each other at their domain boundaries when they grew up.^{21,48,54,55,63}

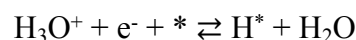
In the second growth stage, the mutually-blocking effect of adjacent edge orientated crystals can facilitate the crystal to grow vertically at the boundaries because of the more free geometry space in the vertical direction upward. Furthermore, the high surface energy (2 orders of magnitude larger than the basal plane) and low surface activation energy of edge plane determined the edge orientation growth, resulting in formation of the columnar platelet structure, which were always decorated by abundant active edge sites (*eE*).^{48,57,60,63} It can be also stated that the different growth rate of each S-Mo-S layer resulted in the uneven edge orientated columnar platelets.^{7,15,30} In other words, the stepped-termination

1 surfaces (*sS*) were ultimately formed. The concomitantly-formed vertical pores around the columnar
2 MoS₂ platelets can enable the free access of electrolyte to the internal of the electrode, allowing active
3 sites to fully expose to electrolyte.^{41,48} The energetic plasma atmosphere, as optimized in this study, is
4 essential for the staged-growth of MoS₂ films: the initial growth of MoS₂ basal plane with abundant *tB*
5 (below ~20 nm thickness) and subsequent growth of MoS₂ edge plane with abundant *eE* and *sS*.
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13 3.3 Insights into electrocatalytic activities of various active sites of 2H-MoS₂ for HER

14 The typical polarization curves of MoS₂ films decorated by different type of active sites are shown in
15 **Figure 4(a)**. The ~15 nm MoS₂ film gives a high overpotential of 386 mV *vs* RHE at a current density
16 of -10 mA/cm², which is lower than that of the ~35 nm MoS₂ film with the stepped-termination surface
17 (432 mV *vs* RHE). For the column-dominated MoS₂ films, the thicker the MoS₂ film, the greater HER
18 activity can achieve: as the thickness of the columnar MoS₂ film increased from 76 nm to 880 nm, and
19 further to 3050 nm, the HER activities are boosted with the overpotential as low as 342 mV *vs* RHE,
20 280 mV *vs* RHE and 204 mV *vs* RHE, respectively. The improved electrocatalytic activity of 3050 nm
21 (2H-) MoS₂ should be attributed to the porous and vertically-aligned MoS₂ film with large specific
22 surface area and abundant exposed active edge sites.^{17,41} It is worthy to further elucidate both the
23 electrocatalytic activity and efficiency of the difference active sites in the MoS₂ electrode for HER.
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39 The Tafel slope is used to evaluate the dominant HER mechanism of the cathodic
40 electrode/electrolyte interface in the low current range. As shown in **Figure 4(b)**, the Tafel plots of the
41 ~15 nm, ~35 nm, 76 nm, 880 nm and 3050 nm films and Pt/C are 136 mV/dec, 159 mV/dec, 128
42 mV/dec, 123 mV/dec and 125 mV/dec, and 37 mV/dec, respectively. As reported by Tributsch and
43 Carway et al.^{41,64,65}, the Tafel slope of ~120 mV/dec was generally observed as the surface coverage of
44 the adsorbed hydrogen, H_{ads} (H*), on the electrode was relatively low. Thus, the Volmer reaction
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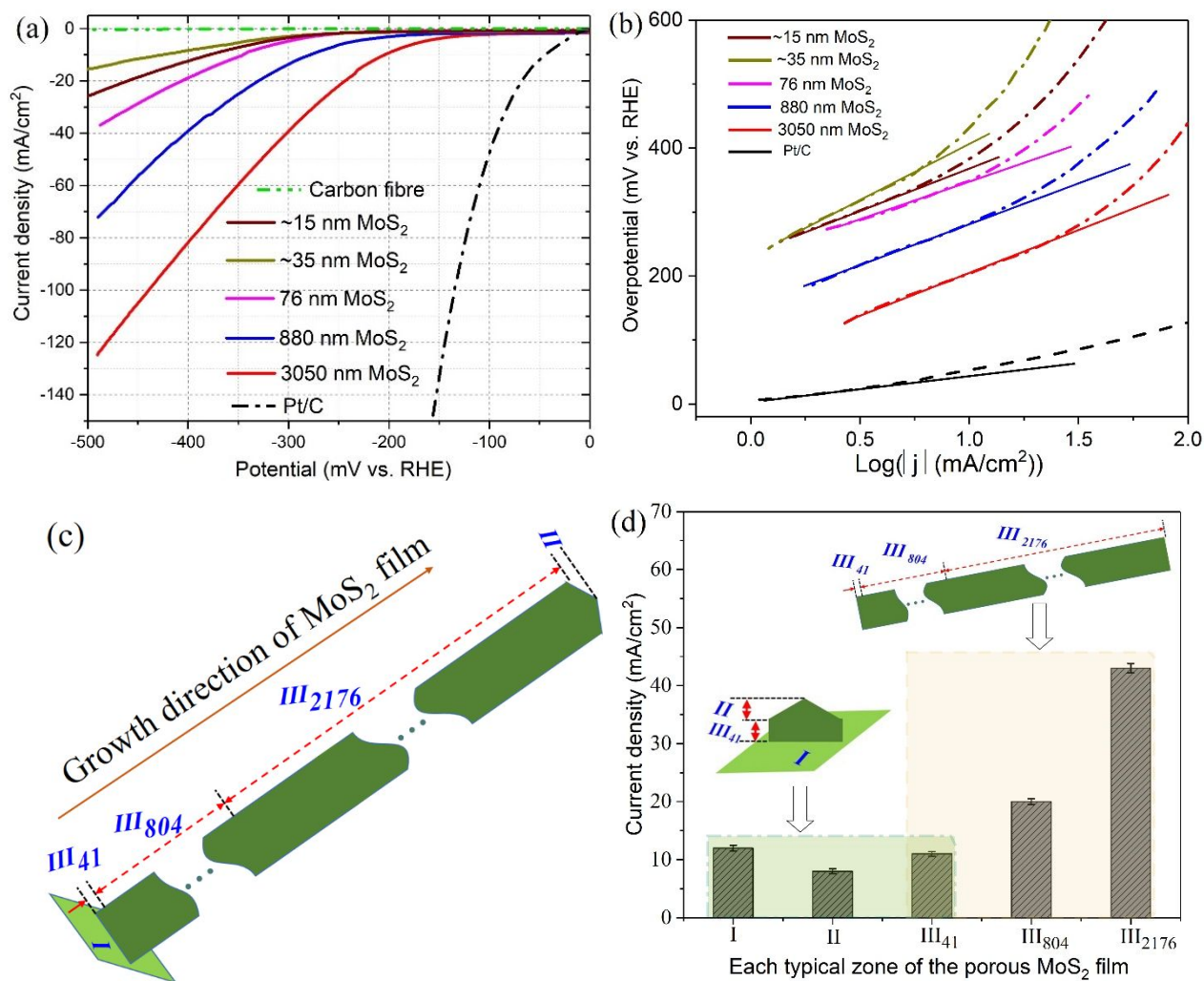
1 is the rate-dominating step (*RDS*) of MoS₂ film for HER in this work. In this equation, the * indicates
2 the catalytic active sites. It is still unclear which is the dominant factor for the limited formation of H*
3 on the active sites: is it the small amount of active sites, the limited electron transfer ability through the
4 active materials or the low supply capacity of H₃O⁺ to the internal active site from electrolyte? Until
5 now, there are still no consensus on this dominant factor on the unremarkable hydrogen reaction
6 kinetics, associated with Tafel slope in the range of 100~145 mV/dec for 2H-MoS₂.
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15 To elucidate the electrocatalytic activity of active site, the basal orientated plane at the interface was
16 defined as *Zone I*, the stepped-termination surface was defined as *Zone II*, and the columnar platelet
17 edge was defined as *Zone III* (shown in **Figure 1(b)** and **Figure 4(c)**). The ~15 nm film possesses the
18 immature basal planes decorated by terrace active sites (*tB*), and the ~35 nm film constitutes of *Zone I*
19 with thickness of ~20 nm and the upper *Zone II* (~15 nm) with *sS* active sites, in which the *Zone I* was
20 covered by the upper *Zone II*. The film with thickness over 76 nm constitutes of the bottom *Zone I* with
21 thickness of ~20 nm (as illustrated in **Figure 1**), the topmost ~15 nm thickness *Zone II* with *sS* active
22 sites and the middle columnar *Zone III* with *eE* active sites, in which the *Zone I* surface was covered by
23 the *Zone III*. Based on the aforementioned analysis, the electrocatalytic activities of MoS₂ were
24 attributed to the terrace sites on the immature basal planes (*tB*) for ~15 nm MoS₂ film, uncovered
25 stepped-termination surface sites (*sS*) for ~35 nm MoS₂ film, and both the exposed edge sites of the
26 columnar platelets (*eE*) and uncovered stepped-termination surface sites (*sS*) for 76 nm MoS₂ film,
27 respectively. The operating overpotential of 400 mV vs *RHE* was selected as one representative
28 evaluation criterion in this study. From the **Figure 4(b)**, it can be found that the ~15 nm MoS₂ film's
29 Tafel slope (136 mV/dec) is lower than that of ~35 nm MoS₂ film (169 mV/dec), and the current
30 density (12 mA/cm² at 400 mV vs RHE) is higher than that of ~35 nm MoS₂ film (8 mA/cm² at 400 mV
31 vs RHE). It indicates that the electrocatalytic activity of terrace sites on the immature basal plane (*tB*)
32 is higher than the stepped-termination surface sites (*sS*).
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2 With further increase in film thickness, the columnar Zone *III* of MoS₂ film grew up. Thus, the Zone
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4 *III* of the 880 nm MoS₂ film can be further divided into Zone *III*₄₁ and Zone *III*₈₀₄, and Zone *III* of the
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6 3050 nm MoS₂ film can be further divided into Zone *III*₄₁, Zone *III*₈₀₄ and Zone *III*₂₁₇₆. The Tafel slope
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8 of 76 nm MoS₂ film should be considered as a mixture of the columnar Zone *III*₄₁ and short stepped-
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10 termination surface Zone *II*, while the proportion of Zone *II* was approximate 0 in the mixed Tafel
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12 slope value as the columns were up to the length of 880 nm and 3050 nm MoS₂ films. The similarity of
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14 Tafel slopes of the ~15 nm film and the column-dominated films (880 nm and 3050 nm MoS₂ films)
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16 verified that the terrace active sites on the immature basal planes and active edge sites on columnar
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18 platelet edge possess the same electrocatalytic activity for HER. This is the first evidence for
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20 elucidating the HER activity of 2H-MoS₂ with diverse active sites *via* tailoring the mono-/di-/tri-types
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22 of active site in each film.
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27 It is well worth to further evaluate the electrocatalytic efficiency of *eE* active sites in MoS₂ films.
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29 Taking the current density at the given overpotential of 400 mV *vs* RHE as an example (*J*(400 mV)),
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31 the *J*_I(400 mV) value of ~15 nm MoS₂ film represents the electrocatalytic efficiency of Zone *I* terrace
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33 sites on basal plane (*tB*). The *J*_{II}(400 mV) value of ~35 nm MoS₂ film represents the electrocatalytic
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35 efficiency of ~15 nm thickness Zone *II*'s stepped-termination surface (*sS*) because the matured ~20 nm
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37 thickness basal plane layer was covered by upper Zone *II* during film deposition process in plasma, as
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39 shown in **Figure 1(c)**. The difference of the two values of 76 nm film and the ~35 nm film, $\nabla J_{III41}(400$
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41 mV), represents the electrocatalytic efficiency of Zone *III* edge sites along columnar platelets with 41
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43 nm length (Zone *III*₄₁), and the difference of the two values of the 880 nm film and the 76 nm film,
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45 $\nabla J_{III804}(400$ mV), represents the electrocatalytic efficiency of Zone *III* edge sites along the columnar
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47 platelets with further 804 nm length (Zone *III*₈₀₄), and the difference of the two values of the 3050 nm
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49 film and the 880 nm film, $\nabla J_{III2176}(400$ mV), represents the electrocatalytic efficiency of Zone *III* edge
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51 sites along the columnar platelets with further 2176 nm length (Zone *III*₂₁₇₆). **Figure 4(d)** presents the
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current density of the defined zone of the MoS₂ film at the given overpotential of 400 mV vs RHE. It is obviously observed that the Zone I, Zone II and Zone III₄₁ exhibit the low current density of 11.9 mA/cm², 8.1 mA/cm² and 11.0 mA/cm², respectively. They are much lower than those of the far column zones of $\nabla J_{III_{804}}$ (400 mV) and $\nabla J_{III_{2176}}$ (400 mV), which are 20.2 mA/cm² and 42.8 mA/cm², respectively. It suggested that large amount of *eE* active sites of MoS₂ are contributed to the high electrocatalytic efficiency for HER.



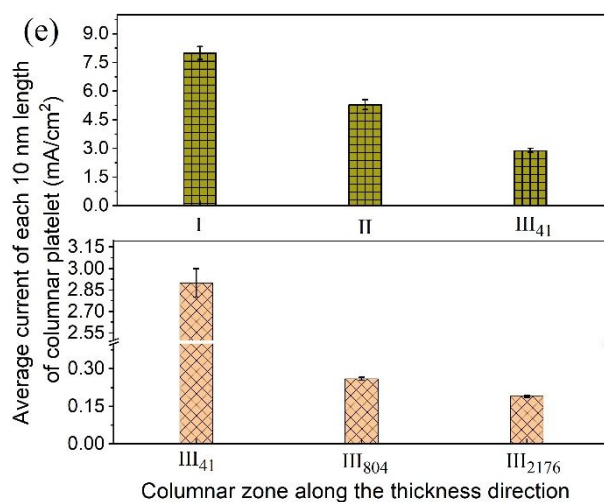


Figure 4. Electrochemical measurements for the MoS₂ film on CF in 0.5 M H₂SO₄: (a) Polarization curves for MoS₂ films with different thickness at a scan rate of 2 mV/s, (b) Tafel plots for the MoS₂ films, (c) the illustration of the typical active zones along the height of the 3050 nm MoS₂ film, (d) the current density of different active zones under the overpotential of 400 mV *vs RHE* and (e) the corresponding current density of each 10 nm length of the active zones.

Since the Zone *I* of ~15 nm film, Zone *II* in ~35 nm film and Zone III₄₁ in 76 nm film have the same order of magnitude of distance to the current collector, the difference of charge transport in these three zones can be negligible and the active site activity should be considered to be the dominant factor for the electrocatalytic efficiency. Taking the current density of each 10 nm length of the active Zones *I*, *II* and *III* as the standard of comparison, the electrocatalytic efficiencies of the typical active zones were further investigated at the given overpotential of 400 mV *vs RHE*, as shown in upper of **Figure 4(e)**. The results show that the current density of each 10 nm length Zone *I* (in abundance of terrace active sites (*tB*)) is 7.9 mA/cm²·10 nm⁻¹, substantially higher than those of the Zone *II* of stepped-termination surface active site (*sS*) and Zone *III* of exposed edge site (*eE*), which are 5.3 mA/cm²·10 nm⁻¹ and 2.9 mA/cm²·10 nm⁻¹, respectively. Lots of previous reports have already demonstrated the electrocatalytic activity of terraces on basal plane (*tB*), the stepped-termination surface (*sS*) and column edge site (*eE*) of vertically-aligned MoS₂, but it is the first time to properly compare their electrocatalytic activity and efficiency. Increasing the length of columnar platelets would increase the amount of available

1 electrocatalytic sites at the edge of columnar platelets (eE), enabling the high current density at a given
2 overpotential of 400 mV vs RHE, as shown in **Figure 4(d)**. Nevertheless, the current density of each 10
3 nm length of the Zones III_{41} , III_{804} and III_{2176} decreases gradually from 2.90 mA/cm²·10 nm, to 0.26
4 mA/cm²·10 nm and then 0.19 mA/cm²·10 nm at the given overpotential of 400 mV vs RHE, as shown
5 in the bottom of **Figure 4(e)**. The similar current density evolution trends of the different active site
6 zones (Zones III_{41} , III_{804} and III_{2176}) are also observed under the given overpotential of 350 mV vs RHE
7 (**Figure S4**) and 450 mV vs RHE (**Figure S5**), respectively. It is immediately apparent that the current
8 density of MoS₂ columnar platelets is distance dependent: edge active sites far away from the current
9 collector have a low yield of hydrogen product as the distance gradually increases from dozens of
10 nanometers, to hundreds of nanometers and further to thousands of nanometers scale. By aid of the
11 controllable gradient thickness of MoS₂ film electrodes, it can be further demonstrated that the increase
12 in distance of eE active sites to the current collector by one or two orders of magnitude (from dozens of
13 nanometers to hundreds of nanometers, and further to thousands of nanometers) reduces the HER
14 electrocatalytic current by about one order of magnitude (**Figure S6**). It can be considered to be further
15 exploration of quantitative correlation of the electrocatalytic activity with dependence of distance to the
16 current collector.³²

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39 Practically, the electrocatalytic activity was sensitively associated with (i) the exposed active site
40 density, (ii) the energetic adsorption of key reaction intermediates (H⁺) and desorption of the reaction
41 product on the active sites and (iii) the charge and proton transfer from the current collector to each
42 active site.^{3,7,15,65} The electrochemical double layer capacitance (C_{dl}) is expected to be linear
43 proportional to the electrochemical surface area (ECSA) of porous MoS₂ film, which method was
44 employed to study the distribution of the active sites for HER.^{7,38,66} It has been previously proved that
45 the columnar structure was independent on the MoS₂ platelets' length. So the amount of the exposed
46 active sites is linearly proportional to the surface area of columnar platelets even though the surface
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1 active sites are only one part of the entire surface involved. Thus, the comparison of the relative density
2 of the exposed active sites of Zones III_{41} , III_{804} and III_{2176} can be still estimated *via* the ∇C_{dl} . The
3
4 original C_{dl} values were estimated through linear fitting the plot of the current density difference
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6 ($\nabla j = j_a - j_c$) at overpotential of 150 mV vs RHE *versus* the scan rate. The ∇C_{dl} values of the MoS₂
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8 columnar platelets at Zone III_{41} , Zone III_{804} and Zone III_{2176} can be further estimated through the $\nabla j_{III_{41}}$,
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10 $\nabla j_{III_{804}}$ and $\nabla j_{III_{2176}}$ values *versus* the scan rate, in which the $\nabla j_{III_{41}}$ value is the different ∇j values
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12 between the 76 nm and ~35 nm films, $\nabla j_{III_{804}}$ value is the different ∇j values between the 880 nm and
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14 76 nm films and $\nabla j_{III_{2176}}$ value is the different ∇j values between the 3050 nm and 880 nm films,
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16 respectively (The raw data are presented in **Figure S7**). On basis of these, the calculated $\nabla C_{dl_III_{41}}$,
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18 $\nabla C_{dl_III_{804}}$ and $\nabla C_{dl_III_{2176}}$ values can be utilized to compare the exposed electrochemical surface area
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20 of the columnar MoS₂ platelets, as shown in **Figure 5(a)**. The ∇C_{dl} value increases from 0.31 mF/cm²,
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22 to 7.66 mF/cm² and further to 19.3 mF/cm² with gradual increasing in the length of columnar MoS₂
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24 platelets from 41 nm, to 804 nm and 2176 nm. As the ∇C_{dl} value of each 10 nm length of MoS₂
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26 columnar platelets was further compared, it can be seen that all the $\nabla C_{dl_III_{41_10}}$ (7.56×10^{-3} mF/cm²),
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28 $\nabla C_{dl_III_{804_10}}$ (9.48×10^{-3} mF/cm²) and $\nabla C_{dl_III_{2176_10}}$ (8.87×10^{-3} mF/cm²) values are in the same order of
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30 magnitude (as shown in **Figure 5(b)**). It indicates that all the columnar zones *III* have the similar
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32 electrochemical surface area, namely, the homogeneously-distributed active sites on the columns' edge,
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34 which should not be the dominant factor responsible to the gradually-reduced current density of each
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36 10 nm length columnar MoS₂ platelet as they were gradually far away from the current collector. The
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38 current density of each 10 nm length of MoS₂ columnar platelets under a given overpotential of 400
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40 mV vs RHE, normalized with the ECSA,⁷ are 15.30 mA/cm²·10 nm (Zone III_{41}), 1.07 mA/cm²·10 nm
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42 (Zone III_{804}) and 0.86 mA/cm²·10 nm (Zone III_{2176}). This ECSA-normalized current densities indicated
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the real electrocatalytic efficiency of the MoS₂ columnar platelets is distance dependent: the farther from the current collector the active site is, the lower catalytic efficiency it has.

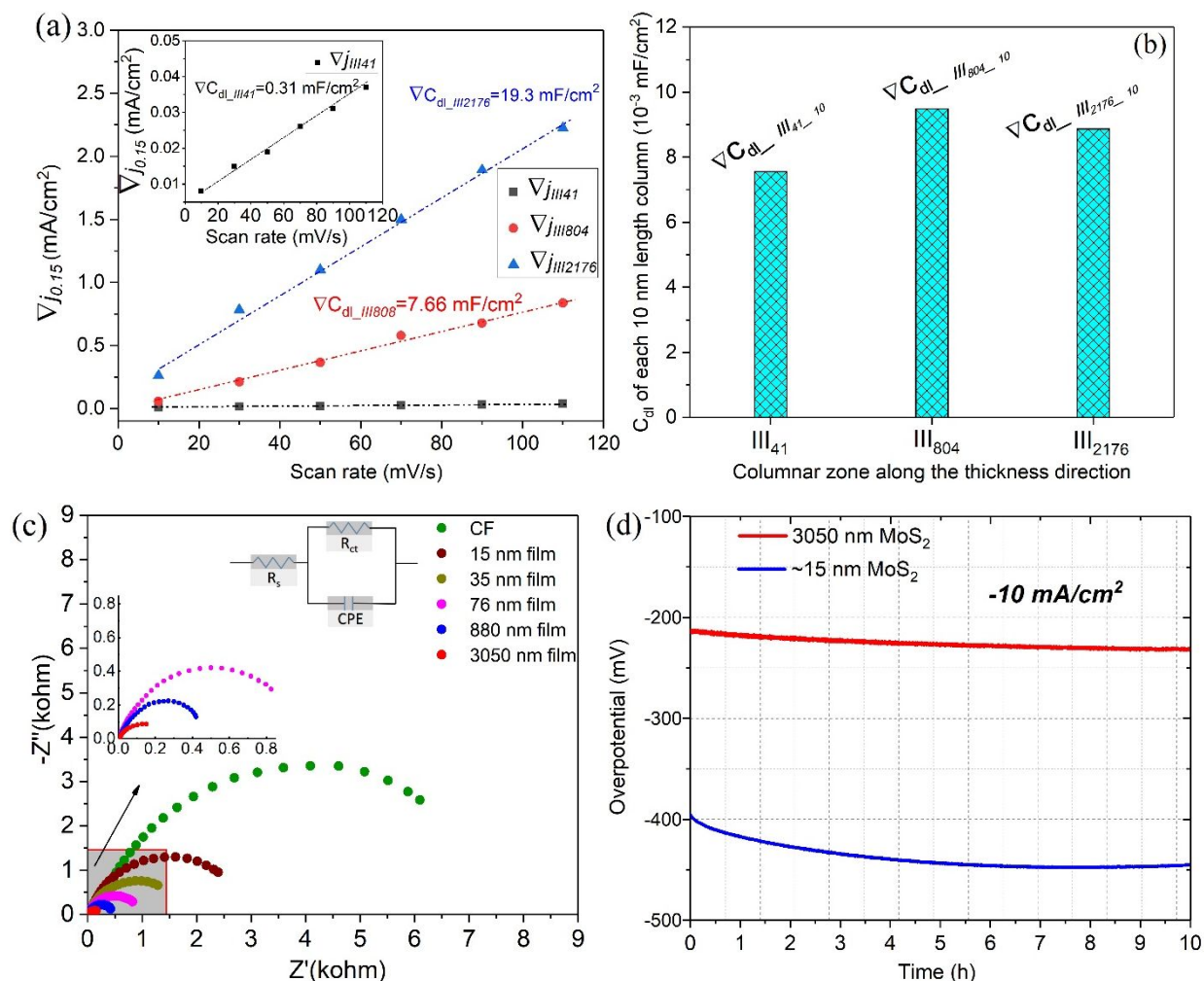


Figure 5. Electrochemical characterization of MoS₂ films on CF: (a) charge-current density difference plotted against the scan rate of the MoS₂ films (C_{dl} is equivalent to the slope of the fitted line), (b) the ∇C_{dl} of each 10 nm length of different zone III along the length of the MoS₂ columns, (c) Nyquist plots showing EIS spectra measured at the overpotential of 200 mV vs RHE with real (Z') and imaginary (Z'') components and (d) chronopotentiometry responses ($\eta \sim t$) recorded from 3050 nm and ~15 nm films at current density of -10 mA/cm².

The electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) was further performed to confirm the rate-dominating step (*RDS*) for the gradual reduction of current density along the length of the columnar platelets, the spectra are shown in **Figure 5(c)** and the R_{ct} values are listed in **Table S1**. The semicircles

1
2 are observed in the low frequency regime from the Nyquist curves, which can provide us the
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4 dominating step information on the surface exchange process of intermediate and the hydrogen product
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6 in HER. The absence of Warburg impedance suggested that mass transport for supplying the H_3O^+ to
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8 the active sites was fast, which conclusively suggested that charge transfer was the *RDS* in HER.^{15,41}
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10 Furthermore, the thick MoS_2 film has a small semicircle, namely, the low charge transfer resistance.
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12 This was attributed to the increased internal platelet edge surface of the elongated porous and columnar
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14 MoS_2 film which was fully exposed to the intermediate. In this case, the intermediate can be accessible
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16 to the internal active sites along the vertical pore channels of film, ensuring the increased interaction
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18 between internal active sites with the reactants. It was demonstrated that the conductivity of the in-
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20 plane MoS_2 (columnar crystals) was 1,000 times higher than that of out-of-plane.^{41,67,68} However, on
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22 basis of aforementioned results in this study, it can be stated that the vertical-aligned columnar MoS_2
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24 crystal platelet with abundant active edge sites can't fundamentally change the overall *2H-MoS₂* semi-
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26 conduction characterization or the limited charge transfer capacity either. The low conductivity is still
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28 the barrier for the *2H-MoS₂* to achieve complete interaction of far-end active sites with the as-absorbed
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30 H_3O^+ , due to the inefficient electron supply. Thus, the zone *III* of columnar platelet far away from the
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32 current collector presents low electrocatalytic activities (**Figure 4 (e)**). The farther the active site is, the
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34 lower electrocatalytic activity it has.
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41 Furthermore, the electrocatalytic stability of the physically-deposited MoS_2 electrodes was measured
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43 at the fixed current density of -10 mA/cm^2 . The typical chronopotentiometry response curves of the
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45 thickest 3050 nm MoS_2 film and the thinnest $\sim 15 \text{ nm}$ MoS_2 film are shown in **Figure 5(d)**. The results
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47 show a more stable and low overpotential for the 3050 nm MoS_2 film electrode. To maintain the
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49 cathodic current density of -10 mA/cm^2 , the electrode overpotential for 3050 nm MoS_2 film increases
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51 from 213 mV to 232 mV (8.2 % fluctuation) over the duration of 10 hours. The 3050 nm MoS_2 film
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53 was still pinning on CF substrate after running 10 hours, as confirmed by FESEM image and the EDS
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2 elemental mapping measurement in **Figures S8(a)-(d)**. For the ~15 nm MoS₂ film, the overpotential
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4 increases from 394 mV to 445 mV (11.4 % fluctuation) to maintain the current density of -10 mA/cm².
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6 The low fluctuation of electrochemical performance indicated the physically-deposited MoS₂ films
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8 could serve as a robust platform to deeply reveal the *RDS* of electrocatalytic mechanism for HER. This
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10 new approach proposes and evaluates a new insight on how to investigate the electrocatalytic activities
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12 of various active sites in MoS₂ electrocatalyst. Our further research plan is to present how to arrange
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14 the conductive agent along the edge-orientated columnar platelets but without any cover or passivate
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16 the active sites to fast transfer electron to the far-end active sites, to approach its intrinsic activity rate
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18 for HER.
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22 23 **4. CONCLUSIONS**

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25 The porous and ordered MoS₂ film with various active sites (exposed edge of columnar sheets (*eE*),
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27 stepped-termination surface (*sS*) and terraces on basal plane (*tB*)) was successfully fabricated on
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29 carbon fibre by one-step physically-sputtering strategy in energetic plasma environment. The amount
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31 of active sites at the edge of columnar platelets can be customized *via* simply controlling the length of
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33 the *2H*-MoS₂ columns. This new approach proposes and evaluates a facile strategy to investigate the
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35 electrocatalytic activities of various active sites (*eE*, *sS* and *tB*) and the dependence of *eEs*'
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37 electrocatalytic activities on the distance to the current collector in columnar MoS₂ platelets
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39 electrocatalyst for HER. The results reveal that the *tB* active site has the same electrocatalytic activity
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41 to the *eE* active site but it is higher than that of *sS* active site. The electrocatalytic efficiency of the *eE*
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43 active sites at the columnar platelet edge decreased gradually as their distances to the current collector
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45 were gradually increasing, from dozens of nanometers to hundreds of nanometers and further to
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47 thousands of nanometers scale. It should be attributed to the limited charge transfer from the current
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49 collector to the far-end active sites of the MoS₂ columnar crystal platelets. In comparison to the
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51 previously-reported pure *2H*-MoS₂ for HER, the physically-deposited *2H*-MoS₂ films can serve as a
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2 robust platform to deeply reveal the *RDS* of electrocatalytic mechanism for HER. As one reference, we
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4 believe that this strategy can be employed as a model for the porous and ordered active material to
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6 study the electrocatalytic activities of various active sites for HER or/and oxygen evolution reaction.
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9 10 **ASSOCIATED CONTENT**

11 12 **Supporting Information**

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15 The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications website at ///

16
17 FESEM image of FIB sample; SAED patterns along the thickness direction of cross-sectional 3050
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19 nm MoS₂ film; cross-sectional HAADF image of stepped-termination surface of columnar platelets;
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21 current densities of each 10 nm length column along the thickness direction; cycle voltammogram (CV)
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23 curves; FESEM image and EDS mapping of the 3050 nm films after running over 10 hours.
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44 45 **Author Contributions**

46
47 #Shusheng Xu and Jiao Xu contributed equally to this work. Shusheng Xu, Anne Neville, Yanan Wang
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49 conceived the ideas, designed the research and oversaw the entire research. Jiao Xu, Zewen Duan and
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1 Shusheng Xu synthesized the electrocatalysts and conducted the electrochemical measurements, Yu-
2 Zhen Liu, Yanan Wang, Yong Hua and Xiaomin Gao characterized the electrocatalysts.
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7 **Notes**

8
9 The authors declare no conflict of interest.
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11

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13
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GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT

