Extraordinary Room-Temperature Photoluminescence in Triangular WS₂ Monolayers


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Supporting Information

ABSTRACT: Individual monolayers of metal dichalcogenides are atomically thin two-dimensional crystals with attractive physical properties different from those of their bulk counterparts. Here we describe the direct synthesis of WS₂ monolayers with triangular morphologies and strong room-temperature photoluminescence (PL). The Raman response as well as the luminescence as a function of the number of S–W–S layers is also reported. The PL weakens with increasing number of layers due to a transition from direct band gap in a monolayer to indirect gap in multilayers. The edges of WS₂ monolayers exhibit PL signals with extraordinary intensity, around 25 times stronger than that at the platelet’s center. The structure and chemical composition of the platelet edges appear to be critical for PL enhancement.

KEYWORDS: Metal dichalcogenides, tungsten disulfide, 2D materials, photoluminescence, Raman

The synthesis and isolation of atomically thin two-dimensional (2D) crystals such as graphene and boron nitride have enabled fascinating advances in 2D metallic (graphene) and insulating (h-BN) systems. However, many potential applications require intermediate behavior, that is, semiconductors. In this context, monolayers of transition metal dichalcogenides such as MoS₂ and WS₂ have recently caught the attention of the scientific community as 2D semiconductor crystals with direct gaps in the visible spectrum in bulk form these systems have indirect band gaps. The bulk transition metal disulfides exhibit strong intralayer sulfur–metal covalent bonds (with metal atoms sandwiched by sulfur layers) and weak interlayer van der Waals stacking. The isolation of single atomic layers from these materials has been an experimental challenge due to the material’s natural tendency to form closed fullerenelike, nanotube, or stacked multilayered geometries. Few-layer MoS₂ has been successfully synthesized by annealing (NH₄)₂MoS₄ thin films. Recently, MoS₂ monolayers have been isolated via mechanical exfoliation and sulfurization of molybdenum films; their electronic and optical properties include carrier mobilities of ≈200 cm² V⁻¹ s⁻¹ and weak room-temperature photoluminescence. In contrast, WS₂ monolayers have only been prepared by chemical routes, and their characterization was limited to structural studies and band structure calculations.

Here we report the synthesis of single- and few-layered 2D triangular microplatelets of WS₂ via the sulfurization of ultrathin WO₃ films. These 2D islands displayed extraordinarily strong photoluminescence (PL) from their edges, at room temperature and visible wavelengths. A combination of Raman spectroscopy, atomic force microscopy (AFM), and scanning and high-resolution transmission electron microscopy (SEM, HRTEM) confirmed that the samples indeed consist of a single S–W–S layer and revealed that the giant PL signal arises from the vicinity of edges with zigzag termination. Our first-principles density functional theory (DFT) calculations show that the system becomes direct gap upon thinning to a single layer, consistent with the experimental observation of strong PL only in single-layer platelets.

The 2H-WS₂ polytype crystalline structure has the hexagonal space group P6₃/mmc with lattice parameters of a = 3.1532 Å and c = 12.323 Å. Each WS₂ monolayer contains a single layer of W atoms with a 6-fold coordination symmetry, hexagonally packed between two trigonal atomic layers of S atoms, as depicted in Figure 1a,b. Similar to MoS₂, bulk WS₂ is an indirect-gap semiconductor; it has a gap of 1.3 eV. However, theoretical calculations reveal that with decreasing number of layers, WS₂ transitions from indirect gap (in bulk) to
direct gap (in a monolayer), as shown in Figure 1d and e (see Supporting Information for computational details). For bulk WS$_2$, the electronic states involved in the indirect transition (i.e., the valence band maximum at $\Gamma$ and the conduction band minimum at T) originate from linear combinations of tungsten d-orbitals and sulfur p$_z$-orbitals. These electronic states exhibit a strong interlayer coupling, and their dispersion strongly depends on the number of layers. For a monolayer, the indirect gap between these states is larger than the direct transition at K, thus making the material a direct band gap semiconductor (Figure 1d and e). The conduction and valence states at K are mainly due to tungsten d-orbitals, and their energies are not very sensitive to the number of layers; the experimental direct band gap at the K point is $\sim$2.05 eV.\textsuperscript{14,29}

However, small differences between the valence band at K between bulk and monolayer are noteworthy. In the bulk, there are two well-known direct transitions at the K point due to the splitting of the valence band; experimentally these transitions have been observed by absorption spectroscopy\textsuperscript{14,30} and assigned as excitons A (1.95 eV)\textsuperscript{14,29} and B (2.36 eV)\textsuperscript{14,29} (Figure 1d). However, for a monolayer this splitting is absent (see Figure 1e), and only one direct electronic transition is expected to be observed by optical spectroscopy.\textsuperscript{30}

One of the most common approaches used to produce WS$_2$ nanotubes, fullerene-like structures, and films is the sulfurization of WO$_3$ powders.\textsuperscript{31} We have modified this process to yield single- and few-layered symmetric triangular WS$_2$ clusters of various sizes. First, we deposit ultrathin films (5−20 Å) of WO$_3$
on a SiO₂/Si substrate by thermal evaporation of WO₃ powder under high vacuum. These films are then exposed to a sulfur-rich atmosphere in a quartz tube reactor at ~800 °C. The thinnest WO₃ films (5–10 Å) produce triangular islands that correspond to an initial stage in the growth of a WS₂ monolayer. Figure 2a provides an SEM image of monolayer triangular islands; the regions with greater contrast in the island interiors indicate the nucleation of a second layer. The film thickness was determined by AFM in noncontact mode (for as-grown samples on SiO₂, Figure 2b,c) and by HRTEM cross-sectional images (for samples transferred to TEM grids, Figure 2d). The typical height measured by AFM for a WS₂ monolayer on SiO₂ was ~1 nm, while the spacing between the first and the second WS₂ monolayers was ~0.6 nm. The ~0.6 nm spacing between WS₂ monolayers is in good agreement with the theoretical value and that obtained by TEM and X-ray bulk diffraction. The larger AFM-derived spacing between the first monolayer and the substrate is not surprising, since it involves distinct tip-sample and sample-substrate interactions; similar effects have been observed for MoS₂ and graphene. WS₂ islands ranging from nanometers to micrometers in lateral extent coexist in our samples; we believe that the smallest monolayer islands correspond to the earliest stages of growth. The 2D islands may nucleate by sulfurization of small WO₃ clusters and then expand laterally as W and S species diffuse on the substrate toward the expanding clusters. Lateral growth could eventually result in the coalescence of neighboring WS₂ islands of different crystalline orientation, thus yielding to a large variety of island morphologies.

Electron diffraction studies from platelets transferred onto TEM grids reveal single-crystal domains larger than a micrometer (Figure 3d–f). After transferring the WS₂ islands to the TEM grid, we observe skew-stacked and folded WS₂ layers (Figure 3a), as indicated in the diffraction patterns of Figure 3b. HRTEM images from these regions exhibit the expected Moiré patterns (Figure 3c). High-resolution phase-contrast images from a single-crystal WS₂ monolayer (Figure 3f) reveal the honeycomb-like structure of the plain view projection. Electron diffraction of small triangular islands confirmed that they are single crystals with edges perpendicular to the {100} crystalline direction, suggesting that the islands have mostly zigzag edges (Figure 1h–j). Notice that due to edge roughness a small fraction of the edge could have other orientations. Ideal armchair terminations would alternate S and
W atoms, whereas ideal zigzag edges can be terminated by a pure element: either S or W. From a chemical standpoint, sulfur is more likely to be on the edges of metal dichalcogenide clusters, as previously demonstrated by scanning tunneling microscopy (STM) of triangular MoS₂ crystals and density functional theory calculations on WS₂ clusters. Detailed calculations suggest that the energetically preferred termination at high sulfur availability is a tungsten-terminated crystallographic zigzag edge, capped by two additional sulfur atoms per edge tungsten. The presence of intense W and S peaks in energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy data (Figure 3g) with only a minute amount of O, demonstrate that the WO₃ films are efficiently sulfurized and fully converted into WS₂.

Room-temperature Raman spectra of monolayer WS₂ platelets (Figure 4a) show E₁ İslam and A₁g phonon modes at 356 and 417.5 cm⁻¹, respectively. These values are slightly different from those of bulk WS₂ (355.5 and 420.5 cm⁻¹, respectively). Figure 4b shows the thickness dependence of the frequency for the E₁ İslam and A₁g Raman modes. The A₁g mode redshifts with decreasing number of layers. The van der Waals interaction between layers in bulk transition metal dichalcogenides stiffens the lattice, which is consistent with softening of the A₁g mode in the monolayer. The E₁ İslam phonon mode, on the other hand, blueshifts for a decreasing number of layers. Similar anomalous behavior of the E₁ İslam mode has been previously reported in few-layered MoS₂ films and might be caused by stronger dielectric screening of the long-range Coulomb interactions between the effective charges in thicker samples. The frequency difference between these two modes increases with the number of S−W−S layers in the film (Figure 4b).

As discussed earlier, WS₂ is expected to transition from an indirect-gap semiconductor in a multilayered form to a direct-gap semiconductor in a monolayer form. Experimental evidence of this behavior has not previously been reported for the WS₂ system. Our PL experiments shown in Figure 4c give clear evidence of this transition. For a monolayer, the PL is very intense and exhibits a single peak (Figure 4c) corresponding to the direct excitonic transition at the K point (Figure 1e). For increasing number of layers, the indirect transition between the local minimum of the conduction band at the T point and the local maximum of the valence band at the Γ point decreases in energy; hence the indirect transition between these two electronic states starts to compete with the direct transition at the K point (Figure 1d). There is also a valence band splitting at the K point, which generates two distinct excitons (A and B, as labeled in Figure 1d). The competition between direct and indirect electronic transitions dramatically reduces the PL quantum efficiency and gives rise to a new feature at longer wavelength (labeled I in Figure 4c) when the WS₂ film thickness increases to two (2L) or three (3L) layers. The luminescence from exciton B is also apparent for 2L and 3L. Notice that the indirect transition for 2L is higher in energy than that for the 3L and bulk films, suggesting that the 2L electronic bands have not completely evolve to the bulk configuration. The PL from bulk samples is very weak and only shows the features (I) associated with the indirect transition.

We now analyze the Raman and PL as a function of the position on the triangular WS₂ islands. For the 488 nm laser excitation, the intensity of the A₁g Raman mode (relative to that of the Si substrate peak) monotonically decreases with decreasing the number of WS₂ layers. Figure 5a and b show SEM images of two different samples, one containing small (∼5 μm size) triangular WS₂ islands (Figure 5a) with various second- and few-layer plateaus on their surfaces (darker contrast regions), and the other (Figure 5b) having a larger monolayer WS₂ island (∼15 μm size) with only two small higher plateaus near the center. The Raman mappings of the intensity ratio Iₐ/I₃ for those islands are shown in Figure 5c and 5d. The blue region with Iₐ/I₃ ~ 0.5 corresponds to the monolayer part of the islands; this was also confirmed from the frequency shifts of the E₁ İslam and A₁g phonon modes. The Raman mappings enable one to correlate other properties such as the
PL response to the location and number of layers in the 2D island.

Figure 5e and f show the spatial distribution of the maximum PL intensity when the excitation laser is scanned over the sample surface. The correlation of PL and Raman maps with the SEM images demonstrates that the extraordinary PL signal arises mainly from monolayers of WS₂. Regions with more than one layer (e.g., P1) exhibit very weak or no PL near ∼1.95 eV, consistent with the indirect band gap of few-layer and bulk WS₂. Figure 5i shows the PL spectra obtained from five different positions within the large WS₂ islands of Figure 5b. For this excitation wavelength (488 nm), the A₁g Raman peak intensity decreases with the amount of WS₂ material, and both Raman and PL intensity are also equally affected by external factors such as the local electric fields and the laser excitation power; thus we report the PL intensity normalized to the A₁g Raman peak intensity. Other than the Raman peaks, a single sharp PL peak (full width at half-maximum of ∼42–68 meV) is the only feature observed from 490 to 900 nm. The presence of this single PL peak is in agreement with the theoretical prediction that only one direct electronic transition at the K point should be observed for a WS₂ monolayer (Figure 1a). Direct electronic transitions in WS₂ originate from excitonic radiative relaxation, and for this reason the PL signal always appears at energies slightly lower than the 2.05 eV direct band gap of WS₂. The position of the PL maximum varies for different locations on the island, between 1.99 and 1.94 eV.

Since the Raman frequencies—which are strain-sensitive—are homogeneous across the entire monolayer region of the sample, we rule out inhomogeneous strain as a possible cause for the inhomogeneous exciton energy. The longest-wavelength emission occurs near the edges of the islands, at locations that also tend to exhibit high PL intensity. If regions of stronger exciton binding (and hence lower-energy PL emission) correspond to minima in an effective potential for excitons, then the red-shifted regions near the island edges can be
Clusters play a significant role in modifying the local physicochemical properties of the material. For instance, diverse edge passivation in metal dichalcogenides could produce different spin states that change the edge magnetic properties. Furthermore, recent first-principles calculations have indicated that a high spin density could be localized surrounding metal vacancies in similar types of metal dichalcogenides. Enhanced catalytic activity has been also correlated with the density of edges sites in MoS$_2$ 2D clusters. These unusual edge behaviors have inspired us to further investigate through first principles calculations the electronic properties of finite WS$_2$ monolayers.

We carried out DFT spin polarized simulations on individual triangular zigzag-edge WS$_2$ clusters (S$_n$W$_{2n}$ and S$_{10}$W$_{36}$) and WS$_2$ (6-zigzag) nanoribbons (see Supporting Information) since this type of edge has been identified through electron diffraction of our samples. A zigzag edge, preserving the stoichiometry, can terminate in either sulfur or tungsten. These two possibilities can be studied within a single WS$_2$ zigzag nanoribbon (see Figure 6 a–d). Due to the high reactivity of bare tungsten edges, they should be passivated with the atomic species present in the chamber, such as sulfur and oxygen (this last in much lower concentration): sulfur, because of its high content in our experiment, and oxygen since the precursor material is WO$_3$. It is noteworthy that sulfur passivation has been studied in zigzag MoS$_2$ triangular islands using STM, identifying states at the Fermi level at the edges. Taking this into account, we have obtained the partial density of states (PDOS) from bulk-like and edge regions of the WS$_2$ nanoribbons (Figure 6 a–d) with sulfur and oxygen passivation (see Supporting Information) and also from triangular WS$_2$ clusters (Figure 6 e–g). In both cases (WS$_2$ triangular islands and WS$_2$ nanoribbons), the interiors rapidly develop semiconducting behavior similar to that of a full monolayer, with a band gap around 2 eV, consistent with the experimental observation of PL. The edges in each case examined (bare sulfur, bare tungsten, sulfur, or oxygen passivated tungsten) support edge-localized states at the Fermi level. For the oxygen-terminated tungsten edge, a chemisorbed termination with atomic oxygen in a bonding geometry similar to that of WO$_3$ (and a lower density of states near the Fermi level) is preferred over physisorbed molecular oxygen by 0.3 eV per 40-atom cell (see Supporting Information). The detailed behavior of the edge states, including possible magnetism and more complex adsorbed species, will be published elsewhere.

In summary, we have reported the first successful synthesis of individual (S–W–S) monolayers of WS$_2$. We also established a Raman signature for individual WS$_2$ monolayers. The observation of room-temperature PL in a WS$_2$ monolayer is

**Figure 6.** (a, b, and c) PDOS adding the alpha (up) and beta (down) spins of three different WS$_2$ nanoribbon regions: (a) Bare sulfur zigzag edge. (b) Central region with infinite monolayer features. (c) Fully sulfur passivated tungsten edge. (d) Model consisting of a double unit cell used in the calculations. PDOS (as a sum of the alpha and beta spins) of a triangular cluster with zigzag edges fully passivated with sulfur. (e) PDOS at the sulfur–tungsten edge. (f) PDOS at the central region of the island showing infinite monolayer features. (g) Model showing shaded regions where the PDOS has been considered.
reported here for the first time. This photoluminescent behavior is supported by the transition of the system from indirect-gap behavior in the bulk to direct-gap behavior in monolayers, as predicted by our calculations. Moreover, the PL signal undergoes an extraordinary enhancement toward the edges (and corners) of our triangular platelets. Our observations thus motivate future work to engineer structures to tailor the optoelectronic response of monolayers of metal dichalcogenides, both to elucidate the fundamental mechanisms of edge-enhanced PL and also to develop potential future nano-optoelectronic devices. The fact that this material can be synthesized on SiO$_2$/Si substrates, following a simple and reproducible route, opens up numerous possibilities for 2D device fabrication. The electronic properties of the infinite 2D monolayer, the bulk (i.e. multilayer), as well as different kinds of edge passivation in finite systems were also investigated by first-principles calculations.

**Materials and Methods.** Synthesis. WO$_3$ thin films (5–20 Å) were thermally deposited on SiO$_2$/Si substrates in a high-vacuum chamber (10$^{-5}$–10$^{-6}$ Torr). Prior to thermal deposition, a SiO$_2$/Si wafer was diced into 1 cm$^2$ pieces, washed in an ultrasonic bath with acetone and isopropanol (50/50), and blow dried with UHP nitrogen gas. Subsequently, the SiO$_2$ surface, and the wafer was subsequently immersed in the 15 M KOH solution. The grid was released by the action of the caustic solution and was washed thoroughly with deionized water. Finally, the PMMA/WS$_2$ film was released by the action of a KOH 15 M solution. A TEM grid was placed on the absorbent paper and was washed thoroughly with deionized water. The TEM grid was placed on absorbent paper and was washed thoroughly with deionized water. The TEM grid was placed on absorbent paper and was washed thoroughly with deionized water.

Characterization. The WO$_3$ films were characterized by Raman and PL spectroscopies, performed in a Renishaw inVia confocal microscope-based Raman spectrometer using the 488 nm laser line as the excitation wavelength. The spectra were acquired with a maximum laser power of 0.028 mW. The spectra were collected in back-scattering geometry until the total energy reaches 200 kV, field-emission source, ultra-high-resolution pole piece (Cs = 0.5 mm), 1.9 Å Scherzer limit, and equipped with an energy dispersive X-ray (EDX) spectrometer. Two different microscopes were used in our experiments: LEO 1530 FESEM and FEI NanoSEM 630 FESEM. Noncontact atomic force microscopy was performed in a MFP-3D-SA made by Asylum Research.

**Theoretical Modeling.** Density functional theory (DFT) spin-polarized simulations on individual triangular zigzag WS$_2$-like clusters with sizes $n = 7$ ($S_{11}W_{26}$) and $n = 8$ ($S_{104}W_{96}$) were carried out using the DMOL3 code as implemented in Materials Studio. The general gradient approximation (GGA) was used as exchange-correlation potential and the Perdew-Burke-Ernzerhof (PBE) functional with an atomic cutoff radius of 4.5 Å.$^{50,41}$ The clusters were optimized to reach a convergence energy tolerance of $2 \times 10^{-5}$ Ha/atom with a maximum force per atom of 0.004 Ha/Å. Additional calculations in which the clusters were put in a box have been carried out, with distances between clusters of 35 Å of vacuum to reduce interactions among them.

WS$_2$ nanoribbons were simulated using a plane wave code as implemented in CASTEP,$^{42}$ considering single and double supercells ($2 \times 1 \times 1$ to allow reconstruction at the edges) under GGA-PBE with a Monkhorst-Pack k-point grid with 9 $\times$ 1 $\times$ 1 k-points and a plane wave basis cutoff of 500 eV; optimizing the geometry until the total energy reaches $2 \times 10^{-5}$ eV/atom and the maximum force per atom exhibits values less than 0.05 eV/Å.

For the bulk WS$_2$ and single-layer calculations, the CASTEP plane wave code was used under GGA-PBE considering a Monkhorst-Pack grid with 9 $\times$ 9 $\times$ 1 k-points and a plane wave basis cutoff of 500 eV; optimizing the geometry until the total energy reaches $2 \times 10^{-5}$ eV/atom and the maximum force per atom exhibits values less than 0.05 eV/Å.

### ASSOCIATED CONTENT

#### Supporting Information

Optical contrast of monolayered WS$_2$ on Si/SiO$_2$ substrates; PL and Raman from the WO$_3$ precursors; position dependence of the WS$_2$ monolayers PL full width at half maximum (FWHM) and PL integrated intensity; comparison of the PL signal and FWHM for WS$_2$ and MoS$_2$; and additional first-principles calculations for different edge passivation. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at http://pubs.acs.org.

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**Notes**

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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