

Supporting Information

Oxygen-deficient titanium dioxide as a functional host for lithium-sulfur batteries

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Experimental section

All chemicals were analytical grade and used without any further purifications.

Synthesis of TiO₂/oleylamine hybrid.

The synthesis of TiO₂/oleylamine (OA) particles referred to previous work¹ with little modification. In a typical procedure, 4.5 mL tetrabutyl titanate was rapidly added into 200 mL ethanol containing 0.8 mL deionized (DI) water and 1.8 mL oleylamine under vigorous stirring. The NH₂- group of OA can complex with TiO₂ *via* intermolecular hydrogen-bonding. Meantime, long-chain alkyl groups of OA tend to self-assemble and aggregate by van der Waals interaction, leading to formation of spherical TiO₂/OA particles with reduced surface energy of the total system. After aging statically for 2 h, the resulting precipitates were collected by centrifugation, washed with ethanol for 3 times and finally dried at 60 °C in air. The TiO₂/OA then served as precursor (Scheme 1a) for synthesis of TiO₂-Ar and TiO₂-air samples in the following procedure.

Synthesis of TiO₂-Ar and TiO₂-air samples.

The mesoporous TiO₂ was prepared by hydrothermal reaction of 0.2 g TiO₂/OA precursor in a mixture of 40 mL ethanol and 20 mL H₂O in 100 mL Teflon-lined autoclave at 160 °C for 12 h. During this process, amorphous TiO₂ colloids in the hybrid were crystallized into mesoporous anatase; meantime, trace residual OA was *in situ* capped on the TiO₂ surface (Scheme 1b). The resultant TiO₂ product was rinsed with ethanol and distilled water in sequence, and finally dried at 60 °C in air. Then, the TiO₂ powders were annealed in a tube furnace at 500 °C for 2 h purged with floating Ar, and then naturally cooled to room temperature to obtain mesoporous oxygen-deficient TiO₂

(denoted as “TiO₂-Ar”, Scheme 1c). In contrast, pure mesoporous TiO₂ was harvested after annealing at 500 °C for 2 h in air (denoted as “TiO₂-air”, Scheme 1d).

Preparation of TiO₂-Ar/S and TiO₂-air/S composite cathodes.

The composite sulfur cathodes were prepared by loading sulfur into the mesoporous TiO₂-Ar and TiO₂-air, respectively by a conventional melt-diffusion method with little modification. Typically, sulfur powders (300 mg) were dissolved in 10 mL CS₂ containing 200 mg of TiO₂-Ar (or TiO₂-air) powders. The mixture was continuously stirred for 8 h and then dried at 40 °C for 12 h until CS₂ solvent was thoroughly evaporated. Finally, the resulting composites were sealed in a Teflon-lined autoclave and maintained at 155 °C for 12 h, followed by naturally cooling to room temperature.

Physical characterizations.

Powder X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns were recorded on a Bruker diffractometer with Cu K α radiation at 40 kV/mA. Thermogravimetric (TG) analysis was carried out using a thermal analyzer (Setaram, Labsys Evo) in air (for the determination of carbon content in TiO₂-Ar) or in Ar atmosphere (for the measurement of sulfur contents in TiO₂-Ar/S and TiO₂-air/S) with a temperature ramp rate of 5 °C min⁻¹. The morphology and particle size of the samples were observed by a field-emission scanning electron microscope (SEM, Hitachi S-4800). N₂ adsorption/desorption isotherms were recorded on a Micrometrics, TriStar II 3020 system at 77 K. Prior to adsorption, the samples were degassed for 12 h at 100 °C in vacuum. Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) and high-resolution TEM (HRTEM) micrographs were acquired on a JEM-2100F transmission electron microscope operated at 200 kV. High angle annular dark field

scanning transmission electron microscopy (HAADF-STEM) images and energy-dispersive X-ray (EDX) patterns were obtained from an FEI Talos microscope fitted with super-X EDX system operated at 200 kV. The surface composition and element valence states of the samples were analyzed using an X-ray photoelectron spectroscope (XPS, Thermo Fisher Scientific, Alpha) using a monochromatic Al K_{α} radiation source at 15 kV (1486.71 eV). The XPS peak positions locations were calibrated using the C 1s peak reference of adventitious carbon at 284.8 eV. Spectral deconvolution was performed using the XPS Peak 4.1 software. Electron paramagnetic resonance (EPR) signals were collected using a Bruker EMX plus-10/12 with a Microwave Bridge (microwave frequency: 9.853 GHz; power: 20 mW; modulation amplitude: 4 G; modulation frequency: 200 kHz) at room temperature. The contact angle measurements were performed using an OCA35 automatic contact angle instrument.

Polysulfide adsorption experiments.

Sulfur and Li_2S powders with a 5:1 molar ratio were added to a 1 : 1 (v/v) 1,3-dioxolane (DOL) and 1,2-dimethoxyethane (DME) mixture and stirred overnight at 60 °C. The as-prepared Li_2S_6 solution (0.5 mM) was used as the stock solution for adsorption measurements. 20 mg $\text{TiO}_2\text{-Ar}$ or $\text{TiO}_2\text{-air}$ powder was added to 5 mL each of the Li_2S_6 stock solution. The mixture was vigorously stirred to facilitate adsorption, followed by keeping at static for 12 h at room temperature.

Electrochemical tests.

Electrochemical performances were measured using coin-type CR2025 cells with Li foil as counter and reference electrodes at room temperature. The working electrodes were prepared by thoroughly blending the active materials ($\text{TiO}_2\text{-Ar/S}$ or $\text{TiO}_2\text{-air/S}$),

carbon black (super-P) and polyvinylidene difluoride (PVDF) binder with 8:1:1 weight ratio in N-methyl-2-pyrrolidone (NMP) solvent. The resulting slurry was pasted on an Al foil, dried at 55 °C for 12 h in vacuum and then punched into circular disk electrodes. 1.0 M lithium bis(trifluoromethanesulfonyl)imide (LiTFSI) dissolved in 1,3-dioxalane (DOL) and dimethyl ether (DME) (1:1 v/v) with 1 wt% LiNO₃ additive was used as the working electrolyte. The assembling of the Li-S cells was operated in an Ar-filled glove-box with water and oxygen contents below 1 ppm. Cyclic voltammetry (CV) was recorded on CHI660E (Shanghai Chenhua instrument Co., Ltd) electrochemical workstation within a potential window of 1.8~2.8 V vs. Li⁺/Li at 0.1 mV s⁻¹. Galvanostatic charge/discharge tests were carried out on a LAND CT2001A test instrument (Wuhan) at current rates of 0.2~5 C (1 C = 1675 mA g⁻¹). The specific capacities were calculated based on the weight of sulfur in the composite cathodes. Electrochemical impedance spectra (EIS) were measured at open-circuit potential with an electrochemical workstation (Autolab PGSTAT 302N) in the frequency range from 100 kHz to 10 mHz with an amplitude of 10 mV.

Computational details.

First-principles density functional theory (DFT) calculations were performed using CASTEP in Materials Studio.^{2,3} The exchange and correlation energies were calculated using OTFG ultrasoft pseudopotential and Perdew–Burke–Ernzerhof (PBE) functional within the generalized gradient approximation (GGA). The electron-ion interactions were described within a plane-wave basis set with an energy cutoff of 580 eV. A 2×3×1 supercell containing 90 atoms was used to model the electronic structures of bulk anatase. To correct the on-site electron correlation, GGA plus Hubbard model (GGA+U) has been employed with $U = 7.5$ eV.⁴ To simulate the surface electronic structures, a

TiO₂ (100) surface slab was cleaved and a vacuum layer of 20 Å was used to avoid the unwanted interactions between neighboring cells along *z*-direction. For simulations of oxygen-deficient anatase bulk anatase or surface, one O atom was removed from the supercell or (100) surface slab, respectively. The convergence tests of the total energy with respect to the *k*-points sampling and the energy-cutoff were carefully examined, using 2×2×1 Monkhorst-Pack *k*-points grid for TiO₂ bulk and 1×1×1 *k*-points for the pristine surface slabs and adsorption with Li₂S₄ or Li. Ionic relaxations were performed using a conjugate gradient algorithm until the net force on all individual atoms was less than 0.03 eV Å⁻¹, the SCF tolerance was set to 1×e⁻⁶ eV·atom⁻¹ for geometry optimization.

The adsorption energy (E_{ad}) for Li₂S₄ or Li on TiO₂ surface is determined using the following equation:

$$E_{ad} = E_{total} - E_{surf} - E_{mol}$$

where E_{total} is the total energy of the system containing TiO₂ (001) surface with adsorbed Li₂S molecule (or Li⁺), E_{surf} is the energy of the clean TiO₂ (001) surface with or without V_o^{**} , E_{mol} is the energy of a free Li₂S₄ molecule or Li. During E_{ad} calculations, van der Waals interactions were included. The Li diffusion on TiO₂ (001) surface slab was simulated using a complete linear synchronous transit/quadratic synchronous transit (LST/QST) method.

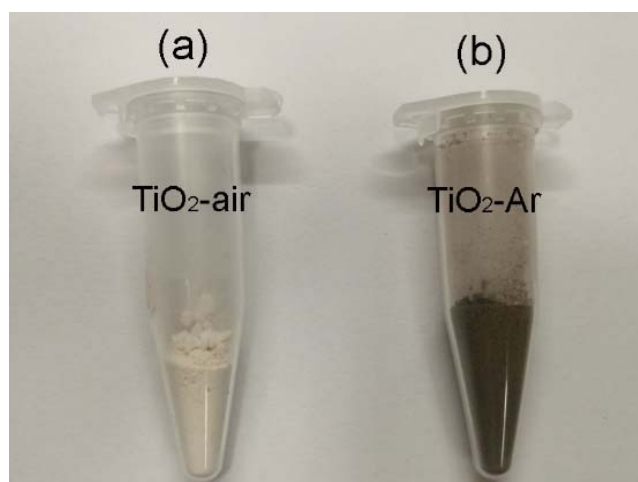


Fig. S1 Digital photos of the porous (a) TiO₂-air and (b) TiO₂-Ar samples.

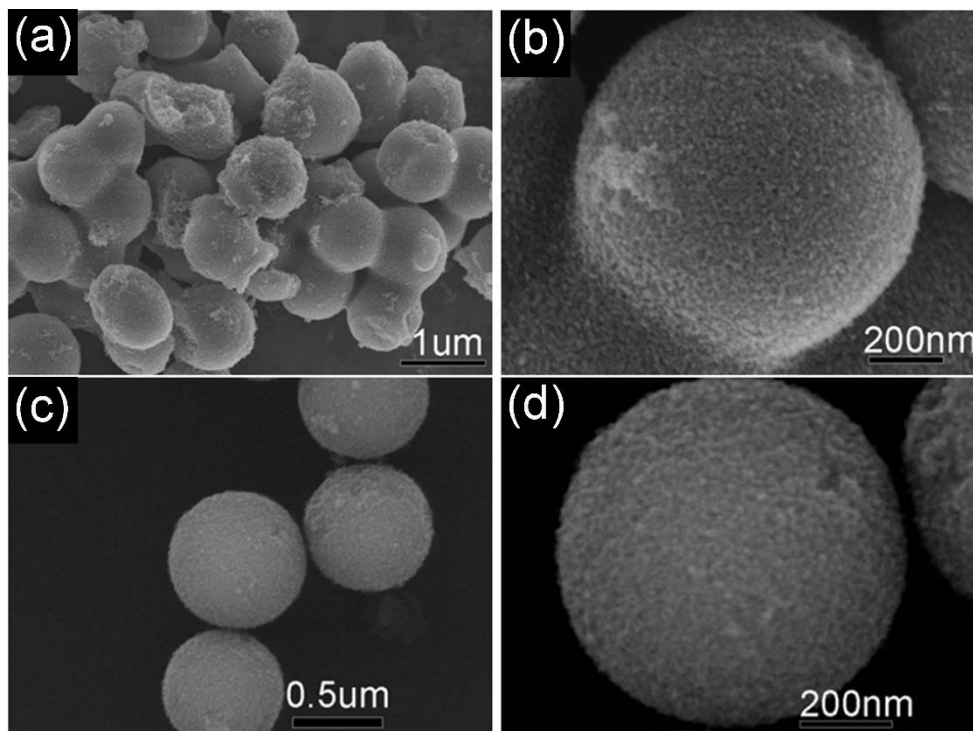


Fig. S2 SEM images of the as-prepared TiO₂ samples. (a, b) TiO₂-Ar, (c, d) TiO₂-air.

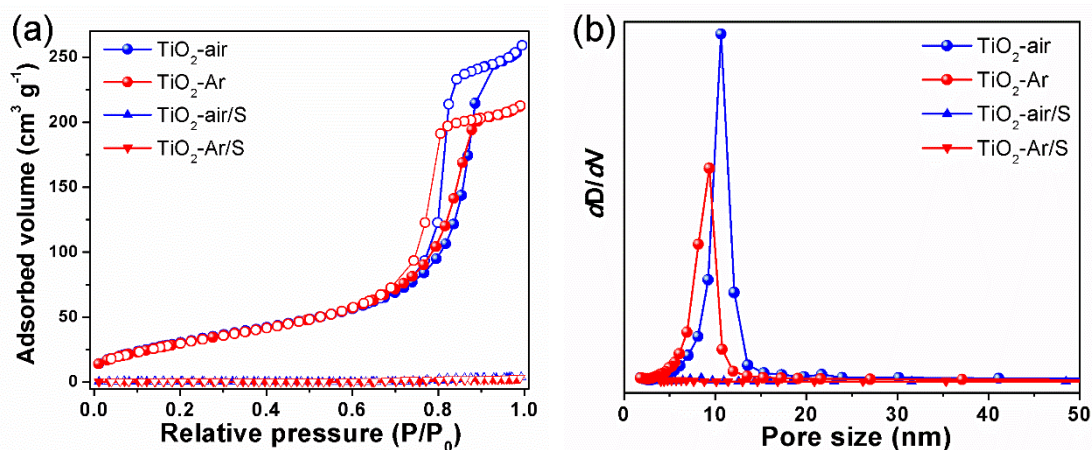


Fig. S3 (a) N₂ sorption isotherms and (b) pore size distribution plots of TiO₂-Ar, TiO₂-air, TiO₂-Ar/S and TiO₂-air/S samples.

From Fig. S3a, the TiO₂-Ar and TiO₂-air both possess high specific surface areas of 118 and 121 m² g⁻¹, respectively, due to their interconnected mesoporous structure. However, after sulfur filling the specific surface areas of the resultant TiO₂-Ar/S and TiO₂-air/S composites are sharply reduced to ~1.3 m² g⁻¹ and 1.2 m² g⁻¹ respectively, suggesting the full occupation of inner voids by sulfur species.

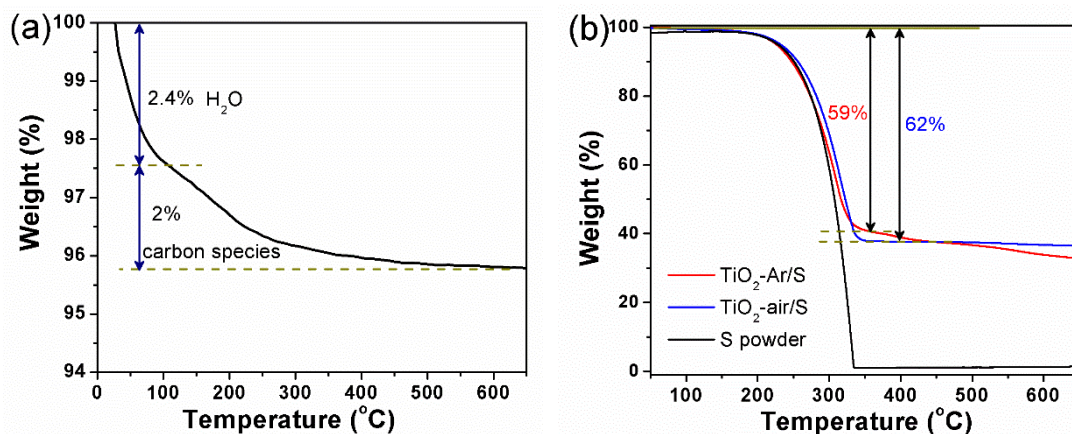


Fig. S4 TG analyses of (a) TiO₂-Ar sample in air and (b) TiO₂-Ar/S, TiO₂-air/S and bare S powders in N₂, respectively.

Thermogravimetric (TG) measurements are used to determine the weight fraction of carbon species in the TiO₂-Ar sample. In Fig. S4a, the weight loss of ~2.4 wt % before 100 °C is mainly caused by the desorption of physically adsorbed H₂O on the surface. The second weight drop of ca. 2 wt% between 200 and 600 °C corresponds to the decomposition of the carbon species. Herein, a higher temperature of ~600 °C is required for the complete removal of carbon compared to recent literature (~480 °C)⁵ which can be mainly ascribed to the trap of most carbon inside the mesopores and formation of Ti-C chemical bonds.⁶

TG curves of TiO₂-Ar/S, TiO₂-air/S and pure S powders are presented in Fig. S4b. The weight loss for the 3 samples all occurs between 170 and 350 °C caused by sulfur sublimation. The corresponding weight fractions of sulfur in TiO₂-Ar/S and TiO₂-air/S are calculated to be 59% and 62% respectively, which are near to the setting mass ratios.

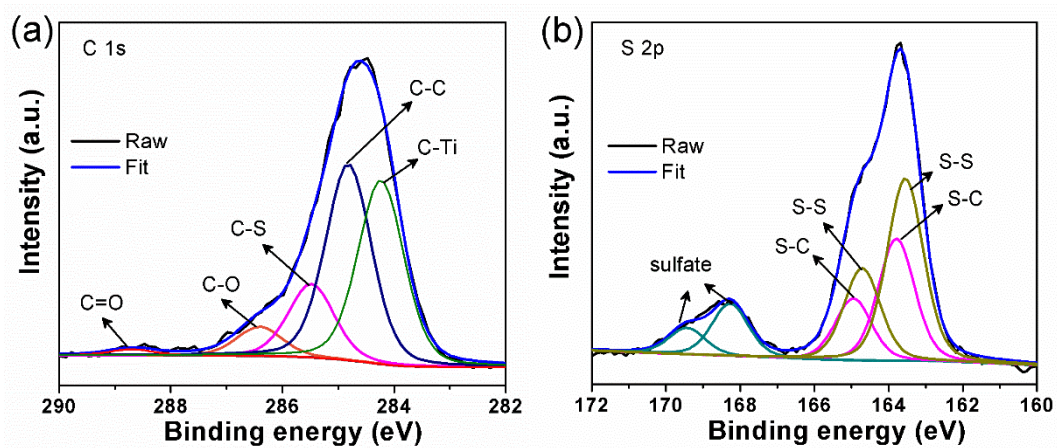


Fig. S5 High-resolution XPS spectra of (a) C 1s and (b) S 2p spectra in TiO₂-Ar/S.

The existence of C-C, C-O and C=O bonds stems from minority amorphous carbon with surface functional groups that was produced by carbonization of residual oleylamine. The C-Ti peak in C 1s spectrum further supports the formation of Ti-C bonding at TiO₂/C interface.⁶

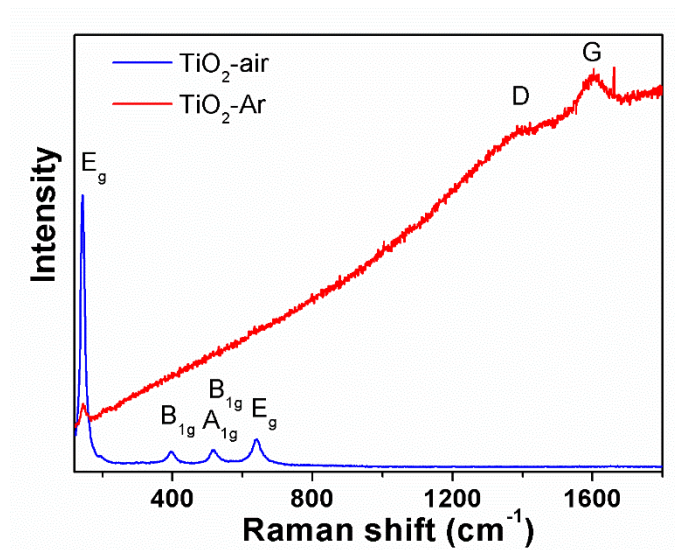


Fig. S6 Raman spectra of TiO₂-Ar and TiO₂-air samples.

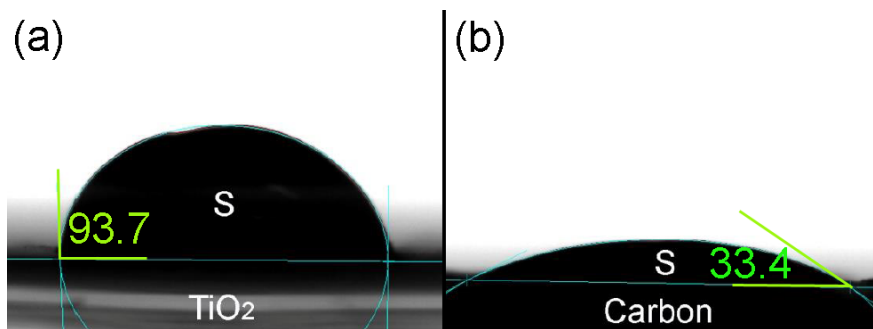


Fig. S7 Contact angle measurements of melted sulfur on (a) TiO₂ and (b) carbon surface, respectively.

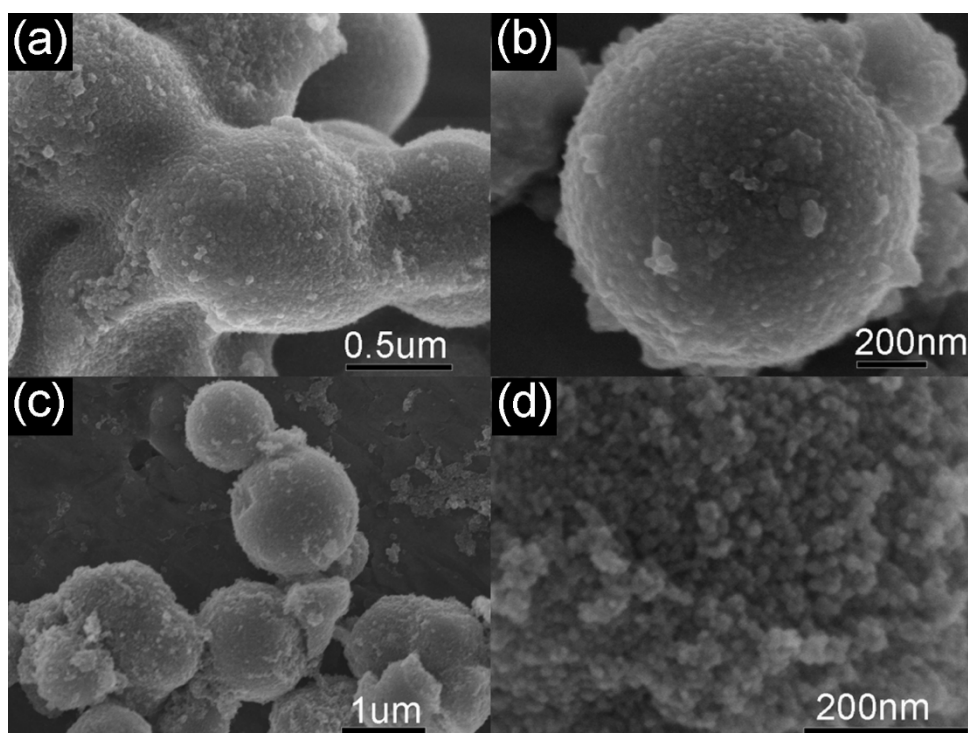


Fig. S8 SEM images of (a, b) $\text{TiO}_2\text{-Ar/S}$ and (c, d) $\text{TiO}_2\text{-air/S}$ samples.

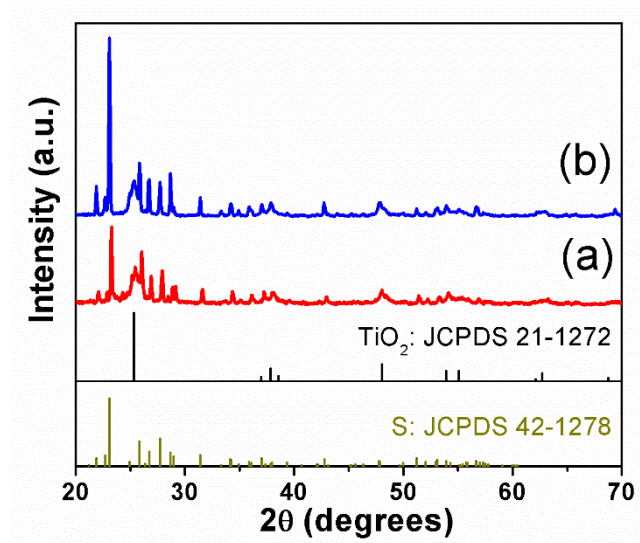


Fig. S9 XRD patterns of (a) TiO₂-Ar/S and (b) TiO₂-air/S samples.

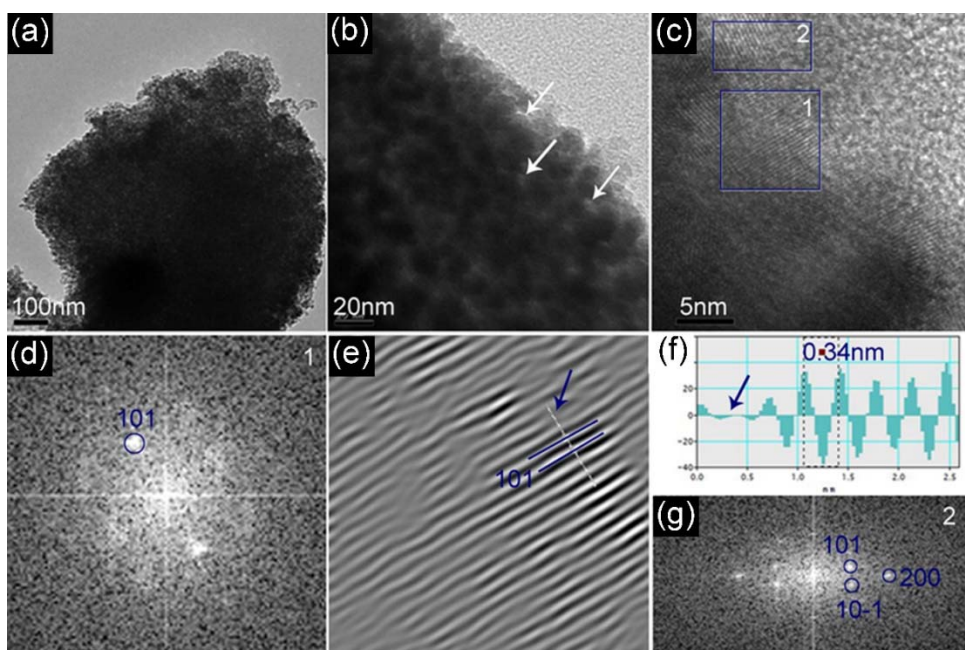


Fig. S10 TEM characterizations of the TiO₂-Ar/S sample. (a) TEM image; (b) magnified view revealing few mesopores (marked by white arrows); (c) HRTEM; (d) FFT pattern of region 1 in (c); (e) IFFT image derived from (101) spots in (d); (f) intensity of line profile (marked by white in (e)); (g) FFT pattern of region 2 in (c).

TEM images (Fig. S10a and b) depict that the spherical morphology and mesoporous structure of TiO₂-Ar have been preserved after S impregnation. HRTEM micrograph and corresponding FFT patterns (Fig. S10c, d, g) reveal the presence of anatase. In addition, some dislocations can be discerned as marked by blue arrows (Fig. S10e and f). The intensity of line profile (Fig. S10f) displays a large change in the contrast from the right/central regions to the left edge position, reflecting the presence of structural distortion possibly caused by oxygen loss from TiO₂ lattice and compressive stress at TiO₂/C interface.⁷ The absence of crystalline S can be due to its poor stability and easy sublimation under intensive e-beam irradiation in vacuum.

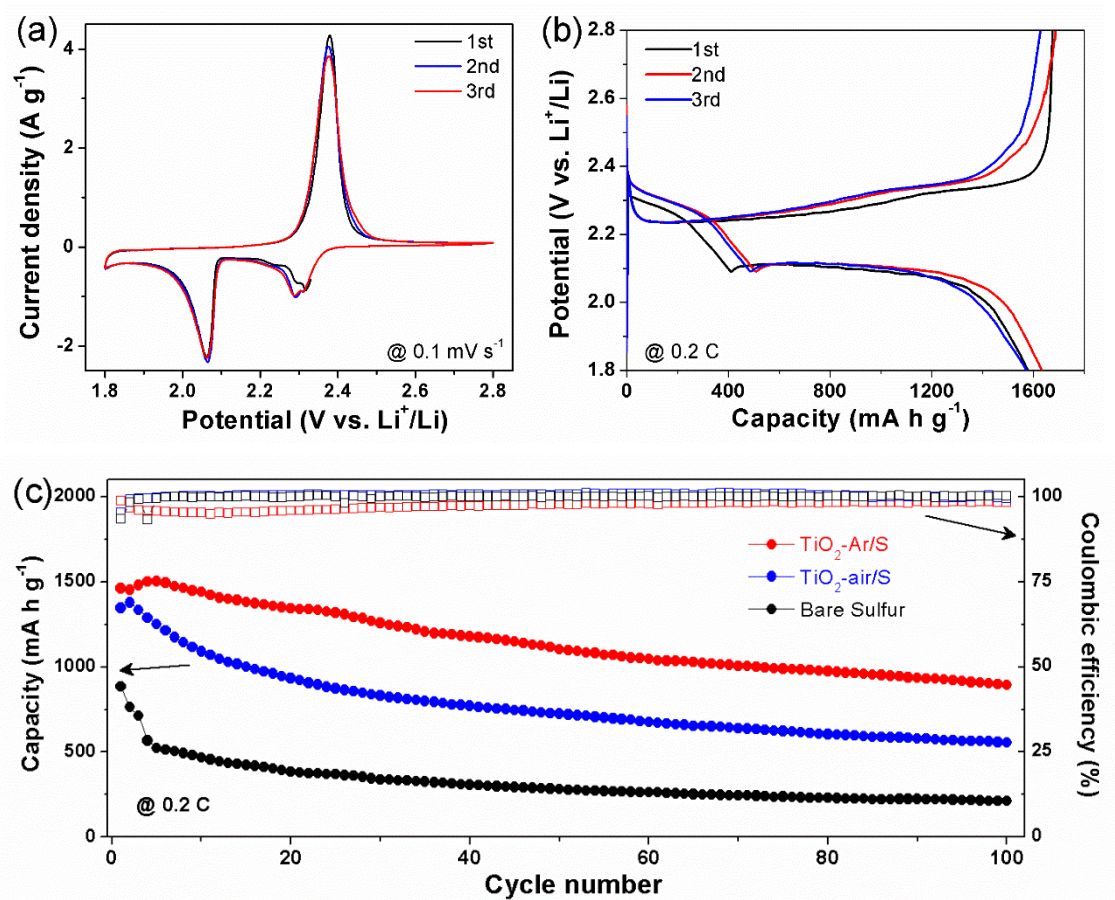


Fig. S11 (a) cyclic voltammetry curves and (b) galvanostatic charge-discharge curves of $\text{TiO}_2\text{-Ar/S}$ electrode in the initial 3 cycles. (c) cycling performance the 3 electrodes at 0.2 C ($1 \text{ C} = 1675 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$).

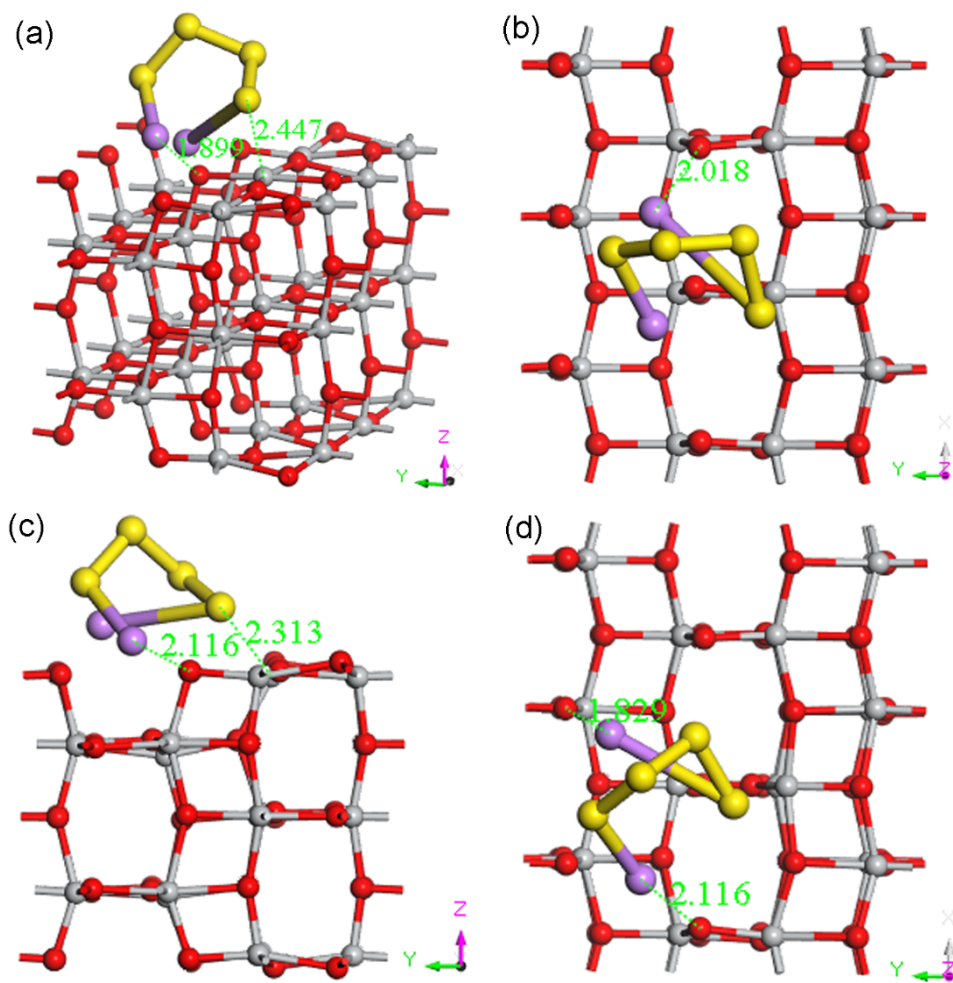


Fig. S12 Optimized adsorption configurations of Li_2S_4 on anatase (100) slab surface without (a, b) and with (c, d) V_{O} . The grey, red, yellow and pink balls represent Ti, O, S and Li, respectively.

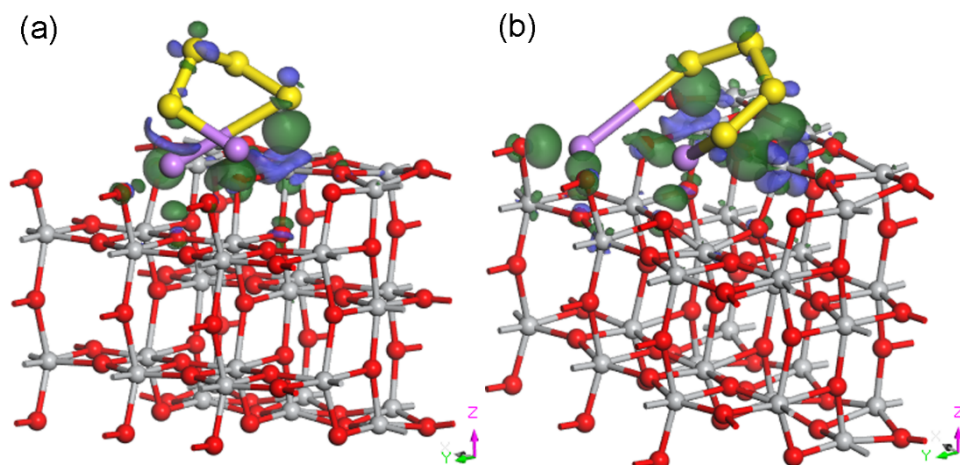


Fig. S13 Optimized geometry structures and corresponding charge density distribution contours of Li_2S_4 adsorbed on anatase (100) slab surface without (a) and with (b) V_o (The green and blue contours signify the electron accumulation and depletion regions, respectively). The grey, red, yellow and pink balls represent Ti, O, S and Li atoms, respectively.

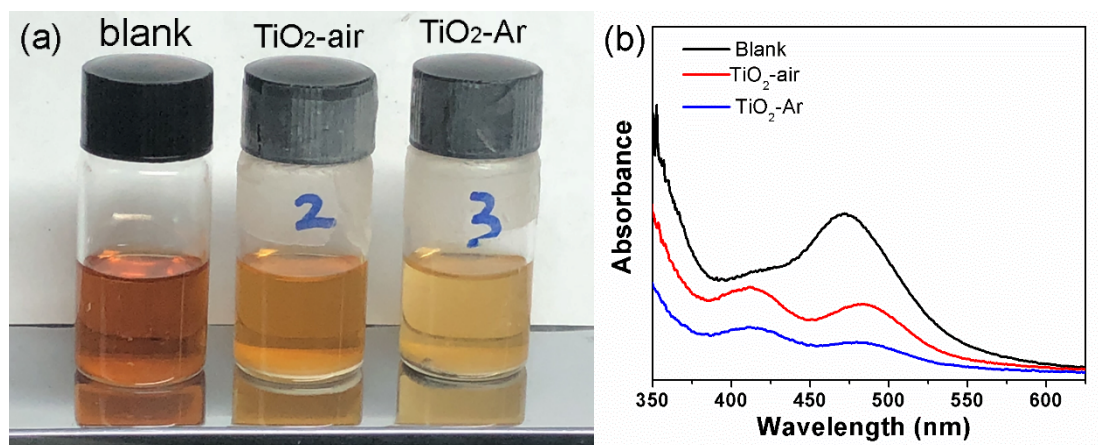


Fig. S14 (a) Digital photos of blank Li₂S₆ electrolyte and after adding TiO₂-air or TiO₂-Ar, respectively; (b) UV-vis absorption spectra of the supernatant separated from the Li₂S₆ solutions after adsorption experiments in (a).

In Fig. S14a, the color of the Li₂S₆ solution after adding TiO₂-Ar and TiO₂-air both fades, demonstrating their high affinity to polysulfides. In Fig. S14b, the UV-vis absorption peaks for supernatant from Li₂S₆ solutions with TiO₂-Ar greatly diminished compared to that with TiO₂-air, confirming the higher affinity of TiO₂-Ar to polysulfide.

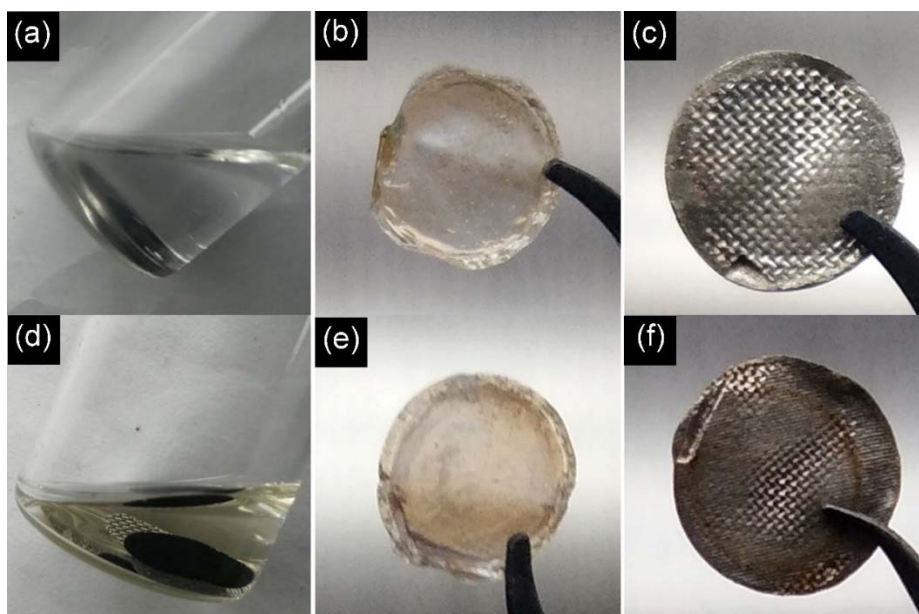


Fig. S15 Photographs of Li-S cells' components after 100 cycles at 0.2 C. (a, d) cathode soaked in fresh electrolyte; (b, e) separator; (c, f) Li anode. Images of (a-c) and (d-f) are taken from Li-S cells with $\text{TiO}_2\text{-Ar/S}$ and $\text{TiO}_2\text{-air/S}$ as cathodes, respectively.

In Fig. S15a, the electrolyte soaked with cycled $\text{TiO}_2\text{-Ar/S}$ cathode remains colorless, suggesting no polysulfide formed or trace formed polysulfide has been tightly adsorbed at cathode surface. In contrast, the electrolyte with cycled $\text{TiO}_2\text{-air/S}$ cathode changes to slightly yellow (Fig. S15d), hinting the possible formation of soluble polysulfides. In addition, both the separator and Li-anode coupled with $\text{TiO}_2\text{-Ar/S}$ remain almost clean (Fig. S15b and c). Instead, some sulfide species are deposited on the surface of separator and Li-anode coupled with $\text{TiO}_2\text{-air/S}$ (Fig. S15e and f), possibly due to the shuttling of polysulfide intermediates.

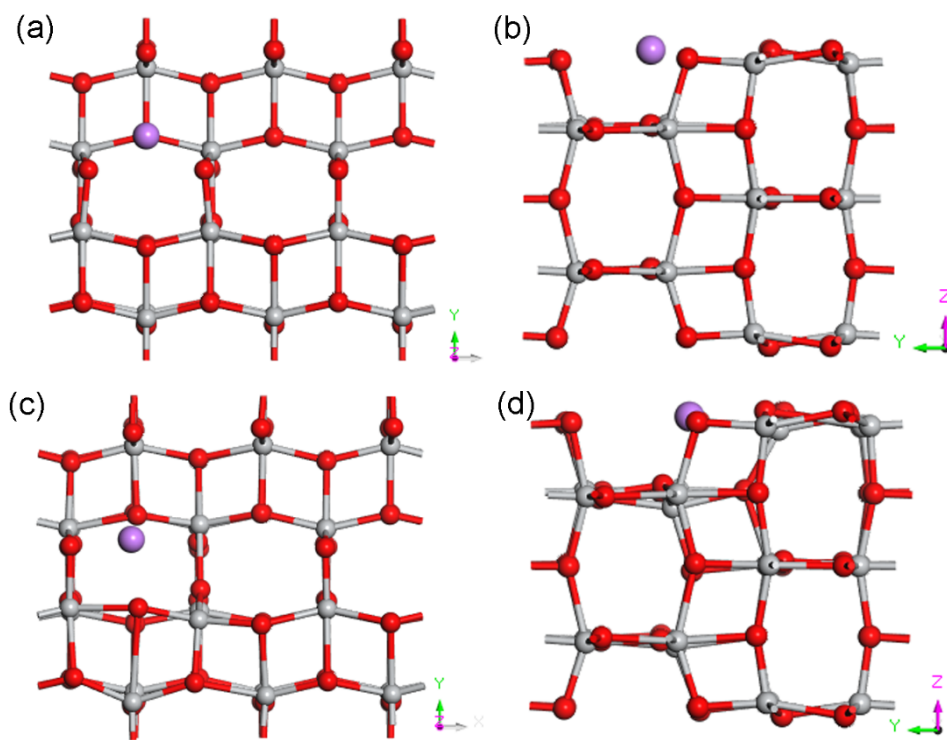


Fig. S16 Optimized adsorption positions of Li on anatase (100) slab surface of (a, b) without and with (c, d) V_O . (a, c) top view, (b, d) side view. The grey, red, and pink balls represent Ti, O, and Li, respectively.

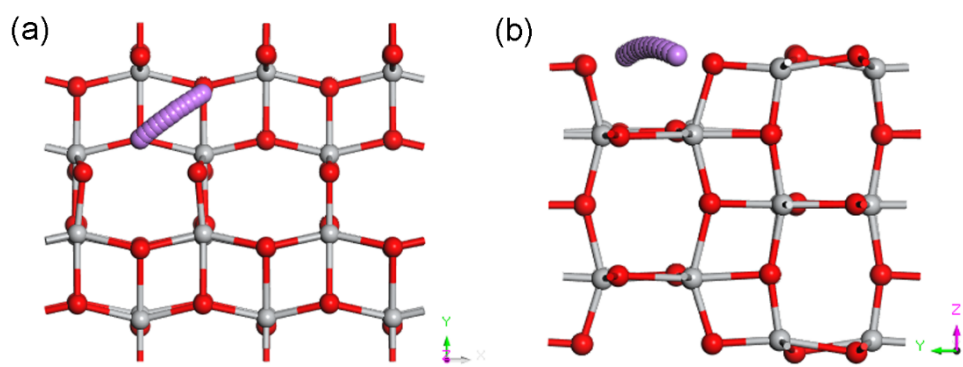


Fig. S17 Li diffusion paths on TiO₂ (100) slab without $V_o^{\bullet\bullet}$. (a) top and (b) side view.

Table S1. Summary of pore characteristics of the as-synthesized samples.

	TiO ₂ -Ar	TiO ₂ -air	TiO ₂ -Ar/S	TiO ₂ -air/S
BET (m ² g ⁻¹)	118	121	1.3	1.2
Pore volume (cm ³ g ⁻¹)	0.58	0.6	-	-
Average pore size (nm)	9.4	10.6	-	-

Table S2. Rate performance comparison of our work with recent literature of Li-S batteries using other cathode hosts.

Cathode hosts	Capacity (mA h g⁻¹) 0.5 C	Capacity (mA h g⁻¹) 1 C	Capacity (mA h g⁻¹) 2 C	Capacity (mA h g⁻¹) 5 C
TiO₂ with V_o** (This work)	999	712	571	401
Hollow C@TiO ₂ @C ⁸	800	630	560	NA
Graphene aerogel/TiO ₂ ⁹	707	664	606	333(4 C)
TiO ₂ @graphene+C ¹⁰	682	534	426	165(3 C)
Magneli Ti _n O _{2n-1} @C ¹¹	801	700	NA	NA
mesoporous TiO ₂ ¹²	576	520	445	NA
C@Ru particles ¹³	790	610	420	NA
TiO ₂ -TiN junction ¹⁴	710	600	480	NA
graphene/SnS ₂ /TiO ₂ ¹⁵	697	563	499	306
rGO ¹⁶	900	750	600	230
3DNG/TiO ₂ ¹⁷	1000	800	600	200
N-C/MoS ₂ /CNT ¹⁸	906	801.8	671.6	NA
MoS ₂ /hierarchical C spheres ¹⁹	902	775	700	NA
MoS ₂ /rGO ²⁰	860	750	660	NA
SnS ₂ dots/Graphene ²¹	650	514	412	NA
C nanofibers/MnO ₂ ²²	859	565	NA	NA
Co-VN@C ²³	820	730	650	490

NA: not available

Table S3. Cyclability comparison of our work with other work of Li-S cells using other cathode hosts.

Cathode hosts	Current rate (C)	Cycle number	Retained capacity (mA h g⁻¹)	Retention ratio (%)
TiO₂ with V_o** (This work)	0.2	100	900	61
TiO₂ with V_o** (This work)	1.0	500	538	59
Magneli Ti _n O _{2n-1} @C ¹¹	1.0	500	425	60
graphene/SnS ₂ /TiO ₂ ¹⁵	0.2	100	739	65
MoS ₂ /rGO ²⁴	1.0	300	480	55
Graphene/Pt ²⁵	0.2	100	~700	~64
TiS ₂ ²⁶	0.3	100	~800	~50
rGO ¹⁶	0.2	100	~700	~58
MoS ₂ /rGO ²⁰	1.0	300	480	55

NA: not available

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