Two-Photon-Pumped Perovskite Semiconductor Nanocrystal Lasers

Yanqing Xu,†‡§ Qi Chen,†‡§ Chunfeng Zhang,*,†‡§ Rui Wang,† Hua Wu,‖ Xiaoyu Zhang,‖ Guichuan Xing,‖ William W. Yu,‖ Xiaoyong Wang,† Yu Zhang,⁎‖ and Min Xiao*,†‡§

†National Laboratory of Solid State Microstructures, School of Physics, and Collaborative Innovation Center of Advanced Microstructures, Nanjing University, Nanjing 210093, China
‡Synergetic Innovation Center in Quantum Information and Quantum Physics, University of Science and Technology of China, Hefei, Anhui 230026, China
§State Key Laboratory on Integrated Optoelectronics and College of Electronic Science and Engineering, Jilin University, Changchun 130012, China
‖Key Laboratory of Flexible Electronics & Institute of Advanced Materials, Jiangsu National Synergistic Innovation Center for Advanced Materials, Nanjing Tech University, 30 South Puzhu Road, Nanjing 211816, P.R. China
#Department of Physics, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas 72701, United States

Supporting Information

ABSTRACT: Two-photon-pumped lasers have been regarded as a promising strategy to achieve frequency up-conversion for situations where the condition of phase matching required by conventional approaches cannot be fulfilled. However, their practical applications have been hindered by the lack of materials holding both efficient two-photon absorption and ease of achieving population inversion. Here, we show that this challenge can be tackled by employing colloidal nanocrystals of perovskite semiconductors. We observe highly efficient two-photon absorption (with a cross section of 2.7 × 10^4 GM) in toluene solutions of CsPbBr_3 nanocrystals that can excite large optical gain (>500 cm^-1) in thin films. We have succeeded in demonstrating stable two-photon-pumped lasing at a remarkable low threshold by coupling CsPbBr_3 nanocrystals with microtubule resonators. Our findings suggest perovskite nanocrystals can be used as excellent gain medium for high-performance frequency-up-conversion lasers toward practical applications.

INTRODUCTION

Visible lasing achieved with infrared multiphoton pumping has been proposed as an alternative approach for frequency up-conversion,1−13 which is viable for applications of three-dimensional material fabrication and biomedical photonics owing to the merits of spatially confined excitation and no phase-matching requirement.1,14,15 However, such new type of lasers have strict demands on the optical properties of the gain media, i.e. large optical gain with highly efficient multiphoton absorption, which limit the available lasing materials to certain selective organic dyes,1−4 polymers,5,6 and inorganic semiconductor nanostructures.5−11,16 Among those applicable systems, zero-dimensional CdSe nanocrystals (NCs) exhibit excellent performances6−8,10,11,16 benefiting from the high photoluminescence (PL) efficiency (>80%)17,18 and a relatively large cross section of two-photon absorption (10^3−10^4 GM, 1 GM = 10^{-50} cm^4 s).19,20 Nevertheless, efficient two-photon-pumped optical gain in CdSe NCs can only be achieved when the pumping power exceeds a relatively high threshold value (typically, >5 mJ cm^-2).6,7,9,11

Recently, perovskite lead halide semiconductors have emerged as an excellent family of materials for optoelectronic applications which have attracted tremendous attention for their exceptional performances in solar cells and photodetectors.21−28 This new class of semiconductors have low density of midgap trap states,29 long carrier diffusion length,30−32 and high PL efficiency,33 making them also promising for applications in light-emitting diodes and lasers.16,21,33−37 Colloidal nanostructures of perovskite semiconductors have recently been synthesized to further promote their light-emitting performance by the aid of the quantum confinement effect.38−47 Notably, the amplified spontaneous emission (ASE) and lasing from NCs of cesium lead halide (CsPbX_3, X= Cl, Br, and I) have recently been demonstrated with a low threshold under one-photon pumping.45 In comparison to the conventional CdSe NCs, the absorption cross section of CsPbX_3 NCs is about 2 orders of magnitude larger, indicating strong light−matter interaction in the perovskite semiconductor NCs.45,46 The emission color can be tuned with a simple procedure of anion exchange without modifying the size-dependent properties,40,42 making CsPbX_3 NCs particularly suitable for color-tuning applications.

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In this paper, we report the feasibility of using perovskite semiconductor NCs to tackle current challenges facing the two-photon-pumped lasers. In a model system of CsPbBr$_3$ NCs, we have observed a large cross section of two-photon absorption at 800 nm ($\sim 2.7 \times 10^6$ GM). Two-photon-pumped optical gain is explicitly observed by employing ultrafast transient absorption (TA) spectroscopy, which can support ASE in CsPbBr$_3$ NCs. The puriﬁcation step was performed by vacuum overnight to evaporate the solvent. More details are available in SI.

**Experimental Section**

**Sample preparation.** Colloidal CsPbBr$_3$ NCs were synthesized with an approach modified from the single-step technique developed by Kovalenko and co-workers. The purified NCs were dispersed in toluene solvent with the density of NCs carefully calibrated (For details, see Supporting Information SI). Quantum efﬁciency of PL emission is above 60% as characterized with an integrating sphere.

The NC sample has been characterized by transmission electron microscopy (TEM) and X-ray diffraction (XRD). A quartz cuvette (0.1 mm thick) ﬁlled by toluene solution of CsPbBr$_3$ NCs (2 $\mu$M) was employed for $z$-scan measurement. For TA spectroscopic experiments, thin NC ﬁlms were fabricated by spin coating with thickness controlled by spinning rate and solution concentration. To demonstrate ASE, thick ﬁlms of CsPbBr$_3$ NCs were prepared by drop-casting CsPbBr$_3$ NCs on glass substrates. Thicknesses of the NC ﬁlms were checked by proﬁlometer. The system of gain media coupled to microcavity resonators is formed by drawing concentrated toluene solutions of NCs into microcapillary tubes. The samples were left in vacuum overnight to evaporate the solvent. More details are available in SI.

**Optical characterizations.** The standard optical characterizations for steady optical properties of the prepared samples are described in SI. For TA spectroscopy, pump pulses at 800 nm (Libra, Coherent, 1 kHz, 90 fs) and each data point. The angle between the polarizations of pump and probe beam was set at the magic angle. The ASE and lasing characterizations were performed with two-photon excitations by femtosecond pulses at 800 nm from a Ti:sapphire regenerative ampliﬁer (Libra, Coherent, 1 kHz, 90 fs) under ambient environment. For VSL measurements, the beam was focused into a stripe by a cylindrical lens with a focal length of 10 cm. To demonstrate lasing, the emission from the NC-implanted microcapillary tube was collected normal to the tube with an objective lens. The emission was then routed to a monochromator (Acton 2500i, Princeton Instrument) and analyzed with a liquid-nitrogen-cooled charge-coupled device with spectral resolution of 0.1 nm.

**Results and Discussion**

Figure 1A shows the morphology of CsPbBr$_3$ NCs characterized by TEM. The sizes of the cubic shaped NCs are comparable to the excitonic Bohr radius ($\sim 7$ nm) and results in a clear quantum conﬁnement effect, as evidenced by the bandgap offset and the recent demonstrations of single-photon emission from single CsPbBr$_3$ NCs. CsPbBr$_3$ NCs exhibit cubic structure at room temperature, as characterized by high-resolution XRD.
resolution TEM (Inset, Figure 1A) and X-ray diffraction (Figure 1C). The excitonic absorption spectrum shows a narrow excitonic peak at 505 nm (Figure 1D). The cross section of linear absorption at 400 nm ($\sigma^{(1)}$) is evaluated to be $\sim 1.2 \times 10^{-13}$ cm$^{-2}$ (Details are available in SI). The excitonic PL emission can be generated under either one-photon or two-photon excitation. Figure 1E compares the normalized PL spectra recorded from a drop-cast film with pulse excitations at 400 and 800 nm, respectively. The PL intensity excited at 800 nm shows a quadratic power dependence when the excitation fluence is relatively low (Inset, Figure 1E), confirming two-photon absorption to be the primary excitation pathway. The PL emission excited at 800 nm is on the red side of PL excited at 400 nm with a slightly longer decay lifetime (Figure S4, SI). Nevertheless, the reabsorption effect in thin films should not be as significant as that in single crystals. Other factors with divergent relaxation pathways relevant to different selection rules for one- and two-photon excitation processes may be involved, which deserves in-depth study in the future.

Figure 1F presents a z-scan curve measured on the sample of toluene solution of CsPbBr$_3$ NCs with a peak intensity of 100 GW/cm$^2$ together with the control experiment on the solvent itself. A thin quartz cuvette (0.1 mm thickness) was chosen to satisfy the widely-used approximation established by Sheikbahae et al. [Details available in SI]. The cross section of two-photon absorption ($\sigma^{(2)}$) is estimated to be $\sim 2.7 \pm 1.0 \times 10^6$ GM at 800 nm in CsPbBr$_3$ NCs, which is further confirmed by directly measuring the power-dependent nonlinear transmission on solutions (Figure S2, SI) and z-scan experiments on films (Figure S1, SI). This value is over two-orders of magnitude larger than that of the CdSe NCs emitting similar color [Figure S3A, SI]. Recently, the two-photon absorption coefficient in bulk crystals of CH$_3$NH$_2$PbBr$_3$ was found to be comparable to that in bulk CdS semiconductor. The value in CsPbBr$_3$ NCs, if scaled in volume, is much higher than CH$_3$NH$_2$PbBr$_3$ crystal. Such divergence is probably caused by the different oscillator strengths of interband transitions due to different cations in the materials of CH$_3$NH$_2$PbBr$_3$ and CsPbBr$_3$ besides the quantum size effect. The values of $\sigma^{(2)}$ in different CsPbX$_3$ NCs are also evaluated [Figure S3, SI]. With increasing excitonic absorption energy, the cross section

Figure 2. TA study of optical gain with two-photon excitation. (A, B) TA spectroscopic data of a NC film with two-photon excitation at 0.3 and 1.5 mJ cm$^{-2}$, respectively. The SE feature is manifested as a pronounced bleach signal with high fluence pumping (B). (C) Development of optical gain in pump-dependent nonlinear absorption spectra recorded at a delay time of $\sim$5 ps. Inset: a magnified view of the spectroscopic signature of optical gain pumped by two-photon excitation. (D) Pump-fluence-dependent nonlinear absorption changes ($-\Delta \alpha/\alpha_0$) measured at 518 nm, and 527 nm, respectively. (E) The TA kinetics probed at 527 nm consists of the components of SE and ESA with two-photon excitation at 1.5 mJ cm$^{-2}$. The dashed line indicates the gain threshold. The lifetime with gain above the loss is labeled as $\tau_g = 35$ ps. (F) Schematic diagram of the mechanism of optical gain with two-photon excitation.
(α(2)) decreases as a result of the bandgap effect.53 The cross section per volume in CsPbBr3 NCs is also one-order of magnitude higher than that of CdSe NCs [Figure S3B, SI], suggesting the volume effect is not the only effect responsible for the efficient two-photon absorption in perovskite NCs [Figure S3, SI]. Despite such a significant divergence in the cross sections of two-photon absorption for CsPbBr3 and CdSe NCs, the ratio between two- and one-photon absorption cross sections in CsPbBr3 NCs (at the order of 10−31 cm2 s) is comparable to that in CdSe NCs. In another words, the origin of such large two-photon absorption should be similar to that for one-photon absorption in CsPbBr3 NCs whose magnitude is about two-orders of magnitude higher than that of CdSe NCs due to the strong oscillator strength of interband transitions.45,48

When NCs are pumped into high-energy excited states, the optical gain becomes possible if the population inversion is built up when the relaxations to the emissive states are faster than the removal processes like Auger recombination and other recombination pathways. We employ ultrafast TA spectroscopy to track the development of optical gain in the NC film under two-photon excitation. The light amplification/attenuation of the NC film is probed with a broadband white-light supercontinuum source which is variably delayed with respect to the pump pulses. Considering the absorbance before and after two-photon excitation to be a0 and α, optical gain is achieved when the two-photon-induced negative absorption (−Δα = α0 − α) becomes greater than α0 (i.e., −Δα/α0 > 1).

Figures 2A and 2B plot the values of Δα probed near the band gap under weak and strong fluence excitations, respectively. Briefly, the signal of Δα consists of a major band of the ground-state bleaching (GSB) close to the excitonic absorption peak, a long-lived photoinduced absorption (PIA) feature in the short-wavelength range (<490 nm) and another short-lived PIA peak at 520 nm. The photoinduced bleaching (PIB) feature at 510−530 nm becomes profound with increasing excitation fluence, which is probably caused by stimulated emission (SE) (Figure 2B and 2C). The nonlinear absorption spectra recorded at a delay time of 5 ps show the emergence of an optical gain when excitation fluence exceeds the threshold value of ~0.7 mJ/cm2 (Figure 2D). Notably, the optical gain appears in the wavelength range of 525−535 nm, although the bleaching signal covers a much broader wavelength range (Inset, Figure 2C). The value of Δα/α0 probed at the PL center wavelength is below the gain threshold, even though the optical gain at 527 nm gets saturated with the pump fluence above 1.2 mJ cm−2 (Figure 2D).

Next let us analyze the temporal dynamics of optical gain for more insights. Figure 2E plots the TA signal (−Δα/α0) probed at 527 nm. Upon pulse excitation, a PIA feature simultaneously appears followed by the buildup of absorption bleach in the first 10 ps. With excitation at 800 nm, the PIA signal may have contributions from the absorption of the excited states (ESA) that are populated simultaneously by two-photon excitation and/or the coherent nondegenerate two-photon absorption (i.e., simultaneous absorption of a pump photon and a probe photon). The PIA signal shows an exponential decay with a lifetime of ~0.6 ps, suggesting the PIA signature to be mainly contributed by the ESA from hot-excited states populated by two-photon excitation. We find that the onset of this TA signal can be modeled as a summation of ESA and SE components with the same lifetime parameter of ~0.6 ps (Figure 2E). The lifetime of optical gain (τg, i.e., gain > loss) is ~35 ps which is primarily limited by the loss level and the Auger recombination induced by the multie exciton effect [Figure S6]. The kinetics of optical gain can be summarized in Figure 2F as: Two-photon absorption pumps the electrons to the hot states which relax to the excitonic emission states with a lifetime of ~0.6 ps. This rate is much faster than the recombination process from the emissive states, enabling the population accumulation at the emissive states responsible for the detected optical gain. It is worth noting that the population at the emissive excitonic states may also induce an absorption in the emission band, which was regarded as a major limitation preventing the development of optical gain in solutions of CdSe NCs.54 This effect also causes a negative influence on the gain generation in CsPbBr3 NCs as clearly seen in the TA data measured on the solution sample (Figure S5, SI). The ESA signal from emissive excitonic states is much more distinct in the solution sample than in the NC films (Figure S5, SI), which is probably due to the slow buildup of gain due to the low filling factor of NCs in solution.54 Nevertheless, the SE signal is quite efficient that can overcome the ESA relevant to the excitonic states with increasing excitation fluence, manifesting as the PIB signal in both film and solution samples (Figure S5, SI).

We incorporate the optical gain in a slab waveguide to demonstrate the ASE from thick NC films. By drop-casting colloidal solutions of CsPbBr3 NCs on glass substrates, films with thicknesses of 300−400 nm are made. Figure 3A shows the edge emission spectra recorded from a thick NC film under different fluence excitations. ASE is observed with clear evidence including the gain-induced line width narrowing (Inset, Figure 3A) and threshold behavior in power dependence of the emission intensity (Figure 3B). The peak of ASE at 533 nm is slightly red-shifted with respect to the gain revealed by ultrafast TA spectroscopy, which is probably caused by the contrast of dielectric constant in the film and solution. The threshold for ASE is ~0.8 mJ cm−2 which is about one-order of magnitude lower than that for CdSe NC films with similar emitting color under two-photon excitations.6,7

The net modal gain is a key figure-of-merit for demonstrating lasers. We evaluate optical gain using the well-established VSL method,37,45 where the excitation beam is focused to be a strip line by a cylindrical lens whose length is controlled by an adjustable slit. Figure 4A shows the emission spectra recorded...
from a spin-cast film (~300 nm thick) with different stripe lengths under the excitation fluence of ~1.5 mJ cm$^{-2}$. The ASE peak emerges when the stripe length is longer than 0.16 mm, suggesting that a certain level of optical amplification is required to overcome the propagation losses. Figure 4B plots the intensity at the ASE peak as a function of the stripe length. We adopt the model describing the stripe-length-dependent ASE intensity as

$$I = \frac{1}{g} I_0 = \frac{1}{g} \left( e^{gL} - 1 \right)/L,$$

where $I$, $I_0$, $g$, and $L$ are the ASE intensity, the modal gain, and the stripe length, respectively. Fitting the measured data to the model, the modal gain coefficient is then estimated to be ~580 cm$^{-1}$ (Figure 4B). The modal gain coefficients measured in several different samples are in the range of 500–580 cm$^{-1}$. This is among the largest values obtained for two-photon-pumped optical gain. Recently, efficient two-photon-pumped optical gain was obtained in CdSe/ZnS nanorods and nanoplatelets, in which, the cross section of linear absorption can be up to the order of 10$^{13}$ cm$^{-2}$, suggesting that the strong light–matter interaction of linear absorption is probably also critical for achieving efficient optical gain under two-photon pumping.

Finally, we demonstrate frequency up-converted lasers by incorporating the perovskite NCs into optical resonators of glass microcapillary tubes. The NC microcavity is fabricated by drawing toluene solution of CsPbBr$_3$ NCs into a microcapillary tube. Figure 5A displays the fluorescence image of a lasing cylindrical microcapillary tube incorporated with CsPbBr$_3$ NCs. Inset: the WG modes supported by the microring resonator. (B) Two-photon-pumped PL spectra recorded with excitation fluence below (0.7 mJ cm$^{-2}$, black) and above threshold (1.0 mJ cm$^{-2}$, green), respectively. The inset shows the emission intensity as a function of excitation fluence.

High lasing threshold has been a major drawback that limits the applications of two-photon-pumped lasers. Considering the colloidal nature of perovskite NCs, we compare the measured threshold values for two-photon-pumped lasers in CsPbBr$_3$ NCs with previously demonstrated systems of cadmium chalcogenide colloidal NCs. ASE provides a benchmark for comparing different material sets on their suitability and performance for lasing applications. The demonstrated threshold for ASE pumped by two-photon excitation with CsPbBr$_3$ NC films (0.8 mJ cm$^{-2}$) is about one order of magnitude lower than that for spherical CdSe NCs. Recently, there is a rapidly growing interest in manipulating optical properties of CdSe nanocrystals with different shapes and dimensionality.

Figure 5. Two-photon-pumped microring lasing from CsPbBr$_3$ NCs. (A) Fluorescence image of a lasing cylindrical microcapillary tube incorporated with CsPbBr$_3$ NCs. Inset: the WG modes supported by the microring resonator. (B) Two-photon-pumped PL spectra recorded with excitation fluence below (0.7 mJ cm$^{-2}$, black) and above threshold (1.0 mJ cm$^{-2}$, green), respectively. The inset shows the emission intensity as a function of excitation fluence.
two-photon excitations is not distinct in the work of Wang et al., but can be clearly observed in the current work [Figure 1E]. Moreover, the gain mechanism and laser design proposed in our current work may also apply to other perovskite NC samples with comparable density of excitons.

In type-I CdSe NCs, the presence of multiple excitons in single NCs has been regarded as a prerequisite for gain generation due to the spin degeneracy of lowest excitonic states. Single-exciton optical gain can be achieved by engineering materials to break the degeneracy of the emissive excited states. In conventional NCs, only more than one photoexcited excitons per NC can support a detectable optical gain. Theoretically, the high symmetric cubic phase of the perovskite CsPbBr3 NCs may result in multifold degeneracy for the lowest excitonic transition. However, the spin degeneracy can be lifted by the strong spin–orbit interaction relevant to the heavy lead atoms in CsPbBr3 NCs. These features suggest that the gain mechanism in CsPbBr3 NCs may be different from CdSe NCs, which needs more in-depth studies in the future. In this work, with the threshold value of 0.8 mJ cm\(^{-2}\), the average density of excitons per NC (\(\sim N = \sigma_{\text{eff}} P^2 / \tau_{\text{u}}\)) generated by two-photon excitation is estimated to be 1.6 which is similar to the threshold density of \(\sim 1.5\) pumped by single-photon excitation (Figure S7, SI). These facts imply that the multie exciton effect may also be important for the gain generated in CsPbBr3 NCs, which is consistent with the measured pump-fluence dependent TA traces (Figure S6, SI). The exciton dynamics probed at 505 nm with different pump fluences above threshold shows a remarkably shortened lifetime as a clear evidence of Auger recombination due to the multie exciton effect, which can also explain the declined slope of the fluence-dependent emission intensity prior to reaching the threshold (Figure 3B). The involvement of multie exciton effect may also cause the saturation of the ASE intensity under a relatively low fluence (\(\sim 1.5\) mJ cm\(^{-2}\), Figure 3B) with the exciton density about three times of the threshold value since the two-photon excitation is quadratically dependent on the incident fluence. The lifetime of a bie exciton is estimated to be \(\sim 218\) ps (Figure S6, SI). The transition energy should be less than that of single exciton due to bie exciton binding, which probably explains the red shift of the optical gain with respect to the PL emission. Nevertheless, the possible contribution ofsingle exciton cannot be fully excluded at the current stage. For instance, Yukun et al. reported the optical gain in similar NCs with average excitons of \(\sim 0.5\) per NC under one-photon excitation. The lasing in the multie exciton regime observed here may be explained as a consequence of extrinsic losses in CsPbBr3 NCs such as the Urbach tail\(^{15}\) relevant to imperfections in the crystalline structure.

In summary, we have demonstrated large optical gain and lasing under two-photon excitation in perovskite semiconductor NCs. The superior performance with a remarkably high gain coefficient and low threshold suggests that perovskite semiconductor NCs are particularly suitable for applications in two-photon-pumped lasers arising from the highly efficient PL emission and giant cross section of two-photon absorption. Considering the color tunability and the processability of colloidal gain media, perovskite semiconductor NCs can be coupled into a variety of microresonators to achieve miniaturized lasers covering broad spectral bands for practical applications. The stability has also been regarded as a critical issue facing the optoelectronic devices with perovskite semiconductors. Nevertheless, the two-photon-pumped perovskite NC lasers remain to be active for the time window of \(\sim 10^8\) shots in our experiments under ambient environment [Figure S9, SI], which might benefit from the absence of organic cations in the all inorganic NCs used here. The performance may be further improved by engineering the samples with the pump laser coupled into the resonators, since two-photon absorption is quadratically dependent on the local field.

**ASSOCIATED CONTENT**

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications website at DOI: 10.1021/jacs.5b12662.

Additional experimental details, characterization of two-photon absorption in the toluene solution of CsPbBr3 NCs, time-resolved PL spectra under one-photon/two-photon excitation, TA characterization of the toluene solution of CsPbBr3 NCs, Auger recombination, single-photon-pumped ASE, laser stability, and control experiments on CdSe/ZnS NCs. (PDF)

**AUTHOR INFORMATION**

**Corresponding Authors**

*cfzhang@nju.edu.cn
*yuzhang@jlu.edu.cn
*mxiao@uark.edu

**Author Contributions**

The authors Y.X. and Q.C. equally contributed to this work.

**Notes**

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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