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# Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> Nanoparticles Wrapped in Multi-walled Carbon Nanotubes With Enhanced Lithium Storage Capability

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We have designed a novel hybrid nanostructure by coating Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles with multi-walled carbon nanotubes to enhance the lithium storage capability of Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>. The strategy to prepare Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>@MWCNTs involves the synthesis of Fe nanoparticles wrapped in MWCNTs, followed by the oxidation of Fe nanoparticles under carbon dioxide. When used as the anode in a Li-ion battery, this hybrid material (70.32 wt% carbon nanotubes, 29.68 wt% Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>) showed a reversible discharge capacity of 515 mAhg<sup>-1</sup> after 50 cycles at a density of 100 mAhg<sup>-1</sup> and the capacity based on Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles was calculated as 1147 mAhg<sup>-1</sup>. Three factors are responsible for the superior performance: (1) The hollow interiors of MWCNTs provide enough spaces for the accommodation of large volume expansion of inner Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles, which can improve the stability of electrode; (2) The MWCNTs increase the overall conductivity of the anode; (3) A stable solid electrolyte interface film formed on the surface of MWCNTs may reduce capacity fading.

With a fast-developing technology in electric energy storage, Li-ion batteries (LIBs) have become the predominant power source for portable electronics due to their high energy density, long lifespan and environment benignity<sup>1,2</sup>. Up to now, although great progress has been achieved by using graphite as anode material for commercial LIBs, the lower theoretical capacity (372 mAhg<sup>-1</sup>) of graphite limits its further practical application<sup>3-5</sup>. Transition metal oxides, as anode materials for LIBs, have gained significant momentum due to their higher theoretical capacities than graphite by the formation of metal simple substance through a chemical conversion mechanism<sup>6,7</sup>. Among these transition metal oxides materials, Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> is believed to be a promising candidate to replace graphite because of its high theoretical capacity (1007 mAhg<sup>-1</sup>), low cost, ease of fabrication and environmental benignity<sup>8-10</sup>. In principle, the lithium storage capacity of Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> is attributed to the reversible conversion reaction between Li<sup>+</sup> ions and Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, leading to the formation of Fe NPs in a Li<sub>2</sub>O matrix. Generally, the conversion reaction will result in fast capacity fading of Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> due to the drastic volume variation and severe destruction of the electrode upon electrochemical cycling. In addition, the low conductivity of Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> also induces additional performance degradation, especially at high current densities<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, during the cycle process, the solid electrolyte interface (SEI) films formed at the interface between Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> and liquid electrolyte can be broken owing to the shrink of Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> anode materials. When the fresh Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> is exposed to the electrolyte again, the thicker of SEI film will increase with each charge/discharge cycle, which obviously leads to a degradation in battery performance<sup>12</sup>. In order to solve puzzle of Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> anode materials, all kinds of approach including the synthesis of hollow-structured Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> have been attempted<sup>13-15</sup>. Although the hollow structure can provide high surface area, short lithium diffusion length to enhance the rate capacity and extra free space to alleviate the volume variation, it is still a challenge to deal with low conductivity and unstable SEI films of Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> anode materials<sup>16</sup>.

Fabrication of hybrid nanomaterials with carbon coating has been considered as one of the most effective ways towards high-performance electrode materials for LIBs, especially for the electrode materials with volume variation during the charge-discharge process<sup>17</sup>. Under the stimulus of their special properties, various carbon-mixed Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> anode materials have been reported<sup>18-21</sup>. Due to their porous structure and excellent electrical conductivity, carbon nanotubes (CNTs) are widely used in the field of preparation of hybrid electrode materials. For example, Zhou et al. have prepared a nanosized Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> decorated single-walled carbon nanotube (SWCNT)



membrane as a high-performance flexible anode for LIBs, showing a discharge capacity of  $801 \text{ mAhg}^{-1}$  after 90 cycles. The highly conducting SWCNT network in membrane not only facilitates electron conduction of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ , but also buffers the strain of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ <sup>22</sup>. Lou's group have synthesized carbon-coated  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  hollow nanohorns on the CNTs backbone for superior lithium storage capability. The CNTs backbone and the outmost continuous carbon nanocoating may serve as a structural buffering layer to cushion the internal strain. This hybrid nanomaterial demonstrates a discharge capacity of  $820 \text{ mAhg}^{-1}$  after 100 cycles, while  $\text{CNT@Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  without carbon coating has a discharge capacity of  $660 \text{ mAhg}^{-1}$ <sup>23</sup>. In addition to the well conductivity, CNTs have other advantages in the application of electrode for LIBs. The hollow interior of CNTs is an ideal carrier for metal oxide NPs, which could provide enough inner space for the large volume expansion of metal oxide NPs in charge/discharge cycling of batteries. Furthermore, a stable SEI film could be formed during lithiation and delithiation because the electrolyte will contact with the outer surface of CNTs. Therefore, the purpose of this work is to design a novel hybrid material with discontinuous  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  NPs wrapped in MWCNTs and investigated its potential application as an anode material in lithium ion batteries.

## Results

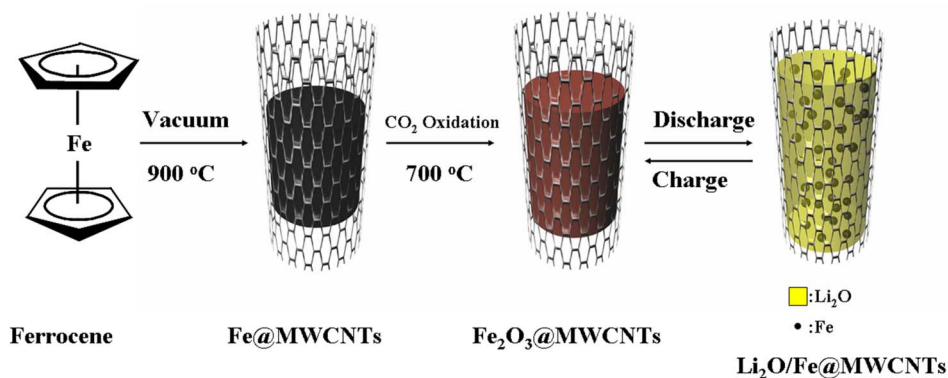
Fig. 1 schematically illustrates the procedure to generate  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ @MWCNTs. First,  $\text{Fe@MWCNTs}$  are synthesized by placing dried ferrocene in a vacuum tube, which has been reported by our group<sup>24,25</sup>. Firstly, Fe NPs are generated in the decomposition process of ferrocene, then the chemical bonds of C–H are ruptured and the graphitic shells are formed due to the Fe NPs acting as catalysts<sup>26</sup>. Second, in order to obtain the hybrid nanostructure of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ @MWCNTs, the  $\text{Fe@MWCNTs}$  were conducted at high temperature ( $700^\circ\text{C}$ ) using carbon dioxide as surrounding environment for oxidation of Fe NPs and for protection of MWCNTs<sup>27</sup>. When used as anode material for LIBs, the  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  NPs react with lithium ions and form Fe NPs in a  $\text{Li}_2\text{O}$  matrix during the discharge process, then reversibly react in the charge process. Owing to the structural stability of MWCNTs and discontinuous distribution of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  NPs, this volume change of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  NPs only occurs in the hollow interior of MWCNTs, which can provide the enough inner space for accommodation of the large volume variation. The larger inner space for enhanced lithium storage capability have been confirmed by previous papers including tin-NPs encapsulated in elastic hollow carbon spheres<sup>28</sup>, Si NPs encapsulated in continuous hollow carbon tubes<sup>29</sup> and hollow carbon nanofiber-encapsulated sulfur<sup>30</sup>. However, compared with above the amorphous carbon coating, MWCNTs will have a relatively stronger conductivity, which obviously enhance conductivity of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  as anode materials.

The crystallographic structure of the hybrid material was analyzed by X-ray diffraction (XRD), shown in Fig. 2(a). In black line ( $\text{Fe@MWCNTs}$ ), a relatively strong peak centred at  $44.8^\circ$  and a weak peak

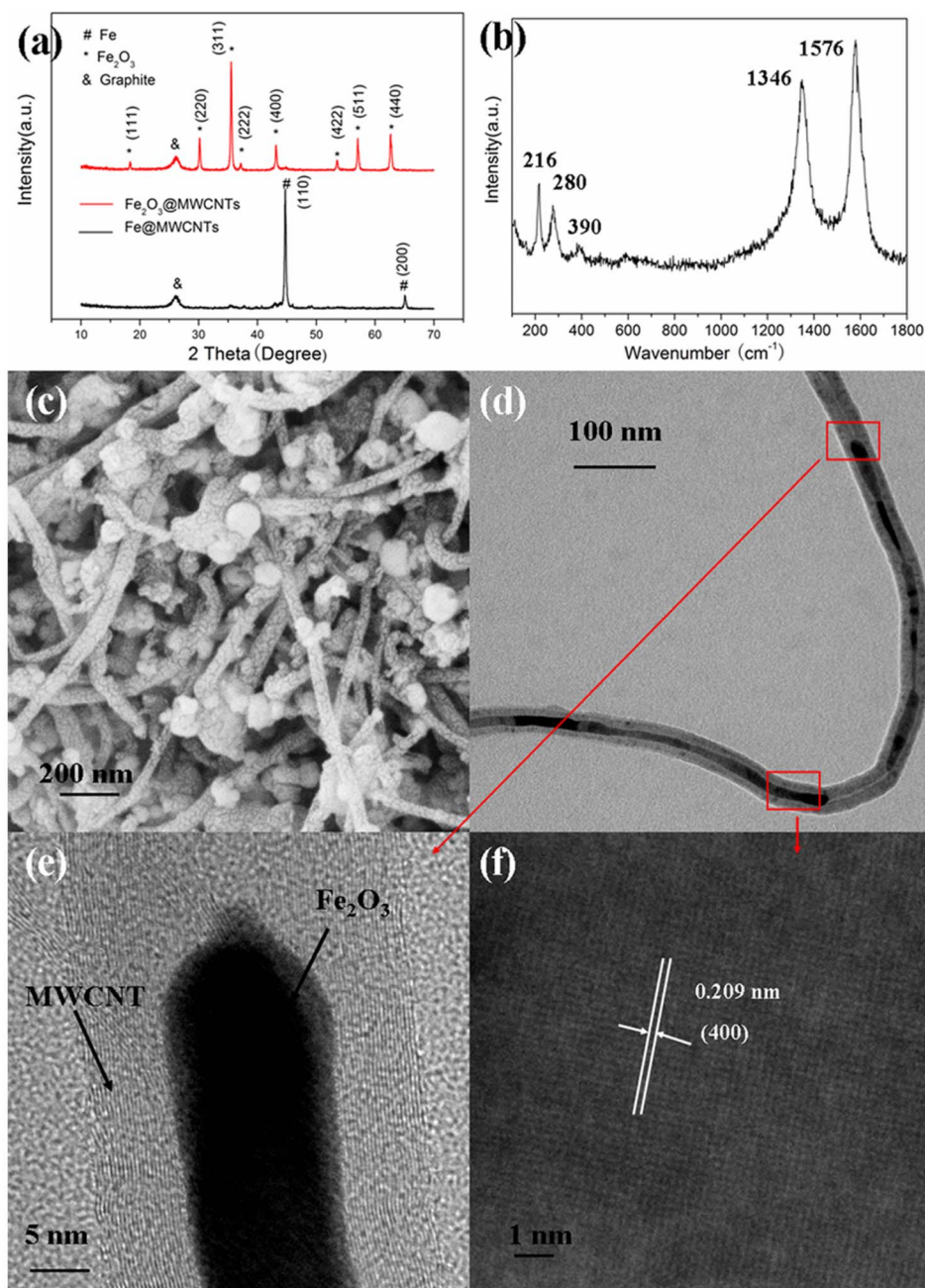
centred at  $65.2^\circ$  are observed, which can be indexed as crystalline Fe (110) and (200) diffractions (JCPDF 89-4186), respectively. A weak broadening diffraction peak at  $26.3^\circ$  is well indexed as the (002) reflection of graphite (JCPDF 75-2078). After high temperature oxidation of  $\text{Fe@MWCNTs}$  using carbon dioxide as oxidant, the sharp diffraction peak at  $18.4^\circ$ ,  $30.3^\circ$ ,  $35.7^\circ$ ,  $37.3^\circ$ ,  $43.3^\circ$ ,  $53.8^\circ$ ,  $57.3^\circ$ ,  $62.9^\circ$  can be obviously found, which correspond well to the (111), (220), (311), (222), (400), (422), (511) and (440) crystal planes of iron oxide (JCPDS file 19-0629,  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ , or JCPDS file 39-1346,  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ ), respectively. However, it is hard to identify the iron oxides  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  or gamma- $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  due to their same spinel structure and similar lattice parameter ( $0.8346 \text{ nm}$  for gamma- $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  and  $0.8396 \text{ nm}$  for  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ )<sup>31</sup>. Simultaneously, the diffraction peaks of Fe disappear and the peak of graphite still remain, which means the completely conversion from  $\text{Fe@MWCNTs}$  to iron oxide@MWCNTs.

Because of the similar XRD pattern of gamma- $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  and  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ , the Raman spectrum was used to further confirm the composition of the hybrid material. Fig. 2(b) shows the Raman spectrum of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ @MWCNTs at the range of  $100\text{--}1900 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ . According to the previous report, the peaks located at  $216 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ ,  $280 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  and  $390 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  should result from one  $\text{A}_{1g}$  mode and two  $\text{E}_g$  modes of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ , respectively<sup>32</sup>. Meanwhile, compared with standard  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  Raman spectrum, a small blue-shift may attribute to the interaction between  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  and MWCNTs<sup>33</sup>. Moreover, the peak at around  $1576 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  involves the in-plane bond stretching motion of pairs of carbon  $\text{sp}^2$  atoms, which also exists in the G mode with  $\text{E}_{2g}$  symmetry. The D mode of graphite around  $1346 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  is related to the degree of disorder in carbon  $\text{sp}^2$  bonded clusters in graphite<sup>24</sup>. Therefore, the two peaks indicate the existence of carbon in the products. In addition, the two peaks can be used to evaluate the extent of carbon-containing defects. From the Raman spectrum, it can be seen that the MWCNTs contain graphitic structures and defects, which may be helpful to enhance the diffusion rate of  $\text{Li}^+$  ions and electronics.

The morphology and microstructure of  $\text{Fe@MWCNTs}$  were examined by SEM and TEM, shown in Fig. S1 and Fig. S2. As shown in Fig. S1, the as-obtained  $\text{Fe@MWCNTs}$  display standard 1D nanostructures. The TEM image shown in Fig. S2(a) reveals that  $\text{Fe@MWCNTs}$  have nanotube structures with discontinuous Fe NPs wrapped in CNTs. When the size of some Fe nanoparticles is larger than the inner diameter of the CNTs, the wrapped parts of CNTs may deform, which can be observed from Fig. S2(a). Moreover, it is interesting to find that these nanotubes have a hemispherical “Fe nanoparticles cap” at each end of the cylinder (Fig. S2(b)), resulting in large number of nanoparticles to be visible within the micrograph field of view<sup>24</sup>. After oxidation, the appearance of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ @MWCNTs had not been changed and remained the 1D nanostructures, which can be clearly seen from the SEM image shown in Fig. 2(c). Furthermore, it can be observed that there are many crevices in the surface of MWCNTs, which is useful to increase the contact area of electrode and electrolyte. The TEM image shown in Fig. 2(d)



**Figure 1** | Schematic illustration of the formation and discharge/charge process of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ @MWCNTs.



**Figure 2** | (a) X-ray diffraction patterns of Fe@MWCNTs and Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>@MWCNTs, (b) Raman spectrum of Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>@MWCNTs, (c) SEM, (d) TEM and (e–f) HRTEM images of Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>@MWCNTs.

illustrates that the Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> NPs are still wrapped in MWCNTs without injuring the wall of MWCNTs. The energy-dispersive X-ray spectrum (Fig. S3) of a single MWCNT indicates the existence of Fe, C and O without other impurity elements. A high-resolution TEM (HRTEM) image shown in Fig. 2(e) clearly demonstrates the graphite layer of carbon nanotube and a 10 nm pore diameter of single MWCNT. Another HRTEM image shown in Fig. 2(f) displays the lattice fringes with a space of 0.209 nm, which can be indexed as (400) lattice plane of Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>. The result of the electron microscopy characterization is of good agreement with XRD and Raman characterizations, confirming the successful preparation of Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>@MWCNTs.

For further investigation of the chemical composition of the as-prepared Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>@MWCNTs, the XPS measurements were carried out. Fig. S4 exhibits a wide scan XPS survey spectrum of Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>@MWCNTs between 0 and 1100 eV. The characteristic peaks of C, Fe,

and O can be indexed clearly. Meanwhile, the spectrum of Fe 2p is shown in Fig. S5, and the peaks at 710.9 eV and 724.5 eV correspond to the Fe 2p<sub>3/2</sub> and Fe 2p<sub>1/2</sub>, respectively<sup>34</sup>. The N<sub>2</sub> absorption/desorption isotherms at 77 K are shown in Fig. S6 and a characteristic of a type IV with type H3 hysteresis loop. The specific surface area calculated with the BET model is 42.55 m<sup>2</sup>g<sup>-1</sup>. The pore size distribution (Fig. S7) has a relatively wide peak of 10 nm, corresponding well with the previous microscopy findings. The mass fraction of Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> and MWCNTs is 29.68% and 70.32% according to the ICP characterization.

## Discussion

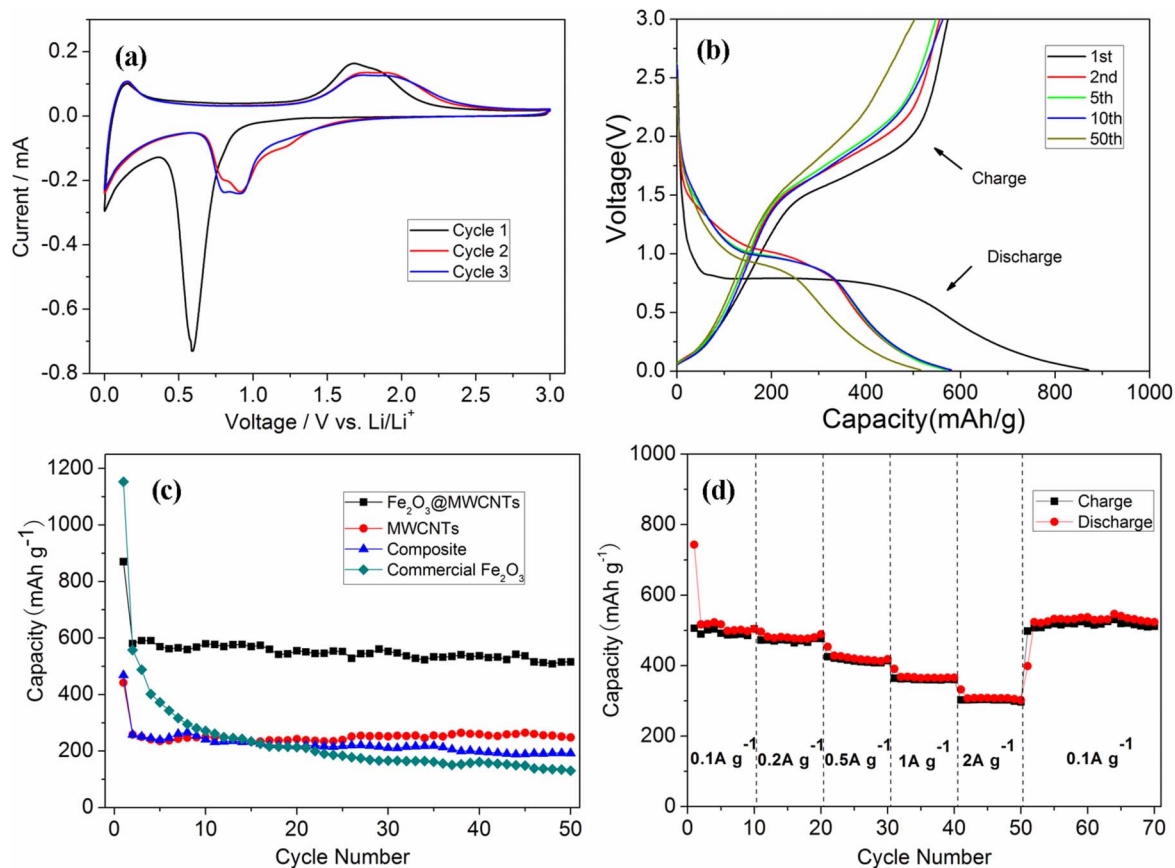
To investigate the electrochemical performance of Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>@MWCNTs, two-electrode 2032 coin cells with Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>@MWCNTs anodes were fabricated with Li metal as the counter electrode. The electrochemical performance of Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>@MWCNTs was firstly



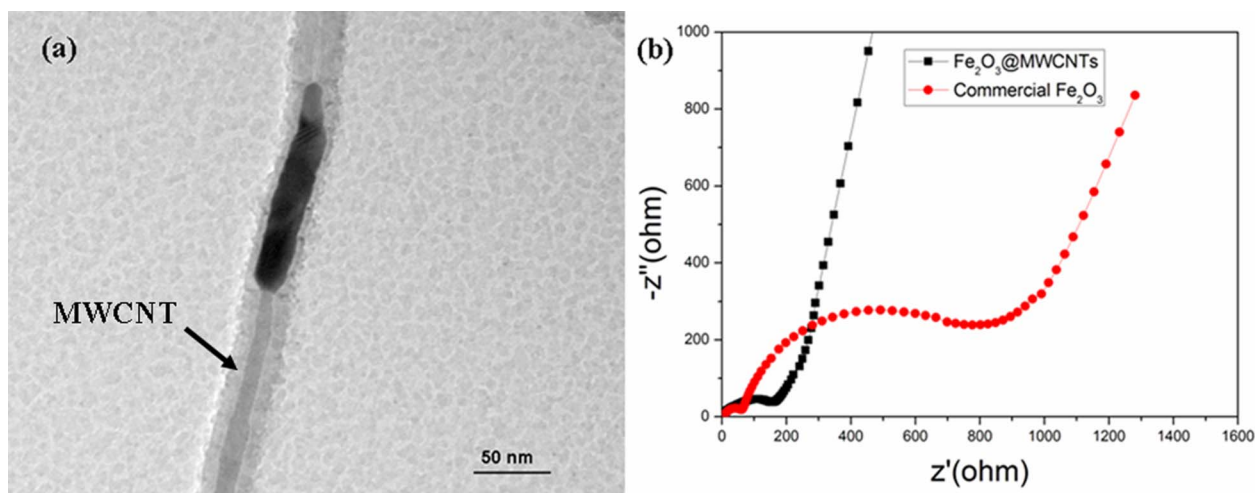


evaluated by cyclic voltammetry (CV) in the 0–3.0 V voltage window at the scan rate of  $0.1 \text{ mV s}^{-1}$  (Fig. 3(a)). It is clearly seen from the CV curves that there is a substantial difference between the first and the subsequent cycles. There is obviously one reduction peak in the potential of 0.6 V, which appears only in the first cycle. This peak corresponds to the  $\text{Li}^+$  ions insertion into  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  and the formation of  $\text{Li}_2\text{O}$ . The first anodic scan shows an extended peak between 1.6 V and 1.9 V, which corresponds to oxidation of Fe to  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$  ions to reform  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ . For the second and third curves, a broad reduction peak at 0.85 V is observed, which indicates the reversibility and capacity stability. This broadening is due to the amorphous nature/crystal structure destruction of the electrode material<sup>34</sup>. Fig. 3(b) shows the discharge and charge voltage profiles of different cycles at a current density of  $100 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$ , in good agreement with the CV measurements. A plateau at 0.75 V can be observed only in the first discharge voltage profile, which means the formation of Fe and  $\text{Li}_2\text{O}$ , corresponding to the peaks in CV curves. In the subsequent discharge profiles, the plateau moves to 0.9 V because of the change of crystalline structure in the first cycle<sup>35</sup>. When the discharged electrode has been charged to 3.0 V, a smooth voltage profile is observed until 1.5 V which is followed by sloping voltage plateau up to 2.0 V and a steep rise up to 3.0 V, implying the regeneration of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ . The discharge and charge capacities of the 1st cycle are 870 and  $573 \text{ mA h g}^{-1}$ , respectively, with an initial coulombic efficiency of 65.9%. The discharge capacity of the 2nd cycle is  $580 \text{ mA h g}^{-1}$ . Such an irreversible capacity ( $290 \text{ mA h g}^{-1}$ ) is attributed to the formation of SEI layer and irreversible electrochemical reactions between lithium ions and electrode material.

To investigate the impact of unique structure of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3@$ MWCNTs on lithium storage capability, the coin cells based on MWCNTs, commercial  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ , the composite of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  and MWCNTs (same mass ratio with  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3@$ MWCNTs) have been assembled and test under the same condition with  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3@$ MWCNTs. The curves of capacity versus cycle number at a current density of  $100 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$  were shown in Fig. 3(c). Compared with the contrast,  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3@$ MWCNTs exhibited a reasonable cycle performance. Despite the capacity decayed in the first cycle, even after 50 cycles, the discharge capacity can retain a value of  $515 \text{ mA h g}^{-1}$ . Simultaneously, the initial coulombic efficiency of 47% recovered to 96% in the second cycle, and maintained almost 95% in the subsequent cycles (Fig. S8). As a comparison, MWCNTs, commercial  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  and the composite only exhibited the 50th discharge capacities of  $248 \text{ mA h g}^{-1}$ ,  $130 \text{ mA h g}^{-1}$  and  $192 \text{ mA h g}^{-1}$ , respectively. Although the discharge capacity of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3@$ MWCNTs is not larger than the previous reports of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3/\text{CNTs}$  composite anode owing to the relatively low loading ratio of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  nanoparticles. However, according to the discharge capacity ( $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3@$ MWCNTs:  $515 \text{ mA h g}^{-1}$ , MWCNTs:  $248 \text{ mA h g}^{-1}$ ) and mass ratio ( $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ : 29.68%, MWCNTs: 70.32%), the discharge capacity contributed by  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  NPs can be calculated as  $1147 \text{ mA h g}^{-1}$  (Fig. S9), which is higher than the previous reports<sup>8–11,13–15,18–21</sup>. This high value is even larger than the theoretical capacity of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  ( $1007 \text{ mA h g}^{-1}$ ), suggesting that such a MWCNTs wrapping structure can enhance the lithium storage capability of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  and ensure the complete reaction between  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  and  $\text{Li}^+$  ions. As mentioned above,  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  NPs react with  $\text{Li}^+$  ions and cause volume change inside MWCNTs.



**Figure 3** | (a) Cyclic voltammetry of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3@$ MWCNTs between 3 and 0 V at a scan rate of  $0.1 \text{ mV s}^{-1}$ , (b) Galvanostatic discharge/charge voltage profiles of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3@$ MWCNTs at a current density of  $100 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$ , (c) Discharge capacities versus cycle number of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3@$ MWCNTs, MWCNTs, the composite and commercial  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  at the current density of  $100 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$  between 3 and 0 V, (d) Discharge and charge capacity of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3@$ MWCNTs at different current densities between 3 and 0 V.



**Figure 4** | (a) TEM image of the  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ @MWCNTs after 50 cycles, (b) Nyquist plots of ac impedance spectra of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ @MWCNTs and commercial  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ .

Furthermore, a stable SEI film can form in the outside of MWCNTs. Thus,  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ @MWCNTs exhibits higher and more stable lithium storage capability than commercial  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  and the composite. Although the commercial  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  shows a high initial discharge capacity of  $1152 \text{ mAhg}^{-1}$ , the capacity suffers a fast fading in the following cycles. When tested at the current density of  $500 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$ ,  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ @MWCNTs also delivered a discharge capacity of  $430 \text{ mAhg}^{-1}$  after 40 cycles (Fig. S10), which is better than that for commercial graphite anodes.

In addition to the cycling performance, the high-rate capability is also important especially for high-power applications. Benefited from the unique hybrid structure, the  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ @MWCNTs exhibited an excellent rate performance which is shown in Fig. 3(d). Even cycled at a high rate of  $2000 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$  (3.6 C), this material can still deliver an average discharge of  $320 \text{ mAhg}^{-1}$ . When the current rate is restored to  $100 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$ , a stable capacity of  $520 \text{ mAhg}^{-1}$  is resumed.

For revealing the structural evolution of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ @MWCNTs, the electrode after 50 cycles was examined by TEM, which is shown in Fig. 4(a). The structure of a single MWCNT is well preserved, implying the excellent stability of the graphite wall. It has been reported that CNTs can enhance the electrical conductivity transition metal oxide<sup>36</sup>. Because of the existence of large amount of MWCNTs,  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ @MWCNTs exhibit much lower resistance than the bare  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ , as evidenced by the drastically reduced diameter of the semi-circle at high-frequency region in the electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) patterns (Fig. 4(b)). Moreover, Waki's group has proven that the defects on MWCNTs had positive effects on Li storage property<sup>37</sup>. According to the Raman spectrum shown in Fig. 2b, there is a sharp peak of D mode of graphite around  $1346 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  which is related to the degree of disorder in carbon  $\text{sp}^2$  bonded clusters in graphite. This confirms that MWCNTs have a large amount of defects such as graphitic edges and disordered structures. From the SEM image in Fig. 2c, it can also be seen some crevices in the surface of MWCNTs, which are useful for the accessing of electrolyte into the hollow interior of MWCNTs. Thus the  $\text{Li}^+$  ions diffusion and electron transfer are also facilitated to give the greatly enhanced electrochemical performance of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ @MWCNTs. Besides, the synergistic effect between  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  and MWCNTs, for example, storing  $\text{Li}^+$  ions in the interface between  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  and MWCNTs, can also enhance the discharge capacity.

In summary, we have designed and synthesized a novel hybrid nanomaterial of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  NPs wrapped in multi-walled carbon nanotubes. This hybrid nanostructure exhibits a discharge capacity of  $515 \text{ mAhg}^{-1}$ , after 50 cycles as anode electrode for LIBs, while the

capacity is calculated as  $1147 \text{ mAhg}^{-1}$  based on the mass ratio of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  NPs. Such an enhanced property could be attributed to the unique structure of MWCNTs wrapping, which not only accommodates the large volume variation but also enhances the overall conductivity. Moreover, a stable SEI film formed on the surface of MWCNTs also reduces capacity fading. This hybrid structure can be also applied to enhancing other electrode materials.

## Methods

**Synthesis.** All chemicals are of analytical grade and used without purification. The synthesis of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  nanoparticles wrapped in multi-walled carbon nanotubes ( $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ @MWCNTs) contains two steps: Synthesis of Fe nanoparticles wrapped in multi-walled carbon nanotubes ( $\text{Fe}$ @MWCNTs) and Oxidation of Fe nanoparticles to  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  nanoparticles. The synthesis method of  $\text{Fe}$ @MWCNTs has been reported by our group<sup>24</sup>. In a typical synthesis, dried ferrocene (0.02 g) were placed into a quartz tube with the inner diameter of 12 mm and effective heating length 150 mm. After being vacuumed, the quartz tube containing ferrocene was sealed. After that, the quartz tube was placed into a tube furnace and heated to  $200^\circ\text{C}$  and maintained for 1 h so that the ferrocene can be slowly sublimed in the quartz tube. Subsequently, in order to gradually decompose ferrocene in the quartz tube, the tube furnace was heated to and maintained at  $400^\circ\text{C}$  for 1 h. Finally, the tube furnace was heated to and maintained at  $950^\circ\text{C}$ . After 4 h, the tube furnace was naturally cooled to room temperature. After breaking the quartz tube and intense sonication for 30 min in a beaker, a black solution was obtained and the black products were collected under the induction of a magnet with 0.20 T and washed with ethanol for three times. Then the as-prepared  $\text{Fe}$ @MWCNTs were oxidized to  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ @MWCNTs using carbon dioxide. The annealing process in carbon dioxide was performed at  $700^\circ\text{C}$  for 30 min with a heat rate of  $10^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$  to obtain  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ @MWCNTs.

**Characterization.** The powder X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns were collected on a Japan Rigaku D/MAX-cA X-ray diffractometer equipped with Cu K $\alpha$  radiation over the  $2\theta$  range of  $10$ – $80^\circ$ . Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) images were performed on a JEOL JSM-6700M scanning electron microscope. Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) images were obtained on a Hitachi H-800 transmission electron microscope, using an accelerating voltage of 200 kV. High-resolution transmission electron microscopy (HRTEM) images were taken on a JEOL-2010 transmission electron microscope, which was operated at 200 kV. Energy-dispersive X-ray (EDX) analysis was obtained with an EDAX detector installed on the same HRTEM. The Raman spectrum was taken on a LABRAM-HR Confocal Laser Micro-Raman spectrometer using an Ar<sup>+</sup> laser with  $514.5 \text{ nm}$  at room temperature. X-ray Photoelectron Spectrum (XPS) was performed on an ESCALAB 250 X-ray Photoelectron Spectrometer with Al K $\alpha$  radiation. Specific surface areas were calculated from the results of  $\text{N}_2$  physisorption at 77 K (Micromeritics ASAP 2020) by using the BET (Brunauer–Emmett–Teller) and BJH (Barrett–Joyner–Halenda).  $1 \text{ mg}$   $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ @MWCNTs was dissolved in 50 mL hydrochloric acid (concentration:  $1 \text{ molL}^{-1}$ ). After intense sonication for 10 min, the mixed solution was transferred into a 75 mL Teflon-lined stainless steel autoclave and maintained at  $120^\circ\text{C}$  for 8 h and then naturally cooled to room temperature. After centrifuging, the concentration of iron ions in solution was measured using inductive coupled plasma-atomic emission spectroscopy (Atomscan Advantage).

**Electrochemical measurements.** The electrochemical behavior of the as-prepared  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ @MWCNTs was examined using CR2032 coin type cells vs. Li with 1 M LiPF<sub>6</sub>



in ethylene carbonate and diethyl carbonate (EC:DEC = 1 : 1, v/v) as the electrolyte. The working electrode was fabricated by compressing a mixture of the active materials, conductive material (acetylene black), and binder (polyvinylidene fluoride) in a weight ratio of  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3/\text{MWCNTs}/\text{carbon}/\text{PVDF} = 7 : 1 : 2$  onto a copper foil current collector, then drying at  $60^\circ\text{C}$  for 12 h. The cells were assembled in an argon-filled glove box (MBraun Labmaster 130). The electrode capacity was measured by a galvanostatic discharge-charge method in the voltage range between 3 V and 0 V at a current density of  $100 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$  on a battery test system (Neware CT-3008W). Cyclic voltammetry was performed using an electrochemical workstation (CHI 660C) between 0–3 V at a scan rate of  $0.1 \text{ mVs}^{-1}$ . The impedance spectra of the cells were measured on an electrochemical workstation (CHI 660C) in the frequency range of 0.001–100 kHz.

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## Author contributions

Q.W.C. and N.Y. designed the research, analysed data and wrote the paper. N.Y. and X.H.Z. carried out the electrochemical and physical measurements. H.Z., Y.L., F.W. and H.W. performed electrochemical measurements and other characterization.

## Additional information

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