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Front Matter: Volume 8553

, "Front Matter: Volume 8553," Proc. SPIE 8553, Optics in Health Care and Biomedical Optics V, 855301 (7 January 2013); doi: 10.1117/12.2014549

SPIE.

Event: Photonics Asia, 2012, Beijing, China

Optics in Health Care and Biomedical Optics V

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Editors

5–7 November 2012

Beijing, China

Sponsored by

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SPIE

Volume 8553

Proceedings of SPIE, 1605-7422, v. 8553

SPIE is an international society advancing an interdisciplinary approach to the science and application of light.

Optics in Health Care and Biomedical Optics V, edited by Qingming Luo, Ying Gu, Xingde D. Li,
Proc. of SPIE Vol. 8553, 855301 • © 2012 SPIE • CCC code: 1605-7422/12/\$18
doi: 10.1117/12.2014549

Proc. of SPIE Vol. 8553 855301-1

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Please use the following format to cite material from this book:

Author(s), "Title of Paper," in *Optics in Health Care and Biomedical Optics V*, edited by Qingming Luo, Ying Gu, Xingde D. Li, Proceedings of SPIE Vol. 8553 (SPIE, Bellingham, WA, 2012) Article CID Number.

ISSN: 1605-7422

ISBN: 9780819493088

Published by

SPIE

P.O. Box 10, Bellingham, Washington 98227-0010 USA

Telephone +1 360 676 3290 (Pacific Time) · Fax +1 360 647 1445

SPIE.org

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Contents

xiii	<i>Symposium Committees</i>
xv	<i>Conference Committee</i>
xix	<i>Quantum dot lasers and relevant nanoheterostructures (Plenary Paper) [8552-1]</i> A. E. Zhukov, N. V. Kryzhanovskaya, A. V. Savelyev, A. M. Nadtochiy, E. M. Arakcheeva, F. I. Zubov, V. V. Korenev, Saint Petersburg Academic Univ. (Russian Federation); M. V. Maximov, Y. M. Shernyakov, M. M. Kulagina, I. A. Slovinskiy, Ioffe Physical-Technical Institute (Russian Federation); D. A. Livshits, Innolume GmbH (Germany); A. Kapsalis, C. Mesaritakis, D. Syvridis, Univ. of Athens (Greece); A. M. Mintairov, Univ. of Notre Dame (United States)

SESSION 1   ADVANCED BIOMEDICAL OPTICAL TECHNIQUES

8553 04	Integrated on-chip lens applied to microfluidic chips (Invited Paper) [8553-3] Y. Zhao, Q. Li, X.-M. Hu, D.-F. Yang, Beijing Institute of Technology (China)
8553 05	Motion compensation of optical mapping signals from rat heart slices (Invited Paper) [8553-4] B. Stender, Univ. zu Lübeck (Germany); M. Brandenburger, Fraunhofer Research Institution for Marine Biotechnology (Germany); B. Wang, Z. Zhang, Xi'an Jiaotong Univ. (China); A. Schlaefer, Univ. zu Lübeck (Germany)

SESSION 2   INNOVATIVE OPTICAL IMAGING METHODS I

8553 0A	Coherent fiber supercontinuum laser for nonlinear biomedical imaging [8553-9] H. Tu, Y. Liu, Univ. of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (United States); X. Liu, J. Lægsgaard, D. Turchinovich, Technical Univ. of Denmark (Denmark); S. A. Boppart, Univ. of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (United States)
8553 0B	Wide field-of-view microscopy with Talbot pattern illumination [8553-10] J. Wu, G. Liu, Shanghai Jiao Tong Univ. (China) and Univ. of Michigan (United States)

SESSION 3   PHOTONIC THERAPEUTICS

8553 0D	Indirect photobiomodulation in functional networks (Invited Paper) [8553-12] T. C.-Y. Liu, W.-W. Zhu, X.-B. Yang, South China Normal Univ. (China)

SESSION 4   PHOTODYNAMIC THERAPY

- 8553 0F   **Advanced optical techniques for monitoring dosimetric parameters in photodynamic therapy (Invited Paper)** [8553-15]
B. Li, Z. Qiu, Fujian Normal Univ. (China); Z. Huang, Fujian Normal Univ. (China) and Univ. of Colorado Denver (United States)
- 8553 0G   **Efficacy of gallium phthalocyanine as a photosensitizing agent in photodynamic therapy for the treatment of cancer** [8553-16]
K. Maduray, B. Odhav, Durban Univ. of Technology (South Africa)
- 8553 0H   **Efficient photodynamic therapy against *Staphylococcus aureus* using [Ru(bpy)₂(dppn)]²⁺: a novel cationic photosensitizer** [8553-17]
Y. Wang, Chinese People's Liberation Army General Hospital (China) and Nankai Univ. (China); Y. Wang, Y. Gu, Chinese People's Liberation Army General Hospital (China)
- 8553 0J   **Polyethylene glycol-functionalized bis(arylidene)cycloalkanone photosensitizers for two-photon excited photodynamic therapy** [8553-19]
Q. Zou, Technical Institute of Physics and Chemistry (China) and Graduate Univ. of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (China); H. Zhao, Chinese People's Liberation Army General Hospital (China); Y. Zhao, Technical Institute of Physics and Chemistry (China); Y. Wang, Y. Gu, Chinese People's Liberation Army General Hospital (China); F. Wu, Technical Institute of Physics and Chemistry (China)

SESSION 5   INNOVATIVE OPTICAL IMAGING METHODS II

- 8553 0O   **Design of an affordable fluorescence confocal laser scanning microscope for medical diagnostics** [8553-24]
C. Bechtel, Technische Univ. Dresden (Germany); J. Knobbe, H. Gröger, H. Lakner, Fraunhofer-Institut für Photonische Mikrosysteme (Germany)
- 8553 0P   **Multiview hyperspectral topography of tissue structural and functional characteristics** [8553-25]
S. Zhang, Univ. of Science and Technology of China (China) and The Ohio State Univ. (United States); P. Liu, Univ. of Science and Technology of China (China); J. Huang, The Ohio State Univ. (United States); R. Xu, Univ. of Science and Technology of China (China) and The Ohio State Univ. (United States)

SESSION 6   OPTICAL COHERENCE TOMOGRAPHY I

- 8553 0Q   **Recent advances in optical coherence tomography (Invited Paper)** [8553-26]
Z. Ding, C. Wang, Y. Shen, L. Huang, L. Wu, C. Du, Zhejiang Univ. (China)
- 8553 0S   **Phantom testing of a novel endoscopic OCT probe: a prelude to clinical *in-vivo* laryngeal use** [8553-28]
T. Tatla, J. Y. Pang, Northwick Park Hospital (United Kingdom); R. Cernat, G. Dobre, Univ. of Kent (United Kingdom); P. J. Tadrous, Northwick Park Hospital (United Kingdom); A. Bradu, Univ. of Kent (United Kingdom); G. Gelikonov, V. Gelikonov, Institute of Applied Physics (Russian Federation); A. G. Podoleanu, Univ. of Kent (United Kingdom)

SESSION 7   OPTICAL COHERENCE TOMOGRAPHY II

- 8553 0V   ***In vivo* integrated photoacoustic ophthalmoscopy, optical coherence tomography, and scanning laser ophthalmoscopy for retinal imaging** [8553-32]
W. Song, Harbin Institute of Technology (China) and Northwestern Univ. (United States);
R. Zhang, Harbin Institute of Technology (China); H. F. Zhang, Q. Wei, Northwestern Univ.
(United States); W. Cao, Harbin Institute of Technology (China) and The Pennsylvania State
Univ. (United States)

SESSION 8   PHOTONIC DIAGNOSTICS I

- 8553 0W   **Studying the role of macrophages in circulating prostate cancer cells by in vivo flow cytometry (Invited Paper)** [8553-33]
X. Cui, J. Guo, Fudan Univ. (China); Z. Gu, Shanghai Jiao Tong Univ. (China); X. Wei, Fudan
Univ. (China) and Shanghai Jiao Tong Univ. (China)
- 8553 0Z   **Simulating the demyelination of a nerve fiber by action potential encoded second harmonic generation** [8553-36]
H. Yang, Z. Luo, X. Chen, Y. Huang, S. Xie, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)

SESSION 9   PHOTONIC DIAGNOSTICS II

- 8553 11   **Identification of non-neoplastic and neoplastic gastric polyps using multiphoton microscopy (Invited Paper)** [8553-38]
S. Jiang, Fujian Normal Univ. (China); D. Kang, M. Xu, Fujian Medical Univ. (China); X. Zhu,
S. Zhuo, J. Chen, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 12   **Collagen fiber spatial orientation mapping using polarization-sensitive SHG microscopy**
[8553-39]
V. A. Hovhannisyan, P.-S. Hu, C.-Y. Dong, National Taiwan Univ. (Taiwan)
- 8553 13   **Measuring intracellular calcium dynamics of HeLa cells exposed to nitric oxide by microplate fluorescence reader** [8553-40]
Y. Huang, J. Chen, H. Yang, L. Zheng, Y. Wang, H. Li, S. Xie, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 14   **Metabolic changes of cultured DRG neurons induced by adenosine using confocal microscopy imaging** [8553-41]
L. Zheng, Y. Huang, J. Chen, Y. Wang, H. Yang, Y. Zhang, S. Xie, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)

SESSION 10   PHOTONIC DIAGNOSTICS III

- 8553 18   **Nonlinear optical imaging characteristics of colonic adenocarcinoma using multiphoton microscopy** [8553-45]
N. Liu, R. Chen, H. Li, J. Chen, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)

- 8553 19 **Molecular application of spectral photoacoustic imaging in pancreatic cancer pathology** [8553-46]
M. Lakshman, C. Hupple, VisualSonics Inc. (Canada); I. Lohse, Ontario Cancer Institute (Canada) and Campbell Family Cancer Research Institute (Canada); D. Hedley, Ontario Cancer Institute (Canada), Campbell Family Cancer Research Institute (Canada), and Univ. of Toronto (Canada); A. Needles, C. Theodoropoulos, VisualSonics Inc. (Canada)

SESSION 11 INNOVATIVE MICROSCOPY IMAGING METHOD

- 8553 1A **Dynamics of two-photon two-color transitions in flurophores excited by femtosecond laser pulses (Invited Paper)** [8553-47]
P. S. Shternin, A. G. Smolin, O. S. Vasyutinskii, Ioffe Insitute (Russian Federation); S. Denicke, S. Herbrich, K.-H. Gericke, Technische Univ. Braunschweig (Germany)
- 8553 1B **CW STED nanoscopy with a Ti:Sapphire oscillator** [8553-49]
Y. Liu, Shanghai Jiao Tong Univ. (China) and Peking Univ. (China); H. Xie, Peking Univ. (China); E. Alonas, P. J. Santangelo, Georgia Institute of Technology and Emory Univ. School of Medicine (United States); D. Jin, Macquarie Univ. (Australia); P. Xi, Peking Univ. (United States)
- 8553 1C **LOSOM: phase relief imaging can be achieved with confocal system** [8553-50]
T. Peng, Peking Univ. (China) and Xi'an Univ. of Technology (China); H. Xie, Y. Ding, Peking Univ. (China); Y. Lu, D. Jin, Macquarie Univ. (Australia); P. Xi, Peking Univ. (China)
- 8553 1D **Design of a real-time portable confocal scanning laser microscope** [8553-52]
X. Yang, Peking Univ. (China) and Xi'an Univ. of Technology (China); Y. Zhao, Peking Univ. (China); G. Yin, Shanghai Bandweave Technologies Co. Ltd. (China); H. Li, Peking Univ. (China) and Xi'an Univ. of Technology (China); T. Wang, P. Xi, Peking Univ. (China)

SESSION 12 MUTIMODE IMAGING

- 8553 1E **Photo-acoustic excitation and detection of guided ultrasonic waves in bone samples covered by a soft coating layer** [8553-53]
Z. Zhao, Univ. of Oulu (Finland); P. Moilanen, Univ. of Jyväskylä (Finland); P. Karppinen, Univ. of Helsinki (Finland); M. Määttä, Univ. of Oulu (Finland); T. Karppinen, E. Hæggström, Univ. of Helsinki (Finland); J. Timonen, Univ. of Jyväskylä (Finland); R. Myllylä, Univ. of Oulu (Finland)
- 8553 1F **ICG-loaded microbubbles for multimodal billiary imaging in cholecystectomy** [8553-54]
R. Qin, S. Melvin, The Ohio State Univ. (United States); R. X. Xu, The Ohio State Univ. (United States) and Univ. of Science and Technology of China (China)
- 8553 1G **Multimodal imaging of ischemic wounds** [8553-55]
S. Zhang, Univ. of Science and Technology of China (China) and The Ohio State University (United States); S. Gnyawali, J. Huang, The Ohio State Univ. (United States); P. Liu, Univ. of Science and Technology of China (China); G. Gordillo, C. K. Sen, The Ohio State Univ. (United States); R. Xu, Univ. of Science and Technology of China (China) and The Ohio State Univ. (United States)

- 8553 1H **Novel coaxial atomization processes for microfabrication of multi-layered biodegradable microcapsules** [8553-56]
T. Si, Univ. of Science and Technology of China (China); L. Zhang, The Ohio State Univ. (United States); G. Li, Univ. of Science and Technology of China (China); R. Xu, Univ. of Science and Technology of China (China) and The Ohio State Univ. (United States)

SESSION 13 OPTICS IMAGING ALGORITHMS AND ANALYSIS I

- 8553 1I **Electromagnetic scattering from biological tissue** [8553-57]
Z. Tong, O. Korotkova, Univ. of Miami (United States)
- 8553 1J **3D reconstruction for endoscopic environment based on optical tracker** [8553-58]
B. Yang, Y. Zhou, X. Hu, J. Lin, Q. Xing, Beijing Institute of Technology (China)
- 8553 1L **Photoacoustic imaging: a potential new tool for arthritis (Invited Paper)** [8553-128]
X. Wang, Univ. of Michigan Health System (United States)

SESSION 14 OPTICS IMAGING ALGORITHMS AND ANALYSIS II

- 8553 1O **Investigating the backscattering characteristics of individual normal and cancerous cells based on experimentally determined three-dimensional refractive index distributions** [8553-64]
W.-C. Hsu, J.-W. Su, C.-C. Chang, K.-B. Sung, National Taiwan Univ. (Taiwan)
- 8553 1P **Cost-effective approaches for high-resolution bioimaging by time-stretched confocal microscopy at 1 μ m** [8553-65]
T. T. W. Wong, Y. Qiu, A. K. S. Lau, J. Xu, A. C. S. Chan, K. K. Y. Wong, K. K. Tsia, The Univ. of Hong Kong (Hong Kong, China)
- 8553 1Q **Quantitative interferometric microscopy: tool for phase imaging from 2D to 3D** [8553-66]
S. Wang, L. Xue, J. Lai, Y. Song, Z. Li, Nanjing Univ. of Science and Technology (China)

SESSION 15 SPECTROSCOPY FOR BIOMEDICAL APPLICATION

- 8553 1R **Fast reconstruction of Raman spectra from narrow-band measurements based on Wiener estimation** [8553-67]
S. Chen, Y. H. Ong, Q. Liu, Nanyang Technological Univ. (Singapore)
- 8553 1S **Evaluation of human dentine demineralization of yellow race by Raman spectra** [8553-68]
Z. Zhan, W. Guo, H. Liu, X. Zhang, S. Xie, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 1T **Assessment of skin flap viability using visible diffuse reflectance spectroscopy and auto-fluorescence spectroscopy** [8553-69]
C. Zhu, S. Chen, Nanyang Technological Univ. (Singapore); C. H.-K. Chui, Singapore General Hospital (Singapore); Q. Liu, Nanyang Technological Univ. (Singapore)

- 8553 1U **Characterization and differentiation of normal and abnormal semen samples using micro-Raman spectroscopy** [8553-70]
Z. Huang, X. Chen, Fujian Normal Univ. (China); J. Chen, Fujian Provincial Hospital (China); Y. Li, J. Lei, R. Chen, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 1V **Brain cancer probed by native fluorescence and stokes shift spectroscopy** [8553-71]
Y. Zhou, Chinese People's Liberation Army General Hospital (China); C. Liu, The City College of New York, CUNY (United States); Y. He, Beijing Normal Univ. (China); Y. Pu, The City College of New York, CUNY (United States); Q. Li, W. Wang, BeiHang Univ. (China); R. R. Alfano, The City College of New York, CUNY (United States)

SESSION 16 LASER-TISSUE INTERACTION

- 8553 1X **Rabbit electroretinograms evoked by 632.8nm laser flash stimuli** [8553-74]
Z.-F. Yang, Beijing Institute of Radiation Medicine (China); H.-X. Chen, People's Liberation Army General Hospital (China); J.-R. Wang, B.-L. Guan, Beijing Institute of Radiation Medicine (China); G.-Y. Yu, People's Liberation Army General Hospital (China); X.-N. Zhang, W.-Y. Zhang, J.-G. Yang, Beijing Institute of Radiation Medicine (China)
- 8553 1Y **The threshold of vapor channel formation in water induced by pulsed CO₂ laser** [8553-75]
W. Guo, X. Zhang, Z. Zhan, S. Xie, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 1Z **Mechanisms of interaction between very high-frequency photoacoustic waves and the skin** [8553-76]
G. F. F. Sá, C. Serpa, L. G. Arnaut, Univ. de Coimbra (Portugal)

POSTER SESSION

- 8553 20 **A method of simulating polarization-sensitive optical coherence tomography based on a polarization-sensitive Monte Carlo program and a sphere cylinder birefringence model** [8553-63]
D. Chen, N. Zeng, C. Liu, Key Lab. for Minimal Invasive Medical Technologies (China); H. Ma, Key Lab. for Minimal Invasive Medical Technologies (China) and Tsinghua Univ. (China)
- 8553 21 **Temperature changes in the pulp chamber during dentin ablation with Er:YAG laser** [8553-73]
X. Zhang, H. Zhao, Z. Zhan, W. Guo, S. Xie, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 22 **Second harmonic generation imaging of skin wound healing and scarring in a rabbit ear model** [8553-79]
Y. Tang, Fujian Normal Univ. (China) and Fujian Medical Univ. (China); X. Zhu, Fujian Normal Univ. (China); S. Xiong, Fujian Medical Univ. (China); J. Chen, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 23 **Study of ABO blood types by combining membrane electrophoresis with surface-enhanced Raman spectroscopy** [8553-80]
J. Wang, J. Lin, Z. Huang, Fujian Normal Univ. (China); L. Sun, First Hospital of Fuzhou (China); Y. Shao, Shenzhen Univ. (China); P. Lu, W. Shi, J. Lin, R. Chen, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)

- 8553 25 **Surface-enhanced Raman spectroscopy study of radix astragali based on soxhlet extractor** [8553-82]
P. Lu, J. Lin, N. Liu, Fujian Normal Univ. (China); Y. Shao, Shenzhen Univ. (China); J. Wang, W. Shi, J. Lin, R. Chen, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 26 **Photo-induced electron transfer between dendritic zinc(II) phthalocyanine bearing carboxylic terminal groups and methyl viologen** [8553-83]
Y. Wang, J. Chen, L. Huang, S. Xie, H. Yang, Y. Peng, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 27 **Cutaneous pain effects induced by Nd:YAG and CO₂ laser stimuli** [8553-84]
J.-R. Wang, Beijing Institute of Radiation Medicine (China); G.-Y. Yu, People's Liberation Army General Hospital (China); Z.-F. Yang, Beijing Institute of Radiation Medicine (China); H.-X. Chen, People's Liberation Army General Hospital (China); D.-D. Hu, Beijing Institute of Radiation Medicine (China); X.-B. Zou, People's Liberation Army General Hospital (China)
- 8553 28 **Distinction of gastric cancer tissue based on surface-enhanced Raman spectroscopy** [8553-85]
J. Ma, H. Zhou, L. Gong, S. Liu, Z. Zhou, Ocean Univ. of China (China); W. Mao, Qingdao Municipal Hospital (China); R. Zheng, Ocean Univ. of China (China)
- 8553 29 **Error analysis of image acquisition by moving objective lens** [8553-86]
H. Xie, H. Chen, Y. Cai, F. Yang, Guangxi Univ. (China)
- 8553 2A **Reverse propagation properties of light wave in tapered micro-nano fiber for cell endoscopy** [8553-87]
D. Zhou, J. Zhong, Jinan Univ. (China)
- 8553 2C **Polyion complex micelles incorporating poly (aryl benzyl ether) dendritic phthalocyanine: effective photosensitizers for enhanced photodynamic therapy** [8553-89]
K. Chen, M. Yu, H. Zhang, D. Ma, S. Pang, W. Huang, Y. Peng, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 2D **Ultra-long scan depth optical coherence tomography for imaging the anterior segment of human eye** [8553-90]
D. Zhu, M. Shen, L. Leng, Wenzhou Medical College (China)
- 8553 2G **Quadratic triangular element for diffuse optical tomography** [8553-93]
X. Zhang, Y. Deng, J. Xu, Z. Luo, H. Gong, Q. Luo, Huazhong Univ. of Science and Technology (China)
- 8553 2J **Photoacoustic measurement for glucose solution concentration based on tunable pulsed laser induced ultrasound** [8553-96]
Z. Ren, G. Liu, Z. Huang, D. Zhao, Jiangxi Science and Technology Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 2L **Expansion of scattered phase matrix based on Zernike polynomials** [8553-98]
H. Ye, Z. Gao, Q. Wang, K. Bao, X. Yang, Nanjing Univ. of Science and Technology (China)
- 8553 2M **Optical-resolution photoacoustic microscopy for imaging blood vessels in vivo** [8553-99]
Y. Yuan, South China Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 2N **Optical characters of prostate using nonlinear optical microscopy** [8553-100]
S. Wu, H. Li, X. Zhang, Y. Wang, D. Peng, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)

- 8553 2P **Effect of apertures in ultrasound-modulated optical tomography with photomultiplier tube** [8553-102]
L. Zhu, S. Ran, Z. Lin, H. Li, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 2Q **The tapered-tip single fiber optical tweezers and its multi-trapping** [8553-103]
X. Guo, Z. Liu, Y. Zhao, L. Yuan, Harbin Engineering Univ. (China)
- 8553 2R **Scattering properties of normal and cancerous tissues from human stomach based on phase-contrast microscope** [8553-104]
H. Zhang, Z. Li, H. Li, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 2S **Retrieval of atmospheric visibility from multi-axis differential optical absorption spectroscopy** [8553-105]
H. J. Zhou, Univ. of Science and Technology of China (China) and Anhui Institute of Optics and Fine Mechanics (China); W. Q. Liu, F. Q. Si, Anhui Institute of Optics and Fine Mechanics (China)
- 8553 2T **Monte Carlo simulation of photon coherent behavior in half linfinite turbid medium by scaling method** [8553-106]
L. Lin, Guangdong Medical College (China); M. Zhang, H. Liu, Dongguan Univ. of Technology (China)
- 8553 2U **In vivo detection of hemoglobin oxygen saturation and carboxyhemoglobin saturation variations with photoacoustic microscopy** [8553-107]
Z. Chen, S. Yang, D. Xing, South China Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 2V **Photoacoustic imaging of prostate cancer using cylinder diffuse radiation** [8553-108]
W. Xie, L. Li, Z. Li, H. Li, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 2W **Realization of the ergonomics design and automatic control of the fundus cameras** [8553-109]
C. Zeng, Z. Xiao, S. Deng, X. Yu, Guilin Univ. of Electronic Technology (China)
- 8553 2Y **Study the effect of temperature on optical properties of biological tissue-simulating phantom based on OCT** [8553-111]
Y. He, H. Li, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 2Z **Miniature interferometer for refractive index measurement in microfluidic chip** [8553-112]
M. Chen, Univ. of Shanghai for Science and Technology (China); M. Geiser, F. Truffer, Univ. of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland (Switzerland); C. Song, Univ. of Shanghai for Science and Technology (China)
- 8553 30 **Study for noninvasive determination of optical properties of bio-tissue using spatially resolved diffuse reflectance** [8553-113]
D. Peng, Fujian Normal Univ. (China) and Jimei Univ. (China); H. Li, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 31 **Development of an in situ magnetic beads based RT-PCR method for electrochemiluminescent detection of rotavirus** [8553-114]
F. Zhan, X. Zhou, South China Normal Univ. (China)

- 8553 32 **ERK-dependent activation of Sp1 is required for low-power laser irradiation-induced vascular endothelial cell proliferation** [8553-115]
J. Feng, D. Xing, South China Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 33 **Iterative reconstruction for bioluminescence tomography with total variation regularization** [8553-117]
W. Jin, Peking Univ. (China); Y. He, Beijing Aerospace Control Ctr. (China)
- 8553 34 **Imaging the morphological change of tissue structure during the early phase of esophageal tumor progression using multiphoton microscopy** [8553-118]
J. Xu, Fujian Normal Univ. (China); D. Kang, M. Xu, Fujian Medical Univ. (China); X. Zhu, S. Zhuo, J. Chen, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 36 **Amplification-free detection of miRNA via an ECL chips system** [8553-120]
W. Liu, X. Zhou, South China Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 37 **Label-free and sensitive fluorescence detection of nucleic acid, based on combination of a graphene oxid /SYBR green I dye platform and polymerase assisted signal amplification** [8553-121]
X. Zhu, D. Xing, South China Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 39 **Photoacoustic spectroscopic differences between normal and malignant thyroid tissues** [8553-123]
L. Li, W. Xie, H. Li, Fujian Normal Univ. (China)
- 8553 3A **Ex-vivo endoscopic laryngeal cancer imaging using two forward-looking fiber optic scanning endoscope probes** [8553-124]
R. Cernat, Univ. of Kent (United Kingdom); T. Tatla, J.-Y. Pang, P. J. Tadrous, Northwick Park Hospital (United Kingdom); G. Gelikonov, V. Gelikonov, Institute of Applied Physics (Russian Federation); Y.-Y. Zhang, Johns Hopkins Univ. (United States); A. Bradu, Univ. of Kent (United Kingdom); X. D. Li, Johns Hopkins Univ. (United States); A. G. Podoleanu, Univ. of Kent (United Kingdom)
- 8553 3B **Glucose and temperature sensitive luminescence ZnCdS nanoparticles** [8553-125]
V. I. Kochubey, E. K. Volkova, J. G. Konyukhova, N.G. Chernyshevsky Saratov State Univ. (Russian Federation)
- 8553 3C **Characterization of muscle stretching and damage using polarization-sensitive optical coherence tomography (PS-OCT)** [8553-126]
D. Chen, N. Zeng, C. Liu, H. Ma, Tsinghua Univ. (China)

Author Index

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- 5   Innovative Optical Imaging Methods II
Ronald Xu, The Ohio State University (United States)
- 6   Optical Coherence Tomography I
Valery V. Tuchin, N.G. Chernyshevsky Saratov State University
(Russian Federation)
- 7   Optical Coherence Tomography II
Xingde D. Li, Johns Hopkins University (United States)
- 8   Photonic Diagnostics I
Xun-Bin Wei, Shanghai Jiao Tong University (China)
- 9   Photonic Diagnostics II
Xun-Bin Wei, Shanghai Jiao Tong University (China)
- 10   Photonic Diagnostics III
Buhong Li, Fujian Normal University (China)
- 11   Innovative Microscopy Imaging Method
Zhihua Ding, Zhejiang University (China)
- 12   Mutimode Imaging
Qin Li, Beijing Institute of Technology (China)
- 13   Optics Imaging Algorithms and Analysis I
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- 14   Optics Imaging Algorithms and Analysis II
Zhihua Ding, Zhejiang University (China)

- 15 Spectroscopy for Biomedical Application
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- 16 Laser-Tissue Interaction
Tianhong Dai, Massachusetts General Hospital (United States)

Quantum dot lasers and relevant nanoheterostructures

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ABSTRACT

Spectral and power characteristics of QD stripe lasers operating in two-state lasing regime have been studied in a wide range of operation conditions. It was demonstrated that neither self-heating nor increase of the homogeneous broadening are responsible for quenching of the ground-state lasing beyond the two-state lasing threshold. It was found that difference in electron and hole capture rates strongly affects light-current curve. Modulation *p*-type doping is shown to enhance the peak power of GS lasing transition. Microring and microdisk structures ($D = 4\text{--}9\text{ }\mu\text{m}$) comprising $1.3\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ InAs/InGaAs quantum dots have been fabricated and studied by μ -PL and NSOM. Ground-state lasing was achieved well above room temperature (up to 380 K). Effect of inner diameter on threshold characteristics was evaluated.

Keywords: Quantum dots, semiconductor laser, microring resonator, two-state lasing

1. INTRODUCTION

For various applications, including optical data transmission, pumping of Raman amplifiers, aesthetic laser surgery, etc, efficient lasers operating around $1.3\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ are requested. Lasers based on self-organized InAs/InGaAs quantum dots (QDs) offer an attractive combination of the required wavelength with extremely low threshold current density and high characteristic temperature. However, at sufficiently high currents a shorter-wavelength ($\lambda \sim 1.2\text{ }\mu\text{m}$) band caused by the first excited-state (ES1) transition appears in the spectrum¹. Such a behavior is now referred to as two-state lasing. For a majority of applications two-state lasing has to be suppressed whereas the GS spectral component of the lasing spectrum has to be maximized. Analysis of QD laser behavior based on rate² and master³ equations predicts that optical power of the GS component reaches its maximal value at threshold of the two-state lasing and then persists. However a number of experimental facts revealed that the GS component declines down to its complete quenching^{4,5} due probably to laser self-heating in CW regime⁴ and/or increase of homogeneous broadening⁵ have been proposed. To clarify possible reasons of the GS lasing quenching we studied spectral and light-current characteristics of broad-area QD lasers.

Microdisks and microrings optical resonators comprising a III-V active region are promising candidates for light emitters to be integrated with silicon photonic circuits. Owing to a combination of a compact size and a high Q-factor, which can be achieved in such structures, ultralow threshold operation is expected. Although the majority of whispering gallery mode (WGM) resonators has been contained quantum-well active region composed of InP-based materials⁶, QDs may have certain advantages. These include attainability of $1.3\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ emission in GaAs-based structures with high refractive index contrast, low temperature sensitivity, suppressed sidewall recombination rates⁷, making it possible to achieve lasing in resonators of small diameter. Since the first report⁸ on QD microdisk laser capable of operating at 77K, significant progress has been made toward high-temperature lasing. In particular, room-temperature lasing has been reported to date for microdisks of few microns in diameter⁹, whereas for relatively large microrings ($35\text{--}85\text{ }\mu\text{m}$) lasing has been recently extended up to 50°C ¹⁰. In the present work we demonstrate ground-state lasing up to 107°C for optically pumped microring lasers (MRLs) having an outer diameter as small as $6\text{--}7\text{ }\mu\text{m}$.

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2. TWO-STATE LASING AND ITS SUPPRESSION IN QD LASERS

2.1 Quenching of GS spectral component

Epitaxial structures comprising a single plane or multiple planes of InAs/InGaAs QDs were grown by molecular beam epitaxy. Stripe lasers of various cavity lengths were tested in pulse regime (300ns @ 2 kHz) on temperature-stabilized heatsink. An evolution of the lasing spectrum with increasing the pump current is shown in Figure 1,a for a 4-mm-long single-QD-plane laser at 17°C. The corresponding light-current characteristics (total output power and optical power of GS and ES1 spectral components of the spectrum) are presented in Figure 1,b. The ES1 band (around 1.18 μm) appears in the spectrum at approximately 3 A whereas the GS component reaches its maximum at 5A, well beyond the onset of two-state lasing. A complete quenching of the GS lasing is observed at 12 A.

Figure 1. Lasing spectra at different currents (a); laser power (b): dashed-dotted curve – total (GS+ES1), solid curve – ground-state component (GS), dashed curve – first excited-state component (ES1).

As it is seen in Figure 1,a the GS band is split into two peaks (~ 1.254 and ~ 1.262 nm). According to M. Sugawara et al⁵ this splitting can be attributed to the homogenous broadening of the QD optical transition. They also suggested that the GS lasing quenching at high currents could be explained by increase of the homogenous broadening. In spite of this we found that the splitting is practically unchanged (6.5 ± 0.4 meV) as current increases up to 12 A. Therefore, the quenching can not be associated with the aforementioned reason. Moreover, spectral positions of the both GS peaks also remain very stable so that the current-induced red shift is only 0.4 nm. Such a shift corresponds to a negligible temperature increment of about 1°C which can not itself lead to suppression of the GS lasing because in this particular laser diode the GS lasing at low currents can be observed up to 68°C. Thus, the GS lasing quenching at high currents can not be attributed to self-heating of the active region as well.

2.2 Effect of difference in electron and hole relaxation rates

More sophisticated model that does not imply either the homogeneous broadening or self-heating effect is based on assumption of the asymmetry in charge carrier distribution in a QD¹¹. Energy separation of ground- and excited-state energy levels of holes is much smaller than kT that leads to a nearly equal probability of occupation of the hole levels. As a result, there is a competition for the “joint holes” between electrons of the ground-state and the excited-state levels. Because the ES1 electron level has a higher degeneracy as compared to the GS level, in the regime of two-state lasing the holes are effectively swept out from QDs because of their recombination with ES1 electrons. In its turn this leads to the quenching of the GS lasing as the pump current grows.

Figure 2. $L-I$ curves for ground-state component (a): circles – experiment; lines – calculation for different ratio of hole-to-electron relaxation rates (h). Operation diagram of QD laser: heavy lines separates regions of different lasing regimes (NL – no lasing, GS – pure ground-state lasing, GS+ES1 – two-state lasing, ES1 – pure excited-state lasing); thin lines correspond to different h values.

However, we found that the observed experimental data can not be quantitatively described if one takes into account only the above-mentioned asymmetry. Reasonable agreement between modeling results and experiment was achieved under assumption that electron and hole relaxation rates into QDs are different. More precisely, we assumed that the hole capture is slower than the electron one which makes the competition for holes more pronounced and leads to complete quenching of the GS lasing at lower pumps. Figure 2,a shows the calculated evolution of the GS power with the pump current. The results are shown for different ratio of the hole-to-electron relaxation rates h which is assumed to be independent of the injection rate. The best agreement of the model results with the experiment is found for $h = 0.75$. Lower rate of the hole relaxation is probably associated with their slower velocity in the matrix/wetting layer. Using the

extracted value of h we can also reproduce fairly well temperature dependences of the two-state lasing threshold and the current of the GS-lasing quenching.

Using the proposed model we are capable of calculating the operation diagram of QD laser as shown in Figure 2,b. The diagram depicts different regimes of the laser operation as a function of electron (g_{ec}) and hole (g_{hc}) capture rates: subthreshold regime of no lasing (NL), regime of lasing via GS optical transition (GS), two-state lasing regime (GS+ES1), regime of lasing via ES1 transition only (ES1). Depending on the ratio of hole-to-electron relaxation rates ($h = g_{hc}/g_{ec}$) and the total optical loss various scenarios of laser behavior can be realized. In particular, in case of sufficiently fast hole capture ($h = 1$ in Figure 2,b) the two-state lasing can persist so that the GS lasing peak is not completely suppressed even at very high injection levels.

2.3 Effect of p -type doping

Modulation p -type doping of QDs may noticeably improve temperature stability of the threshold current¹². We found that p -doping affects the two-state lasing behavior as well. Temperature dependences of the two-state lasing threshold current as well as the ground-state lasing threshold current are presented in Figure 3 for two 0.6-mm-long diodes of similar design (10 planes of InAs/InGaAs QDs): one with undoped active region and another with modulation doping (~ 10 acceptors per QD). The GS-lasing thresholds measured at room temperature are nearly equal in both structures (~ 0.35 A). At the same time, the onset of the two-state lasing is significantly shifted to higher currents in the p -type doped laser (~ 5.5 A) as compared to its undoped analogue (~ 1.1 A). Light-current curve (insert of Figure 3) demonstrates that the maximum optical power of the GS spectral component reaches 3.6 W in the laser with p -type doping, while it is about 2.4 W in the undoped counterpart. Another finding is that the temperature interval, where GS lasing can be achieved, extends to higher temperatures in the p -doped structure (from 55 to 100°C).

Figure 3. Threshold vs temperature for ground-state lasing (solid symbols) and two-state lasing (open symbols) in lasers with undoped (circles) and p -type doped (squares) QDs. Insert: power of the GS-line vs current.

2.4 Comparison of lasing and spontaneous emission spectra

Spontaneous emission spectra may provide additional information on peculiarities of the two-state lasing. We studied QD lasers having 4 cleaved facets where both lasing and spontaneous emission can be simultaneously detected as shown in Figure 4. At least five peaks of different origin are easily resolved: two narrow peaks of lasing emission via ground-state (1264.3 nm) and first excited-state (1179.8 nm) transitions and three broad peaks of spontaneous emission via ground-state (1264.0 nm), first excited (1172.0 nm) and second excited-state (1108.4 nm) transitions. The characteristic feature is that the GS lasing peak nearly coincides with the peak position of GS spontaneous emission. This implies that the GS lasing arises from QDs of the most probable (mean) size. At the same time ES1 lasing peak is noticeably red-shifted with respect to the peak position of ES1 spontaneous emission indicating that QDs, which size is larger than the mean one, are chiefly responsible for the ES lasing. Similar behavior was observed in a wide interval of current density.

Figure 4. Emission spectrum: squares – experiment, solid curves – lasing emission, dotted curves – spontaneous emission. Insert: peak position vs current density: solid circles – GS lasing, open circles – ES1 lasing, solid curve – GS spontaneous emission, dotted curve – ES1 spontaneous emission.

3. MICRORING STRUCTURES

3.1 Experiment

An epitaxial structure was grown by molecular beam epitaxy on semi-insulating GaAs(100) substrate. An active region comprises five layers of InAs/In_{0.15}Ga_{0.85}As QDs separated by 30-nm-thick GaAs spacers. The active region was inserted into a 220-nm-thick GaAs waveguiding layer confined by 20-nm-thick Al_{0.3}Ga_{0.7}As barriers. A 400-nm-thick Al_{0.98}Ga_{0.02}As cladding layer was grown beneath the waveguiding layer. Microrings were defined by photolithography and Ar⁺-etching. The outer diameter was varied in different structures from $D = 4$ to $9\ \mu\text{m}$. The inner diameter ranges from $d = 0$ (microdisks) to $d \approx 0.8D$. Finally, the cladding layer was selectively oxidized into (AlGa)_xO_y. Typical microphotograph of the resonator structure is shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. SEM image of QD microring laser ($D = 6\ \mu\text{m}$, $d = 2\ \mu\text{m}$).

For optical experiments a CW-operating YAG:Nd laser ($\lambda = 532\text{nm}$) was used together with a cooled Ge *pin*-diode. Measurements at elevated temperatures were performed with the structures mounted onto a heated holder equipped with a temperature controller. Low temperature measurements were done in a flow cryostat.

3.2 Low-temperature measurements

An example of luminescence spectrum taken at 77 K from 6 μm -ring with 2 μm inner diameter is shown in Figure 6. Four series of whispering gallery modes of different radial order are clearly observed. All modes presented in the optical spectrum were identified by means of 2D-axisymmetric analysis. The dominant modes are of $n = 2$ and 3 order. Significant overlap of many modes exists (e.g. around 1190.8 nm where 3 modes are close together).

Figure 6. Low-temperature luminescence spectrum of the microring. Estimated mode orders $\text{TE}_{m,n}$ are indicated near the peaks.

3.3 Near-field scanning optical microscopy.

Spatial distribution of light intensity inside the microresonators was studied by means of near-field scanning optical microscopy (NSOM). Several typical NSOM images are presented in Figure 7. Characteristic WGM patterns are clearly seen. Depending on spectral position of the luminescence peaks, NSOM images reveal modes of different radial and azimuthal order.

Figure 7. NSOM images demonstrating WGM modes of different orders in the microring resonator.

3.4 Room-temperature measurements.

A representative room-temperature $\mu\text{-PL}$ spectrum taken under low excitation is shown in the left insert of Figure 8. Full width at half maximum for resonant peaks varies from 0.143 to 0.234 nm giving the quality factor of about 9000.

The threshold power for the microring/microdisk structures was estimated from a light-light curve of the dominant mode. An example is presented in Figure 8 where a characteristic knee is clearly seen. In this particular case ($D = 7 \mu\text{m}$,

$d = 3.4 \mu\text{m}$) the threshold power is 0.37 mW. No correction was made to take into account partial light reflection from the surface or waste of the excitation power in the inner area of microring structures. Overall the threshold power at room temperature in different structures ranges from few tenths of mW to few mW. From one to three modes were usually observed in room-temperature lasing spectra (see right insert of Figure 8).

Figure 8. Intensity of the dominant mode against excitation power (symbols). Curve is a guide to the eye. Insert: luminescence spectrum below threshold (left) and above threshold (right).

Room-temperature threshold characteristics of the microstructures with different inner diameters were compared. In most cases the threshold power (absolute value) decreases by approximately 30-40% as the inner diameter increases from 0 (disk) to $0.3-0.6 D$, see Figure 9. Further ring thinning results in rapid growth of the threshold. As for the effect of the outer diameter, the lowest threshold of 0.37-0.4 mW was found in microrings having an outer diameter of 6–7 μm . Both larger and smaller microrings demonstrate higher threshold power as shown in the insert of Figure 9.

Figure 9. Room-temperature threshold (normalized to the threshold of the microdisk structure) as a function of inner diameter. Insert: the lowest threshold against the outer diameter.

3.5 High-temperature measurements

Threshold power increases super-exponentially with temperature. Around room temperature the characteristic temperature was estimated to be $\sim 60-75 \text{ K}$. In most cases, lasing can be observed up to $80-90^\circ\text{C}$ whereas the highest temperature of lasing was found to be as high as 107°C , Figure 10. To the best of our knowledge this is the highest

temperature ever reported for 1.3 μm QD MRLs. Below room temperature the threshold is nearly unchanged or even slightly increases. Temperature variation of the lasing wavelength is summarized in Figure 10. Spectral position of the ground-state optical transition of quantum-dot luminescence is also shown for comparison. It is seen that the lasing wavelength is quite stable (~ 0.05 nm/K) within relatively wide temperature intervals (e.g. from 20 to 40°C and then from 50 to 90°C) where a certain WGM mode remains the dominant one. Abrupt changes of the lasing wavelength (e.g. around 40-50°C) are due to hopping of the dominant mode.

Figure 10. Temperature dependences of the threshold power (solid symbols) and wavelengths of the dominant mode (open symbols). QD ground-state optical transition against temperature (dashed curve) is also shown. Solid curve is exponential fit with $T_0=65$ K.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Quantum dot lasing structures of two sorts both emitting around 1.3 μm were studied: broad-area diode lasers and optically pumped microresonators.

Broad-area lasers were used for detailed investigation of the two-state lasing phenomenon and, in particular, quenching of the ground-state lasing emission that observed at high currents. It was demonstrated that the most probable reason for the GS lasing quenching is asymmetry of electrons and holes carrier distributions. Additionally, difference in capture rates of electrons and holes has to be taken into consideration. We also found that the GS-component reaches its maximum beyond the threshold of the two-state lasing and that different groups of QDs are responsible for GS- and ES1-lasing in the two-state lasing regime. Finally, we demonstrated that *p*-type modulation doping of QDs leads to noticeable suppression of the ES1-lasing thereby resulting in enhancement of peak power of the GS spectral component.

Microrings and microdisks of few micrometers in diameter were made by ion etching and selective oxidation with Q-factor of about 9000. Whispering gallery modes of second and third radial orders dominate the luminescence spectrum. Nearly single-mode lasing was observed at elevated temperatures. The lowest threshold (around 0.4 mW at RT) was found in microdisks of intermediate diameter (6-7 μm) with approximately 50% inner aperture. The highest temperature was found to be 107°C and the threshold was in mW-range.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work is supported in different parts by Russian Ministry of Science and Education, Russian Foundation for Basic Research, Programs of Fundamental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. NVK is thankful for support to Saint-Petersburg's Committee on Science and Higher School.

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