

中国激光

半导体激光泵浦的 3 μm 摻铒固体激光研究进展

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摘要 3 μm 激光在国防安全、生物医疗、光谱分析等领域具有广阔的应用前景。与非线性频率变换、半导体激光技术相比, 利用掺 Er 的激光增益介质产生 3 μm 激光是一种比较直接、高效的方法。随着 3 μm 掺 Er 激光器在输出功率和效率方面的突破, 半导体激光泵浦的 3 μm 掺铒固体激光已成为热点研究方向。回顾了不同基质材料掺杂 Er 离子产生 3 μm 激光的输出特性和研究进展; 从铒离子能级结构出发, 分析了铒离子间的能量传递上转换、激发态吸收等跃迁过程对 3 μm 激光输出性能的影响, 并对 3 μm 稀土离子掺杂固体激光器的功率提升潜力和发展前景进行了展望。

关键词 激光器; 掺铒固体激光; 3 μm 激光; 高功率; 自终止

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1 引言

3 μm 激光在医疗、生物学等领域有很多重要的应用, 由于这一波段位于水的强吸收带, 比 10.6 μm 更易被水、Ca、P 等吸收, 可用于人体软组织和硬组织的切除。获得 3 μm 激光的主要手段包括非线性频率变换、半导体激光技术、稀土离子或过渡金属离子掺杂介质直接产生方式等。其中, 非线性频率转换技术^[1]是目前最成熟的方案之一, 但是, 通过这种方式产生 3 μm 波段的激光需要多级装置泵浦, 结构较为复杂, 成本相对较高。量子级联激光器^[2-3]是中红外激光发展的另一个重要方向, 目前输出功率在瓦量级水平, 只能工作在连续或准连续状态下, 输出脉冲激光的峰值功率较低。相比之下, 固体激光增益介质中掺 Er 产生 3 μm 激光是一种比较直接高效的获得 3 μm 中红外激光的方法, 适合连续或脉冲运转, 能够获得高功率、大脉冲能量的激光输出。

Er³⁺ 离子在近红外和中红外波段有很多重要的发射波长, 位于眼安全波段的 1.5~1.6 μm 激光

在通信领域具有重要应用, 位于水强吸收带的 3 μm 激光在医疗、科研、工业领域均具有重要应用。掺 Er 激光器通过⁴I_{11/2} 到⁴I_{13/2} 能级的辐射产生 3 μm 激光, 由于激光上能级比激光下能级的寿命短(例如: Er: YAG 的激光上能级⁴I_{11/2} 的寿命约为 0.1 ms, 而激光下能级⁴I_{13/2} 的寿命为~6.5 ms), 根据经典激光理论, 受“自终止效应”的影响, 很难实现连续激光输出, 只能在脉冲模式下工作^[4]。然而, 由于掺 Er³⁺ 系统固有的复杂能量传递过程和斯塔克子能级分裂, 上下激光能级均分裂为多重斯塔克子能级, 斯塔克能级的粒子数由玻尔兹曼分布决定, 这样, 虽然上下激光能级间的宏观粒子数反转条件没有达到, 但两个斯塔克子能级之间的粒子数反转使得连续激光输出成为可能。目前, 在 Er: YAG^[5]、Er: YLF^[6]、Er: Y₂O₃^[7] 等多种材料中均实现了高效的 3 μm 激光连续波运转。

利用半导体激光泵浦掺 Er 的激光增益介质产生 3 μm 激光, 泵浦波长为 0.97 μm, 发射波长为~3 μm, 量子亏损非常大, 理论上激光器的效率仅限于~33%, 这意味着三分之二的泵浦功率被浪费,

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作为寄生热沉积到增益介质中,导致激光性能的退化。另外,由于上下能级之间的带隙比较窄,非辐射跃迁带来的激光上能级热猝灭效应比较明显,理论上会进一步降低量子效率。尤其对于声子能量较大的Er:YAG介质,多声子弛豫效应比较强。事实上,由于 Er^{3+} 离子间合作上转换过程的存在,在掺杂浓度(原子数分数)为50%的Er:YAG晶体中,已经实现了高于量子极限的34%的激光斜效率^[8]。

本文总结了3 μm波段掺Er固体激光器的研究工作,从 Er^{3+} 离子的能级结构出发,分析了离子间能量传递上转换(ETU)、激发态吸收(ESA)、交叉弛豫(CR)等过程对3 μm激光自终止效应和激光效率的影响。回顾了不同基质材料中掺Er产生3 μm激光的研究进展,分析了影响激光功率提升和输出性能的因素,并对高功率3 μm掺Er固体激光的发展前景进行了展望。

2 Er^{3+} 的能级结构

Er^{3+} 的能级结构如图1所示,其中ESA表示激发态吸收(Excited-state absorption),CR表示交叉弛豫(Cross relaxation),NR表示非辐射弛豫(Non-emission relaxation),ETU表示能量传递上转换(Energy-transfer up-conversion)。 $3\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ 波段的激光跃迁发生在 $^4\text{I}_{11/2}$ 和 $^4\text{I}_{13/2}$ 能级之间,可用商业化的0.97 μm半导体激光直接将 Er^{3+} 离子泵浦到 $3\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ 激光上能级。由于 $3\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ 激光上下能级之间的带隙较窄,受多声子弛豫效应的影响,激光上能级 $^4\text{I}_{11/2}$ 的寿命较短,下能级 $^4\text{I}_{13/2}$ 的寿命相对较长,这就使得 $3\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ 激光存在自终止效应。很多掺铒介质产生 $3\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ 激光是在低温条件下实现的。因为在较

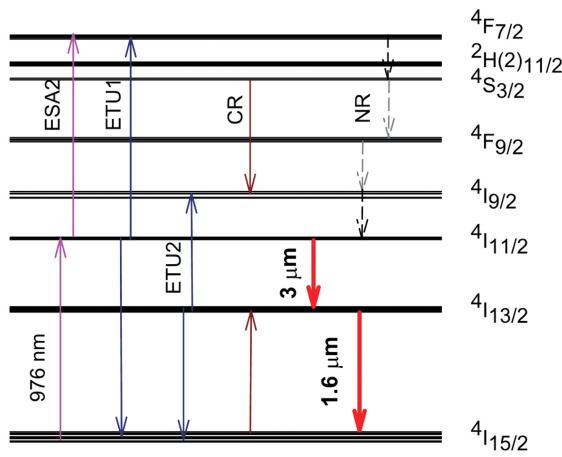


Fig. 1 Energy-level transition of Er^{3+}

低温度下,随着晶格振动的减少,多声子跃迁的几率减少,从而上能级荧光寿命增加。而在室温条件下,多声子弛豫效应较强,需要提高铒离子的掺杂浓度,随着掺杂浓度的提高,下能级寿命大幅度降低,而上能级寿命几乎不变,上下能级的寿命差缩短,从而减小自终止效应的影响。

在高掺杂的掺 Er^{3+} 系统中,存在两种主要的能量传递上转换过程。其中一种是图1所示的ETU1过程($^4\text{I}_{11/2} + ^4\text{I}_{11/2} \rightarrow ^4\text{F}_{7/2} + ^4\text{I}_{15/2}$),一次ETU1会同时消耗2个激光上能级粒子,因而该过程会导致 $3\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ 激光阈值提高。另一种是ETU2过程($^4\text{I}_{13/2} + ^4\text{I}_{13/2} \rightarrow ^4\text{I}_{11/2} + ^4\text{I}_{15/2}$),一次ETU2过程可以消耗2个下能级的粒子,上转换至 $^4\text{I}_{9/2}$ 能级的粒子可以通过多声子弛豫过程跃迁到 $^4\text{I}_{11/2}$ 能级,从而补充1个上能级粒子。随着 Er^{3+} 掺杂浓度的提高,ETU1和ETU2过程均会增强,当ETU2与ETU1过程的参数比 W_{22}/W_{11} (W_{22} 和 W_{11} 分别为激光下能级 $^4\text{I}_{13/2}$ 和上能级 $^4\text{I}_{11/2}$ 的ETU参量)达到最大值时,能获得最优的 $3\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ 激光效率^[9]。由于不同激光基质材料的声子能量不同,获得最高斜效率所需的 Er^{3+} 掺杂浓度也不同。在低声子能量的基质中,由于上下能级间非辐射跃迁的几率较低,上能级寿命相对较长,自终止效应较弱;而在大声子能量的基质中,由于较高的非辐射跃迁几率,激光上能级寿命远低于下能级寿命,需要通过提高Er离子的掺杂浓度来增加Er离子间的能量传递几率,并充分利用ETU过程缩短上下能级的寿命差。研究显示,当 BaY_2F_8 的 Er^{3+} 掺杂浓度(原子数分数)为12%~15%^[10-11]、 LiYF_4 的 Er^{3+} 掺杂浓度(原子数分数)为~15%^[12]、 YSGG 的 Er^{3+} 掺杂浓度(原子数分数)为~30%^[13]、 $\text{Y}_3\text{Al}_5\text{O}_{12}$ 的 Er^{3+} 掺杂浓度(原子数分数)为~50%^[14]时, W_{22}/W_{11} 达到最大。这表明基质材料的声子能量越大,获得最优 $3\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ 激光斜效率所需的 Er^{3+} 掺杂浓度越高。

Georgescu等^[15]从理论上分析了Er:YAG晶体产生 $3\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ 激光的效率,由于ETU过程的存在,0.97 μm泵浦产生 $3\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ 激光的理论量子效率可以达到59.8%。到目前为止,实验上在掺 Er^{3+} 增益介质中产生 $3\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ 激光的最高斜效率为50%,这是在掺杂浓度(原子数分数)为15%的Er:LiYF中获得的^[6]。这一结果证明了在优化的掺杂浓度下,ETU过程可有效提高 $3\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ 连续激光产生效率。有研究人员用1.5 μm泵浦光将 Er^{3+} 离子直接泵浦到 $^4\text{I}_{13/2}$

能级,随后利用ETU过程将其激发到⁴I_{11/2}激光上能级,在YLF、YAG、SrF₂、CaF₂等多种基质材料中也产生了3 μm激光输出^[16],更是直接证明了ETU过程的作用。但是在准连续波输出模式下,3 μm激光斜率效率大大降低^[17],这是因为激光下能级的粒子数比连续泵浦模式下少得多,而ETU速率正比于激光下能级粒子数密度的平方,因而ETU速率也明显弱于连续波输出模式^[18-19]。

图1中的CR过程代表相邻Er³⁺离子之间的交叉弛豫过程,CR过程会同时补充一个上能级和一个下能级粒子。此外,在⁴I_{11/2}和⁴F_{7/2}能级之间还存在激发态吸收过程(ESA2),即处于激光上能级⁴I_{11/2}的粒子会再吸收一个泵浦光子的能量,跃迁至更高的⁴F_{7/2}能级上,该过程不仅会消耗激光上能级的粒子,同时跃迁上去的粒子会以热弛豫或荧光辐射的形式向下跃迁,在激光运转时产生额外的热量,因而激发态吸收过程不利于3 μm激光的产生,应尽量减小该过程的影响。2012年,科研人员在实验上测量了Er:Lu₂O₃单晶在0.97 μm附近的激发态

吸收光谱,测得Er:Lu₂O₃单晶的最佳泵浦波长为0.971,0.974,0.980 μm,且需要窄线宽的泵浦源才能获得高的光光转换效率,在优化的泵浦波长下,获得了36%的激光斜效率^[20]。实验表明,选择泵浦波长时,在保证较高的基态吸收(GSA)的前提下,尽量避开激发态吸收波长,可有效提高3 μm激光斜效率。

3 掺铒3 μm激光的研究进展

不同的基质材料掺杂Er³⁺离子后会产生不同的发射波长,例如:Er:YAG发射波长为2.94 μm,Er:Y₂O₃的发射波长位于2.7 μm附近。近些年,研究人员在激光增益介质中掺Er产生~3 μm中红外激光输出方面开展了大量工作,包括连续波输出^[8,21]、调Q脉冲输出^[22]、锁模脉冲输出^[23]以及1.6 μm和~3 μm级联输出^[24]等。表1汇总了半导体激光泵浦的3 μm掺铒固体激光的性能,其中CW为连续波,RT为室温,LNT为液氮温度(77 K)。

表1 半导体激光泵浦的3 μm掺铒固体激光的性能汇总

Table 1 Performances of LD pumped 3 μm Er-doped solid-state laser

Active medium	Doping concentration (atomic fraction) / %	Laser regime	Laser wavelength / μm	Output power / W	Slope efficiency / %	Cooling temperature	Year
Er: YAG	-	Pulse	2.94	50	-	RT	2015
Er: YAG	50	CW	2.94	1.15	34	RT	1999
Er: YSGG	35	Pulse	2.8	34.9	13.7	RT	2019
Er: YAP	5	CW	2.92	6.9	30.6	RT	2020
Er: YLF	15	CW	2.8	0.123	50	RT	1997
Er: Y ₂ O ₃	2	CW	2.7	14	26	LNT	2011
Er: Y ₂ O ₃	-	CW	2.74	24	24	LNT	2016
Er: Lu ₂ O ₃	7	CW	2.85	1.4/5.9	36/27	RT	2012

3.1 掺Er石榴石介质产生3 μm激光的研究进展

Er:YAG是最常见的掺铒3 μm激光增益介质,其高的声子能量(约为860 cm⁻¹)和强的多声子猝灭效应导致激光上下能级寿命之比约为1:50,需要提高掺杂浓度降低上下能级寿命之比,获得高效的3 μm激光输出。1999年,Chen等^[8]利用半导体激光器作为泵浦源(泵浦波长为963.7 nm和964.2 nm),在掺杂浓度(原子数分数)为50%的Er:YAG晶体中,获得了最高功率为1.15 W、波长为2.94 μm的激光输出,激光斜效率(34%)略高于量子极限效率(32.7%)。2016年,Pantec公司推出了适合医疗和工业应用的DPM-40模块^[25](图2),

采用半导体侧面泵浦技术,在Er:YAG晶体中获得了波长为2.94 μm、平均功率为50 W、单脉冲能量高于300 mJ(脉冲宽度为400 μs)的脉冲激光输出,峰值功率为1 kW。Yang等^[26]在Er:YAG晶体中获得了脉冲能量为226 mJ、脉冲宽度为62 ns、重复频率为3 Hz的3 μm激光,相应的峰值功率达到3.6 MW。

Arbabzadah等^[27]研究了掺杂浓度(原子数分数)均为50%的Er:YAG和Er:YSGG晶体的3 μm激光准连续输出特性。在Er:YAG晶体中获得了波长为2.936 μm、单脉冲能量为31 mJ、斜效率为12.6%的激光输出;在Er:YSGG晶体中获得了波长为2.797 μm、单脉冲能量为55 mJ、斜效率为20.5%

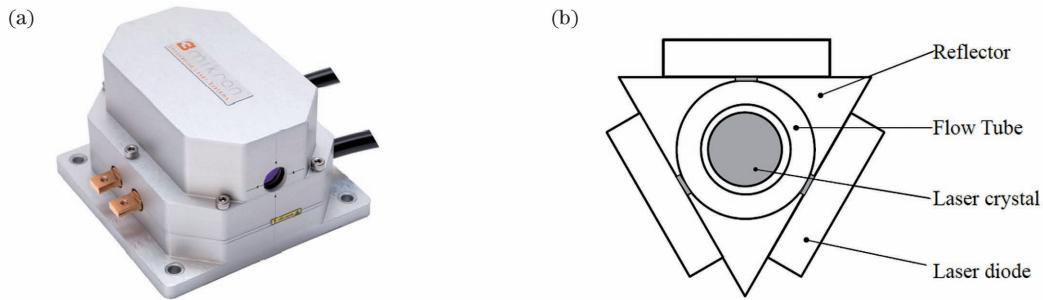


图2 Pantec 公司的 DPM-40 模块^[25]。(a)DPM-40 模块;(b)侧面泵浦的激光装置图

Fig. 2 DPM-40 module of Pantec company^[25]. (a) DPM-40 module; (b) laser design with side pump

的激光输出。相比 Er: YAG, Er: YSGG 拥有更长的上能级寿命, 同时, 上能级的能量传递上转换(图1)速率更低 ($W_{11} = 7.3 \times 10^{-22} \text{ m}^3 \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$ @ Er: YSGG, $W_{11} = 3.7 \times 10^{-21} \text{ m}^3 \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$ @ Er: YAG), 从这个角度看, $0.97 \mu\text{m}$ 半导体激光泵浦的 Er: YSGG 晶体比 Er: YAG 更适合作为 $3 \mu\text{m}$ 激光增益介质, 并且 Er: YSGG 晶体也具有更大的储能潜力, 更适合调 Q 脉冲输出。2019年, Ye 等^[28]利用掺杂浓度(原子数分数)为 35% 的 Er: YSGG 作为激光增益介质, 用 $0.97 \mu\text{m}$ 半导体激光作为泵浦源, 在室温条件下, 获得了平均功率为 34.9 W 的 $2.8 \mu\text{m}$ 脉冲激光输出, 重复频率为 120 Hz , 脉冲宽度为 $500 \mu\text{s}$, 相应的斜效率和光光转换效率分别为 13.7% 和 12.7%。

3.2 Er: YAP 和 Er: YLF 产生 $3 \mu\text{m}$ 激光的研究进展

铝酸钇(YALO_3 , YAP)是一种优良的激光基质材料, 具有与钇铝石榴石($\text{Y}_3\text{Al}_5\text{O}_{12}$, YAG)相似的优良热力学及力学性能^[29], 如较高的热导率、相似的莫氏硬度(8.5)、更低的声子能量(550 cm^{-1})^[30]。并且 YAP 具有比倍半氧化物更低的熔点(YAP 的熔点约为 1875°C , 倍半氧化物的熔点 $>2400^\circ\text{C}$), 这使得 YAP 单晶的制备更为容易。YAP 晶体属正交晶系, 是双折射率较高的晶体, 三价稀土离子 Er^{3+} 掺杂的 YAP 晶体可以直接产生线偏振激光。Yao 等^[21]用 $0.976 \mu\text{m}$ 波长锁定的激光二极管(LD)作为泵浦源, 在掺杂浓度(原子数分数)为 5% 的 Er: YAP 晶体中产生了输出功率为 6.9 W 、波长为 $2.92 \mu\text{m}$ 的激光输出, 斜效率为 30.6%, 接近量子极限效率。

与石榴石相比, 氟化钇锂(LiYF_4 , YLF)同样具有较低的声子能量($<650 \text{ cm}^{-1}$), 激光上下能级间的无辐射跃迁概率较低, 因而具有相对较高的上能级寿命。YLF 是白钨矿型四方晶系结构的晶体, 具有负折射率温度系数, 热透镜效应较小, 具有良好的

热稳定性和高的激光损伤阈值。在掺杂浓度(原子数分数)为 15% 的 Er: YLF 中也已经获得了平均功率大于 10 W 的 $2.81 \mu\text{m}$ 激光输出, 单脉冲能量大于 100 mJ , 斜效率约为 18.7%^[31]。Jensen 等^[32]和 Wyss 等^[6]分别开展了 Er: YLF 晶体产生 $3 \mu\text{m}$ 激光的实验, 斜效率分别达到 35% 和 50%, 再一次证明 $0.97 \mu\text{m}$ 泵浦掺 Er 介质产生 $3 \mu\text{m}$ 激光可以获得高于量子极限的激光效率。

3.3 掺 Er 倍半氧化物介质中产生 $3 \mu\text{m}$ 激光的研究进展

倍半氧化物作为一种优秀的激光增益介质, 通过掺杂 Yb ^[33-34]、 Tm ^[35] 和 Ho ^[36] 等离子, 均已获得了良好的激光输出性能。与 YAG 相比, 倍半氧化物(Lu_2O_3 、 Sc_2O_3 和 Y_2O_3)具有更高的热导率和更低的声子能量。倍半氧化物材料的熔点很高($>2400^\circ\text{C}$), 难以通过单晶生长工艺制备, 但其相变点远低于熔点温度, 通过陶瓷制备工艺在较低的温度($1500\sim1700^\circ\text{C}$)下就可以实现倍半氧化物透明陶瓷的制备。

基态吸收(${}^4\text{I}_{15/2} \rightarrow {}^4\text{I}_{11/2}$)的主要波段范围位于 $0.96 \mu\text{m}$ 到 $0.99 \mu\text{m}$ 之间, 并不是所有波长都适合作为泵浦波长。Li 等^[20]测量了 Er: Lu_2O_3 晶体的基态吸收和激发态吸收光谱, 提出泵浦波长的选择应尽量避开激发态吸收峰, 这有利于提高 $3 \mu\text{m}$ 激光效率, 如图 3 所示, 其中 $\Delta I/I$ 光谱是通过泵浦-探测技术^[37]测量得到的, I 为探测光束的强度, ΔI 为通过泵浦和未泵浦晶体后的探测光束强度差。对于 Er: Lu_2O_3 晶体, 最佳泵浦波长(${}^4\text{I}_{15/2} \rightarrow {}^4\text{I}_{11/2}$)为 $\sim 0.971 \mu\text{m}$ 、 $\sim 0.974 \mu\text{m}$ 和 $\sim 0.980 \mu\text{m}$, 在这几个波长处, Er: Lu_2O_3 晶体具有较大的基态吸收和较小的激发态吸收截面。研究者利用波长可调谐的半导体激光器(955~982 nm 可调谐, 光谱宽度为 0.3 nm)作为泵浦源, 获得了波长为 $2.85 \mu\text{m}$ 、功率为 1.4 W 的激光输出, 斜效率达到 36%; 利用 $0.971 \mu\text{m}$

波长锁定的半导体激光器(光谱宽度为3 nm)作为泵浦源,获得了功率为5.9 W的激光输出,斜效率为27%。36%的斜效率超过了量子极限效率(34%),得益于优化的泵浦波长和窄化的光谱宽度,激发态吸收的影响减小。

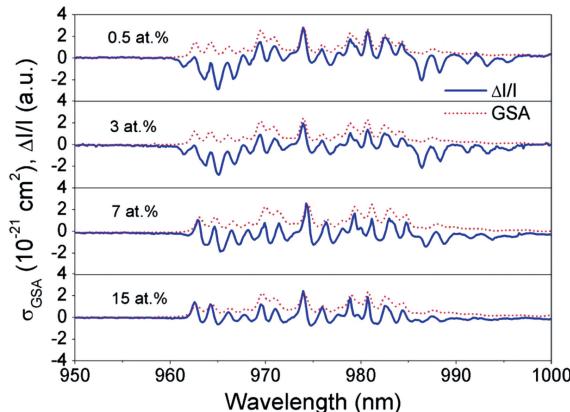


图3 Er:Lu₂O₃ 的基态吸收和ΔI/I 光谱^[20]

Fig. 3 GSA and $\Delta I/I$ spectra of Er:Lu₂O₃^[20]

2011年,研究者在77 K的低温环境下,利用Er:Y₂O₃陶瓷作为激光增益介质,在2.8 μm处获得了功率为14 W的连续波输出^[38]。2016年,研究者在液氮制冷条件下,利用Er:Y₂O₃陶瓷将连续波输出功率进一步提升至24 W,斜效率为24%^[7]。

江苏师范大学课题组基于自制的倍半氧化物陶瓷,在3 μm激光产生方面开展了一系列研究工作^[39-41]。在室温条件下用0.976 μm半导体激光器泵浦Er:Y₂O₃陶瓷,在2.7 μm处获得了3.8 W的激光功率输出,斜效率为14.4%^[41]。最近,通过对半导体激光器输出的泵浦光斑进行整形并对系统热

管理进行进一步优化,在室温条件下已经获得了波长为2.8 μm、功率大于10 W的激光输出,斜效率超过20%。

3.4 1.6 μm 和 3 μm 激光级联输出的研究进展

在固体激光器中,级联 $^4I_{11/2} \rightarrow ^4I_{13/2} \rightarrow ^4I_{15/2}$ 两个或多个跃迁有着重要的意义,能够提高激光输出的整体效率,有利于热管理。1993年,Schmaul等^[42]采用0.647 μm氪离子激光泵浦掺杂浓度(原子数分数)为1%的Er:LiYF₄晶体,首次实现室温条件下2.81 μm和1.62 μm的连续波级联激光输出,总的激光斜效率为1.3%,输出功率仅为毫瓦量级。

研究者在液氮冷却的低温条件下,开展了Er:Y₂O₃产生3 μm激光的实验(图4)^[7],并且研究了Er:Y₂O₃陶瓷在低温条件下的激光级联输出特性^[38,43-45]。用0.974 μm窄带半导体激光泵浦掺杂浓度(原子数分数)为0.5%的Er:Y₂O₃陶瓷,分别在1.6 μm和2.7 μm波长处获得了24 W和13 W的激光输出,斜效率分别为38%和24%。实验表明,在多波长级联模式下,1.6 μm和2.7 μm激光的输出功率和效率比在单波长“非级联”工作模式下都有所提高,级联方式使3 μm激光的输出功率提高了约30%。2016年,研究者研究了Er:YAG的级联输出特性^[24],1.6 μm激光的最大输出功率为45 W,斜率效率为55%,2.7 μm激光的最大输出功率略低于10 W,斜率效率为~16%。YAG基质中 $^4I_{11/2}$ 到 $^4I_{13/2}$ 的多声子跃迁具有更高的概率,导致级联Er:YAG中的3 μm激光输出斜率效率比级联Er:Y₂O₃激光器低~10%。

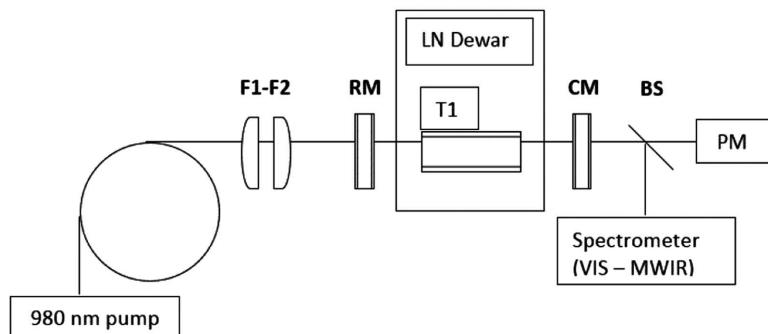


图4 液氮冷却的Er:Y₂O₃激光实验装置图^[7]

Fig. 4 Experimental setup for liquid-nitrogen-cooled Er:Y₂O₃ laser^[7]

4 结束语

3 μm激光在医疗、国防、科研等领域具有重要应用。利用掺Er介质产生3 μm激光是一种比较

直接高效的方法,并且在YAG、YLF、Y₂O₃、Lu₂O₃等多种基质材料中均获得了良好的激光输出性能。由于Er³⁺离子的能级结构比较复杂,不同基质材料的声子寿命也不同,需要综合考虑ETU、ESA、CR

等跃迁过程的影响。随着高质量低声子能量激光增益介质制备技术的提高,特别是陶瓷增益介质的发展,通过对泵浦波长、泵浦光线宽、掺Er激光增益介质的掺杂浓度、激光谐振腔参数等进行优化设计,3 μm激光的输出功率水平和激光效率有望得到进一步提升,像其他波长体系一样实现高功率运转。另外,基于低声子能量增益介质的中红外固体激光相比光纤激光技术路径,在高峰值功率、大脉冲能量运转情况下更有优势。总之,与半导体激光技术或非线性频率变换相比,使用掺Er介质直接产生3 μm激光是一种极具竞争力的方法。

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Research Progress of LD-Pumped 3 μm Er-Doped Solid-State Lasers

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Abstract

Significance 3 μm laser sources have a broad application prospect in the fields of national defense and security, biomedicine, spectral analysis, and so on. Compared with the nonlinear frequency conversion and semiconductor laser technologies, laser-diode pumping for Er-doped lasers to emit 3 μm wavelength is a more direct and efficient method. The radiation from energy level $^4I_{11/2}$ to $^4I_{13/2}$ of Er³⁺ ions produces 3 μm lasing. Since the lifetime of the upper level is shorter than that of the lower level, it is difficult to realize a continuous laser operation due to the “self-termination effect” from the classic laser theory. However, due to the inherent complex energy transfer process and Stark sub-level splitting of the Er³⁺ doped system, an efficient 3 μm laser continuous wave operation has been realized in many Er-doped matrices such as Er:YAG, Er:YLF, and Er:Y₂O₃.

The main known problems linked with Er-doped 3 μm lasers are self-termination and large quantum losses. If the Er³⁺ ions are doped into low phonon matrix, the probability of non-radiative transition is reduced and the fluorescence decay time at the upper laser level $^4I_{11/2}$ is prolonged. This fact results in a low probability of self-termination. To reduce the self-termination effect in high phonon matrix, a high Er-doping level is required. With the increase of doping level, the spacing between Er³⁺ ions is shortened, which is beneficial to ion-ion energy transfer. However, using the high doped active medium affects thermal conductivity, which makes the thermal management of the laser system more difficult. The Er-doped laser gain medium is pumped by a semiconductor laser of 0.97 μm to produce a 3 μm laser with a large quantum loss. Theoretically, the laser efficiency is limited to ~33%, which means that two-thirds of the pump power is wasted and deposited into the gain medium as parasitic heat, resulting in degradation of laser performance. Researchers have established a mathematical model to estimate the theoretical limit of the emission efficiency of 3 μm Er: YAG laser, and they have found a simple analytical expression for the emission efficiency, which shows that the theoretical quantum efficiency can reach 59.8% due to the existence of an ETU process. So far, the maximum efficiency of 3 μm lasers with Er³⁺-doped gain media in experiments has reached to 50% in Er:LiYF with doping concentration (atomic fraction) of 15 %. This result proves that with an optimized doping concentration, the 3 μm laser efficiency can be effectively improved due to the ETU process.

Using laser materials with a low Er³⁺ doping concentration and cascading two transitions ($^4I_{11/2} \rightarrow ^4I_{13/2} \rightarrow ^4I_{15/2}$), where the first $^4I_{11/2} \rightarrow ^4I_{13/2}$ transition corresponds to the mid-IR ~3 μm laser and the second $^4I_{13/2} \rightarrow ^4I_{15/2}$ corresponds to the eye-safe 1.6 μm spectral region, respectively, provide a number of important benefits, including the increased overall efficiency of optical output and thermal management. In addition, the second eye-safe transition ($^4I_{13/2} \rightarrow ^4I_{15/2}$) effectively depletes the lower laser level and sustains a positive inversion, as required for a CW operation.

Progress The 3 μm laser performance in various Er-doped host materials is summarized (Table 1), including continuous wave output, Q-switched pulse output, mode-locked pulse output, and 1.6 μm and ~3 μm cascading outputs, etc. At present, the 3 μm laser products are commercially available with Er: YAG and Er: YLF as gain media. Due to the strong heat generation inside Er: YAG with 50% atomic fraction, the side-pumping design is carried out, which results in a poor beam quality. Sesquioxides, which have a low phonon energy and high thermal conductivity, have emerged as a promising laser host material for ~3 μm laser operation in recent years. An efficient laser operation could be obtained with the sesquioxides at a low Er³⁺ concentration. With 2% (atomic fraction) Er: Y₂O₃ ceramics as laser gain media, researchers have obtained a 14 W laser output at 2.8 μm and cryogenically cooled temperature of 77 K (Fig. 4). In 2016, the output power is further increased to 24 W with a

slope efficiency of 24% under the liquid nitrogen cooled condition. Research group from Jiangsu Normal University has obtained a 3.8 W laser output at 2.7 μm at room temperature with 7% (atomic fraction) Er:Y₂O₃ ceramic, and the output power has been increased to more than 10 W.

Conclusion and Prospects With its recent breakthrough in terms of output power and laser efficiency, the erbium-doped 3 μm laser has become an object of intense scientific research. With the improvement of high-quality low phonon energy laser gain media, especially the development of ceramic gain media, the 3 μm laser performance can be further improved by optimizing the wavelength and spectral linewidth of pump sources, doping concentration of Er-doped laser gain media, and laser cavity parameters. Compared with semiconductor laser and nonlinear frequency conversion technologies, the laser-diode pumped Er-doped laser emitting 3 μm wavelength is very promising, especially in the pulsed laser operation for producing high peak power and large pulse energy.

Key words lasers; Er-doped solid state laser; 3 μm laser; high power; self-termination