OFF-AXIS HOLLOW-CHANNEL PLASMA TAILORING FOR GENERATING TWO-COLOR X-RAY FREE-ELECTRON LASERS*

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Abstract

Plasma-wakefield-based acceleration offers a route to realize compact X-ray free-electron lasers, but its application is currently limited by beam quality. Two-color X-ray FEL pulses provide a powerful tool for probing ultrafast dynamics. Here we propose a scheme for generating such pulses by using an off-axis elliptical hollow-channel plasma to tailor the electron-beam phase space while preserving its quality. In this approach, the plasma wakefield imprints a time-dependent transverse tilt along the bunch, while the elliptical channel geometry effectively suppresses the quadrupole wakefield and minimizes the induced mismatch. This enables fresh-slice lasing control at different wavelengths in two undulator sections. Simulations show the feasibility of generating femtosecond-scale, high-power two-color pulses with tunable temporal separation at the Shanghai Soft X-ray Free Electron Laser facility.

INTRODUCTION

X-ray free-electron lasers (FELs), which produce ultrashort, high-brightness X-ray pulses, play a critical role in a wide range of fundamental research and applications in medicine, chemistry, biology, and so on [1, 2]. Two-color FELs, delivering two consecutive pulses with adjustable time and wavelength separation, are particularly valuable for pump-probe experiments at atomic and molecular scales. Traditional approaches, such as using two electron bunches or split undulator schemes, provide limited flexibility in controlling the time or wavelength separation between pulses.

Recently, the fresh-slice method has been demonstrated to generate two-color pulses from a single electron bunch [3]. By introducing a time-dependent transverse offset, i.e., tilt or focusing mismatch, selected temporal slices lase in one undulator segment while other slices remain "fresh" for subsequent lasing. This method enables independent control of pulse delay and duration while preserving beam emittance, as shown in simulations at LCLS and SwissFEL [4, 5].

Plasma wakefield acceleration (PWFA) has been introduced to the FEL community as a promising route toward compact X-ray FELs due to its ultra-high accelerating gradients [6]. However, the extreme longitudinal and transverse fields intrinsic to PWFA—specifically, the extremely strong, non-uniform accelerating fields and the nonlinear transverse focusing fields—pose significant challenges for preserving the high brightness and low emittance required for X-ray FEL operation.

Hollow plasma channels (HPCs) have been proposed to mitigate these issues. Unlike uniform plasmas, the HPC is devoid of plasma electrons along its axis, effectively suppressing nonlinear focusing forces and providing an emittance-preserving environment for high-brightness electron beam modulation [7–9]. By maintaining beam quality within the plasma, HPCs allow the generation of controlled transverse tilts when the beam propagates off-axis.

In this work, we propose a novel PWFA based technique to produce tilt beam suitable for two-color FELs with an off-axis hollow plasma channel. Particle-in-Cell (PIC) simulations show that an elliptical channel design can naturally suppress quadrupole wakefield, ensuring high-quality tilted beams. Full simulations confirm that our approach can generate femtosecond-scale, high-power two-color pulses.

LAYOUT

The layout of the proposed two-color FEL operation is illustrated in Fig. 1, including the elliptical HPC modulation section, the match and orbit control beamline, the undulator sections, and the magnetic chicane used to separate and delay the lasing slices. The electron bunch is first injected off-axis into an elliptical hollow plasma channel, which imparts a transverse dipole wakefield along the bunch, generating a tilt in the off-axis direction.

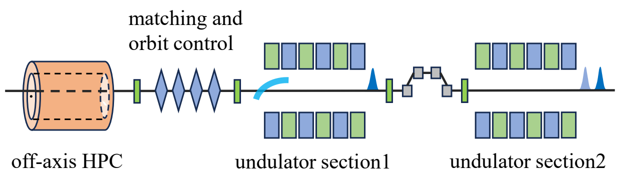

Figure 1: Schematic layout of the two-color FEL operation. Both undulator sections contain several undulator modules, the FODOs between undulators are not shown for clarity.

The subsequent beamline provides matching and orbit control. It matches the electron beam to the designed Twiss parameters at the undulator entrance position while steering specific temporal slices onto the beamline axis, enabling the fresh-slice lasing scheme: only the on-axis slice interacts efficiently with the radiation field, while the other slices oscillate near the undulator axis, and remain "fresh" for subsequent lasing.

* Work supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (12475322), Young Scientists in Basic Research CAS (YSBR-060), the Youth Innovation Promotion Association CAS (2023302), and the Oriental Talent Young Scientist Program (QNZH2024036).
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Following this section, the beam enters the undulator line, which is split by a magnetic chicane. The first undulator section is aligned with a selected temporal slice of the tilted bunch, allowing this slice to lase at the first photon energy. A pair of correctors located between the undulator sections then realign the second temporal slice onto the undulator axis, which subsequently emits the second color. The magnetic chicane introduces a controllable delay between the new lasing slices and pre-existing FEL pulse. By adjusting the undulator parameters in each section, the wavelengths of the two FEL pulses can be independently tuned.

TILT GENERATION WITH HPC

According to theoretical models [10], the dipole wakefield in the HPC follows a sinusoidal form. For a uniform current distribution, the corresponding bunch wake exhibits a $(1 - \cos)$ dependence. Since the characteristic HPC wakefield wavelength is typically on the order of several hundred micrometers, an electron bunch with a length of about 100 µm experiences a progressively stronger dipole kick toward the bunch tail. As a result, the transverse tilt amplitude in offset, defined as dy_c/ds, becomes significantly larger for the tail slices.

Thanks to the extremely high wakefield strength, the plasma modulation section can be very short. The slice-averaged transverse position and angle at s can therefore be approximated as

$$\vec{y}_i(s) = \left[L_p/2 \cdot y'_c(s),\ y'_c(s)\right]^T, \tag{1}$$

where L_p is the plasma length and the off-axis modulation is assumed to be in the y direction. To control the beam trajectory, a pair of orbit correctors is placed downstream. In the thin-lens approximation, each corrector gives the whole bunch a transverse kick $\Delta\vec{y} = [0,\ \Delta y']^T$. The final transverse vector of slice s is then

$$\vec{y}_f(s) = M_2\left[M_1\vec{y}_i(s) + \Delta\vec{y}_1\right] + \Delta\vec{y}_2, \tag{2}$$

where M_1 and M_2 are the transfer matrices of the two beamline sections. By properly tuning $\Delta\vec{y}_1$ and $\Delta\vec{y}_2$, a target slice s_0 can be steered onto the undulator axis with $\vec{y}_f(s_0) = 0.$. For another slice s_1, the initial relative transverse coordinates at the plasma exit satisfy

$$\vec{y}_i(s_1) - \vec{y}_i(s_0) = \left[L_p/2,\ 1\right]^T \left(y'_c(s_1) - y'_c(s_0)\right). \tag{3}$$

After beam transport, the relative coordinates become

$$\vec{y}_f(s_1) - \vec{y}_f(s_0) = M_2M_1\left[L_p/2,\ 1\right]^T \left(y'_c(s_1) - y'_c(s_0)\right). \tag{4}$$

Therefore, both the initial and final slice-to-slice offsets remain proportional to $y'_c(s_1) - y'_c(s_0)$, showing that the longitudinal profile of the tilt modulation is preserved during beam transport. To fully exploit the steep tilt for generating short FEL pulses, the on-axis lasing slice should be selected as close to the bunch tail as possible.

Additionally, the off-axis HPC also generates a quadrupole wakefield, which induces time-dependent focusing mismatch and degrades beam quality. Recent theoretical studies on blowout plasma wakefields indicate that similar quadrupole wakefield are produced in plasma structures with elliptical symmetry [11], providing a conceptual basis for non-circular channel designs. Although a complete theory for elliptical hollow channels is still lacking, our simulations show that an appropriately designed elliptical channel can effectively cancel the quadrupole wakefield, producing high-quality tilted beams suitable for two-color FEL applications.

Table 1: Main Parameters in Simulations

Parameter	Value
Beam energy	1.0 GeV
Energy Spread	0.01 %
Current	1500 A
Bunch length	100 μm
Normalized emittances	1.0 μm·rad
Undulator period	1.6 cm

BEAM DYNAMICS SIMULATION

The main parameters used in simulations are listed in Table 1, with beam parameters relevant to the Shanghai Soft X-ray Free-Electron Laser (SXFEL) facility [12]. The wakefields interaction inside the HPC is simulated using the three-dimensional PIC code HiPACE++ [13]. To simplify, an ideal beam with flat-top current profile is initialized with a vertical off-axis offset of 90 µm at the channel entrance. The channel is modeled as a sharp-edge hollow plasma structure with density 10^{16} cm^{-3}, length 20 cm, inner radius 450 µm, and outer radius 650 µm.

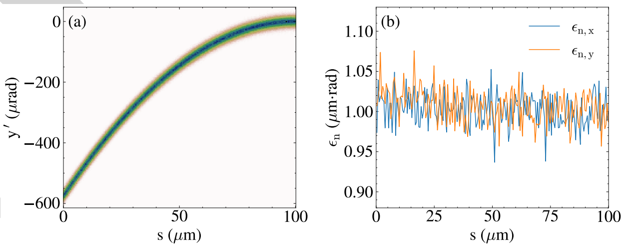

Figure 2: The distribution of (a) the angular kick $y'(s)$ and (b) the normalized slice emittances at the exit of the HPC. Larger s corresponds to the bunch head.

After the beam-plasma interaction, a clear time-dependent angular kick is generated, as shown in Fig. 2(a). Consistent with the theoretical discussion above, the kick profile is distinctly nonlinear, with a progressively larger gradient toward the bunch tail. During subsequent beam transport, this time-dependent angular kick is converted into a transverse tilt of the beam, with the lasing slice preferably selected as close to the bunch tail as possible. At the same time, the slice emittances remain nearly unchanged along the bunch, as shown in Fig. 2(b), demonstrating that the elliptical HPC modulation introduces negligible emittance degradation.

To quantify the time-dependent mismatch, we further evaluate the 2D betatron mismatch factor B_{mag} [14] at the plasma exit. Figure 3(a) shows the dependence of $B_{\mathrm{mag},x,y}$ on the channel ovality, defined as the ratio of the minor to major axis. The optimal ovality is found to be approximately 0.933, at which the slice mismatch factors remain very close to 1 over the full bunch, as shown in Fig. 3(b). Moreover, a relatively large tolerance to variations in ovality is observed, which confirms the effective cancel of the quadrupole wakefield with a elliptical channel. The resulting tilted beam provides a clean and robust starting point for the two-color fresh-slice FEL process.

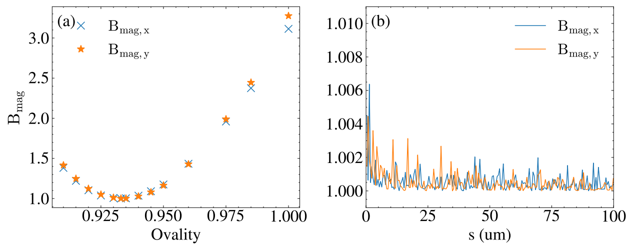

Figure 3: Mismatch analysis for the elliptical HPC: (a) dependence of $B_{\mathrm{mag},x,y}$ on the channel ovality, and (b) slice mismatch factors at the optimized ovality of 0.933.

FEL PERFORMANCE

By adjusting the strengths of the orbit correctors in the beam transport section simulated with ELEGANT [15], different temporal slices can be steered onto the undulator axis. Using GENESIS 1.3 Version 4 [16], we perform FEL simulation at the wavelength of 4 nm for several selected lasing slices in the first undulator section, as shown in Fig. 4.

Owing to the suppression effect of the tilted beam, femtosecond-scale near-single-spike FEL pulses can be obtained. In our scheme, different lasing slices correspond to different local tilt amplitudes. As the on-axis slice moves toward the bunch head, the lasing suppression of neighboring slices becomes weaker with decreased tilt amplitude, so the pulse length becomes longer. In addition, shot-noise-induced jitter of the peak position further broadens the averaged profile and reduces its peak value. Therefore, to obtain two pulses with similar temporal profiles, the two undulator sections should operate on slices close to each other. For comparison, with the same beam parameters, the SASE saturates at about 20 m with an average power of about 1 GW, further confirming that the HPC modulation preserves the beam quality well.

With a similar orbit-corrector setting, another temporal slice can be aligned to the undulator axis for the second-color lasing. The two colors are simulated in separate GENESIS runs due to their different central wavelengths. A magnetic chicane between the two undulator sections provides a wide tunability of the temporal delay. Since the present scheme does not rely on energy chirp, the chicane has little impact on the fresh beam quality for the second-stage lasing. Meanwhile, the wavelength of the second pulse can be tuned independently through the undulator parameter.

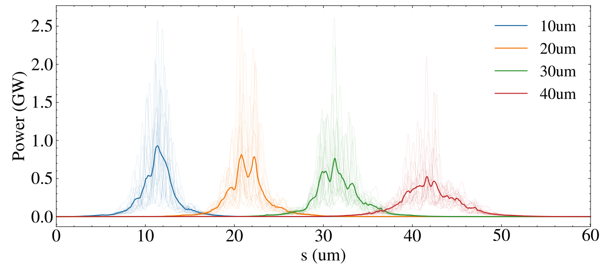

Figure 4: Power profiles for different lasing slices at 25 m of the first undulator section. Thin lines represent individual 20-shots and thick lines denote the averages.

Figure 5 shows a representative case where the first slice, 10 µm from the bunch tail, radiates at 4.0 nm, and the second slice, 20 µm from the bunch tail, radiates at 4.1 nm. Each undulator section is 25 m long. Since the second slice is closer to the bunch head, the time separation can be tuned to zero or even negative values by switching on and adjusting the chicane strength. The spectral peaks are clearly separated, benefiting from the nearly single-spike spectrum enabled by the fresh-slice scheme. Moreover, the bunching factor and energy spread distributions further confirm that the two pulses are generated from two distinct fresh slices.

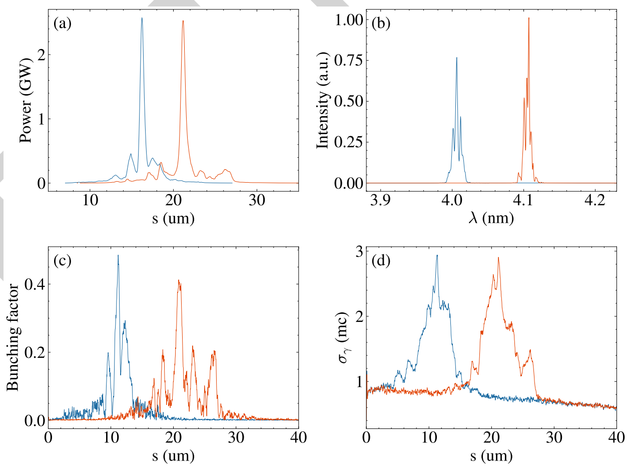

Figure 5: Representative two-color FEL results. (a) Temporal power profile with delay chicane switched off and (b) corresponding spectrum. (c) Bunching factor and (d) energy spread distributions at the first and second undulator sections

CONCLUSION

A PWFA-based scheme for two-color X-ray FEL generation using an off-axis elliptical hollow plasma channel has been proposed. The elliptical channel effectively suppresses the quadrupole wakefield, enabling the generation of high-quality tilted beams with minimal mismatch. Based on this tilt, a fresh-slice configuration is realized in a two-stage undulator, producing femtosecond-scale two-color FEL pulses from a single bunch. The temporal delay is flexibly controlled by the chicane, while the wavelength separation is independently tuned through the undulator parameters. This scheme provides a compact and flexible approach for two-color FEL operation.

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