

Nanocrystalline mesoporous palladium activated tin oxide thin films as room-temperature hydrogen gas sensors†

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A unique nanocrystalline, mesoporous PdO–SnO₂ film exhibiting high sensitivity and selectivity to hydrogen gas at room temperature has been developed.

SnO₂-based gas sensors work by monitoring changes in electrical resistance that result mainly from reduction/oxidation of the crystal surface by the target gas. To-date elevated temperatures^{1–6} or UV light⁷ are required to achieve rapid adsorption/desorption and oxidation/reduction kinetics needed for a practical, rapid, and sensitive H₂ detector. Very recently, nanocrystalline SnO₂-based sensors showed room temperature sensitivity towards ethanol and carbon monoxide, but poor sensitivity for hydrogen gas,^{8,9} whereas indium oxide doped SnO₂ films deposited on microelectromechanical systems device showed an appreciable (but slow) response to H₂ gas at room temperature.¹⁰ Here we are reporting a surfactant-templated unique nanocrystalline, mesoporous PdO–SnO₂ film exhibiting very high sensitivity and selectivity to hydrogen gas at room temperature. As hydrogen is currently used in many different sectors of technology and is expected to be the fuel of the future, a H₂-selective sensor material active at room temperature is of considerable immediate interest.¹¹

Synthesis of mesoporous SnO₂ powders using cationic⁶ or nonionic poly(ethylene oxide) based¹² surfactants has been recently reported. However, these methods are incapable of producing high quality films of SnO₂ or Pd-doped SnO₂, and to-date there are no reports of nanocrystalline mesoporous SnO₂ films having high surface area and room temperature gas sensitivity. We are reporting here a surfactant-directed assembly approach to form high surface area mesoporous Pd-doped SnO₂ films exhibiting an interconnected nanocrystalline structure and high sensitivity for H₂ gas at room temperature. We prepared uniform 8 mol% PdO–92 mol% SnO₂ (nominal composition) films on glass or Si-wafer substrates using the block copolymer surfactant Pluronic P123 (PEO₂₀PPO₇₀PEO₂₀) as a structure directing agent,¹² and tin (IV) *tert*-butoxide and Pd acetate as tin and palladium sources respectively (see experimental section in ESI†). To elucidate the role of nanostructuring, we also prepared films of identical

composition without the surfactant. A main goal of our synthetic procedure was to incorporate Pd in SnO₂ as PdO, because, in this form, it is known to suppress grain growth in bulk sol–gel systems¹³ and to increase both their on-set resistance value³ and sensitivity towards H₂.^{2,3} In addition, PdO acts as an electron acceptor, trapping charge from the SnO₂ conduction band. This trapped charge, along with that of ionosorbed oxygen, induces stronger depletion of electrons from the Sn oxide surface causing greater increases in resistance.³ Films prepared with (molar ratio P123/Sn = 0.024) and without surfactant are designated SnPd₅ and SnPd₀, respectively. The thickness of SnPd₅ film measured by ellipsometry and FE-SEM is about 230 nm. The FTIR spectrum of the SnPd₅ films dried at 100 °C showed C–H stretching vibrations associated with the surfactant. However, the spectrum of the corresponding air-annealed (400 °C/6 h) films showed complete removal of organics, having bands attributed solely to Sn–O (and possibly overlapped Pd–O) vibrations.¹⁴ As prepared SnPd₅ films exhibited a broad low angle XRD peak (see Fig. S1 in ESI†) centered at $2\theta = 1.57^\circ$ ($d = 5.62$ nm), consistent with a worm-like micellar mesophase, whereas, as expected, the corresponding SnPd₀ films showed no low angle X-ray diffraction. Upon calcination at 400 °C in air, SnPd₅ films crystallized, causing the low angle XRD peak to shift only slightly to lower 2θ (larger d -spacing), reflective of the minor coarsening accompanying dimensionally-constrained framework crystallization. TEM imaging of calcined SnPd₅ films (Fig. 1) revealed a sponge-like morphology composed of uniform ~5 nm diameter grains (Fig. 1a), which is also confirmed by FE-SEM shown in the inset of Fig. 1a (top left). Energy dispersive X-ray scattering (Fig. 1b) confirmed the presence of Pd, Sn and O in the film. Selected area electron diffraction (SAED) patterns (inset of Fig. 1a) and wide angle XRD analyses (see Fig. S2 in ESI†) indicate a polycrystalline tetragonal structure (cassiterite), typical for SnO₂. The high-resolution electron micrograph (Fig. 1c) shows coalesced, almost spherical nanocrystalline grains with average diameters of 4–5 nm. Importantly, we could not locate any distinct PdO nanoparticles in FE-SEM or TEM investigations of the calcined films, and XPS analysis of the unspattered film surface shows a Pd 3d_{5/2} line at 337.5 eV corresponding to the Pd²⁺ ion.¹⁵ These results imply that either a PdO–SnO₂ solid solutions formed,¹⁶ or that PdO exists as extremely uniformly dispersed nanoparticles, but we could not distinguish between the two by wide-angle XRD.¹⁷

Surface acoustic wave-based nitrogen sorption analyses (at 77 K)¹⁸ along with refractive index measurements were used to understand the influence of the templating procedure on thin film porosity (as opposed to the porosity of related mesoporous powders). Fig. 2a plots the nitrogen adsorption-desorption

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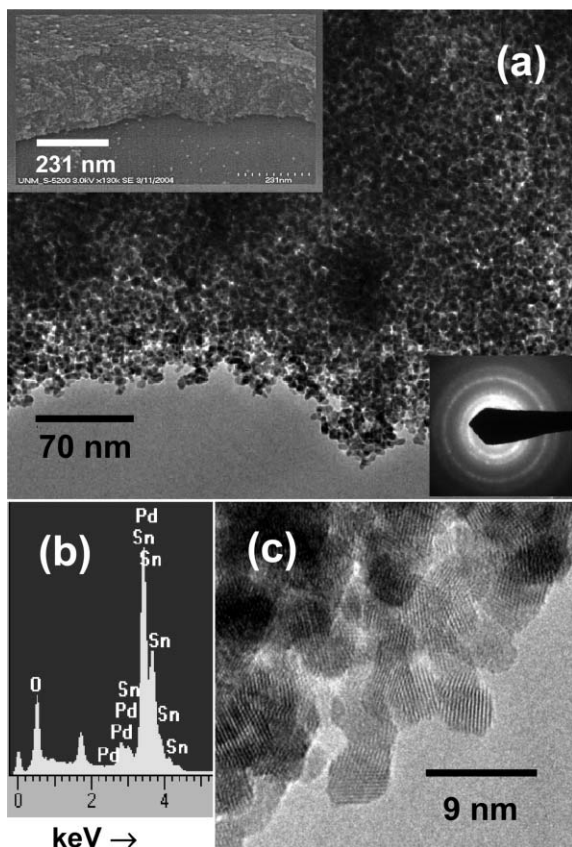


Fig. 1 Electron microscopy images of SnPd₅ film calcined at 400 °C for 6 h in air. (a) Low magnification TEM image showing sponge-like porous structure of the film. Insets (top left) show the FE-SEM image taken at 40° tilt angle and selected area electron diffraction (SAED) pattern (below right) which could be indexed to tetragonal (cassiterite) SnO₂, (b) Energy dispersive X-ray scattering (EDX) taken from the above image showing presence of O, Pd and Sn and (c) High resolution TEM image showing lattice fringes corresponding to cassiterite SnO₂ of the near-spherical interconnected nanocrystals.

isotherms of the films prepared with and without surfactant. The SnPd₀ film prepared without surfactant has a low pore volume and surface area of 14.4 m² g⁻¹ or 49.5 m² cm⁻³, compared to

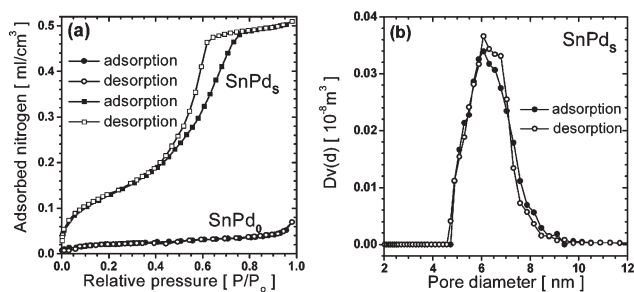


Fig. 2 N₂ physisorption measurements at 77 K of the SnPd₅ and SnPd₀ films calcined at 400 °C for 6 h in air. (a) Nitrogen adsorption-desorption isotherms and (b) Pore size distributions of SnPd₅ film using density functional theory (DFT) method. The films were applied to ~1 cm² area of a piezoelectric ST-cut quartz SAW substrate with interdigitated gold transducers designed to operate at ~97 MHz. Mass change was monitored as a function of relative pressure (sensitivity ~80 pg cm⁻²) using a surface acoustic wave (SAW) technique.¹⁸

143.5 m² g⁻¹ or 493 m² cm⁻³ for the for the surfactant templated film SnPd₅. The pore size distribution of SnPd₅ is quite narrow, and the mean pore diameter, about 6.2 nm, is comparable to the nanocrystal diameter (Fig. 2b). The SnPd₀ film has a higher refractive index than the SnPd₅ film, 1.69 compared to 1.30, due to its much lower porosity. The measured surface area of the SnPd₅ film is quite high taking into account the high densities of the component oxides comprising the crystalline skeleton (6.95 and 8.3 g cm⁻³ for SnO₂ and PdO, respectively), and comparable to reports of mesoporous SnO₂ powders prepared using surfactant templating.^{12,19} There are no reports of corresponding nanocrystalline/high surface area PdO/SnO₂ films except for the case where trimethylsilyl termination of the surface hydroxyl groups was employed to avoid surface condensation reactions and, at high temperature, form silica nanoparticles that pin grain boundaries and suppress grain growth.⁹ In our case, confinement within the nanodomains, established by the templating procedure, presumably serves to foster particle coalescence but limits 3D grain growth, allowing the formation of a highly porous, high surface area, doped oxide.

Motivated by the high surface area and uniform incorporation of PdO within the SnPd₅ framework, gas sensing properties were measured at room temperature (21 ± 1 °C).²⁰ The sensor film has an initial resistance value of about 100–110 MΩ in air. Fig. 3a shows the decrease of the electrical resistance of the SnPd₅ film in

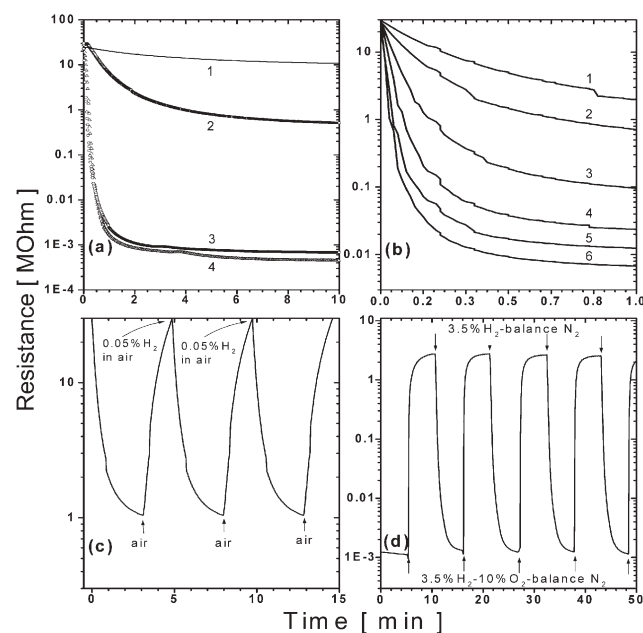


Fig. 3 Gas sensing behaviour of SnPd₅ film at room temperature (21 ± 1 °C). The dynamic electrical responses (resistance range 30 MΩ and lower) to different gases was recorded with HP3478A digital multimeter using a LabView software (see ESI† for details). (a) Resistance changes when the sensor's surrounding atmosphere is switched from pure air to: (1) pure CH₄; (2) 0.5% vol. CO-in-N₂; (3) 0.5% vol. H₂-in-N₂; and (4) 0.5% vol. H₂-in-N₂, R.H. = 50%. (b) Resistance changes when the surrounding atmosphere is changed from pure air to: (1) 0.05% vol.; (2) 0.1% vol.; (3) 0.2% vol.; (4) 0.5% vol.; (5) 1.0% vol.; and (6) 2.0% vol. H₂-in-air. (c) Resistance changes when the sensor's surrounding atmosphere is cycled between air and 0.05% vol. H₂-in-air. (d) Cyclic resistance changes when 10% vol. O₂ is introduced or removed from a reducing process gas stream (here 3.5% vol. H₂-in-N₂).

response to pure CH₄ (1), 0.5% vol. CO-in-N₂ (2), 0.5% vol. H₂-in-N₂ (3) and humidified (R.H. = 50%) 0.5% vol. H₂-in-N₂ (4). The data indicate that the speed and magnitude of the response towards H₂ is much larger than the response to other reducing gases such as CO and CH₄. Also, the presence of H₂O vapor in the surrounding atmosphere does not appear to interfere with the response towards H₂.

Fig. 3b shows the sensor's response towards increasing concentrations of hydrogen gas (0.05, 0.1, 0.2, 0.5, 1 and 2% vol.) in air. This response to different levels of H₂ in air is appreciably fast, especially as we approach the explosion limit of 4% vol. H₂-in-air. Fig. 3c shows reversible changes in resistance when the surrounding atmosphere is cycled between pure air and 0.05% vol. H₂-in-air, suggesting that the sensor responds very quickly to both the introduction as well as the removal of small amounts of H₂ gas in air. We have also tested the response to oxygen introduced in a hydrogen process stream by cycling the surrounding gas between the gas mixtures 3.5% H₂-balance N₂ and 3.5% H₂ -10% O₂-balance N₂. In this situation (Fig. 3d), the sensor's resistivity changes can alternatively be utilized as an alarm to signify the undesirable presence of O₂ (or its removal) in a reducing process gas stream.

The maximum gas sensitivity value S (defined as the ratio of sensor resistance in air, R_a to that in a sample gas, R_g)³ of our sensor film (SnPd₅) was found to be about 300, 5000, and 20 000 for 0.05, 0.5 and 2% vol. H₂-in-air, and 100 000 for 0.5% vol. H₂-in-N₂, respectively. These values are very high (~3–4 orders of magnitude) in comparison to previously reported sensors operating at high (200–400 °C)^{2–6} and low temperatures.²¹ Moreover, our sensor's response to H₂ in air is also very fast for practical rapid detection of H₂. Beyond room temperature operation, another advantage of this sensor is that it is relatively insensitive to CO or CH₄, especially in the presence of O₂ (e.g. the sensor's sensitivity towards 0.05% vol. H₂ in air is 300-fold larger than towards 0.05% vol. CO in air).

It has been reported that reduced grain size could enhance the sensitivity of SnO₂⁹ towards reducing gases. The unusually high hydrogen sensitivity and rapid response of our films at room temperature presumably results from the high surface area, 3-D accessible sponge-like mesoporous structure, and uniform incorporation of PdO in the SnO₂ lattice. The surfaces of the interconnected nanosized single crystalline grains of PdO–SnO₂ allow rapid room temperature reduction of SnO₂ in response to H₂, causing a dramatic decrease of resistance values. When the film is exposed to air (oxygen), the reduced film surface reverts back to its original state. This surface reduction/oxidation process proceeds with no measurable changes in lattice spacing or nanostructure of the SnO₂. In the case of CO or CH₄, the film shows much weaker room temperature sensitivity, as a result of the weak interaction of CO gas with Pd²⁺ and Sn⁴⁺ ions at room temperature^{13,14} and the much weaker reducing character of CH₄ gas. On the other hand, H₂O vapor only physisorbs on the SnO₂ surface at $T < 100$ °C with practically no²² or very little effect on sensor's electrical resistance.²³

In conclusion, we have demonstrated a synthesis approach that combines nanostructuring, molecular-level dispersion of a Pd catalyst, and homogenous film formation in a simple 'one-pot' process, leading to a unique material that overcomes existing

barriers to rapid room temperature hydrogen detection by tin oxide. As an example, alternating between air and 0.5% vol. H₂ gas in N₂, changes the resistance reversibly and rapidly by a factor of about 10⁵ at room temperature. An additional advantage of this material is its relative insensitivity to other combustible gases such as CO or CH₄, or to ubiquitous H₂O vapour.

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