

# High and Temperature-Insensitive Piezoelectric Strain in Alkali Niobate Lead-free Perovskite

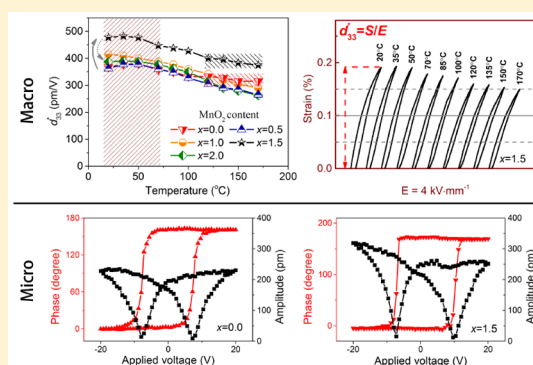
Mao-Hua Zhang,<sup>†</sup> Ke Wang,<sup>\*,†,‡</sup> Yi-Jia Du,<sup>‡</sup> Gang Dai,<sup>\*,‡</sup> Wei Sun,<sup>†</sup> Geng Li,<sup>†</sup> Duan Hu,<sup>†</sup> Hao Cheng Thong,<sup>†</sup> Chunlin Zhao,<sup>†</sup> Xiao-Qing Xi,<sup>†</sup> Zhen-Xing Yue,<sup>†</sup> and Jing-Feng Li<sup>†</sup>

<sup>†</sup>State Key Laboratory of New Ceramics and Fine Processing, School of Materials Science and Engineering, Tsinghua University, Beijing 100084, P. R. China

<sup>‡</sup>Microsystem and Terahertz Research Center, China Academy of Engineering Physics, Chengdu 610200, P. R. China

**S** Supporting Information

**ABSTRACT:** With growing concern over world environmental problems and increasing legislative restriction on using lead and lead-containing materials, a feasible replacement for lead-based piezoceramics is desperately needed. Herein, we report a large piezoelectric strain ( $d_{33}^*$ ) of 470 pm/V and a high Curie temperature ( $T_c$ ) of 243 °C in  $(\text{Na}_{0.5}\text{K}_{0.5})\text{NbO}_3\text{-(Bi}_{0.5}\text{Li}_{0.5})\text{TiO}_3\text{-BaZrO}_3$  lead-free ceramics by doping  $\text{MnO}_2$ . Moreover, excellent temperature stability is also observed from room temperature to 170 °C (430 pm/V at 100 °C and 370 pm/V at 170 °C). Thermally stimulated depolarization currents (TSDC) analysis reveals the reduced defects and improved ferroelectricity in  $\text{MnO}_2$ -doped piezoceramics from a macroscopic view. Local poling experiments and local switching spectroscopy piezoresponse force microscopy (SS-PFM) demonstrates the enhanced ferroelectricity and domain mobility from a microscopic view. Distinct grain growth and improvement in phase angle may also account for the enhancement of piezoelectric properties.



## INTRODUCTION

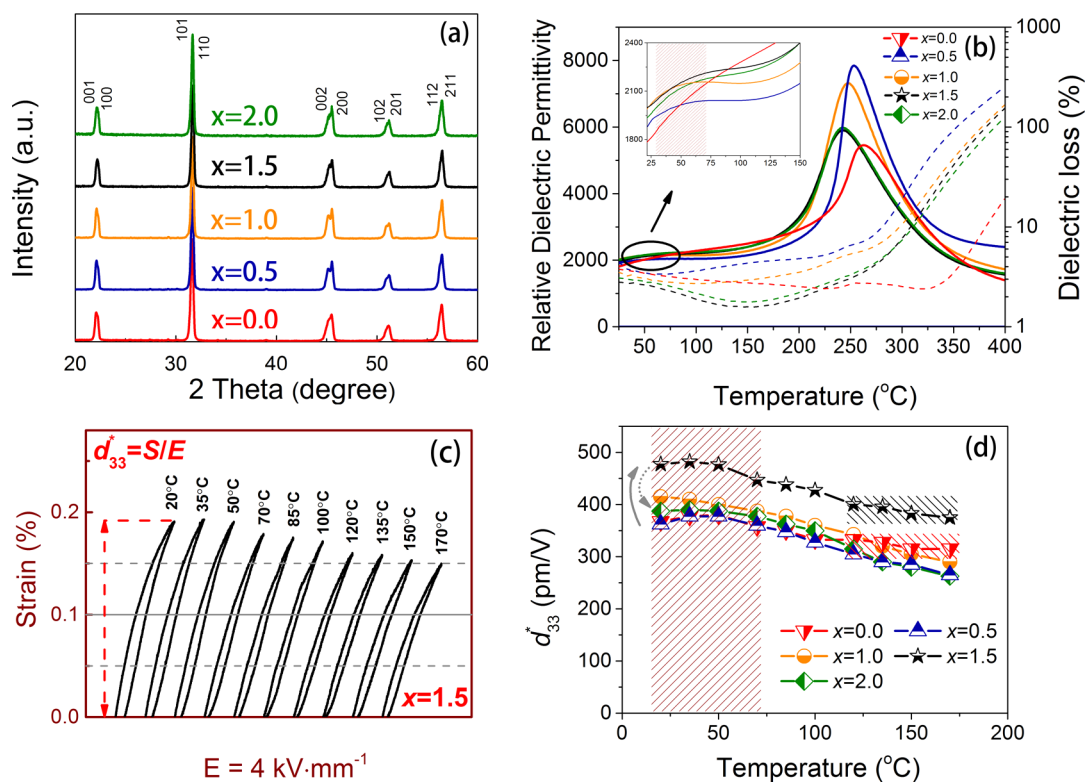
Piezoelectric materials can achieve interconvertibility of the energy between the mechanical and the electrical one. The versatility of  $\text{Pb}(\text{Zr,Ti})\text{O}_3$  (PZT) makes it outshine any other piezoelectric materials and irreplaceable in the global piezoelectric market. Since Saito et al. achieved a PZT-like value of piezoelectric coefficients in  $(\text{K,Na})\text{NbO}_3$ -based (KNN) lead-free ceramics,<sup>1</sup> scientific research in the quest to expel toxic substances represented by PZT has never ceased in the piezoelectric community for the past decade.<sup>2–18</sup> However, PZT is still a monopoly in industry up to now, and is reported to have grasped 94.5% of the piezoactuators market share in 2014.<sup>19</sup>

KNN-based piezoelectric materials are featured with the low driving voltage comparable to that of PZT and thus limited hysteresis and energy dissipation.<sup>4</sup> This characteristic meets the demand for practical applications and in favor of a smooth transition to a lead-free era. Thus, KNN has long been considered as a very promising candidate to replace PZT in certain application fields.<sup>4</sup> In 2016, Wu et al. reported a KNN system with a giant piezoelectric coefficient  $d_{33}$ , which is the highest value recorded using a conventional solid-state method and comparable to that of PZT. Apart from the piezoelectric coefficient  $d_{33}$ , there are also some other figures of merit when it comes to practical applications, e.g., electromechanical coupling factor  $k_p$  and mechanical quality factor  $Q_m$ , for transducer applications; piezoelectric strain  $d_{33}^*$ , for piezoac-

tuator applications. However, a gap still exists between KNN-based piezoceramics and PZT in terms of the piezoelectric strain  $d_{33}^*$ .<sup>20,21</sup> Besides, bound by a polymorphic phase transition (PPT) other than the morphotropic phase boundary (MPB) in PZT, KNN-based material usually comes with an inferior temperature stability compared with PZT. Persistent efforts have been made to promote piezoelectricity and stability. For instance, recent studies have unveiled a notable role of zirconium in tailoring R-T phase boundaries, mimicking the MPB structure in the PZT system. And it is generally accepted as a feasible approach to acquire giant piezoelectricity in the KNN system.<sup>2,3,17,22–24</sup> On the basis of previous research and taking a step further by adding manganese, a KNN-based lead-free material with the nominal composition  $(\text{Na}_{0.5}\text{K}_{0.5})\text{NbO}_3\text{-(Bi}_{0.5}\text{Li}_{0.5})\text{TiO}_3\text{-BaZrO}_3\text{-xMnO}_2$  (abbreviated as KNN-BLT-BZ-xMn) is presented. A large piezoelectric strain ( $d_{33}^*$ ) of 470 pm/V is realized, which is comparable to that of PZT, together with a high Curie temperature ( $T_c$ ) of 243 °C. Moreover, a  $d_{33}^*$  value of 430 pm/V is maintained until 100 °C, manifesting excellent temperature stability. TSDC and PFM analysis reveal the reduced defects and improved ferroelectricity and domain mobility from the perspective of macroscopic and microscopic views, respectively. In addition,

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**Figure 1.** (a) XRD patterns in the  $2\theta$  range  $20^\circ$ – $60^\circ$ . (b) Temperature-dependent dielectric constant and loss of unpoled KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ( $x = 0.0$ – $2.0$ ) ceramics. (c) Temperature-dependent unipolar strain curves of KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ( $x = 1.5$ ) ceramic. (d) Temperature-dependent large signal  $d_{33}^*$  of KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ( $x = 0.0$ – $2.0$ ) ceramics, measured at 1 Hz, from room temperature to  $170^\circ\text{C}$ .

distinct grain growth and improvement in phase angle may also play a part in the enhancement of piezoelectric properties.

## EXPERIMENTAL SECTION

The lead-free ceramics with the nominal composition  $0.92(\text{Na}_{0.5}\text{K}_{0.5})\text{-NbO}_3\text{-}0.02(\text{Bi}_{0.5}\text{Li}_{0.5})\text{-TiO}_3\text{-}0.06\text{BaZrO}_3 + x \text{ wt } \% \text{ MnO}_2$  (In the following termed KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn with  $x = 0.0, 0.5, 1.0, 1.5,$  and  $2.0$ ) were prepared by the conventional solid-state reaction route described elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> The raw powders were  $\text{Na}_2\text{CO}_3$ ,  $\text{K}_2\text{CO}_3$ ,  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$ ,  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3$ ,  $\text{Li}_2\text{CO}_3$ ,  $\text{TiO}_2$ ,  $\text{BaCO}_3$ , and  $\text{ZrO}_2$ . High-resolution X-ray diffraction (XRD) measurement was utilized to determine the crystal structure using  $\text{Cu K}\alpha$  radiation (Rigaku, D/Max2500, Tokyo, Japan). A detailed analysis on microstructures was performed using a scanning electron microscope (SEM, JSM-6460LV, JEOL, Tokyo, Japan). The impedance and phase angle spectra were determined using an impedance analyzer (HP 4294A, Palo Alto, CA). Temperature-dependent dielectric permittivity was measured with an impedance analyzer (TH2827, Changzhou Tonghui Electronic Co, China). A quasi-static piezoelectric constant apparatus was used to determine the piezoelectric coefficient  $d_{33}$ . Field-dependent and temperature-dependent parameters including  $d_{33}(E)$  hysteresis loops, polarization  $P(E)$  hysteresis, bipolar strain  $S(E)$ , and unipolar strain  $S(E)$  were measured with ferroelectric measuring equipment (aixACCT TF Analyzer 1000, Germany). A thermally stimulated depolarization current measurement was conducted using an electrometer/high resistance meter (KEITHLEY 6517B; Keithley Instruments, Inc., Cleveland, OH). Temperature data were collected by the quatro temperature controller of Novocontrol Technologies. The piezoelectric response was characterized using an atomic force microscope (AFM, MFP-3D, Asylum Research, USA) with a functionality of a piezoresponse force microscope (PFM) for the local poling experiments and switching spectroscopy.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1a shows the X-ray diffraction patterns of KNN-BLT-BZ ceramics modified with different doping amounts of  $\text{MnO}_2$ , and all the ceramics present typical perovskite structure. Analysis on the relative intensities of (002) and (200) peaks and XRD full-pattern fitting reveal the coexistence of rhombohedral and tetragonal phases.<sup>17,25</sup> To further characterize the phase structure, experiments on the temperature-dependent dielectric constant and dielectric loss (at 1 kHz) of KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ceramics were performed, as presented in Figure 1b. The dielectric constant anomalies around  $250^\circ\text{C}$  for all the samples correspond to the Curie temperature  $T_C$ , representing the phase transition from cubic to tetragonal in the cooling run. Around room temperature, a bump was observed in the dielectric permittivity curve for each composition, which is associated with the R-T phase transition. The corresponding curves are enlarged in the inset, showing typical diffusion behavior in the temperature range from approximately  $25$  to  $70^\circ\text{C}$ , depending on the specific composition. A similar phenomenon has been observed in  $\text{CaZrO}_3$ -modified KNN piezoceramics, which was speculated to be associated with intergranular stress around polymorphic phase transitions<sup>26</sup> and could possibly act as a key factor for obtaining enhanced thermal stabilities in KNN-based materials.<sup>5</sup> The incorporation of  $\text{ABO}_3$ -type perovskites ( $\text{Bi}_{0.5}\text{Li}_{0.5})\text{-TiO}_3$  and  $\text{BaZrO}_3$ , which decreases the O-T phase transition temperature ( $T_{\text{O-T}}$ ) and increases the R-O phase transition temperature ( $T_{\text{R-O}}$ ) simultaneously, leads to the formation of the R-T phase boundary at ambient temperature. The accompanying existence of 14 possible directions for polarization orientations around the boundary (8 from the rhombohedral and 6 from the tetragonal) can exert influence on the polarization mechanism and may account for the

diffusion. Furthermore, the diffusion phenomenon is possibly due to the relaxor behavior observed in all compositions (Figure S6: Relaxor characteristic of the KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn). Compared with the ceramics without MnO<sub>2</sub> doping, it can be noticed that the ceramics with MnO<sub>2</sub> doping have a lower  $T_c$ . The peak value of the dielectric constant at  $T_c$  increases from 5455 at  $x = 0.0$  to a maximum value of 7847 at  $x = 0.50$  and then slightly decreases to the value of 5900 at  $x = 2.0$ , revealing that the spontaneous polarization of these samples first increased and then decreased with the increasing  $x$ .<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the dielectric constant at room temperature increases with increasing  $x$ , reaching a maximum at  $x = 1.5$ , and then decreases slightly. At the same time, the room temperature dielectric losses are lowered with increasing MnO<sub>2</sub> addition (see Table S1, Electrical properties of KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ceramics).

Well-defined  $P(E)$  hysteresis loops are observed for all the measured samples (Figure S1a:  $P(E)$  loops of KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ceramics), revealing their ferroelectric properties, which are not strongly dependent on the MnO<sub>2</sub> contents. Ceramics with MnO<sub>2</sub> doping exhibit square-like hysteresis loops with lower coercive field  $E_c$ . To fully understand the composition-dependent ferroelectric properties, both  $P_r$  and  $E_c$  are plotted as a function of MnO<sub>2</sub> content  $x$  (Figure S1c: Remnant polarization  $P_r$  and coercive field  $E_c$  of KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ceramics).  $P_r$  grows with the increasing  $x$ , reaching a maximum of 16.4  $\mu\text{C}/\text{cm}^2$  at  $x = 1.0$ . Then, it declines to 15.8 and 15.2  $\mu\text{C}/\text{cm}^2$  as  $x$  increases to 1.5 and 2.0, respectively.  $E_c$  is reduced from 1.30 kV/mm to 1.08 kV/mm, owing to the addition of MnO<sub>2</sub> ( $x = 0.5$ ), and then it remains in the lower range of 1.10–1.19 kV/mm with the further increase of  $x$ . The ferroelectric properties of the ceramics are promoted with the addition of MnO<sub>2</sub>, which is associated with the enhanced domain mobility and easier polarization switching boosted by the reduced  $E_c$ . Typical butterfly shape strain curves are observed for all the ceramics with different MnO<sub>2</sub> doping (Figure S1b: bipolar strain  $S(E)$  curves of KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ceramics). The magnitude of  $S_{\text{neg}}$  is associated with the competitions between 180° and non-180° ferroelectric domains switching; that is, the more the non-180° domain switching, the greater the value is.<sup>19</sup> It also represents the reversible domain switching of piezoceramics harvested under electrical field excitation, which can be regarded as the ferroelectricity contribution. So the improved  $S_{\text{neg}}$  also implies enhanced ferroelectricity with the addition of MnO<sub>2</sub>, which is in agreement with  $P_r$ .

Temperature-dependent piezoelectric strain curves of KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ( $x = 1.5$ ) ceramics are exemplified in Figure 1c. The strain that is repeatedly harvested in unipolar conditions is approximately equal to the  $S_{\text{pos}}$  in bipolar conditions (Figure S1b: bipolar strain  $S(E)$  curves of KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ceramics), which is a figure of merit in practical actuator applications. The normalized strain  $d_{33}^*(S_{\text{max}}/E_{\text{max}})$  shares the same unit (pm/V or pC/N) with piezoelectric coefficient  $d_{33}$ , but is adopted on occasion under large field excursions.<sup>30</sup>  $d_{33}^*$  is usually referred to as a large signal property while the value obtained through the quasi-static piezoelectric constant apparatus is called small signal  $d_{33}$ . To investigate the influence of MnO<sub>2</sub> on the piezoelectric strain behaviors of KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ceramics, temperature-dependent large signal  $d_{33}^*$  values were calculated from piezoelectric strain curves and plotted in Figure 1d. At room temperature,  $d_{33}^*$  increases largely with the increasing  $x$ , giving a maximum value of 470

pm/V at  $x = 1.5$ . This property is superior among KNN-based lead-free piezoceramics and also comparable to that of soft PZT PIC151, as listed in Table 1. Surprising temperature stability is

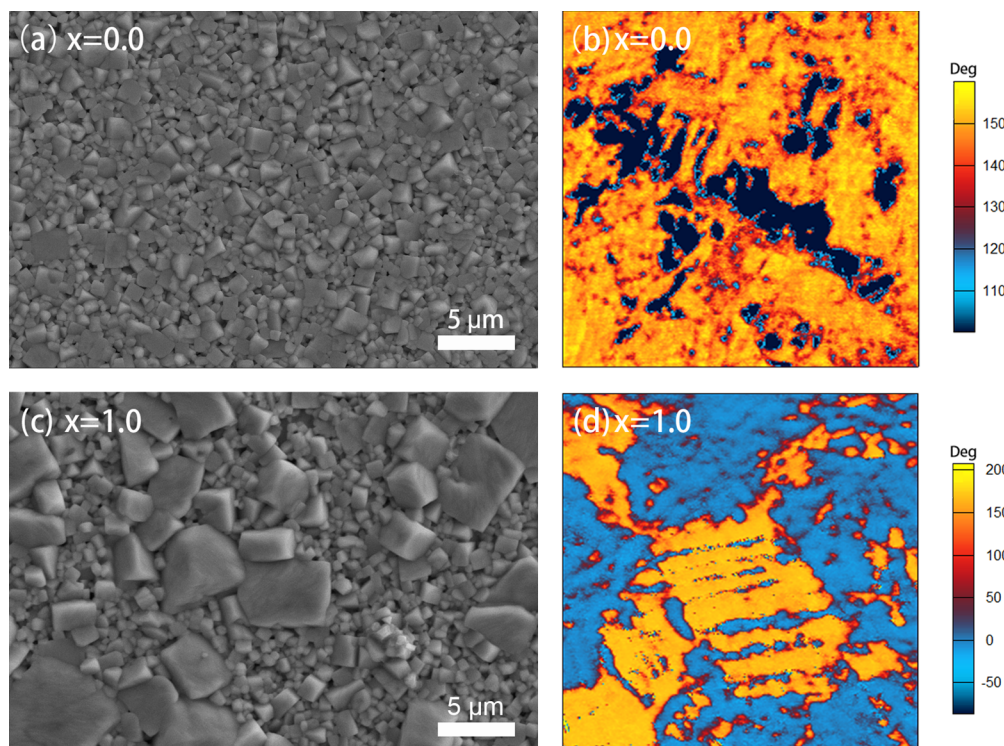
**Table 1. Piezoelectric Strain  $d_{33}^*$  under Certain Electric Fields and Curie Temperature of Representative Systems**

System	$d_{33}^*$ (pm/V)	$E$ (kV/mm)	$T_c$ (°C)	Reference
KNN-BLT-BZ-1.5MnO <sub>2</sub>	475	4	243	This work
LF4 (KNN-based)	400	2	256	Nature <sup>1</sup>
CZ5 (KNN-based)	357	4	200	Adv. Funct. Mater. <sup>5</sup>
KNNS-BNKZ (KNN-based)	355	4	267	ACS Appl. Mater. Interface <sup>28</sup>
BNT-BT-ZnO (BNT-based)	110	6	280	Nat. Commun. <sup>29</sup>
BNT-BT-KNN (BNT-based)	560	8		Appl. Phys. Lett. <sup>10</sup>
PIC151 (Soft PZT)	500		250	Appl. Phys. Lett. <sup>10</sup>

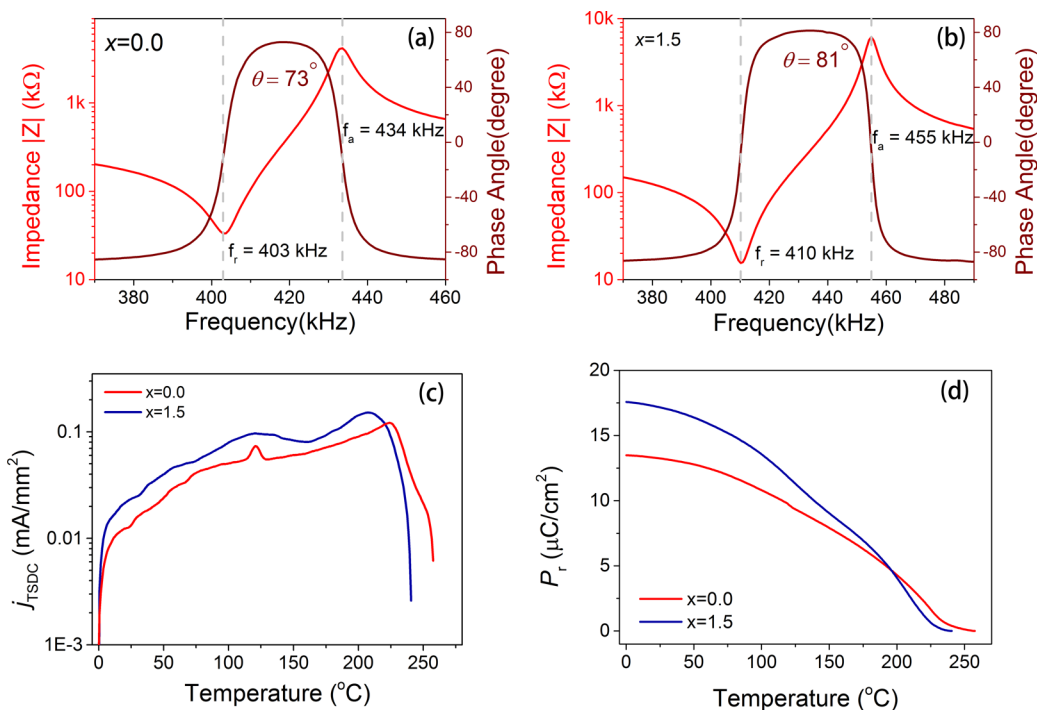
observed for all the compositions from room temperature to 70 °C, which is supposed to be boosted by the diffused phase transition existing in this very range (as shown in the left shadow).<sup>5</sup> Note that the ceramic with composition  $x = 0$  shows good temperature stability in the whole temperature range from room temperature to 170 °C. More surprisingly, the ceramics with composition  $x = 1.5$  exhibit excellent  $d_{33}^*$  performance together with outstanding temperature stability. Furthermore, it is noted that the  $d_{33}^*$  variation of our material in the range from room temperature to 100 °C is less than –10% of its room-temperature value, which is indicated by shadows in Figure S7 (Comparison of temperature dependence of large signal  $d_{33}^*$  for various piezoceramics as normalized to its room temperature value  $d_{33}^*_{\text{RT}}$ ). The temperature stability of the piezoelectric performance is much better than that of other representative KNN-based ceramics and commercial PZT5H ceramics, even comparable to the well-known PZT4 ceramics, which are suitable for applications requiring stable outputs.<sup>1,31–33</sup>

The influence of MnO<sub>2</sub> on the room temperature piezoelectric properties ( $d_{33}$ ,  $k_p$ ) and the mechanical quality factor ( $Q_m$ ) is illustrated in Figure S2 (Room temperature piezoelectric properties  $d_{33}$ ,  $k_p$ , and  $Q_m$  of poled KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ceramics). The ceramics with MnO<sub>2</sub> doping possess higher  $d_{33}$ ,  $k_p$ , and  $Q_m$  values, and both  $d_{33}$  and  $k_p$  are optimized at  $x = 1.5$ , indicating that this composition is optimal for comprehensive piezoelectric properties. The enhancement of  $d_{33}$  and  $k_p$  could be regarded as the “softening” effect while that of  $Q_m$  can be considered the “hardening” one. The simultaneous occurrence of “softening” and “hardening” effects ignites controversy over the role of MnO<sub>2</sub> played in KNN-based piezoceramics, which has also been reported in many other pieces of literature and is not the subject here.<sup>34–37</sup>

The microstructure and PFM phase images of  $x = 0$  and  $x = 1.0$  samples are shown in Figure 2 as representative, and the surface morphology of all the composition ceramics is also provided (Figure S3: Surface morphology of KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ceramics). All the ceramics have a dense structure, and the relative densities of all the sintered samples are larger than 95%. For the undoped ceramics, the grain size distribution is broad and the average grain size is relatively small, which is 0.87  $\mu\text{m}$ . The grain size distribution is inhomogeneous, as some of the grains increase and the average grain size becomes larger after adding MnO<sub>2</sub>. For the KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ceramics with  $x =$



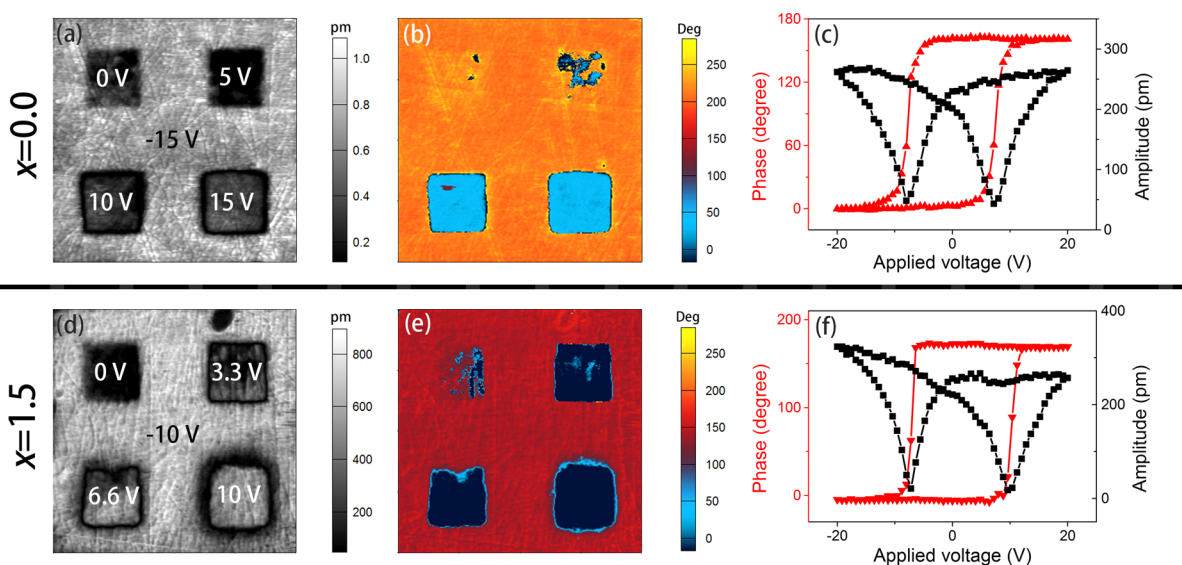
**Figure 2.** Surface morphology of KNN-BLT-BZ ceramics modified with different  $\text{MnO}_2$  contents: (a)  $x = 0.0$ , (c)  $x = 1.0$ . (b) Vertical piezoresponse force microscopy (PFM) phase image of  $x = 0.0$ . (d) Lateral PFM phase image of  $x = 1.0$ .



**Figure 3.** (a, b) Room temperature impedance  $|Z|$  and phase angle  $\theta$  as a function of frequency of KNN-BLT-BZ- $x\text{Mn}$  ( $x = 0.0$  and  $x = 1.5$ ) ceramics. (c) Temperature dependence of depolarization current  $j_{\text{TSDC}}$  and (d) calculated  $P_r$  for poled KNN-BLT-BZ- $x\text{Mn}$  ( $x = 0$  and  $x = 1.5$ ) samples.

0.5, 1.0, 1.5, and 2.0, the grains have an average size of  $1.75 \mu\text{m}$ ,  $1.48 \mu\text{m}$ ,  $1.60 \mu\text{m}$ , and  $1.39 \mu\text{m}$ , respectively. The increased grain size may contribute to the enhanced piezoelectric properties as an extrinsic factor, which is also reported in other systems.<sup>35,38</sup> The addition of  $\text{MnO}_2$ , which may act as a

sintering aid by forming a liquid phase, is a possible reason for the grain growth. The sintering temperature decreases gradually with the increasing  $\text{MnO}_2$  contents, verifying the effectiveness of  $\text{MnO}_2$  in promoting sintering and densification of the ceramics.



**Figure 4.** Poling behavior, piezoresponse hysteresis loops, and typical butterfly shaped amplitude–voltage curves of KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ( $x = 0$  and  $x = 1.5$ ). Out-of-plane images after poling with different electrical voltages, as illustrated in parts a and d, where the larger and the smaller squares correspond to  $4 \times 4 \mu\text{m}^2$  area and  $1 \times 1 \mu\text{m}^2$  area, respectively.

Note that KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ( $x = 1.5$ ) ceramics possess large signal piezoelectric properties with excellent temperature stability. Moreover, the temperature stability of the small signal piezoelectric properties is also noticeable (Figure S5: Temperature-dependent  $d_{33}(E)$  hysteresis loops of KNN-BLT-BZ-1.5Mn ceramics and temperature-dependent small signal  $d_{33}$  of KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn,  $x = 0.0, 1.0$ , and  $1.5$ ). The  $d_{33}(E)$  hysteresis loops of the  $x = 1.5$  sample are shown, where  $d_{33}(E)$  at zero electrical field,  $d_{33}(E = 0 \text{ V})$ , could be considered as small signal  $d_{33}$ . It should be noted that an analogy between the field-dependent  $d_{33}(E = 0 \text{ V})$  value of  $324 \text{ pm/V}$  and the quasi-static  $d_{33}$  value of  $340 \text{ pC/N}$  at room temperature occurs as expected (Table S1, Electrical properties of KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ceramics).<sup>39</sup> A comparison is made among  $x = 0$ ,  $x = 1.0$ , and  $x = 1.5$  ceramics on the temperature-dependent small signal  $d_{33}$ . For all three compositions,  $d_{33}$  remains rather stable in the whole temperature range from room temperature to  $170 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ , manifesting decent intrinsic piezoelectricity. Moreover, the  $x = 1.5$  sample shows slightly better temperature stability as well as piezoelectric output.

The phase angle  $\theta$  is a valuable indicator to evaluate the poling state of piezoceramics, which is supposed to approach  $90^\circ$  for an ideally poled sample.<sup>34,40</sup> The impedance magnitude  $Z$  and phase angle  $\theta$  as a function of frequency of the KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ceramics ( $x = 0.0$  and  $x = 1.5$ ) are plotted in Figure 3a and 3b. Compared with KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ceramics without  $\text{MnO}_2$  doping, ceramics with  $\text{MnO}_2$  doping show higher  $\theta$  value (Figure S4: room temperature impedance  $|Z|$  and phase angle  $\theta$  as a function of frequency of KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ceramics), reaching an optimum value of  $81$  at  $x = 1.5$ . The high  $\theta$  value obtained at  $x \geq 1.0$  manifests that, by doping  $\text{MnO}_2$  additive, it is easier to pole the ceramics to an optimum state by facilitating domain orientation, leading to an enhancement of the piezoelectric coefficient  $d_{33}$ . Thermally stimulated depolarization currents (TSDCs) are regarded as a powerful tool to study and characterize the defects that may exist in the dielectric materials.<sup>41–43</sup> The temperature dependence of the depolarization current  $j_{\text{TSDC}}$  and the integral calculated  $P_r$  for poled KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ( $x = 0$  and  $x = 1.5$ )

samples are shown in Figure 3c and 3d. A TSDC relaxation peak is observed in the  $x = 0.0$  sample, which may be associated with the migration of oxygen vacancies.<sup>43,44</sup> However, no peak is observed in  $\text{MnO}_2$ -doped ceramics. As  $x = 0.0$  ceramics were sintered at a very high temperature of  $1200 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ , alkaline volatilization possibly occurred, resulting in nonstoichiometry and defect, e.g. oxygen, vacancies. For  $\text{MnO}_2$ -doped ceramics, the volatilization of alkaline elements may be compensated by manganese, due to its multiple accessible valence states, leading to reduction of oxygen vacancy defects.

Note that the remnant polarization  $P_r$  of the  $x = 1.5$  sample is higher than that of  $x = 0$  in the whole temperature range from room temperature to  $170 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ . Considering the limited difference in the relative dielectric permittivity between the two compositions in this very temperature range, the improved intrinsic piezoelectric response (proportional to the product of  $P_r$  and the relative dielectric permittivity) contributes to the better piezoelectric coefficient as well as temperature stability. The additive of  $\text{MnO}_2$  effectively reduces the defects and boosts the ferroelectricity in the piezoceramics, leading to an improvement in the piezoelectric properties and temperature stability.

Piezoresponse force microscopy (PFM) provides insight into the piezoelectric properties from a microscopic point of view.<sup>32,45–48</sup> Two samples, KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ( $x = 0.0$  and  $1.5$ ) were selected for comparison (Figure 4). To explore the reversibility of the ferroelectric domains, local poling experiments were conducted. A negative DC voltage large enough to induce complete polarization orientation was first applied to the tip during the scanning of a  $4 \times 4 \mu\text{m}^2$  area. Then, a positive DC voltage with different values, depending on the composition, was applied to the tip during the scanning of a  $1 \times 1 \mu\text{m}^2$  area. The out-of-plane (OP) PFM amplitude and phase images of the  $x = 0.0$  sample and the  $x = 1.5$  sample are presented in Figure 4a–b and Figure 4d–e, respectively, as well as the magnitude of the applied voltage. For the  $x = 0.0$  sample, domains have only partially been induced under a voltage of  $5 \text{ V}$ , which is not sufficient to induce complete domains switching. For  $x = 1.5$ , a relatively low voltage of  $3.3 \text{ V}$  is

enough to induce sufficient domains reversal, where the square exhibits inverse phase contrast compared to the surrounding part. The reduced voltage to induce complete domain switching in the MnO<sub>2</sub>-doped sample is correlated to the enhanced domain mobility, which is observed hereinbefore and has been proved here. To further characterize the piezoelectric properties, the local switching spectroscopy piezoresponse force microscopy (SS-PFM) was employed. A sequence of DC voltage ranging from -20 to 20 V with a superimposed AC signal of 1 V was applied to the sample through the conductive tip during scanning.<sup>49</sup> To ensure the representativeness and reliability of our results, a piezoresponse measurement was performed within a 20 × 20-μm-sized mesh of 100 points. Typical phase hysteresis loops and amplitude-to-voltage curves were shown in Figure 4c and Figure 4f, respectively. Both of the phase curves reveal 180° contrast under the external electrical field, manifesting sufficient polarization switching behavior. It should be noted that the sample with MnO<sub>2</sub> doping exhibits a more square-like hysteresis loop, indicating better ferroelectricity. Both of the samples present complete butterfly shaped piezoresponse curves. The amplitudes of the piezoresponse under zero and the maximum electrical field divided by AC voltage (1 V) are termed as the local effective piezoelectric coefficients  $d_{33}$  and  $d_{\max}$ , respectively. For the  $x = 0$  and  $x = 1.5$  samples,  $d_{33}$  values are 200 and 235 pm/V, respectively, which are comparable to those obtained by testing on bulk ceramics. The microscopic results supported by PFM are in coincidence with those from the macroscopic perspective.

## CONCLUSIONS

A large piezoelectric strain  $d_{33}^*$  of 470 pm/V associated with high temperature-insensitive behavior (a high curie temperature  $T_c$  of 243 °C and  $d_{33}^*$  of 430 pm/V at 100 °C) is reported in alkali niobate lead-free perovskite. MnO<sub>2</sub> doping has significantly boosted the comprehensive piezoelectric and ferroelectric performance through a combination of macro- and microscale methods of property characterization. We believe that properly modified lead-free perovskites are potential substitutes for lead-based counterparts, especially for fields requiring thermally stable piezoelectric output.

## ASSOCIATED CONTENT

### Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications website at DOI: 10.1021/jacs.7b00520.

Supporting  $P(E)$  and bipolar strain  $S(E)$  curves, SEM images, impedance spectroscopy, temperature-dependent small signal  $d_{33}$  and large signal  $d_{33}^*$ , relaxor characteristics, and other electrical properties of KNN-BLT-BZ- $x$ Mn ( $x = 0.0$ – $2.0$ ) ceramics (PDF)

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

### Corresponding Authors

\*wang-ke@tsinghua.edu.cn

\*daigang@mtrc.ac.cn

### ORCID

Ke Wang: 0000-0001-9840-2427

### Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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