

# Domain pinning behavior of ferroelectric $\text{Pb}_{1-x}\text{Sr}_x\text{TiO}_3$ ceramics

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## Abstract

Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) was employed to investigate  $90^\circ$  domain nucleation, growth and interactions of ferroelectric  $(\text{Pb}_{1-x}\text{Sr}_x)\text{TiO}_3$  (PSrT) ceramics under electrical loading in the present work. Experimental results imply that as-sintered specimens exhibit simple domain arrangements. Domain boundaries multiply quickly by nucleating from grain-boundaries and/or defective regions under electrical loading. A conventional  $90^\circ$  domain boundary may dissociate into a set of zigzag domain boundaries with unconventional polarization arrangements under alternate electrical stimulation. If the zigzag domains grew and were impeded by one or a set of boundaries, leading to domain pinning, another sets of zigzag domains may nucleate from a  $90^\circ$  domain boundary again. Nucleation, growth and pinning of domain boundaries repeated and finally highly strained grains with polarization degradation and defects appear during electric polarization cycles.

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## 1. Introduction

Ferroelectrics have emerged as an important class of materials due to their incredibly wide diversity of exhibited phenomena, such as piezoelectricity, pyroelectricity, ferroelectricity, electro-optical and acoustic-optic phenomena. The properties of ferroelectrics and piezoelectrics are closely related to dynamical behavior of their domain structures due to polarization variation under working conditions.

The problem of fatigue frequently limits the application of ferroelectric ceramics, since it may markedly degrade the switching polarization. Polarization fatigue has been extensively investigated in many previous works using various models.<sup>1–10</sup> Domain pinning was reported and has been thought to be an important cause of the fatigue of ferroelectric materials, and the major mechanisms of domain pinning proposed can be classified into two categories: firstly, the defects with charges,<sup>1</sup> such as oxygen vacancies, electronic or ionic charges, etc.<sup>2–4</sup> and secondly, the mechanical fatigue.<sup>5–8</sup>

Most of works, using the model of space charges and electronic properties to interpret the phenomenon of ferroelectric

fatigue, suggest that electronic or ionic charges are trapped at domain boundaries,<sup>5–7</sup> such as Duiker and Beale<sup>8</sup> suggests that fatigue is associated with the trapping of electronic charge and atomic-scale distortions in the perovskite oxygen octahedron.

Recently, the mechanism of mechanical fatigue was considered for ferroelectrics. Most of researchers believe that  $90^\circ$  domain arrangements follow “tail-to-head” or “head-to-tail” rules to reduce electrical energy. However, some peculiar domain arrangements have been reported to arise after an electric field and thermal treatment were applied.<sup>9–14</sup> Tsun and Chou<sup>9</sup> reported microstructural evolution of ferroelectric tin-modified lead zirconate titanate ceramics, indicating that polarization degradation is closely related to domain boundary interactions during polarization switching. Chou and Chen,<sup>10</sup> using  $\text{PbTiO}_3$  single crystals, demonstrated that various high energy polarization configurations may exist in the specimens if strain field is large, indicating that mechanical strain energy may play more important role than electrostatic energy in polarization fatigue of ferroelectrics. Khachatryan<sup>6</sup> proposed that the degradation of the ferroelectric properties is a direct consequence of the mechanical fatigue. Demczyk et al.<sup>15</sup> has also claimed that domain pinning occurred at grain boundaries.

This paper seeks to understand the mechanism of domain pinning. The roles played by the nucleation and growth of

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90° domains during polarization switching is considered. Secondly, dynamic behavior of domain boundaries after applying external fields induced by electric polarization. Domain wall motions under electric and mechanical stress loading were simulated and microstructural evolution was investigated using transmission electron microscopy.

## 2. Experimental procedures

The polycrystalline ceramic materials  $\text{Pb}_{1-x}\text{Sr}_x\text{TiO}_3$  ( $x = 0.01\text{--}0.9$ ) was prepared by solid-state reaction, using powders of  $\text{PbO}$  (99.99%),  $\text{SrCO}_3$  (99.5%) and  $\text{TiO}_2$  (99.9%). The mixed powders were calcined at 700 °C for 2 h in air. After wet ball-milling, the powders were compacted with a cold-isostatic press at 40000 Psi and sintered at 1250 °C for 4 h in an atmosphere of oxygen. The structure of the bulk was elucidated using an X-ray diffractometer (XRD) with a copper target. During sintering, the lead-containing materials were completely covered with powders of the same composition, using a double-crucible method in an oxygen atmosphere, to prevent possible loss of  $\text{PbO}$ .

The structure of the bulks was analyzed using a Rigaku DMAX-B X-ray diffractometer. The ferroelectric properties of the ceramic samples were measured using silver electrodes. The  $P$ – $E$  behavior was characterized using a modified Sawyer–Tower circuit. Fatigue experiments were performed at 60 Hz and 1 kHz using an electric field of 35–50 kV/cm. Bulk as-sintered PSrT specimens and fatigue-test specimens were hand-ground to a thickness of 20–50  $\mu\text{m}$ . An ion miller was employed at 5 kV, 0.5 mA, each gun with a tilting angle of 18–20° for further thinning. After perforation, the specimens were bombarded by the ion beam with a reduced voltage (3–4 kV) and tilting angle (13–14°) for several minutes. The microstructure of the bulks was

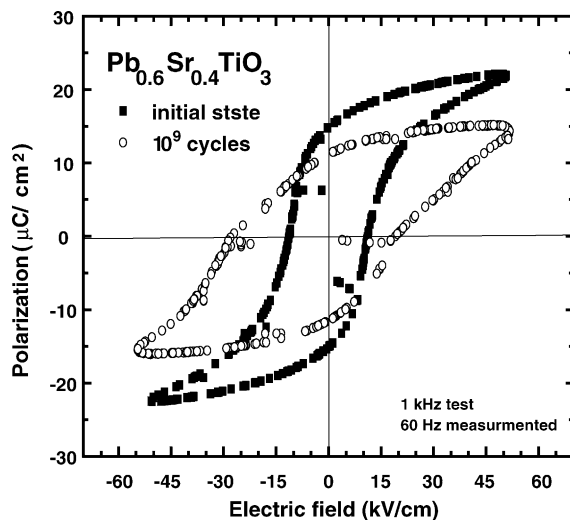


Fig. 1. The  $P$ – $E$  curves of  $\text{Pb}_{0.6}\text{Sr}_{0.4}\text{TiO}_3$  ceramics under an ac-field at a working frequency of 1 kHz implying the difference of remanent polarization and coercive field at the initial and fatigue (after  $10^9$  cycles) states.

investigated using a Jeol 2000FXII and a Jeol 4000EX microscope.

## 3. Results and discussion

Fig. 1 shows the  $P$ – $E$  hysteresis loop for a virgin specimen and a fatigued specimen tested at a frequency of 1 kHz



Fig. 2. TEM micrographs showing microstructural evolution of  $\text{Pb}_{0.6}\text{Sr}_{0.4}\text{TiO}_3$  ceramics under polarization switching at a working frequency of 1 kHz and 55 kV/cm. (a) as-sintered state; (b) polarization switching for  $10^5$  cycles; (c)  $3 \times 10^9$  switching cycles.

for up to  $3 \times 10^9$  cycles. The initial properties of the specimen are as follows;  $P_r = 15 \mu\text{C}/\text{cm}^2$ , saturated polarization  $P_s = 23 \mu\text{C}/\text{cm}^2$ , and  $E_c = 12 \text{ kV}/\text{cm}$ . For the specimen after fatigue testing,  $P_r = 12 \mu\text{C}/\text{cm}^2$ ,  $P_s$  is  $15 \mu\text{C}/\text{cm}^2$ , and  $E_c = 20 \text{ kV}/\text{cm}$ . In this case,  $P_r$  drops 20% and the coercive field  $E_c$  increases by 83%, indicating that the specimen was fatigued, according to the commonly used  $P_r$  or  $E_c$  criterion.

To correlate electrical properties with microstructures, TEM investigations were carried out after electrical measurements. Microstructures within grains are quite simple in as-sintered specimens, as shown in Fig. 2(a). The amount of domain boundaries multiplies quickly and domain structures become complicated after electric polarization switching applies. Domain boundaries may nucleate from grain boundaries where high strain accumulates due to material extension/contraction under an electric field. Intriguingly, small zigzag-shaped domain boundaries were constantly induced from a straight  $90^\circ$  domain wall under an ac-field, labeled as A in Fig. 2(b). Simultaneously, the zigzag-shaped domain kept growing (including forward and lateral directions) until it intersected with other domain walls, labeled as B in Fig. 2(b). Fig. 2(c), on the other hand, shows a grain with high dislocation density produced by the intersected domain after  $3 \times 10^9$  switching cycles with an electric field of  $55 \text{ kV}/\text{cm}$ . The contrast of the domain boundaries is almost smeared out by defect strain fields in the present case. The intersection of domain boundaries reduces the switchability of polarization domain, and therefore the coercive field increased with the density of domains boundaries intersection.

Fig. 3 is a TEM micrograph showing an intriguing domain boundary generation mechanism. A straight  $90^\circ$  domain boundary may dissociate into many small zigzag shaped domain boundaries under a polarization switching process. The zigzag domain boundaries nucleate and grow in both outward and lateral directions, and the domain boundaries expand till they intersect with other domain boundaries. If the

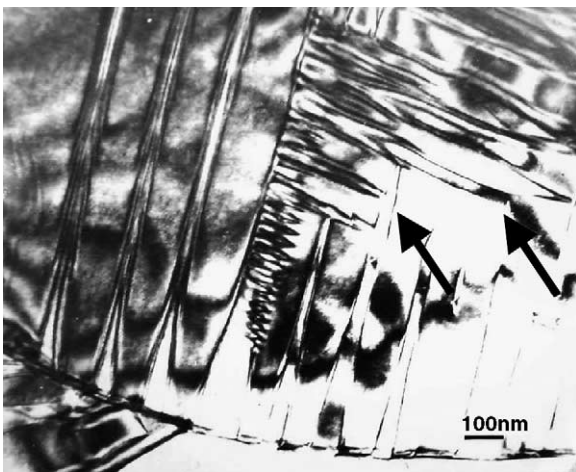


Fig. 3. Domain boundary dissociation under a polarization switching cycles of  $\text{Pb}_{0.6}\text{Sr}_{0.4}\text{TiO}_3$  ceramics, suggesting an intriguing strain energy absorbing mechanism.

density of  $90^\circ$  domain boundaries within a grain is low, domain boundaries may keep nucleating under a stress in terms of wedge-shaped domains or zigzag-shaped domains.

When domain switching occurs, field induced polarization of a specimen increases. For an as-sintered ferroelectric



Fig. 4. Two sets of a-a domain boundaries intersect to form an immobile variant boundary. (a) A bright field image close to (100) zone; (b) a bright field image near the (110) zone; (c) schematic drawing and polarization arrangements among the intersected domain boundaries.

ceramic, remanent polarization may increase at the early stage of polarization cycling. However, if the domain boundaries accumulate in the grains, domain intersections and induced stress field inhibit polarization switching, which reduces remanent polarization and increases coercive field of specimens. To elucidate the relation of domain intersection and polarization switching, a careful analysis of domain pinning using TEM was carried out. Fig. 4 show two sets of a-a domain boundaries intersect with each other in a grain of a  $\text{Pb}_{0.6}\text{Sr}_{0.4}\text{TiO}_3$  specimen. It is clearly observed that a strain contrast occurs at the intersections of the tips of wedge-shaped domains and the perpendicular domain boundaries. The domains were constrained and pinned due to a highly distorted region occurring. The strain contrast around domain boundaries can be monitored through tilting during TEM investigation. One may observe a  $180^\circ$  domain boundary meandering around the  $90^\circ$  domain intersected region and high strain contrast regions can be seen, as shown in Fig. 4(b) and (c) exhibits a schematic drawing of possible polarization arrangements in the structure, and one may observe that the polarization vectors at the domain tips exhibit a high-energy configuration of either head-to-head or tail-to-tail arrangement. Consequence of this is not only a high electric static energy accumulation but also a high mechanical strain happening. Therefore these intersection regions are very easily etched using a chemical solution, implying high-energy state exists. These high-energy intersection regions clearly arrest domain boundaries and impede domain boundary motion and polarization switching.

Once high density of domain boundaries accumulated, the intersections of domain boundaries and hence the strain field spreads all around the grain, polarization switching become more difficult and therefore the observed polarization magnitude saturates. Polycrystalline materials possess many grains with various orientations within the specimen. Each grain may experience different electrical field strength and therefore each grain may display different degree of complexity of domain boundary intersection. If one grain has suffered too much strain accumulation, defects may be generated and even microcrack may appear.

#### 4. Conclusions

Transmission electron microscopic investigations indicate that wedge-shaped  $90^\circ$  domains and zigzag-shaped  $90^\circ$  domains were induced under external stress at grain boundaries or domain walls and that their microstructures became more and more complicated due to domain pinning after electric polarization cycles.

Results of this study suggest that the formation of a zigzag-shaped domain and a wedge-shaped domain in ferroelectric material is important in domain pinning. Domain pinning associated with mechanical fatigue is more easily observed than domain pinning associated with oxygen vacancies in the microstructures. The domain pinning related to mechan-

ical fatigue differs from domain pinning related to oxygen vacancies. The polarization fatigue of a ferroelectric can be improved by enhancing the domain mobility and working at an optimum condition, including frequency, electric field and interfacial compatibility.

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