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Influence of disorder on the in-field $J_c$ of MgB$_2$ wires using highly active pyrene

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In this work, we report on significantly enhanced critical current density ($J_c$) in MgB$_2$ superconductor that was easily obtained by doping with a hydrocarbon, highly active pyrene ($C_{16}H_{10}$), and using a sintering temperature as low as $\sim$600 °C. The processing advantages of the $C_{16}H_{10}$ additive include production of a highly active carbon (C) source, an increased level of disorder, and the introduction of small grain size, resulting in enhancement of $J_c$. © 2008 American Institute of Physics. [DOI: 10.1063/1.2838756]

The discovery of superconductivity in MgB$_2$ has aroused a great deal of interest in the relevant scientific and technological communities. Specifically, its simple binary composition, lack of weak intergranular links, critical temperature ($T_c$) of 39 K, and inexpensive starting materials make MgB$_2$ a promising candidate for applications at operating temperatures around 20 K. However, pristine MgB$_2$ exhibits weak flux pinning, which results in a strong field dependence of the critical current density ($J_c$) and a low irreversibility field ($B_{irr}$), compared to commercial low temperature superconductors such as the Nb-based ones. It is, thus, necessary to further improve the $J_c$ and $B_{irr}$ in MgB$_2$ for magnet applications.

Several techniques, such as mechanical alloying, proton irradiation, mechanical processing, and using nanosized starting materials, have been employed in order to improve flux pinning, $J_c$, and $B_{irr}$, but with limited success. Significant results were obtained by adding carbon (C) compounds to MgB$_2$, resulting in enhancement of both $J_c$ and $B_{irr}$. In particular, SiC nanoparticles significantly enhanced the $J_c$ under magnetic fields around 8 T. However, the addition of SiC to MgB$_2$ has been limited by local agglomerations (with a size of $\sim$30 nm) of unreacted SiC or C, so it is difficult to achieve uniform dispersion within the matrix. In our previous work, we reported on the C source possibilities of carbohydrate (malic acid, C$_4$H$_2$O$_3$) doping through a chemical solution route to achieve homogeneous mixing. It was estimated that intragranular $J_c$ reached $2.5 \times 10^4$ A cm$^{-2}$ at 5 K and 8 T for MgB$_2$+10 wt% C$_4$H$_2$O$_3$ bulk when sintered at 900 °C, with a $T_c$ reduction of only 1.5 K, $B_{irr}$ at 20 K was about 7 T with a $J_c$ criterion of 100 A cm$^{-2}$. The advantages of the chemical solution route using various carbohydrates have now been confirmed by other groups. However, our understanding of the cause of the significantly enhanced $J_c$ and $B_{irr}$ has still remained unclear due to the complicated reactions involved. In addition, although we conducted evaporation processing to eliminate the oxygen (O) content, the fraction of MgO due to included O from the carbohydrate increased gradually with increasing doping level. If we can reduce the MgO fraction within the matrix and find a highly active C source that will be effective at lower sintering temperatures 600 °C, the same as for MgB$_2$ formation, we speculate that the resulting high disorder due to C substitution, as well as strong flux pinning due to the small crystalline size, can have simultaneous positive effects on the in-field $J_c$. A higher sintering temperature is usually necessary for most of the other C sources, leading to crystalline growth and worse pinning. The use of low temperature processing is also crucial as it allows selection of various sensitive sheath materials and the reduction of production costs.

Although Yamada et al. prepared Fe sheathed tape samples by using a liquid aromatic hydrocarbon together with ball milling, it is very difficult to control the composition during ball milling because of its volatile properties. In this study, therefore, we suggested a different hydrocarbon, pyrene ($C_{16}H_{10}$), which has no oxygen content, as the C source. This is a colorless solid and consists of four fused benzene rings, resulting in a large, flat aromatic system. At around a temperature of 145–148 °C, it decomposes into benzene (C$_6$H$_6$), other hydrocarbons, and C. The released fresh C enables the improvement reactivity. In addition, it can be dissolved in a proper solution for homogeneous mixing. To clearly understand the $J_c$ behavior and superconductivity of MgB$_2$ using C$_{16}$H$_{10}$, the lattice parameters, the actual amount of C substituted, the lattice strain, the MgO fraction, and the transport $J_c$ were evaluated and compared to pristine MgB$_2$/Fe wires. Magnesium (Mg, 99%), boron (B, 99%), and pyrene (C$_{16}$H$_{10}$, 98%) powders were used as starting materials. The mixed powders were packed into an Fe tube, which was then drawn to an outer diameter of 1.42 mm. The fabricated wires were sintered at different temperatures within a wide range from 600 to 800 °C for 30 min to 4 h under high purity argon gas and then cooled in the furnace. The heating rate was 5 °C min$^{-1}$.

Figure 1(a) shows the calculated results for pristine MgB$_2$ and MgB$_2$+C$_{16}$H$_{10}$/Fe wires as a function of the amount of pyrene, C$_{16}$H$_{10}$. All wire samples were sintered at 650 °C for 30 min. We observed that the $a$-axis parameter of MgB$_2$+C$_{16}$H$_{10}$/Fe wires decreased gradually with increasing

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amounts of \( C_{16}H_{10} \). The shrinkage of the \( a \)-axis lattice parameter can be attributed to the substitution of \( C \) with small atomic size, which causes disorder in the \( MgB_2 \) structure that can potentially change the properties of \( MgB_2 \). What is interesting is that \( C \) substitution into \( B \) sites took place even as the sintering temperature further increased. The shrinkage of the \( a \)-axis parameter can be attributed to the substitution of \( C \) with small atomic size, which causes disorder in the \( MgB_2 \) structure. However, the \( MgO \) fraction does not increase with increasing doping level. Figure 1(c) shows the calculated \( MgO \) fraction of pristine \( MgB_2 \) and of \( MgB_2 + C_{16}H_{10} \)/Fe wires as determined by Rietveld refinement. At the very least, the \( MgO \) fraction for \( MgB_2 +10 \) wt% \( C_{16}H_{10} \)/Fe wires is less than or similar to that found in the pristine \( MgB_2 \) under experimental conditions. Thus, the \( MgO \) effect on the degradation of \( J_c \) is negligible.

Figure 2 shows the calculated results for pristine \( MgB_2 \) and \( MgB_2 +10 \) wt% \( C_{16}H_{10} \)/Fe wires as a function of sintering temperature. The wire samples were sintered at 600 °C for 4 h, 620 °C for 1 h, 650 °C for 30 min, and 800 °C for 30 min, respectively. What is surprising is that the \( a \)-axis parameter of \( MgB_2 +10 \) wt% \( C_{16}H_{10} \)/Fe wires showed a slight increasing trend from 3.0684 to 3.0724 Å with increasing sintering temperature [Fig. 2(a)]. However, this is not an ordinary phenomenon. For example, common \( C \) additives, such as \( C \), \( SiC \), and carbon nanotube (CNT), can achieve much more \( C \) substitution into the \( MgB_2 \) structure as the sintering temperature further increases, resulting in a reduced \( a \)-axis parameter and enhanced \( B_{irr} \) and \( J_c \). The \( a \)-axis parameter also mimics the change in the \( a \)-axis parameter [Fig. 2(b)]. Obviously, a low sintering temperature can give rise to higher disorder in the \( MgB_2 \) structure, leading to broadening of the diffraction peaks. This implies combined effects of crystalline size reduction and increased lattice strain. Specifically, the crystalline size in \( MgB_2 \) superconductor sample can be attributed to the number of grain boundaries. Based on changes in the \( a \)-axis parameter, the actual amount of \( C \) substitution can be estimated by comparing the calculated value with that of a single crystal. The actual \( C \) substitution for the sample sintered at 600 °C was about \( x = 0.03913 \) in the composition of \( Mg(B_{1-x}C_x)_2 \). As a result, the maximum \( C \) substitution level can be easily achieved at a low sintering temperature of 600 °C under our experimental conditions [Fig. 2(c)]. At this temperature, the much greater amount of \( C \) substituted on the B sites introduces strong electron scattering centers that reduce the electron mean free path and, thus, could significantly enhance \( B_{irr} \).

Figure 3 shows the transport \( J_c \) of pristine \( MgB_2 \) and
MgB$_2$ +10 wt% C$_{16}$H$_{10}$/Fe wires sintered within a temperature range of 600 to 800 °C. The $J_c$ of the MgB$_2$ +10 wt% C$_{16}$H$_{10}$/Fe wires gradually decreased as the sintering temperature increased. This is because grain boundaries are likely to be acting as the predominant pinning centers. In addition, the amount of C substitution decreased with increasing sintering temperature. Note that $J_c$ of the MgB$_2$ +10 wt% C$_{16}$H$_{10}$/Fe wires was higher than that of the pristine MgB$_2$ wire under magnetic field from 7 to 12 T. Transport $J_c$ did not show any large differences among the MgB$_2$ +10 wt% C$_{16}$H$_{10}$ wire samples. As a result, the MgB$_2$ +10 wt% C$_{16}$H$_{10}$/Fe wire sintered at 600 °C showed better $J_c$ performance, compared to samples doped with other forms of C and sintered at a similar temperature.

In summary, using pyrene, C$_{16}$H$_{10}$, is effective for enhancing $J_c$ of MgB$_2$ superconductor, even at sintering temperatures as low as 600 °C. Specifically, the $J_c$ of the sample sintered at 600 °C for 4 h was ~10 000 A cm$^{-2}$ at 10 T and 4.2 K. In addition, the MgO fraction for MgB$_2$ +10 wt% C$_{16}$H$_{10}$/Fe wires was less than or similar to that found in the pristine MgB$_2$ under our experimental conditions. The advantages of using C$_{16}$H$_{10}$ include the production of highly active C due to the decomposition of the pyrene and the introduction of small grain size due to low temperature sintering, resulting in enhancement of $J_c$.

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