Hexagonal VO₂ particles: synthesis, mechanism and thermochromic properties†

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Monoclinic vanadium dioxide VO₂ (M) with hexagonal structure is synthesized by hydrothermal method, and the phase evolution is evidenced. Interestingly, the hexagonal morphology comes into being as a result of the low-energy coherent interfaces, (211)₁//(211)₂ and (211)₁//(020)₂. The size of hexagonal particles is well controlled by changing the concentration of precursor solutions. Hexagonal particles exhibit excellent thermochromic properties with a narrow hysteresis of 5.9 °C and high stability. In addition, the phase transition temperature can be substantially reduced down to 28 °C by simply W doping.

1. Introduction

Vanadium dioxide (VO₂) possesses several phases, M, R, B, A, and D, and exhibits fantastic phase transition between them. The distinguishing feature of each polymorph is the arrangement scheme of edge- or corner-sharing VO₆ octahedra. Monoclinic VO₂ (M) shows a reversible first-order metal-insulator transition (MIT) at 68 °C. When the insulating VO₂ (M) is converted into the metallic rutile phase (R), drastic changes occur in both electrical and optical properties. As a result, VO₂ has been attracting much attention owing to the potential applications in high-tech fields, such as, sensors, catalysts, lithium-ion batteries, storage medium, smart windows, and solution-based synthesis. Interestingly, VO₂ nanostructures were synthesized by the hydrothermal method using V₂O₅ as the vanadium source and oxalic acid (H₂C₂O₄) as a reducing agent. The filling ratio of the vessel is about 70%. Firstly, oxalic acid (H₂C₂O₄) and V₂O₅ (1 : 1–1 : 3 in molar) are directly added into 35 ml deionized water at room temperature (RT), and then ammonium tungstate (NH₄)₁₀W₁₂O₄₁·xH₂O is dispersed into the above solution and stirred for 4 hours. 35 ml of the precursor solution is transferred into a 50 ml stainless autoclave with a Teflon liner and ultimately the autoclave is heated up to 260 °C for 1–24 h and then cooled in air to room temperature. The resulting black precipitate is collected and washed with distilled water and ethanol three times by centrifugation and then dried in vacuum at 60 °C for 12 h. The as-prepared VO₂ nanostructures are ultrasonically dispersed in deionized water for 30 min, and an appropriate quantity of silane coupling agent KH-570 is added with ultrasound treatment for another 30 min. Then, polyurethane (PU,
DISPERCOLLU54, Bayer) is added with magnetic stirring for 10 min. Finally, the suspension is uniformly cast onto a polyethylene terephthalate (PET) substrate using an automatic coating machine and dried at 80 °C for 1 min.30

The morphology of VO2 nanostructures were characterized by transmission electron microscopy (TEM) and field-emission scanning electron microscopy (FESEM, JSM-7000F). The crystal phases was determined by X-ray diffraction (GIXRD, Shimadzu XRD-7000) with Cu Kα radiation (λ = 0.154 nm) at a fixed incident angle of 0.5° and 2θ scanning rate of 8° min⁻¹. Differential scanning calorimetry (DSC, DSC204F1, NETZSCH, Germany) were measured at 50–100 °C with a heating rate of 5 °C min⁻¹ under a nitrogen flow. The elemental component and chemical valence states were determined by X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (Thermo Scientific K-Alpha, XPS). The transmittance spectra were measured in the range of 300–2200 nm at normal incidence using a Hitachi U-4100 spectrometer.

3. Results and discussion

Fig. 1 shows the XRD patterns of the samples prepared at three molar ratios (r = 1, 2, 3) of H2C2O4 to V2O5. Different phase evolutions, VO2 (B) → VO2 (A) → VO2 (M), VO2 (B) → VO2 (M) and VO2 (B) → VO2 (D) → VO2 (M) are evidenced. As shown in Fig. 1a, at the reaction condition of r = 1, only the diffraction peaks of VO2 (B) are identified for 1 h hydrothermal reaction. The corresponding SEM image is shown in Fig. 2a, VO2 (B) exists in the form of nanobelts with 2–4 μm long and 200–400 nm wide. The VO2 (B) phase is confirmed by the TEM images in Fig. 3. The HRTEM image in Fig. 3b shows the lattice fringe spacing of 0.353 nm, corresponding to (110) lattice plane of monoclinic VO2 (B). As illustrated by the selected area electron diffraction (SAED) pattern in the inset of Fig. 3a, the zone axis of the reciprocal lattice is [001]. If the hydrothermal reaction time is elongated to 6 h, new diffraction peaks corresponding to VO2 (A) and VO2 (M) phases appear on the XRD pattern, and a great number of nanobelts with rectangular ends emerge28 (Fig. 2b). If the reaction time is further elongated to 12 h, the peaks of VO2 (B) vanish completely and the peak intensity of VO2 (A) and VO2 (M) increases greatly. As displayed in Fig. 2c, rectangular nanobelts and truncated nanorods coexist. Fig. 3d presents the HRTEM image of the rectangular nanobelts in Fig. 3c, the fringe spacing of 0.59 nm matches well with the (110) plane of tetragonal VO2 (A). According to the SEM images in Fig. 2b–d and the XRD patterns in Fig. 1a, it can be concluded that the truncated nanorods should be VO2 (M). If the reaction time is elongated to 24 h, the peaks of VO2 (A) become weakened gradually, but those of VO2 (M) are enhanced, that is, the growth of VO2 (M) rather than VO2 (A) dominates after the elimination of VO2 (B). At the reaction condition of r = 2, no peak of VO2 (A) appears on the XRD pattern in Fig. 1b, and the size of VO2 (B) nanostructure (Fig. 2e) is reduced substantially as compared to that in Fig. 2a. Phase transition between VO2 (B) and VO2 (R) was studied in situ by electron microscopy,29 and it was found that VO6 octahedra (Fig. S2 †) in VO2 (B) abruptly broke into nanocrystallites and half of VO6 octahedra reorient into rutile structure. VO2 (B) in spheroidal morphology appears (Fig. 2g) because of severe agglomeration. At the reaction condition of...
$r = 3$, VO$_2$ (B) with nanorod-like or nanobelt-like morphology (Fig. 1c) aggregate into urchin-like structures to minimize the energy. Further growth leads to the formation of larger sphere-like particles as a result of Ostwald ripening (Fig. 2j). If the hydrothermal reaction time is elongated, oriented growth plays a dominant role gradually, resulting in hexagonal structure. According to the XRD pattern in Fig. 1c and SEM images in Fig. 2j–k, the particles are indeed VO$_2$ (D) phase. The lattice fringes with a spacing of 0.372 nm corresponds to the (011) lattice plane of VO$_2$ (D), as shown in Fig. 3f. If the ratio of $H_2C_2O_4 : V_2O_5$ is lower than 1 or higher than 3, no VO$_2$ (M) appears. However, pure VO$_2$ (A) is obtained when $r$ is slightly lower than 1 (Fig. S3†). Cao et al. prepared W-doped hexagonal VO$_2$ (M) via one-step hydrothermal reactions at 240 °C for 7 days, and proposed that the hexagonal morphology was assembled by the VO$_2$ (M) rods along six low-index planes, but they did not provide us the underlying mechanism for the formation of the hexagonal morphology. Ji et al. thought that the transformation from VO$_2$ (A) to VO$_2$ (M) was a resolving and re-crystallization process, and the hexagonal particles could be attributed to the electrostatic attraction. However, in this work, no agglomeration and melting behavior are observed during the transformation from VO$_2$ (A) into VO$_2$ (M), but the ultra-long VO$_2$ (A) belts are broken into truncated VO$_2$ (M) rods, and hexagonal morphology of VO$_2$ (M) is formed through an epitaxial growth taking the center regions of rods as the nucleation sites [Fig. 2c and d].

Fig. 4 presents the TEM images of VO$_2$ nanostructure with hexagonal morphology. The lattice spacings of 0.242, 0.230 and 0.242 nm in Fig. 4b correspond to (221), (002) and (221) planes of VO$_2$ (M), respectively. The SAED pattern from an individual nanorod (Fig. 4d) is indexed to monoclinic VO$_2$ with a zone axis of (102). The diffraction pattern does not change as the electron beam is moved along the nanobelt, characteristic of single-crystal feature. The experimental result is well consistent with the calculated SAED pattern in Fig. 4d. The SAED pattern shows that the growth is along [100] direction. As depicted in Fig. 4e, bud-like nanoparticles grow outwards from a nanorod, in which (211) // (211), and (211) // (020), coherent interface exist in the adjacent branches, thus small lattice distortions emerge if they are combined into a heterogeneous interface. It is demonstrated
that the angle (about $60^\circ$) between the adjacent branches is
decided by the coherent interfaces. The overlapped FFT patterns
in Fig. 4g confirm the coherent crystalline planes between the
adjacent branches, and Fig. 4h schematically shows the atomic
arrangement.

Fig. 5 schematically shows the evolution of VO$_2$ (M) hexag-
onal morphology. The reaction proceeds toward the lowest
energy, and promotes the oriented attachment.$^{44}$ Firstly, V$_2$O$_5$ is
reduced by H$_2$C$_2$O$_4$ and the interphase VO$_2$ (B) is produced. As
the reaction proceeds, oriented attachment or aggregation
occurs spontaneously in order to minimize energy,$^{35}$ thus
a great number of belts (Fig. 2b) or urchin-like (Fig. 2i) structure
appear. Then metastable VO$_2$ (B) transforms into a more stable
phase gradually. As aforementioned, different growth processes
yield different interphases, which are dominated by nucleation
rate and growth rate. H$_2$C$_2$O$_4$ plays an important role in
reduction rate and further affects the supersaturation. The ratio
of growth rate to nucleation rate is high under low supersatu-
ration condition and vice versa (Fig. S4†). In another word, the
competition between nucleation rate and growth rate results in
different morphologies, high nucleation rate results in aggrega-
tion and high growth rate leads to ultra-long nanobelts. VO$_2$
(A) is from the stack of VO$_2$ (B) nanobelts. At high nucleation
rate, VO$_2$ (B) prefers to aggregation rather than stacking,$^{36,37}$ and
thus no VO$_2$ (A) appears. Hydrothermal reaction condition of
$r = 1$ (Fig. 2d) yields large hexagonal structure with ultra-long
branches in the range of 4–8 µm and 600 nm in width. The
length decreases to 4–6 µm ($r = 2$) and 2–4 µm ($r = 3$) respec-
tively with increasing H$_2$C$_2$O$_4$. VO$_6$ octahedra of VO$_2$ (B) is
different from VO$_2$ (R), but similar to VO$_2$ (A) (Fig. S2†). Thus,
more energy is needed for the transformation from VO$_2$ (B) to
VO$_2$ (R) ($r = 2$) than to VO$_2$ (A) ($r = 1$). So an appropriate H$_2$C$_2$O$_4$
could promote the formation of VO$_2$ (R).

Fig. 6a shows the DSC curves of the as-synthesized VO$_2$ (M)
with $r$ of 1, 2 and 3. The DSC curves of both $r = 1$ and 2 display
endothermic and exothermic profiles upon heating and cooling
in the temperature range of 0–100 °C, indicating a reversible
phase transition,$^{38}$ but only an endothermic profile is observed
in the heating process for $r = 3$. So the temperature range from
$-70$ to $100$ °C was adopted for the DSC measurement for $r = 3$,
and the results are displayed in Fig. 6b. The phase transition
temperature and hysteresis width of the samples are summa-
rized in Fig. 6c. Apparently, the samples exhibit dramatically
different phase transition properties. The $T_C$ is 68, 60.5 and
62.5 °C during heating process, and 61.1, 137 and $-42$ °C
during cooling process. The hysteresis width is about 6.9, 48.6
and 104.5 °C for the as-synthesized VO$_2$ (M) particles obtained
at $r = 1, 2, 3$, respectively, and the hysteresis width is not
dependent on the particle size of micrometers. As shown in
Fig. 7a, some residual VO$_2$ (A), VO$_2$ (B) and VO$_2$ (D) phases exist

**Fig. 4** (a) Low-magnification TEM images, (b) HRTEM image at the VO$_2$ rod end, (c) SAED pattern of the particle in (b) and (d) the calculated SAED pattern from [012] zone axis, (e) low-magnification TEM image, (f) HRTEM image of the overlap region between adjacent branches, (g) the FFT pattern of the overlap region from panel (f) and (h) the atomic arrangement in panel (f).

**Fig. 5** Schematic evolution of the polymorph morphology.
except the dominating VO$_2$ (M) phase at $r = 1$, 2 and 3, respectively. The residual VO$_2$ (A) has little effect on the phase transition of VO$_2$ (M) obtained under $r = 1$, as shown in Fig. 6c. On the contrary, the phase evolution of VO$_2$ (M) obtained under $r = 2$, 3 is indeed a recrystallization process, and thus there is a considerable interaction between VO$_2$ (B) and VO$_2$ (M) as well as between VO$_2$ (D) and VO$_2$ (M), so the residual VO$_2$ (B) and VO$_2$ (D) affect the phase transition of VO$_2$ (M) obtained under $r = 2$ and 3. The transformation from monoclinic (020)$_M$ plane at room temperature to (200)$_R$ plane at high temperature was accompanied by the peak shift from 39.88$^\circ$C to 39.67$^\circ$C. As shown in Fig. 7b, the peak of (020)$_M$ plane shifts toward the smaller angle at $r = 2$ and 3. In addition, a new peak appears at 39.5$^\circ$C for the sample prepared under $r = 3$, and it is lower than 39.67$^\circ$C, implying increased V–V bond length and stabilized VO$_2$ (R) at room temperature.$^{39}$ Therefore, more energy is needed to induce the phase transition in the cooling cycle, resulting in the large hysteresis width. Fig. 9a and b show the optical transmittance of the as-synthesized and annealed samples, respectively. All the samples show a sharp optical contrast in near infrared at 20 and 90 $^\circ$C. The $T_{\text{vis}}$ and $\Delta T_{2000}$ obtained from Fig. 9a and b are displayed in Fig. 9c and d, respectively. $T_{\text{vis}}$ changes a little but $\Delta T_{2000}$ increases significantly upon thermal annealing. It means that the residual phases affect the NIR modulation ability of VO$_2$ (M) considerably.

It is difficult to obtain pure VO$_2$ (M) in a V$_2$O$_5$–H$_2$C$_2$O$_4$ reaction system if no thermal annealing or doping is done.$^{37}$ As shown in Fig. 8a, pure VO$_2$ (M) is obtained after thermal annealing at 450 $^\circ$C for 2 h. The $T_c$ is about 70.5, 69.3 and 68 $^\circ$C during the heating process, and 61.5, 61.9 and 62.1 $^\circ$C during cooling process (Fig. 8b), and the hysteresis width is about 9, 7.4 and 5.9 $^\circ$C when $r$ is 1, 2 and 3, respectively. Apparently, the hysteresis widths of the samples prepared at $r = 2$, 3 are reduced dramatically upon thermal annealing. But the particle size and structure changes little [Fig. S5†], indicating high stability of the hexagonal VO$_2$ (M). As stated above, the intermediate phases indeed have a great influence on the hysteresis width. In addition, the hysteresis width of the pure VO$_2$ (M) obtained here is significantly smaller than what was reported.$^{25,40}$ It can be due to the lattice distortions in coherent interface of adjacent branches. The defects act as nucleation site for metal-insulator transition and decrease the driving force. The number of branch grows as increasing $r$, as shown in Fig. 2, and the smallest hysteresis is obtained at $r$ of 3.

Based on the preparation process in Fig. S6,† the composite films are prepared to measure the optical properties. The suspension composed of VO$_2$ (M) particles is uniformly cast on the PET substrate and the film exhibits a canary yellow color.

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**Fig. 6** (a and b) DSC curves of the as-prepared samples, (c) $T_c$ and hysteresis width.

**Fig. 7** (a) XRD patterns of as-prepared samples with $r$ of 1–3, (b) magnified patterns.
Fig. 8 (a) XRD patterns of the annealed samples (b) DSC curves of the annealed samples.

(Fig. S3b†). Fig. 9a and b show the optical transmittance of the samples before and after annealing, respectively. All the samples show a sharp optical contrast in near infrared at 20 and 90 °C, indicating that the phase transition occurs. In addition, $\Delta T_{2000}$ is continuously improved from 28.3% to 41% as $r$ increases from 1 to 3, due to the reduced sizes of the particles.

Tungsten (W) is the most effective dopant for reducing the phase transition temperature. Fig. 10a shows a wide-range survey X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) of W-doped VO$_2$ (M). C, V, W and O are detected, in which the signal of C is from the contamination on surface. From Fig. 10b, it can be seen that the V$_{2p3/2}$ peak of the particles is centered at 516.3 eV. As shown in Fig. 10c, the W4f orbital has the binding energies at 35.36 and 37.38 eV corresponding to W 4f$^{7/2}$ and W 4f$^{5/2}$, respectively. Accordingly, W in the powders is in the form of W$^{6+}$.

It confirms that W atoms are actually doped into the VO$_2$ nanoparticles. Fig. 10d shows the energy dispersive spectroscopy (EDS) of which V, O, W and C are involved. Fig. 11a shows the DSC curves of W$_x$V$_{1-x}$O$_2$ samples with different W concentrations. Each DSC curve displays sharp endothermic and exothermic profiles upon heating and cooling cycles. In addition, the double endothermic/exothermic peaks appear during the heating/cooling process, probably due to the non-uniform doping or the polydispersity in the size distribution.

As shown in Fig. 10b, $T_C$ is reduced down to 28 °C and the hysteresis width is less than 10 °C when the doping level is 2.0 at%. The substantially lowered transition temperature and small hysteresis width can meet the requirement for the applications in smart window completely. The hysteresis width is sensitive to the doping concentration.

However, the doped samples with hexagonal structure are more stable with a hysteresis width changing from 5 to 8 °C. In fact, the hexagonal porous morphology can provide a rigid framework and free volume simultaneously for the abrupt change between monoclinic and tetragonal phases.

Fig. 9 Optical transmittance spectra of the (a) as-prepared and (b) annealed samples. (c and d) $T$ vs and $\Delta T_{2000}$ of the as-prepared and annealed samples, respectively.
4. Conclusion

In summary, VO$_2$ (M) has been successfully synthesized through one-step hydrothermal method. H$_2$C$_2$O$_4$ plays a role in adjusting the phases and dimension of VO$_2$. This can be understood from the competition between the nucleation and growth rates. The coherent (012)/(010) and (012)/(002) interfaces between adjacent branches promote the formation of hexagonal structure. Furthermore, it is demonstrated that the VO$_2$ (M) with hexagonal morphology improves the sensitivity and stability. The combination of hexagonal structure and W doping leads to substantially reduced phase transition temperature down to 28 °C.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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