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Ceria–terbia solid solution nanobelts with high catalytic activities for CO oxidation†

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Ceria–terbia solid solution nanobelts were prepared by an electrochemical route and tested as catalysts of high activity for CO oxidation.

Air pollution has become one of the major global problems. Three-way catalysts (TWC) for automotive exhaust treatment, which can transform three environmentally hazardous gases, namely, CO, NOx, and hydrocarbons to environmentally benign or less hazardous form, is therefore a topic of intensive research.1–5 Ceria-based materials are very important components of promoters for automotive TWCs.6–9 It is well known that rare earth ion-doped ceria can increase the ionic conductivities,10 and therefore may generally enhance the catalytic activity of ceria by making oxygen from the bulk more accessible for surface reactions.11

As is well known, Ce4+ and Ce3+ always coexist in CeO2.12 The ionic radius of Ce3+ ion (1.14 Å) is larger than that of Ce4+ ion (0.97 Å) and so the surrounding fluorite lattice will be distorted when Ce3+ vacancies are formed in CeO2. When different +4 cations are doped into the CeO2 lattice, the oxygen diffusivity within the lattices will be influenced. The energetic cost of these distortions in CeO2 can be decreased by formation of solid solutions with 4+ ions of smaller size than Ce4+ ions, such as Zr4+, Hf4+, Pr4+, Tb4+.11–15 In addition, the ion mobility inside the CeO2 lattice will be changed, resulting in the formation of a defective fluorite-structured solid solution. Such modifications in the defect structure of CeO2 will confer new properties to the catalyst such as high catalytic activity.16 The use of variable valence dopants in CeO2 has attracted much attention.17–18 Herein, special emphasis is given on the influence of Tb4+ doping on the catalytic performance of ceria-based mixed oxides. The element Tb can exhibit variable valence states (3+ and 4+), which may have some special impact on the final product.

Constructing novel nanostructures to obtain enhanced properties appears a viable route in designing and selecting catalysts and catalyst promoters for specific catalytic reactions.19,20 CeO2-based composites with nanostructures usually have high surface areas, improved sintering properties and high oxygen storage capacities, which may highly enhance the catalytic performance. To the best of our knowledge, there have been no reports on the successful synthesis of one-dimensional ceria-based mixed oxide nanobelts. Herein, detached Ce1−xTb2xO2−δ nanobelts are first synthesized by electrochemical deposition at room temperature and usual atmospheric pressure without any surface-capping agent. The Ce1−xTb2xO2−δ nanobelts as a new family of CeO2-based oxide nanostructures are desirable because of their unique physical and chemical properties.11 The electrochemical deposition is a simple and low-cost route to this material.

In this experiment a simple three-electrode cell was used. A highly pure Pt foil (99.99 wt%, 0.25 cm2) was used as the auxiliary electrode. A saturated calomel electrode (SCE) was used as the reference electrode that was connected to the cell with a double salt bridge system. The electrochemical deposition was carried out in a solution of 0.01 M Ce(NO3)3 + 0.001 M Tb(NO3)3 + 0.1 M NH4NO3 with a current density of 4.0 mA cm−2 in a configured glass cell at room temperature, in which a Cu plate (99.99 wt%, 0.25 cm2) served as the substrate. The oxygen was dissolved in the deposition solution through bubbling in the electrolyte. Before electrodeposition, the Cu substrate was cleaned ultrasonically in 0.1 M HCl, distilled water, and acetone and then rinsed in distilled water again. The products were characterized by X-ray diffractometry (D/MAX 2200 VPC with Cu-Kα radiation), and an Oxford Instruments INCA energy-dispersive spectrometer (EDS) was employed to analyze chemical composition. Microstructures of the deposits were characterized by field emission scanning electron microscopy (FE-SEM; JSM-6330-F) and X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS, ESCALAB 250) was used to assess the chemical state and surface composition of the deposits.

SEM images of Ce1−xTb2xO2−δ composites with different magnifications are shown in Fig. 1(a) and (b), which reveal that the deposit consists of a large quantity of nanobelts with length of about 0.5–2.0 μm, width of 100–250 nm and thickness of only about 30 nm. The microstructural details of Ce1−xTb2xO2−δ nanobelts were further investigated by TEM as shown in Fig. 1(c) and (d). High-resolution TEM (HRTEM) images of individual nanobelts clearly display lattice fringes for nanocrystals, indicating that these Ce1−xTb2xO2−δ nanobelts possess high crystallinity. The measured interplanar spacings from HRTEM are about 0.31 and 0.28 nm, which are in good agreement with (111) and (200) facet distances of the CeO2 phase, respectively. The SAED pattern (inset in Fig. 1(d)) indicates that the prepared nanobelts have a polycrystalline structure.
The peaks centered at 884.2 eV (oxygen associated with Ce 3+ and 902.2 eV (v) 908.3 eV (w) can be attributed to the lattice oxygen associated with Ce 3+. The peak centered at 899.0 eV (x) corresponds to the O 2e− contribution, and can be attributed to the lattice oxygen associated with CeO2. Two sets of spin–orbit multiplets corresponding to 3d3/2 and 3d5/2 are present as peaks labelled u and v, respectively in Fig. 2(a). The peaks centered at 884.2 eV (v) and 902.2 eV (w) can be attributed to the Ce 4+ contribution. Thus, the surface of the present samples contains Ce both in the 4+ and the 3+ states. Fig. 2(b) shows the Tb 4d spectrum of a Ce1−xTbxO2−δ nanobelt sample. As the kinetic energies of the photoemitted electrons are very low, Tb 3d core level analysis is very difficult by a conventional laboratory spectrometer (with either Mg or Al KR radiation). Thus the most intense core level (Tb 4d) is used for analysis. There is an agreement that Tb 3+ gives a signal below 150 eV and Tb 4+ is related to features well above 150 eV. The spectrum in Fig. 2(b) obviously shows a pronounced shoulder below 150 eV, a maximum at 152.3 eV and a tailing toward 160 eV, indicating the presence of more than one oxidation state, i.e., the 3+ and the 4+ oxidation states. Therefore, the XPS results further demonstrated Ce1−xTbxO2−δ composites were successfully synthesized.

Fig. 3(a) shows the XRD pattern of as-prepared Ce1−xTbxO2−δ (x = 6.5 at.%.) nanobelts. Peaks corresponding to CeO2 (111), (200), (220) and (311) planes were observed, indicating a face-centered cubic-phase CeO2 (JCPDS 34-0394). The diffraction peaks of TbO2 or Tb2O3 were not observed, indicating Tb has entered into the CeO2 lattice. The calculated cell parameter (a) is equal to 0.3578 nm, a little smaller than that of bulk CeO2 (0.5411 nm). This may be due to a lattice constriction effect resulting from Tb4+ ions as Tb4+ has a smaller ionic radius than that of Ce4+ (the ionic radii values for Ce4+, Tb4+, Ce3+ and Tb3+ are 0.97, 0.88, 1.14 and 1.04 Å, respectively). The lattice constriction is additional evidence for the formation of solid solutions. The broadening of the reflections of Ce1−xTbxO2−δ nanobelts in Fig. 3(a) can be attributed to the smaller nanocrystallites. The average crystallite sizes of Ce1−xTbxO2−δ nanobelts were calculated from X-ray line broadening of the (111) reflection using Scherrer’s equation (D = Kλ/(βcos θ), where λ is the wavelength of the X-ray radiation, K is a constant, θ is the diffraction angle, and β is the full width at half-maximum). The average crystallite size of Ce1−xTbxO2−δ nanobelts was determined to be about 5.5 nm. The peak shift of Ce1−xTbxO2−δ (x = 6.5 at.%) nanobelts compared with pure CeO2 can be estimated as about 0.4°. The XRD pattern of Ce1−xTbxO2−δ nanobelts calcined at 1100 K are shown in Fig. 3(b). The same monophasic composition is retained, and no phase segregation is observed.

The catalytic activity of the Ce1−xTbxO2−δ (x = 6.5 at.%.) nanobelts was investigated by performing the CO conversion reaction. Fig. 4 shows the catalytic activities of Ce1−xTbxO2−δ nanobelts, nanoparticles and nanosheets (all x = 6.5 at.%) as a function of reaction temperature (the surface areas of Ce1−xTbxO2−δ nanobelts, nanosheets and nanoparticles are about 115, 72 and 23 m2 g−1, respectively). It can be clearly observed the CO conversion increases with increasing reaction temperature for all samples. For Ce1−xTbxO2−δ nanobelts as catalyst, a 96% CO conversion is achieved at about 913 K. However, only 43% and 57% CO conversions are obtained at
Fig. 4 Conversion of CO over (a) Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanobelts, (b) Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanosheets and (c) Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanoparticles as a function of reaction temperature.

the same temperature for Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanoparticles and nanosheets as catalysts, respectively. (SEM images of Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanoparticles and nanosheets are shown in Fig. S3 and Fig. S4, ESI, †respectively) Therefore, the catalytic activity of Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanobelts is much higher than those of Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanoparticles and nanosheets. Interestingly, a significant lowering of the starting reduction temperature is noticed for Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanobelts compared to Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanoparticles and nanosheets.

Since the components of Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ deposits were kept the same, the above different catalytic activities must originate from the different structures that have different oxygen storage capacities (OSCs). As is well known, the value of OSC is a crucial parameter for catalytic activity. Herein, the OSC properties of Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanobelts, nanoparticles and nanosheets were tested by oxygen release characteristics of the samples calcined at different temperatures under dry air atmosphere in the temperature range 450–1100 K. The change of weight of the sample was monitored by thermogravimetry (TG) under cyclic heat treatments in flowing air. Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ samples were subjected to consecutive cycles of heating and cooling, and typical TG curves of various samples were shown in Fig. S5 (ESI†). In the above results, a large decrease of weight was observed in the first heat treatment (A → B) and this can be attributed to the release of both water molecules and oxygen from Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ solid solutions. In the cooling back stage (B → C), a partial recovery of the weight of Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ sample was observed. In the second heating cycle (C → B), a small decrease of weight was also observed corresponding to the potential oxygen release capacity of the powders in ordinary air atmosphere.\textsuperscript{12} The Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanobelts show the highest weight loss, which is followed by Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanosheets and nanoparticles. Accordingly the Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanobelts have the highest OSC among various Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanostructures. These results are consistent with the catalytic activity order of CO oxidation, where Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanobelts showed better activity than that of Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanosheets, followed by Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanoparticles.

In summary, a novel design of ceria–terbia solid solution nanobelts led to catalysts of high activity for CO oxidation. Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanobelts (x = 6.5 at.%) have been synthesized by electrochemical deposition at room temperature and ordinary atmospheric pressure without any surface capping agent. The electrochemical deposition route shows a facile and low-cost route. The results of XRD and TEM show Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanobelts are well crystallized and have a cubic structure. A strong shape/crystal structure effect of Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ composites for the catalytic activity has been identified. The Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanobelts are most active for the CO conversion reaction compared with Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanoparticles and nanosheets. The high catalytic activity of Ce$_{1-x}$Tb$_{0.2-x}$ nanobelts can be attributed to the special nanostructures with high OSC. These findings can be extended to new studies of other ceria-based mixed oxides with high surface areas.

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Notes and references