Spring-Like Pseudoelectroelasticity of Monocrystalline Cu$_2$S Nanowire

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ABSTRACT: Prediction from the dual-phase nature of superionic conductors—both solid and liquid-like—is that mobile ions in the material may experience reversible extraction—reinsertion by an external electric field. However, this type of pseudoelectroelasticity has not been confirmed in situ, and no details on the microscopic mechanism are known. Here, we in situ monitor the pseudoelectroelasticity of monocrystalline Cu$_2$S nanowires (NWs) using transmission electron microscopy (TEM). Specifically, we reveal the atomic scale details including phase transformation, migration and redox reactions of Cu$^+$ ions, nucleation, growth, as well as spontaneous shrinking of Cu protrusion. Caterpillar-diffusion-dominated deformation is confirmed by the high-resolution transmission electron microscopy (HRTEM) observation and ab initio calculation, which can be driven by either an external electric field or chemical potential difference. The observed spring-like behavior was creatively adopted for electric nanoactuators. Our findings are crucial to elucidate the mechanism of pseudoelectroelasticity and could potentially stimulate in-depth research into electrochemical and nanoelectromechanical systems.

KEYWORDS: In situ TEM, pseudoelectroelasticity, Cu$_2$S nanowires, superionic conductors

Superionic conductors possessing both rigid solid and fluidic liquid sublattices can offer special applications in energy conversion, memristive systems, and crystal growth. A characteristic feature of the dual-phase nature is that the mobile ions occupying the fluidic sublattice may be extracted out of their sublattice under an application of electric field, and be spontaneously reinserted into the material upon removal of the electrical bias, driven by chemical potential gradient. This process, known as “pseudo-electroelasticity”, is essential for unveiling the microscopic working mechanisms responsible for various functional superionic conductors and remains challenging to identify and characterize experimentally.

Valuable work has been conducted to study the microscopic mechanism of redox reactions, ion transport, and mass transfer in various superionic conductors. For example, Valov et al. studied the atomic nucleation at superionic solid electrolyte surface. Ohno et al. studied the short-term plasticity and long-term potentiation in mixed electronic-superionic inorganic synapses. Chen et al. studied the ultrafast silver mass storage and removal in mixed conductors. However, a wide range of microscopic processes are so far still elusive including the diffusion of mobile species during the growth and dissolution processes of the metal protrusion is not evidently revealed, the corresponding relation between measured total current and atoms/ions movement remains to be
characterized, and the long-term stability of protrusion after gap bridged is yet to be confirmed by imaging. One bottleneck of the in situ study of such process is the difficulty of facilitating ion transport pathways in typical materials. To alleviate this problem, the material system of monocrystalline Cu₂S nanocrystals came into our attention. Our previous work proved that the Cu₂S can be heat-treated to undergo a phase transformation from low chalcocite (LC) to high chalcocite (HC) near room temperature, and the HC phase exhibits superionic properties with its S atoms forming a rigid sublattice and Cu atoms randomly jumping around similar to a liquid. This allows chemical potential gradient and external electric field to easily drive the mobilizing Cu⁺ ions in and out of their sublattice, opening up a large window to observe pseudoelectroelasticity under an STM−TEM system.

We were thus able to monitor the whole pseudoelectroelasticity process including LC-to-HC phase transformation, migration and jamming of Cu⁺ ions, nucleation, and growth, as well as spontaneous shrinking of a Cu protrusion.

Results and Discussion. In our experiment, we constructed a close-circuit electrochemical system with a monocrystalline LC-phase Cu₂S NW (Figure S1) incorporated...
between Au and W ends, as shown in Figure 1a. A bias was applied to induce NW pseudoelectroelasticity (Video S1). During the whole process, the loop current in the circuit as well as the length of the prolongation were recorded in real time (Figure 1b). For the interval from 0 to 60 s, the sampling rate is two samples per second. However, for the interval from 60 to 143 s, the circuit is disconnected, leading to the loop current being zero. In order to accurately measure the length of the precipitated copper, we select the sampling points corresponding to the clear images in the video, and the intervals between two sampling points are not constant.

According to the current vs time and the length vs time curves, the process can be divided into four steps: initial state (c–d), electrochemical extraction (d–g), dynamic equilibrium (g–h), and reverse incorporation (h–l).

During the initial state, the NW is unchanged and the loop current is close to zero. After the first 26 s, the electrochemical extraction (formation of Cu phase) took place quickly, and the length of the formed Cu nanowire reached its maximum at 30 s (Figure 1g). The total current (26–30 s) drastically shoots up to \( \sim 1000 \) nA. The maximum conductivity of the Cu2S during the dynamic extrusion state was estimated to be \( \sim 10^3 \)
Siemens/m, consistent with the experiment values reported in the literature (Supporting Information). After this increase, the NW system turned into a dynamic equilibrium state until the end of biasing at 60 s (Figure 1h), the current intensity drops to about several tens of nanoamperes and no further growth of the Cu nanowire was observed. A series of characterizations (Figures S2 and S3) verifying the Cu extraction are included in Supporting Information. After biasing, the electrochemically formed Cu protrusion dissolves back into NW spontaneously in a self-induced way. Meanwhile, the Cu NW is detached from the W tip, and the electric circuit cuts off automatically. The rate of Cu dissolution reduces with time (Figure 1h–l), reflected from the curvature of the length–time dependence curve in Figure 1b. In the end, the protrusion is dissolved almost completely, the shape and the structure of CuS NW returned to its initial dimensions (Figure 1I, Figure S4). The slightly reduced length is caused by the difference of the projection directions.

To understand the detailed migration behavior of Cu ions within the Cu$_x$S NW, a series of HRTEM images were recorded, as shown in Figure 2. The corresponding raw HRTEM images are listed in Figures S5 and S6. Starting with biasing the pristine NW for 1.5 s, the LC structure completely turned into HC accompanied by the disappearance of the stacking faults (Figure 2b). The phase transition is caused by Joule heating. When constant bias is applied, the Cu$_x$S NW’s temperature will rise due to Joule heating until reaching a thermal equilibrium state. We simulated the temperature distribution of a Cu$_x$S NW in thermal equilibrium state by finite element method (Figure S7) and found that the temperature raised by Joule heating is enough to induce phase transition. The detailed phase transition path shows...
that the phase transformation originates at the stacking faults and propagates from the edge inward until the LC structure is completely converted into HC (Figure S8), which is consistent with our previous work.18 Subsequently, the Cu atoms begin to nucleate at the tip of the NW (highlighted in green), and the NW maintain the HC phase during the dynamic extrusion process, as shown in Figure 2c and Video S2. The HRTEM image in Figure 2d confirms that the protrusion is entirely made of metallic copper as confirmed from the spacing of the lattice fringes, which agrees with that of {111}-Cu planes. Figure 2e reveals that the [102] diffraction spot of the LC disappears after 1.5 s, which indicates the complete conversion to the HC phase.

The process of Cu reinsertion (Figure 2h–k) is much simpler. With the bias turned off, HC phase converts back to the LC. Surprisingly, the Cu2S NW keeps LC phase during the entire Cu insertion process as shown in the FFT patterns of Figure 2h–k. It is shown in Figure 2f,g that Cu⁺ ions migrate along the c channel in a synchronized way (caterpillar migration) with an energy barrier of less than 0.6 eV. On the contrary, we find that the isolated motion of a single ion along the c channel is not feasible as it encounters huge repulsion from its neighboring ions along the c channel and bounces back to the initial configuration prior to the hop. Combining in situ HRTEM observations with ab initio calculations, we concluded that the Cu⁺ ion diffusion in this case follows the caterpillar diffusion mechanism rather than the independent ion motion normally observed in most of the metal–halogen superionic conductors.

The different steps in the deformation process are described in a brief manner in Figure 1m. First, the temperature of the Cu2S NW increases due to Joule heating. Next, a crystallographic channel is not feasible as it encounters huge repulsion from its neighboring ions along the c channel and bounces back to the initial configuration prior to the hop. Combining in situ HRTEM observations with ab initio calculations, we concluded that the Cu⁺ ion diffusion in this case follows the caterpillar diffusion mechanism rather than the independent ion motion normally observed in most of the metal–halogen superionic conductors.

Once the Au–Cu2S–W system is connected, the electrochemical potential µ of the system equilibrate and the condition µ(Au) = µ(Cu2S) = µ(W) is fulfilled as shown in Figure 3c(I) and Figure 3d(I). The difference in the work functions of Au and Cu2S suggest the formation of a Schottky contact at the Au–Cu2S interface as shown in Figure 3d(I). This is why the initial loop current is close to zero in Figure 1b.

An applied voltage shifts the Fermi level of the Au electrode relative to the Cu2S (ΔE_F(Au) = eΔφ) and an effective electrical potential difference (Δφ) is induced, where e is charge of the electron, and φ is the local electrostatic potential. According to the energy band diagram of the Au–Cu2S–W system (Figure S9), we know that the major potential drop is concentrated between Au and W electrodes as shown by the red line in Figure 3d (II). With external voltage exerted upon the Cu2S, the mobile Cu⁺ ions would respond by moving with a drift mobility, M_d. At the same time, an equal amount of electrons moving from Au electrode to W electrode through the external circuit leads to a formation of positive charges at Au side of the Au/Cu2S interface. In this way, an electrical double layer is established at the Au/Cu2S interface to maintain the charge balance of the system. It is the electrical double layer that stabilizes the Cu⁺-deficient material. For the electrons arriving at the Cu2S/W interface from the W electrode with energy (E_F) higher the Fermi energy of the redox reaction, that is, E_F > E_µ (Cu²⁺/Cu), can contribute to the electrochemical Cu⁺/Cu half-cell reaction.12 Meanwhile, the activity of Cu is reduced at the Au/Cu2S interface (Figure 3c(II)) in accordance to the Nernst equation. The observed high current (Figure 1B) is a proof of the mass/ion transfer in the Cu2S NW and interface electrode reactions. The ionic conduction is estimated in the order of σ_ion = (10−10²)σ_e (Supporting Information).

The extraction of Cu from the solid electrolyte will lead to a shift of the chemical potential from the green line in Figure 3d(II) to the green line in Figure 3d(III). When it reaches the level denoted by the green line in Figure 3d(III), an equilibrium will be established as shown in Figure 3c(III). In this case, the chemical potential gradient formed during the application of voltage drives a chemical dissolution process of Cu back into the Cu2S matrix, and the directional migration of Cu⁺ ions stops, so the ionic conduction no longer contributes the loop current. In addition, the extrusion of Cu⁺ ions induces cationic vacancies on the Cu2S side near the Au/Cu2S interface that provide an additional potential, reducing both the built-in potential and the depletion width to maintain the Fermi energy balance between Au and Cu2S.21,25 Therefore, the Schottky barrier at the Au/Cu2S interface decreases. This is why the current drops to about several tens of nanoamperes during dynamic equilibrium state, which is much smaller than the current in electrochemical extraction process but higher than the current in the initial state.

Upon removal of bias, the extracted Cu starts to be oxidized and dissolved back into the NW, driven by chemical potential gradient (higher copper concentration toward the W tip side), as shown in Figure 3c(IV). The Cu species will gradually become uniformly spanned inside the NW again, and the chemical potential distribution is shifted from the green line in Figure 3d(IV) to the green line in Figure 3d(I). Obviously, the dissolution of Cu protrusion is slower than the growth, which is because of the electronic conductivity is smaller than the ionic conductivity in Cu2S in Figure 1b. During electrochemical extraction process, the Cu⁺ ions diffusion through
Cu₂S NW and the electrons transfer through the external circuit, so the Cu protrusion formation process is ionic conduction limiting. However, for the Cu dissolution process, the electric circuit cuts off after bias, so electrons only can transfer through Cu₂S NW, and the Cu protrusion dissolution process becomes electronic conduction limiting.

The value of the applied voltage also influences the process of Cu extraction (Figure S10). Constant voltages of variable amplitudes (0–1 V, the interval is 0.1 V) were applied on the NW, the time of Cu⁺ ions to begin moving out and the projected areas of Cu protrusions at 30 s were recorded as shown in Figure 3b. On the basis of these data, the phenomenon of pseudoelectroelasticity can be divided into three categories. It is worth mentioning that the voltage ranges of these three categories varied for different NWs. For a specific NW, the process of Cu⁺ ion precipitation has two critical voltages \( V_1 \) and \( V_2 \) (Figure 3b). There is a positive correlation between the temperature and the applied voltage, since increasing the applied voltage will raise the steady-state temperature of the NW. If the bias is below \( V_1 \), the electric force on the ion is not sufficient to overcome the Cu⁺ ion reduction and diffusion barriers in LC Cu₂S and also, the steady-state temperature of the NW is below the phase transition temperature, which means that the Cu⁺ ions will not precipitate out of the NW. When the bias is between \( V_1 \) and \( V_2 \), the electrical field, in this case, is also not sufficient to overcome the Cu⁺ ion reduction/diffusion barrier in LC Cu₂S, but the steady-state temperature of the NW can increase to above the phase transition temperature, in which case, Cu⁺ ions can become mobile in HC Cu₂S. Thus, the relaxation time required to induce precipitation of Cu⁺ ions reduces with increasing applied voltage. The measured projected areas of the Cu protrusions at 30 s increase with voltage in this range of applied voltage (Figure S10b–d). Above \( V_2 \), the electrical field force is sufficient to overcome the Cu⁺ ion reaction/diffusion barriers in LC Cu₂S and Cu ions instantaneously are electrochemically extracted from the NW following applied bias. In this case, the projected area of the Cu protrusions at 30 s increases with voltage except for 0.8 V, because the protrusion is overlapped in Figure S10f.

Last, we demonstrate the use of the pseudoelectroelasticity behavior of Cu₂S in a linear electric nanoactuator (Figure 4). In this way, we can directly convert electrical energy into mechanical energy, which can be used to drive the reciprocating motion of an object (Video S3). We chose the interface of Cu/Cu₂S interface of the NW as reference position. At a bias of 1 V, the Cu⁺ ions move out and push the W tip out. If the bias is turned off, the extruded Cu⁺ inserts back into the NW and pulls the W tip to its original location (Figure 4a). The relative positions and the relative change in the orientation of the W tip are presented in Figure 4b. We have repeated the actuation process many times for another
NW and found that the movement of the nanoactuator was precisely repeated, confirming the reliability of the system (Figure 4c and Video S4).

**Conclusion.** In summary, we directly monitored the pseudoelectroelasticity process of Cu$_2$S NWs at the atomic scale and have successfully applied this method to nanoelectromechanical systems. The details of the electrochemical dynamics are revealed, which include Cu$_2$S phase transformation, migration and jamming of Cu$^+$ ions, nucleation, growth, as well as spontaneous shrinking of Cu protrusion. The microscopic mechanism convincingly demonstrates that the extraction of Cu$^+$ ions is driven by the external electric field and the cation diffusion barriers are dominated by Joule heat, whereas the oxidation and reinsertion of Cu in the absence of bias is due to the chemical potential difference. Our results open a new perspective about the properties of superionic conductor and provide critical insight into the microscopic mechanisms of ion transport, thereby motivating further research to broaden this concept in electrochemical and nanoelectromechanical systems.

**ASSOCIATED CONTENT**

# Supporting Information
The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications website at DOI: 10.1021/acs.nanolett.8b01914.

Synthesis of copper(1) sulfide NWs set up of the in situ TEM experiment, characterization method and electrical measurements, first-principles calculations, simulation of temperature gradient, conductivity measurements, determination of the structure of the protrusion formed under bias, and the source of extruded Cu ions; figures including structural characterization and elemental composition of samples and the protrusion, the raw HRTEM images corresponding to Figure 2, temperature distribution of Cu$_2$S NW, the phase transition trajectory from LC to HC during the extrusion process, the energy band diagram of the Au/Cu$_2$S/W structure, and the influence of voltage on the Cu extrusion process; and Table S1, showing the analysis of device structure, elasticity or plasticity, dominant ions source, position of extrusion, and dominant driving force in different kinds of reversible metal extrusion-insertion processes (PDF)

Video S1, electric field induced pseudoelectroelastic deformation of one Cu$_2$S nanowire, where the extrusion of the Cu NW is an electrically driven process and that dissolution process is spontaneous (AVI)

Video S2, extrusion process of the Cu NW at high resolution (AVI)

Video S3, one Cu$_2$S nanowire working as a nanoactuator to drive reciprocating motion of an object (here is W tip) (AVI)

Video S4, repeatability of a nanoactuator behavior (AVI)

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**ASSOCIATED CONTENT**

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The authors declare no competing financial interest.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This work was supported by the National Key R&D Program of China (No. 2017YFA0204800) and the National Natural Science Foundation of China (Nos 51420105003, 11327901, 11525415, 11674052). Q.Z. acknowledges funding support from the China Scholarship Council (201606090071) and Scientific Research Foundation of Graduate School of Southeast University (YBPY1708). The work by Q.Z. and Ha.Z. at LBNL was supported by the U.S. Department of Energy, Office of Science, Office of Basic Energy Sciences, Materials Sciences and Engineering Division, under Contract No. DE-AC02-05CH11231 within the KC22ZH program.

**ABBREVIATIONS**

Cu$_2$S, copper sulfide; HRTEM, high resolution transmission electron microscope; STM-TEM, scanning tunneling microscopic transmission electron microscope system; HC, high chalcocite; LC, low chalcocite; NW, nanowire; SAED, selected area electron diffraction; EELS, energy-loss spectroscopy; FFT, fast Fourier transformation; NEB, nudged elastic band