Structural control of vertically aligned multiwalled carbon nanotubes by radio-frequency plasmas

Jitendra Menda, Benjamin Ulmen, Lakshman K. Vanga, Vijaya K. Kayastha, and Yoke Khin Yap
Department of Physics, Michigan Technological University, Houghton, Michigan 49931
Zhengwei Pan, Ilia N. Ivanov, Alex A. Puretzky, and David B. Geohegan
Condensed Matter Sciences Division, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Oak Ridge, Tennessee 37831-6056
and Department of Materials Science and Engineering, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee 37966

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Plasma-enhanced chemical vapor deposition is the only technique for growing individual vertically aligned multiwalled carbon nanotubes (VA-MWCNTs) at desired locations. Inferior graphitic order has been a long-standing issue that has prevented realistic applications of these VA-MWCNTs.

Previously, these VA-MWCNTs were grown by a one-plasma approach. Here, we demonstrate the capability of controlling graphitic order and diameters of VA-MWCNTs by decoupling the functions of the conventional single plasma into a dual-plasma configuration. Our results indicate that the ionic flux and kinetic energy of the growth species are important for improving graphitic order of VA-MWCNTs. © 2005 American Institute of Physics. [DOI: 10.1063/1.2115068]

Carbon nanotubes (CNTs) are among the important materials for the advancement of future nanoscience and nanotechnology. Recently, vertically aligned multiwalled carbon nanotubes (VA-MWCNTs) have gained additional attention for innovative applications, such as nanotubes antennas, vertical transistors, and vertical biosensors. Ideally, these applications require VA-MWCNTs to be grown at desired patterns. Plasma-enhanced chemical vapor deposition (PECVD) is the only technique for growing individual VA-MWCNTs at desired locations. However, the graphitic order of these VA-MWCNTs is inferior to the multiwall CNTs grown by arc discharge and thermal chemical vapor deposition. This has been a long-standing issue for realistic uses of VA-MWCNTs in applications, such as electron field emission devices.

VA-MWCNTs grown by PECVD are usually called carbon nanofibers (CNFs) and have highly distorted structures. Previously, these CNFs were grown by a one-plasma approach. Here, we found that the graphitic order and diameters of VA-MWCNTs are controllable by decoupling the functions of single plasma into a dual-plasma configuration. Our results indicate that the ionic flux and kinetic energy of the growth species are important for improving the graphitic order of VA-MWCNTs.

By a dual-radio-frequency (rf) PECVD technique (dual-rf-PECVD), we showed that VA-MWCNTs can be grown to an area as of 25 cm² at substrate temperatures as low as 540 °C. The dual-rf-PECVD system has a pair of parallel electrodes. The plasma produced on the top and the bottom electrodes is referred as the top plasma and the bottom plasma, respectively. The spacing between the two electrodes is 5 cm with the substrate located 3.5 cm from the top electrode. This substrate is placed on a heater and electrically contacted with the bottom electrode. The heater controls the growth temperatures by using a proportional-integration-differentiation system.

FIG. 1. Scanning electron microscope (SEM) images of VA-MWCNTs grown at different top plasma forward powers: (a) 50 W, (b) 100 W, (c) 150 W, and (d) 200 W. The substrate biasing is maintained at −150 V for all cases. Scale bar = 2 μm.
while keeping the top plasma forward power at 200 W. As plasma heating increases the surface-free energy \( \Delta E_s \), smaller catalyst particles will diffuse and merge as larger clusters. This will decrease \( A \) and increase \( V \). Thus, the volume-free energy \( \Delta E_v \) term will dominate and minimize the total-free energy \( \Delta E \) becomes more negative). The formation of large particles will result in the growth of VA-MWCNTs with larger diameters.

We use Raman spectroscopy to examine the graphitic order of these VA-MWCNTs. This is done by comparing the intensity of the graphitic \( (G) \) and disordered \( (D) \) Raman bands. The \( G \) and \( D \) bands represent the zone center phonons of \( E_{2g} \) symmetry and the \( K \)-point phonons of \( A_{1g} \) symmetry, respectively. The intensity ratio of these two bands \( (I_G/I_D) \) is commonly used as a measure of the graphitic order of carbon-based materials. All measurements are carried out by a confocal micro-Raman system, using a HeNe excitation laser \( (\lambda = 632.8 \text{ nm}) \). The Raman spectra for MWCNTs samples grown by various top plasma forward power are shown in Fig. 2(a). The relation of \( I_G/I_D \) to the forward power is shown in Fig. 2(b). As shown, the \( I_G/I_D \) ratio increases at a forward power of 200 W, which indicates the enhancement of graphitic order of the VA-MWCNTs.

We have then investigated the effect of the bottom plasma by varying the negative dc substrate bias voltage while keeping the top plasma forward power at 200 W. As shown in Fig. 3, an increase in the diameter of the tube is observed when the biasing varied from \([\text{Fig. 3(a)}] \, -50 \text{ V}, \, [\text{Fig. 3(b)}] \, -100 \text{ V}, \, [\text{Fig. 3(c)}] \, -150 \text{ V}. \) The increase in substrate biasing enhanced the kinetic energy of the impinging ions. The ionic flux near the substrate region will also be increased. Thus, the energy transfer to the substrate surface will be enhanced through ion bombardment. This will increase the surface energy of the Ni nanoparticles and induce larger Ni clusters, as discussed earlier. Thus, the diameters of the MWCNTs increased. However, when the bias voltage reaches a level between \(-150 \text{ and } -200 \text{ V} \) [Figs. 3(c) and 3(d)], a decrease in the diameters of the MWCNTs is detected. This can be explained by the sputtering of Ni nanoparticles by the energetic ions. The diameters of MWCNTs continue to decrease at a biasing of \(-250 \text{ V} \) [Fig. 3(e)]. No MWCNTs were formed when the biasing is higher than \(-350 \text{ V} \), which is the total re-sputtering region.

Figure 4(a) shows the Raman spectra for these VA-MWCNTs. The corresponding relation of \( I_G/I_D \) to the substrate biasing is shown in Fig. 4(b). As shown, the \( I_G/I_D \) ratio is low \((-0.48) \) at low substrate biasing \((-50 \text{ V}) \), but is increased to \( I_G/I_D \) of \(-0.80 \) at higher substrate biasing. This result indicates that a biasing threshold occurred \((-50 \text{ to } -100 \text{ V}) \) for growing MWCNTs with high graphitic order. These are consistent with the obtained transmission electron microscope (TEM) images shown in Fig. 5. At a biasing of \([\text{Fig. 5(a)}] \, -50 \text{ V}, \, [\text{Fig. 5(b)}] \, -100 \text{ V}, \, [\text{Fig. 5(c)}] \, -150 \text{ V}, \, [\text{Fig. 5(d)}] \, -200 \text{ V}, \, [\text{Fig. 5(e)}] \, -250 \text{ V}. \) The top plasma forward power is maintained at 200 W for all cases. Scale bar=1 \( \mu \text{m} \).

![Figure 3](image1.png)

**Fig. 3.** SEM images of VA-MWCNTs grown at different substrate biasing: (a) \(-50 \text{ V}, \, (b) \,-100 \text{ V}, \, (c) \, -150 \text{ V}, \, (d) \, -200 \text{ V}, \, \text{and (e) } -250 \text{ V}. \) The top plasma forward power is maintained at 200 W for all cases. Scale bar=1 \( \mu \text{m} \).
shown in the inset. At higher biasing (−150 V), MWCNTs with higher graphitic order are grown as shown in Fig. 5(b). These MWCNTs have straighter and smoother sidewalls as shown in the inset. This result indicates that the growth species with a high kinetic energy is important for the formation of MWCNTs with improved graphitic order. We believe that high substrate biasing will generate directional ion flux and promote covalent bonds of carbon along the tubular axis, as we proposed previously.\textsuperscript{18} Our results are consistent with the theory that both the kinetic energy ($E_k$) and the potential energy ($U$) of the growth species are contributing to the structural properties of solids.\textsuperscript{21} Structural orders of MWCNTs will be enhanced when the total energy ($E=E_k+U$) of the growth species well exceeds the cohesive energy ($E_c$) of the sp$^2$-bonded carbon networks (\textasciitilde7.4 eV/atom). The exceeding energy ($E-E_c$) will quench atomic scale heating\textsuperscript{22} that promotes atomic diffusion and enhances the structural order of VA-MWCNTs. As guided by these findings, we have then optimized the growth of VA-MWCNTs at thinner catalyst films. For example, at 200 W of top plasma and substrate biasing of −100 V, straight VA-MWCNTs with uniform diameter (~60 nm) are grown at 450 °C as shown in Fig. 6.

In summary, the diameters and graphitic order of VAMWCNTs can be effectively controlled by the dual-rf-PECVD technique. This is accomplished by adjusting the ionic flux and the negative dc bias voltages on the substrates independently by a dual-rf-plasma approach.

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FIG. 5. TEM images of MWCNTs grown a substrate biasing of (a) −50 V and (b) −150 V. The top plasma forward power is maintained at 200 W for both cases.

FIG. 6. SEM images of straight VA-MWCNTs at optimum growth conditions.

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