Selective Growth of Pure and Long ZnO Nanowires by Controlled Vapor Concentration Gradients

Samuel L. Mensah, Vijaya K. Kayastha, and Yoke Khin Yap*  
Department of Physics, Michigan Technological University, 1400 Townsend Drive, Houghton, Michigan 49931  
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ZnO can appear as nanowires, nanobelts, and nanocombs, which are attractive for various applications. However, this has prevented the growth of desired nanostructures without other trace morphologies. Here we demonstrated a mechanism for selective growth of pure and long ZnO nanowires. This was obtained by placing a gold film at a high-temperature zone so that ZnO nanowires with controllable densities can be grown on adjacent bare substrates at lower temperature zones. The concentration gradients of gold and ZnO vapors are responsible for this selective growth, which could be applicable for selective growth of ZnO nanobelts and nanocombs in the future.

ZnO nanostructures have proven to be promising materials for applications in electronics and optoelectronic devices. Their wide direct band gap of 3.37 eV and strong exciton binding energy of 60 meV at room temperature are particularly attractive for electro-optical devices. ZnO nanostructures such as nanowires/nanorods, nanobelts, and nanocombs have been synthesized by various growth techniques and vapor-phase transport (thermal chemical vapor deposition) appear to be the simplest and most popular ones. ZnO nanowires (NWs) have exhibited interesting properties for electron field emission and field effect transistors. Short NWs (typically a few micrometers) have been commonly grown vertically aligned on substrates with high purity. However, the growth of long ZnO NWs (>10 μm) by catalyst is always accompanied by traces of other nanostructures. Here we defined a mechanism for selective growth of pure and long ZnO NWs by controlling the concentration gradients of the ZnO growth species and Au vapors. These long NWs could be used for fabricating multiple devices along each piece of NW. Results indicate that a similar approach could be applicable for the selective growth of other ZnO nanostructures in the future.

The growth of our ZnO nanostructures was performed in a horizontal furnace. This system consists of a quartz tube vacuum chamber. A smaller quartz tube (60 cm long and 2 cm in diameter) that contained the precursor materials and the substrates was placed within the vacuum chamber. A mixture of ZnO (0.2 g) and graphite (0.1 g) powder in an alumina boat was used as the precursor materials. These are placed at the closed end of the smaller quartz tube as shown in Figure 1a. Various ZnO nanostructures were formed at different oxygen flow rates. As grown by using 40 sccm of O2 gas flows, ZnO films (b), wide nanobelts with trace NWs (c), NWs with trace nanobelts (d), and thick nanorods (e), were formed at ~850 °C (substrate 1), ~700 °C (substrate 2), ~600 °C (substrate 3), and ~500 °C (substrate 4), respectively. These experiments were repeated by a double flow rate of O2 gas (80 sccm). In this case, ZnO films with bigger grain sizes (f), wide nanobelts with trace NWs (g), NWs with trace nanobelts (h), and nanocombs with trace nanobelts (i), were formed on substrate 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively. Obviously, the formation of various ZnO nanostructures is possible but always mixed with various morphologies. In fact, NW samples with trace nanobelts (Figure 1d and h) can appear like pure and long NWs under SEM at low magnification.

In the second set of experiments, we are interested to understand the effects of the Au catalyst. We have put a series of oxidized Si substrates coated with 5-nm-thick Au films were used as shown in Figure 1a. Various ZnO nanostructures were formed at different oxygen flow rates. As grown by using 40 sccm of O2 gas flows, ZnO films (b), wide nanobelts with trace NWs (c), NWs with trace nanobelts (d), and thick nanorods (e), were formed at ~850 °C (substrate 1), ~700 °C (substrate 2), ~600 °C (substrate 3), and ~500 °C (substrate 4), respectively. These experiments were repeated by a double flow rate of O2 gas (80 sccm). In this case, ZnO films with bigger grain sizes (f), wide nanobelts with trace NWs (g), NWs with trace nanobelts (h), and nanocombs with trace nanobelts (i), were formed on substrate 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively. Obviously, the formation of various ZnO nanostructures is possible but always mixed with various morphologies. In fact, NW samples with trace nanobelts (Figure 1d and h) can appear like pure and long NWs under SEM at low magnification.

In the second set of experiments, we are interested to understand the effects of the Au catalyst. We have put a series of oxidized Si substrates (without Au coatings) as shown in Figure 2a. In this case, formation of ZnO nanostructures solely by ZnO growth species will be revealed. We found that nothing was deposited on substrates located at temperatures higher than 750 °C. This can be explained by the excessive surface free energy and vapor pressures of ZnO growth species closer to the source materials. In this case, the probability of nuclei formation can be described as

\[ P_N = A \exp(-\frac{\pi \sigma^2}{kT} \ln \alpha) \]

where \( A \) is a constant, \( \sigma \) is the surface energy, \( \alpha = 1 \) is the supersaturation, \( \alpha = p/p_\alpha \), \( p \) is the pressure of vapor, and \( p_\alpha \) is the
equilibrium vapor pressure of the condensed phase at that temperature, $k$ is the Boltzmann constant, and $T$ is the temperature in Kelvin. Relatively high $\sigma$ will suppress the nucleation probability. Because ZnO films can be grown at $\sim 850 ^\circ \text{C}$ with Au catalyst (Figure 1b and f), we interpret the function of Au as the catalyst to capture and condense ZnO vapors into solids.

Figure 2 shows ZnO nanostructures grown without catalyst by using 40 sccm of O$_2$ gas flow. ZnO (b) nanobelts with traces of NWs, and (c), (d), (e) sharp-tip nanorods were grown on substrates 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively. Scale bar = 6 $\mu$m.

In the third set of experiments, we introduced a “side-catalyst” configuration as shown in Figure 3. Substrate 1 ($\sim 700 ^\circ \text{C}$) was coated with a 5-nm Au film. Substrate 2 ($\sim 600 ^\circ \text{C}$), substrate 3 ($\sim 500 ^\circ \text{C}$), and substrate 4 ($\sim 400 ^\circ \text{C}$) are oxidized Si substrates without Au coatings. The vapor transport mechanism of this configuration can be described by referring to Figure 4. As the temperature of the furnace ($T$) increases from $T_1$ to $T_3$, the ZnO vapors will start to diffuse and propagate toward the substrates. Concurrently, the Au film on substrate 1 will start to evaporate because of the volatile near-surface atoms of the Au nanoparticles at high temperatures (melting point of bulk Au is 1064.43 $^\circ \text{C}$ but is lower for thin films and nanoparticles). According to Fick’s law, the diffusion flux $J = -D(dN/dx)$, where $J$ is the net flux of vapors (per unit area in unit time), $D$ is the diffusion constant, and $(dN/dx)$ is the concentration gradients of the vapors along the propagation direction $x$. This means that the diffusion will always propagate to a region with lower Au and ZnO vapor concentration as shown in Figure 4. Thus, this configuration will create concentration gradients of ZnO and Au vapors with higher concentration on substrate 1 and lowest concentration at substrate 4.

Results indicate that this approach leads to selective growth of pure ZnO NWs. For example, at 40 sccm of oxygen flows, short nanorods are formed in the Au-coated substrate (Figure 3b). This is different from those grown at substrate 2 in Figure 1a because of a much lower Au vapor concentration in the growth ambient because only one Au-coated substrate was used. Long ZnO NWs ($\sim 10$ to $100$s $\mu$m with diameters $80$ to $500$ nm) were grown on substrates 2, 3, and 4 (Figure 3c, d, and e, respectively, or Figure 3f, g, and h, respectively, at lower magnification). NWs on substrates 2 and 4 have sharp tips but are much longer and smaller in diameter than the nanorods shown in Figure 2. NWs on substrate 3 have the longest lengths and more uniform diameters probably because of the optimum Au and ZnO vapor concentrations. Furthermore, the density of these NWs is controllable, higher on substrate 2 and lower on substrate 4. Apparently, Au vapors have mediated the growth of longer NWs, without which ZnO vapors will simply condense as short ZnO nanorods.

Typical XRD spectra of these ZnO NWs are shown in Figure 5a and can be indexed as wurtzite ZnO crystals ($a = 0.325$ nm and $c = 0.521$ nm). The dominant (002) peak indicates that
these NWs are grown along the c axis as confirmed by high-resolution TEM (inset). TEM also suggests that these ZnO NWs are single crystalline. Raman spectra of these ZnO NWs as excited by a HeNe laser (wavelength 632.8 nm) indicate phonon frequencies at 331, 380, 438, and 581 cm$^{-1}$, which correspond to the $E_{2H} - E_{2L}$, $A_{1T}$, $E_{2H}$, and $E_{1L}$ phonon modes of ZnO (Figure 5b). These samples were also analyzed by PL as excited by a HeCd laser (wavelength $\sim$325 nm). A predominant emission peak at $\sim$380 nm is observed and corresponds to the near-band-edge emission of ZnO attributed to the recombination of the free excitons (inset in Figure 5b). A broad emission at $\sim$530 nm is attributed to the recombination of a photogenerated hole with an electron occupying the oxygen vacancy.

In summary, we have demonstrated selective growth of single-crystalline ZnO NWs by a side-catalyst configuration. The mechanism of this success is the introduction of controlled concentration gradients of ZnO and Au vapors. We believed that a similar mechanism could be applicable to control Au and ZnO vapors for selective growth of other ZnO nanotstructures.

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References and Notes
