Short communication

Solid Oxide Membrane-Assisted Controllable Electrolytic Production of TaC Nanoparticles in Molten CaCl$_2$

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The direct electrolytic production of TaC nanoparticles from a Ta$_2$O$_5$/C precursor in molten CaCl$_2$ by using solid oxide membrane (SOM) technology was investigated in this work. A Ta$_2$O$_5$/C pellet pressed under 6 MPa was used as the cathode, and a yttria-stabilized zirconia (YSZ) tube filled with carbon-saturated liquid tin served as the anode to control the electrolysis process. The phase composition and morphology characteristics of the electrolysis products were investigated. The results show that TaC nanoparticles could be obtained directly from a Ta$_2$O$_5$/C mixture in molten CaCl$_2$ at 1000 °C and 4.0 V within 4 h.

Keywords: SOM process; molten salt; electrolysis; TaC

1. INTRODUCTION

Tantalum carbide is a typical cubic crystal carbide that is difficult to dissolve in water and organic acids, but it can dissolve in a mixture of hydrofluoric acid and nitric acid. Tantalum carbide has good conductivity and superconductivity at room temperature, and it has stable chemical properties, a high melting point and excellent oxidation resistance. TaC and Ta$_2$C are the common compounds formed by carbon and tantalum. The melting points of TaC and Ta$_2$C are 3880 and 3330 °C, respectively [1]. Because of its stable chemical properties, TaC does not react with many other chemicals and has strong oxidation resistance. However, TaC carbide is still currently produced through the traditional
carbothermal reduction method, which is an energy-intensive process. Therefore, developing an alternative process to synthesize TaC at low temperature is still needed. In 2000, Chen, Fray and Farthing successfully used solid TiO_2 powder as a raw material for the first time to produce metal Ti [2] through electrodeoxidization in molten CaCl_2. This method is called the FFC method, which has been demonstrated as a general process in the past 20 years for the electroreduction of solid metal oxides in molten salts to prepare metals and alloys [3-5]. The SOM method developed on the basis of the FFC method has also been proven to be used to prepare metals and alloys by using an oxygen ion-conducting inert anode [6-9]. In particular, the SOM-assisted electroreduction process has the potential to synthesize metal carbides with designed products since the carbon content can be controlled by the membrane.

In this work, we demonstrated that TaC can be directly synthesized from Ta_2O_5/C precursors in a molten CaCl_2 electrolyte by using the solid oxide membrane (SOM) technology. To reduce the complexity of the experiment, the Ta_2O_5/C mixture pellet is directly electrolyzed without an additional sintering process. The electrolysis process from the Ta_2O_5/C mixture to TaC is carried out at 1000 °C and 4.0 V for 4 h, and the electrolysis process as well as the obtained products are analyzed systematically.

2. EXPERIMENTAL

2.1 Fabrication of a mixed Ta_2O_5 and carbon pellet cathode

Electrodes used in the present experiments included a preformed Ta_2O_5/C pellet cathode and an assembled inert SOM-based anode. A schematic diagram of the fabrication of the cathode is shown in

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Fig. 1. Ta$_2$O$_5$ (Aladdin, 99.9%, average particle size ~1 μm) and carbon powder (Aladdin, average particle size ~500 nm) powders were well mixed at a molar ratio of Ta:C =1:1. The mixtures were ball milled with 2 wt.% binder (polyvinyl butyral, PVB) for approximately 24 h, and then approximately 1.0 g of the mixtures was pressed to form cylindrical porous pellet precursors (10 mm in diameter and 1.5-2.0 mm in thickness) under a pressure load of 6 MPa. The cylindrical pellet was then wrapped with two porous nickel foils (porosity:~95%, pore per inch: 110, area density: 380 g/m$^2$, pore size: 0.2 to 0.4 mm) and fixed on an Fe-Cr-Al wire (2 mm in diameter, as a current collector) mesh to form a pellet cathode. Porous nickel foils could be used as extended electronic conductors to provide more uniform electric contact points to the initial Ta$_2$O$_5$/C pellet precursors.

2.2 Fabrication of the SOM-based anode

A schematic diagram and photo of the fabrication of the anode is shown in Fig. 2. The assembled anode in this experiment consisted of a solid-oxygen-ion conducting membrane tube (8 mol% yttria-stabilized zirconia, YSZ; 10 mm in diameter and 100 mm in length), which was manufactured by the slip casting method in our laboratory. The YSZ tube was filled with carbon-saturated liquid tin, and an Fe-Cr-Al wire was inserted into the tube as the current conductor [10]. The carbon-saturated liquid tin was a liquid medium to transport the oxygen ions during the electrodeoxidation procedure. Considering the global emissions of CO$_2$, it was demonstrated in previous work that hydrogen could be introduced into the anode and react with O$_2$ to produce H$_2$O [10,11]. In addition, noble metals could also be painted the inner wall of the YSZ tube to oxidize O$_2$ directly to generate O$_2$ gas [10,12].

Figure 2. (a) Schematic diagram and (b) photo of the fabrication of the SOM anode (yttria-stabilized zirconia (YSZ) tube filled with carbon-saturated liquid tin).

2.3 Electrodeoxidation experiments

The assembled cathode and anode were placed in a corundum crucible that contained molten CaCl$_2$ as the electrolyte. The experiments were systematically carried out in a vertical tubular corundum
reactor located in an electrical furnace, as shown in Fig. 3. The assembled Ta$_2$O$_5$/C pellet cathode and SOM-based anode were placed in an alumina crucible. Then this alumina crucible was poured into approximately 120 g of anhydrous CaCl$_2$ powder to constitute a complete electrolytic cell. This electrolytic cell was placed in a constant temperature belt of an alumina crucible tube reactor in a tube furnace. Argon gas was continuously introduced into the reactor, and the temperature was increased to and kept at the preset electrolysis temperature (1000 °C). The experimental apparatus and the schematic of the SOM process are shown in Fig. 3. The cathode was then electrolyzed at 4.0 V for approximately 1-4 h until the current approached the background levels. A Biologic HCP-803 electrochemical workstation was connected to the anode and cathode to control the experiments and record the current-time curve during the electroreduction process. Electro-deoxidation were terminated, the obtained electrodes were removed from the molten salt into the upper part of the alumina furnace reactor and cooled naturally in a stream of argon, and then the samples were removal from the reactor and immediately washed in deionized water [10]. The morphology of the cathode samples was analyzed by X-ray diffraction using a D8 Advance X-ray diffractometer (Bruker, Germany). The microstructures of the cathode products were characterized by scanning electron microscopy (SEM, JEOL JSM-6700F). The elemental composition of the samples was characterized by using energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS, Oxford INCA EDS system). Raman spectroscopy of the sample was performed on a Renishaw inVia Raman microspectrometer using an Ar-ion laser (633 nm).

![Figure 3](image)

**Figure 3.** (a) Schematic illustration of the electrolytic cell and (b) the SOM-assisted electrodeoxidation process.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Current-time curve of the electrolysis process

Fig. 4 presents the typical current-time curve, which was recorded during the electrochemical reduction process with the Ta$_2$O$_5$/C mixture precursor as the cathode at 1000 °C and 4.0 V. It can be seen in Fig. 4 that the current declines from approximately 1.1 A to the background levels — approximately 0.5 A in 4 h, and it is suggested that the anode system requires approximately 4 h to electrodeoxidize the pellet completely. The current during the electrochemical reduction process decreases rapidly at the beginning of electrolysis, which indicates that the electrolytic cell reaches
reaction equilibrium quickly and may be due to the initial expansion of the three-phase interlined (3PIs) metal/oxide/electrolyte on the surface of the mixed cathode [10,13,14]. Then, the current decreases slowly, which is mainly attributed to the diffusion of oxygen ions from the pellets inside to its outside through molten salt channels. As the electroreduction process continues, the oxygen component is continually removed from the mixed pellet, and the reaction interface moves into the interior of the compound pellet. When the current converges to the background levels (approximately 500 mA), it means the oxygen component contained of the Ta$_2$Os/C pellet cathode has been completely reduced, and the compound pellet has been electrolyzed completely [10].

**Figure 4.** Current-time curve of the electrolysis process of the Ta$_2$Os/C precursor.

### 3.2 XRD analysis of the cathodic products

The variations in the phase composition of the cathode during the electroreduction process are shown in Fig. 5. Clearly, TaC nanoparticles are successfully synthesized after 4 h of electrolysis. Fig. 5 demonstrates the XRD patterns of the products of the Ta$_2$Os/C pellets after being electrolyzed for different lengths of time. Clearly, TaC can be facilely electrosynthesized from Ta$_2$Os/C precursors in molten CaCl$_2$. After 1 h of reduction, diffraction peaks corresponding to Ca$_2$Ta$_2$O$_7$, TaC and CaTa$_4$O$_{11}$ appear. This observation demonstrates that Ca$_2$Ta$_2$O$_7$, TaC and CaTa$_4$O$_{11}$ are produced as intermediate products after electrolysis for 1 h. After 2 h of the reduction process, the amount of Ca$_2$Ti$_2$O$_7$ decreases gradually, while TaC and CaTa$_4$O$_{11}$ are continuously formed. When the electrolysis time is extended to 4 h, the product only contains a single phase TaC. It is indicated that pure TaC has been successfully produced in the cathode after electrolysis for 4 h. The electroreduction process for Ta$_2$Os/C is fast, and the TaC product can remain stable during this long-term synthesis process.
3.3 Microstructural observations

Fig. 6(a)-(c) shows the SEM images of the cathodic products of Ta$_2$O$_5$/C pellets after being electrolyzed for different electro-deoxidation time, and Fig. 6(d) shows the EDS spectrum of the product electrolyzed for 4 h. The morphology of the cathodic product electrodeoxidized for 1 h presents a compact structure, which may be attributed to the presence of multiple products, i.e., Ca$_2$Ta$_2$O$_7$, TaC and CaTa$_4$O$_{11}$ (as shown in Fig. 5). With the extension of electrolysis time, the intermediate products disappear, and the final product possesses a uniform and porous structure.
The particle size decreases to nanoparticles after electrolysis 4 h, and the main phase is TaC. Fig. 6(c) shows the microstructure of the Ta₂O₅/C precursor after electrolysis 4 h. As exhibited in Fig. 6(c), the obtained product shows a porous structure with a particle size of ~1 μm. The EDS analysis (Fig. 6(d)) further confirms that the product only contains Ta and C. Combined with the EDS and XRD analyses, it is suggested that the synthesized product is TaC.

### 3.4 Raman analysis

Figure 7. Raman spectra of the products of Ta₂O₅/C pellets electrolyzed for different times

Raman analysis was conducted on the obtained TaC, and the results are shown in Fig. 7. The G band at ~1345 cm⁻¹ corresponds to the in-plane bond-stretching motion of carbon atoms in the sp² configuration with E₂g symmetry. The D band at ~1580 cm⁻¹ is a breathing mode with A₁g symmetry that is forbidden in pristine graphite and becomes active in disordered graphite structures [15,16]. The ratio of the relative intensity of the D-band and G-band (I_D/I_G) represents the graphitic degree of the carbon materials [17]. As shown in Fig. 7, with the extension of electrolysis time, the intensity of the G-mode is gradually higher than that of the D-mode. It is indicated that the amount of carbon powder in the pellet cathode decreases and the degree of graphitization increases gradually. The Raman peaks at 1750~2000 cm⁻¹ represent the intermediate products during the electrolysis process. The intensities of these Raman peaks decrease gradually with the extension of electrolysis time and finally disappear completely after 4 h of electroreduction. Hence, combined with Fig. 5, it is reasonable to believe that TaC powder with a relatively high purity is obtained as the final product.

### 3.5 Reaction mechanisms of the electrodeoxidation process

According to the results of the experiment and previous studies on the reaction mechanisms of the electrodeoxidation of Ta₂O₅ in CaCl₂-based molten salts [10,18], it is reasonable to believe that the reaction mechanisms of the electrodeoxidation of Ta₂O₅/C precursors to TaC in molten CaCl₂ generally contain chemical/electrochemical compounding, electrodeoxidation, and in situ carbonization processes
The compounding process (such as the generation of CaTa₄O₁₁ by the typical compounding reaction yTa₂O₅ + xCaO → CaₓTa₂₃O₅(5y+x)) is commonly caused by the CaO present in the molten CaCl₂ (without being preelectrolyzed) because CaO will be dissolved into molten CaCl₂ to form Ca²⁺ and O²⁻ [20]. Hence, combining Figs. 5 and 6, the reaction mechanism of the electrodeoxidation of Ta₂O₅/C to form TaC in molten CaCl₂ can be generally summarized as reactions (1)-(5), as illustrated in Fig. 8.

\[
\begin{align*}
Tₐ₂O₅ + 2C + 10e^- & \rightarrow 2TaC + 5O²^- \quad (1) \\
Tₐ₂O₅ + 2CaO (Ca²⁺+O²⁻) & \rightarrow Ca₂Ta₂O₇ \quad (2) \\
Ca₂Ta₂O₇ + 10e^- + 2C & \rightarrow 2TaC + 2CaO (Ca²⁺ + O²⁻) + 5O²^- \quad (3) \\
2Ta₂O₅ + CaO (Ca²⁺ + O²⁻) + C & \rightarrow CaTa₄O₁₁ +TaC \quad (4) \\
CaTa₄O₁₁ + 20e^- + 4C & \rightarrow 4TaC + CaO (Ca²⁺ + O²⁻) + 10O²^- \quad (5)
\end{align*}
\]

![Figure 8. Schematic diagram showing the reaction routes of the electrolysis of Ta₂O₅/C to prepare TaC](image)

4. CONCLUSIONS

In summary, TaC powders have been successfully synthesized from a mixed Ta₂O₅/C precursor at 1000 °C and 4.0 V in molten CaCl₂ via SOM technology. The electroreduction process was investigated by examining partially and fully reduced samples obtained at different electroreduction times. In addition, the reaction mechanism of the electroreduction process for TaC powder was discussed. The reaction pathway from Ta₂O₅/C to TaC during the electrodeoxidation process could be summarized as Ta₂O₅/C → Ca₂Ta₂O₇, TaC, CaTa₄O₁₁ and C → TaC. The results suggested that TaC powder could be obtained as the final product with particle sizes of ~1 μm. Therefore, the SOM-assisted controllable electroreduction process has the potential to provide a novel one-step route to produce TaC powder from Ta₂O₅/C precursors in molten salts.

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