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The normal and inverse magnetocaloric effect in RCu_2 (R=Tb, Dy, Ho, Er) compounds

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ABSTRACT

Orthorhombic polycrystalline RCu_2 (R=Tb, Dy, Ho and Er) compounds were synthesized and the magnetic properties and magnetocaloric effect (MCE) were investigated in detail. All of the RCu_2 compounds are antiferromagnetic (AFM) ordered. As temperature increases, RCu_2 compounds undergo an AFM to AFM transition at T_t and an AFM to paramagnetic (PM) transition at T_N. Besides of the normal MCE around T_N, large inverse MCE around T_t was found in $TbCu_2$ compound. Under a field change of 0–7 T, the maximal value of inverse MCE is even larger than the value of normal MCE around T_N for $TbCu_2$ compound. Considering of the normal and inverse MCE, $TbCu_2$ shows the largest refrigerant capacity among the RCu_2 (R=Tb, Dy, Ho and Er) compounds indicating its potential applications in low temperature multistage refrigeration.

1. Introduction

Magnetocaloric effect (MCE) is the intrinsic property of magnetic materials and the magnetic refrigeration based on MCE has been demonstrated as a promising alternative to the conventional gas compression or expansion refrigeration for its high energy efficiency and environmental friendliness [1–3]. Lots of efforts were made to explore the room-temperature MCE materials such as $Gd_5Si_2Ge_2$ [4], La (Fe, Si)$_{13}$ [5–8], $MnAs_{1-x}Sb_x$ [9], $MnFeP_{1-x}As_x$ [10], NiMnSn [11], NiMnIn [12], etc. In the past few years, much attention has also been paid on the MCE materials with low transition temperatures such as $ErCo_2$ [13], HoCuAl [14], PrSi [15], RAl_2 [16,17] and so on, because these materials are promising to be used for gas liquefaction in magnetic cooling cycle or combined magnetic-gas cooling cycle [18,19]. Most of the low temperature MCE materials have been summarized in the review papers [20,21]. The isothermal magnetic entropy change (ΔS_M) is one of the important parameters to evaluate MCE materials. For most MCE materials, the value of ΔS_M is negative, which can also be described as normal MCE. The positive ΔS_M can also be observed and it has been stated as inverse MCE [11]. The inverse MCE has been observed in Heusler alloys such as NiMnSn [11] and some antiferromagnetic (AFM) materials such as DySb [22], and $ErRu_2Si_2$ [23]. However, in most AFM materials the inverse MCE can only be observed under low magnetic field change and the value of positive magnetic entropy change is not large.

Rare earth (R) based intermetallic compounds have shown interesting magnetic properties and excellent performance on MCE. Orthorhombic RCu_2 series is one of the important categories of R-based intermetallic compounds and the magnetic properties of single crystal and polycrystalline RCu_2 (R=Ce–Lu) compounds have been investigated in detail [24–29]. Results show that the ground state of most RCu_2 compounds is AFM and the field-induced metamagnetic transition was observed. Much work has also been done on the specific heat, magnetoresistance, magnetostriction in RCu_2 compounds [30–35]. Giant magnetostriction was observed in $TbCu_2$ and $DyCu_2$ crystals. The magnetic structures and magnetic transitions of $HoCu_2$ compound were investigated by magnetic, specific heat and Neutron Powder Diffraction experiments [36–38]. Two magnetic transitions were observed in $HoCu_2$ compound at 7.4 K and 10.5 K, respectively [33,36,37]. The lower transition temperature was corresponding to AFM to AFM transition and the higher temperature was corresponding to AFM to paramagnetic (PM) transition. The MCE of $HoCu_2$ and $DyCu_2$ compounds have also been studied. An effective refrigerant capacity of 194 J/kg below 44 K was obtained in $DyCu_2$ compound, and a maximum ΔS_M of 19.3 J/kg K with a relative cooling power of 268 J/kg was found in $HoCu_2$ compound [39,40].

Considering of the interesting magnetic properties of RCu_2 compounds, further study on MCE will be performed. In this work, the RCu_2 (R=Tb, Dy, Ho, Er) compounds were synthesized

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successfully. The magnetic properties and magnetocaloric effect were investigated in detail. Especially, the normal and inverse MCEs in RCu_2 compounds were analyzed and discussed.

2. Experimental procedure

Polycrystalline RCu_2 (R=Tb, Dy, Ho, Er) compounds were prepared by arc-melting method with a high-purity argon atmosphere. The purities of starting materials were better than 99.9%. The ingots were turned over and remelted several times to ensure their homogeneity. After arc-melting, the samples were subsequently wrapped by molybdenum foil, sealed in a high-vacuum quartz tube, annealed at 700 °C for 7 days and finally quenched to liquid nitrogen. The crystal structure was characterized by powder X-ray diffraction (XRD) method with Cu Kα radiation. Magnetic measurements (including *M–T* and *M–H* curves) were performed by employing Vibrating Sample Magnetometer with Quantum Design (SQUID-VSM).

3. Results and discussion

The XRD patterns of RCu_2 (R=Tb, Dy, Ho, Er) compounds at room temperature are shown in Fig. 1. Almost all of the diffraction peaks can be indexed to an orthorhombic crystal structure (space group *Imma* #74). The result is in accord with previous work [38]. The Bragg positions are marked at the bottom of the picture. It can also be seen that there is a small impure peak around 31.7° for $ErCu_2$ compound, which indicates that small amount of impurity may exist. However, it does not affect the discussion in the following section because the amount of purity is not large. That is to say, almost all the obtained RCu_2 (R=Tb, Dy, Ho, Er) compounds are synthesized successfully. The lattice parameters were determined by using Rietveld refinement method. For example, the lattice constant of $HoCu_2$ compound is calculated as follows: a=4.2871(2) Å, b=6.7777(4) Å and c=7.2761(0) Å. As the atom number of R increases, the position of diffraction peak moves towards higher angle range. It indicates that the lattice constant becomes smaller and smaller from $TbCu_2$ to $ErCu_2$ compound. Results show that the RCu_2 compounds crystallize in orthorhombic $CeCu_2$-type structure, which can be considered as a stacking of alternating layers of R and Cu atoms along *c* axis of crystal [38].

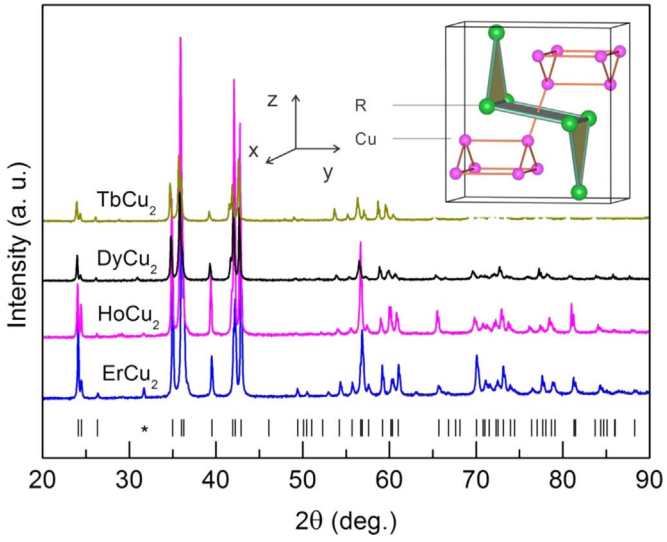

Fig. 1. The XRD patterns of RCu_2 (R=Tb, Dy, Ho and Er) compounds measured at room temperature. Inset: the crystal structure of RCu_2 in one unit cell.

The crystal structure of RCu_2 compounds is shown in the inset of Fig. 1. It can be seen that there are four R atoms in form of one parallelogram along with two triangles and eight Cu atoms in form of two triangular prisms in the unit cell.

The Zero-Field-Cooled (ZFC) and Field-Cooled (FC) magnetization curves were measured at a field of 0.02 T for RCu_2 (R=Tb, Dy, Ho, Er) compounds and they are shown in Fig. 2(a)–(d), respectively. The magnetization of $TbCu_2$ compound shows a fixed and small value at low temperatures, increases rapidly at higher temperatures and then goes down quickly with temperature increasing further. The two drastic changes correspond to two magnetic phase transitions: antiferromagnetic (AFM) to AFM transition and an AFM to paramagnetic (PM) transition. The transition temperatures were determined to be T_t=23.5 K and T_N=49.5 K, respectively. The other RCu_2 (R= Dy, Ho, Er) compounds were also observed to experience the same two magnetic phase transitions. As for $HoCu_2$ compound, the thermal magnetization curves corresponding to AFM to AFM transition shows a more drastic change than that corresponding to AFM to PM transition does. That the order-order magnetic transition is more obvious than order-disorder magnetic transition has been reported in other R-based compound such as PrGa [41]. In fact, the two magnetic transitions for $HoCu_2$ compound have been confirmed according to neutron powder diffraction and specific heat experiments [33,36,37]. The determined transition temperatures in this work are in good accordance with the reported temperatures. The effective magnetic moments have also been calculated according to the Curie-Weiss Law fitting of *M–T* curves in high temperature range. The fitting lines are shown in the inset of Fig. 2(a)–(d). All the transition temperatures, effective magnetic moments and ion magnetic moments for RCu_2 (R=Tb, Dy, Ho, Er) compounds are shown in Table 1. As the atomic number increases, the value of T_t shows a decrease trend. The value of T_N also shows a decrease trend in general, but there is an exception in $ErCu_2$. It may be correlated to the complex magnetic coupling in $ErCu_2$ compound. According to the comparison of effective moments and ion moments for each compound, the value is almost the same for each compound, which indicates only Rare earth atoms contribute to the magnetic moments in RCu_2 (R=Tb, Dy, Ho, Er) compounds.

For most magnetic materials, magnetocaloric effect (MCE) can be observed around transition temperatures. In general, the performance of MCE materials is evaluated by isothermal magnetic entropy change (ΔS_M). For magnetic materials, the total entropy can be written as: $S=S_E+S_L+S_M$. In the above expression, S is the total entropy, and S_E, S_L and S_M are the entropy contributed by electrons, lattice and magnetic moments, respectively. For the second order transition system, external magnetic field usually affect S_M only, and then ΔS equals ΔS_M. It should be mentioned that for the case of first order transition systems, the S_L is more significant. Under the situation that temperature and magnetic field are the only two variables, the differential forms of S can be written as: $dS=\frac{\partial S}{\partial T}dT+\frac{\partial S}{\partial H}dH$. Considering of the definition of entropy and Maxwell relationship ($\frac{\partial S}{\partial T}=\frac{C}{T}$, $\frac{\partial S}{\partial H}=\frac{\partial M}{\partial T}$), the above expression can be written as: $dS=\frac{C}{T}dT+\frac{\partial M}{\partial T}dH$. Under the isothermal condition, magnetic entropy change can be calculated as: $\Delta S_M=\int_0^H\left(\frac{\partial M}{\partial T}\right)dH$. The temperature dependences of ΔS_M under a field change of 0–2 T, 0–5 T and 0–7 T for RCu_2 (R=Tb, Dy, Ho, Er) compounds are shown in Fig. 3(a)–(d), respectively. Since the value of (dM/dT) is negative around T_N, the value of ΔS_M is negative as well. And the presented plots are $-\Delta S_M$ versus T curves. It can be clearly seen that there is a large peak around T_N for all the RCu_2 compounds. The negative ΔS_M around T_N is so called normal MCE. RC is calculated by using the approach $RC=\int_{T_L}^{T_H}|\Delta S_M|dT$, where T_L and T_H are the temperatures corresponding to the full width at half