



# Molecular dynamics of contact behavior of self-assembled monolayers on gold using nanoindentation

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 14 June 2009

Received in revised form 23 June 2009

Accepted 23 June 2009

Available online 30 June 2009

### PACS:

62.20.-x

87.15.ap

### Keywords:

Self-assembled monolayer

Molecular dynamics simulation

Contact pressure

## ABSTRACT

Molecular dynamics simulation is used to study nanoindentation of the self-assembled monolayers (SAMs) on an Au surface. The interaction of SAM atoms is described by a general universal force field (UFF), the tight-binding second-moment approximation (TB-SMA) is used for Au substrate, and the Lennard-Jones potential function is employed to describe interaction among the indenter, the SAMs, and the Au substrate atoms. The model consists of a planar Au substrate with n-hexadecanethiol SAM chemisorbed to the substrate. The simulation results show that the contact pressure increases as the SAMs temperature increases. In addition, the contact pressure also increases as the depth and velocity of indentation increase.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, self-assembled monolayers (SAMs) on a substrate surface have attracted increasing interest for many potential technological applications such as wear protection, electronic device fabrication, biological systems, and dip-pen nanolithography [1–6]. The invention and development of scanning probe microscopy provided a powerful tool and greatly enhanced the ability to understand the patterning of SAMs. A variety of experimental methods have been used to study the physical structures and chemical properties of SAMs [7–12].

On the other hand, due to the rapid development of computer technology, molecular dynamics (MD) simulation can be very effective in simulating the performance of nanodevices, recognizing the microscopic mechanisms and offering insights into microscopic behaviors [13–20]. In addition, it is also a useful and ideal model for understanding the mechanical behaviors and structural properties of a self-organizing system [21–25]. For example, Vemparala et al. [21] utilized molecular dynamics calculations to investigate the structural properties of self-assembled alkanethiol monolayer systems concerning the effect of temperature, lattice spacing, and molecular chain length. Kapila

et al. [22] investigated the friction behavior of model alkylsilane films as a function of separation between the films, temperature and the velocity of the substrate. Recently, Fang et al. [25] studied the contact behavior of SAMs deposited on gold substrate in dip-pen nanolithography and found that the contact angles decreased as the temperature increased, and the smaller the cluster size, the smaller the contact angle.

To study the mechanical properties of SAMs, nanoindentation technique is often used in the experimental tests [26,27]. In the nanoindentation test, the indenter tip generally has a radius of curvature larger than 20 nm. However, the thickness of self-assembled monolayers is generally about 2–4 nm. MD simulation may be more suitable for estimating the mechanical properties. In this paper, the nanoindentation characteristics of the SAMs on an Au surface are investigated by MD simulation. In the simulation, different capped carbon nanotubes are used for an indenter to obtain a better estimate. In addition, the effects of temperature, depth, and velocity of nanoindentation on the contact pressure of the SAMs are also studied.

## 2. Methodology

Fig. 1 shows that the MD model consists of a SAM on an Au substrate with a face-center-cubic (FCC) lattice and an indenter with a capped carbon nanotube. The substrate is made of single crystal Au with the (1 0 0) direction of the top surface. The atom

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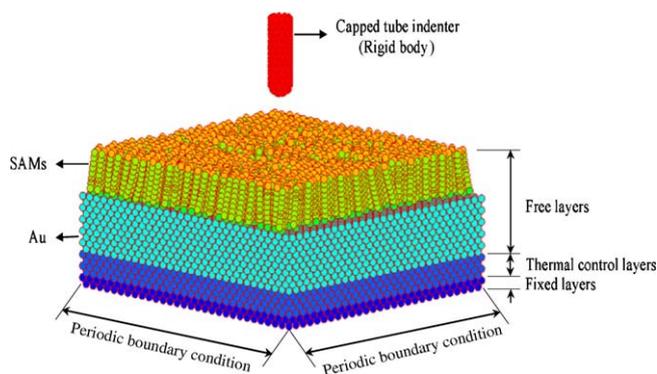


Fig. 1. Schematic of a capped tube indenter and a SAM on an Au substrate.

Table 1

The atom sum and dimension of the SAMs and Au substrate.

Materials	Au	SAMs
Size	$28 \times 30 \times 8$	$24 \times 24 \times 17$
Atom sum	26880	9792
Dimension [ $\text{\AA}^3$ ]	$112.2 \times 120.36 \times 30.6$	$113.45 \times 116.21 \times 47.45$

sum and dimension of the SAMs and Au substrate are listed in Table 1. The SAMs consists of the alkanethiol chain  $S(\text{CH}_2)_{15}\text{CH}_3$  and is chemisorbed on an Au substrate at the temperature of 300 K. The SAMs arrays are set to  $24 \times 24$ . The  $\text{CH}_2$  and  $\text{CH}_3$  groups are treated as a single-spherical molecule to simplify as 17 united molecules per chain. Two layers of Au atoms were fixed at the substrate bottom to support the entire system and the other Au layers of thermostat atoms are set above the fixed layers to depict contact behaviors influenced by sulfur atoms during nanoindentation. A periodic boundary condition of two dimensions was imposed on plane  $x$ - $y$  in the simulation.

The interaction of SAMs atoms is described by a general universal force field (UFF) to characterize the bonded interactions by classical potential [28]. Furthermore, the tight-binding second-moment approximation (TB-SMA), which is a many-body interatomic potential [25], that has proven capable of reproducing a variety of experimental observations [29–30] and is used in the simulation of Au substrate. The intermolecular interaction and

intramolecular non-bonding interaction along the same chain are simulated by the Lennard-Jones potential [13]. The Lennard-Jones potential function is also employed to describe interaction between the SAMs and the Au substrate atoms. The capped carbon nanotubes are used for an indenter in the simulation. The indenter is assumed to be a rigid body and is built from a capped (5,5) nanotube and a capped (10,10) nanotube with a bond length of 1.41  $\text{\AA}$ . The nanotubes are composed of 240 and 530 carbon atoms for a (5,5) nanotube and a (10,10) nanotube, respectively. It is set above the Au substrate surface of 1 nm and then the indenter will approach to the substrate with a speed of 100 m/s.

### 3. Results and discussions

In the simulation, the snapshots of the nanoindentation process with a capped (10,10) nanotube at temperature of 300 K and indentation velocity of 100 m/s for different times are shown in Fig. 2a–c. In these figures, the indenter began to bend the SAM chain around the indentation central region before 10 ps due to the interaction among the indenter atoms and SAM chain molecules. Then, the bended SAM chains were buckled and twist under the tube indenter at 20 ps. The SAM molecules around the indentation circumference became as larger slope to the equilibrium position due to the lateral force. During the indentation process, the deformation took place along the slip (1 1 0) direction on the Au substrate as shown in Fig. 2b. This is because the contact pressure transformation and the dislocation lead to the mechanical slip behavior and stress relaxation.

The potential energy of the SAM molecules on Au substrate at the indentation depth of 1.5 nm and indentation velocity of 100 m/s for various temperature conditions are shown in Fig. 3. Before 10 ps the indentation depth of indenter tip continued to increase, the SAM molecules were affected by attractive force. The attractive force caused potential energy started to go up until it reached a critical contact region. During about 10–15 ps the indent atoms contacted and affected the SAM molecules as well as the potential energy of SAM molecules slightly decreased. After the tube full indented on the SAM molecules, the indentation load and potential energy increased until to the maximum indentation. During the hold time intervals of 25–40 ps, the slip behavior and stress relaxation took place to reduce the potential energy. The fluctuations of the potential energy were due to local structure variations of the chain molecules. After the hold time intervals of

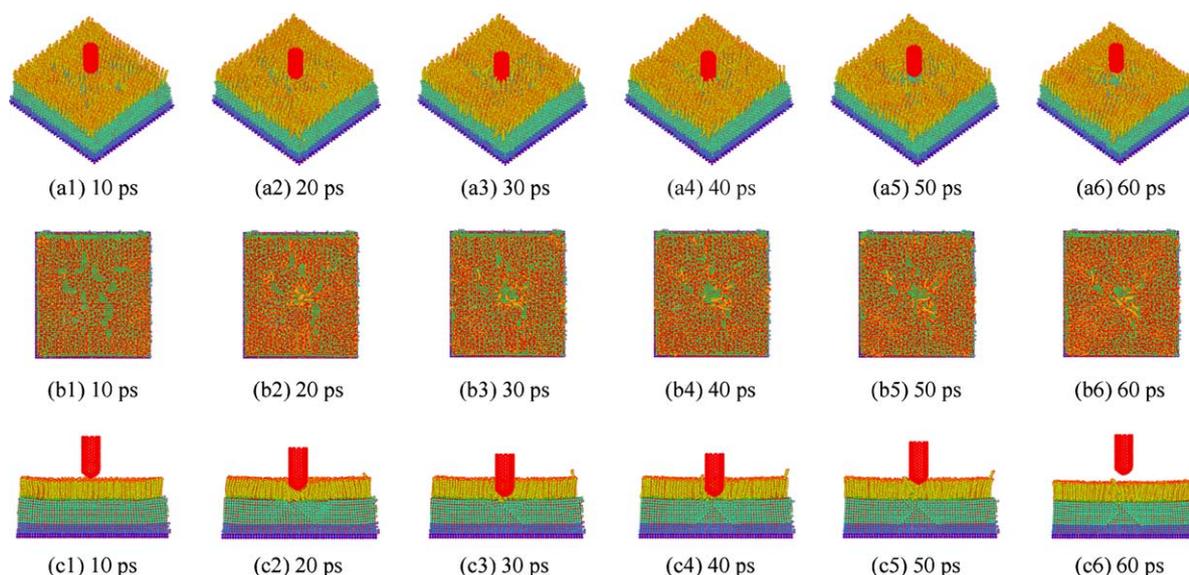


Fig. 2. The snapshots of the nanoindentation process with a capped (10,10) nanotube at temperature of 300 K and indentation velocity of 100 m/s.

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