



In situ TEM tensile testing on high-entropy alloy coating by laser surface alloying



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ABSTRACT

A unique technique, *in situ* TEM tensile testing, was used to investigate the fracture process of Ni-Cr-Co-Ti-V-Al high-entropy alloy coating with complex phases. The results of *in situ* TEM observation indicated that during the fracture process, dislocations get together in the interface between BCC HEA phase and (Co, Ni)Ti₂ compounds and crack propagation happens along the phase interface, leading to the final rupture, which proves that the phase interface may be the probable failure place. Also, the fracture strength and Young's modulus were calculated according to the stress-strain curve from the *in situ* TEM tensile testing. The stress-strain curve shows a good linearity, confirming the brittle failure. The fracture strength is calculated to be ~3.3 GPa and the fracture strain is measured to be ~3.1%. The Young's modulus of the tensile sample is calculated to be ~102 GPa, quite close to that of bulk titanium alloy.

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1. Introduction

Tensile property is one of the most important mechanical properties of materials for many design applications. In general, for structural materials or bulk materials, macro tensile testing is the best way to evaluate the tensile property [1–5]. In our knowledge, engineering stress–engineering strain curve and fracture morphology are the most studied aspects of macro tensile testing. However, during macro tensile testing, the formation of defects such as dislocation, the extension of cracks and the evolution of fracture are also our concerns. So a new method, *in situ* observation especially by a transmission electron microscope (TEM), arises at the historic moment [6–18]. Until now, there have been some studies about nano-scaled materials tested inside a TEM, for example, single-crystal alloy (Au [19], Ni [7–9], Mo [10] and a-Ti [11]), thin films [12,13] and metallic glasses [14–16]. All in all, these previous studies are focused on the mechanical behaviors of

materials with relatively simple structure (BCC, FCC, HCP single-crystal or amorphous) [17]. For materials with complex phases, there are basically no studies about *in situ* observation by TEM.

High-entropy alloy (HEA), proposed by Yeh et al., is becoming a burgeoning and frontier scientific research field [20,21]. The current studies about high-entropy alloy are mainly paid attention to their structure characterization, properties characterization and phase formation rules while researches of microscopic mechanism are relatively less. In this regard, advances in characterization should be applied to comprehensively understand the properties of HEAs such as fracture [22]. Recently, some advanced characterization techniques about *in situ* observation have been applied, that is, *in situ* neutron diffraction study [23] and *in situ* TEM straining experiment [24]. Yet, these objects for *in situ* observation are also simple HEAs with single solid solution structure. Fortunately, they provide new ideas to study HEAs from the micro-scale even nano-scale. In the present study, we attempt to observe the whole fracture process of high-entropy alloy coating with complex phases at the nanoscale using *in situ* TEM tensile testing. By recorded movie of tensile testing, the fracture process was displayed clearly. Nanoscale origin of fracture for HEA coating, coming from phase interface, was identified.

Supplementary video related to this article can be found at

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2. Experimental methods

Ni-Cr-Co-Ti-V-Al HEA coating was synthesized by laser surface alloying, as described previously [25] and recapped here in brief. By ball-milling, premixed powder, containing pure elemental powder Ni, Cr, Co and V, was pre-placed onto the surface of Ti-6Al-4V substrate, using ethyl alcohol as binders. A laser system (YLS-3000, IPG, Germany) was used to form Ni-Cr-Co-Ti-V-Al HEA coating and the parameters of laser surface alloying were: laser power of 2000W, laser spot diameter of 3 mm and laser speeding of 40 mm/s. Then the HEA coating was utilized to prepare the sample for *in situ* TEM tensile testing, shown in Fig. 1. First, the HEA coating was cut to the size of 3 mm × 3 mm × 1 mm using wire-cut electric discharge machine. Samples were then ground manually with SiC papers down to a thickness of ~100 μm. After that, samples were corroded by the solution of 4% HF + 4% HNO₃ + 92% H₂O, and put on the surface of tailored copper table for the next process of focused ion beam (FIB, FEI Nova 200 Nano Lab-dual beam, Netherlands) to produce electron-transparent and specific regions for observation during *in situ* TEM tensile testing with the ion beam at 5pA/30 KV. Afterwards, the samples were transferred to the device of *in situ* TEM tensile testing and tungsten trip was utilized to fasten the T-shaped free end of tensile sample.

The *in situ* TEM tensile testing were conducted at room temperature with a Hysitron PI95 TEM PicoIndenter[®] in a JEOL 2100 field emission gun TEM (JEOL, Japan) operating at 200 KV. The stand-alone tensile sample with a tungsten grip assembly was shown in the last TEM image of Fig. 1. Fig. 1 also displays the assembly drawing of overall tensile testing and the yellow arrow showed the force direction of *in situ* TEM tensile testing. The average strain rate of *in situ* TEM tensile testing was $2 \times 10^{-3} \text{ s}^{-1}$ and the movie of this tensile was recorded by a Gatan CCD camera. In addition, a method of finite element modelling was used to study the stress distribution with the help of a software of ABAQUS. The model of finite element modelling is set up in brief according to the real distribution of BCC HEA phase and (Co, Ni)Ti₂ phase in the *in situ* TEM tensile testing shown in Fig. 3 and the schematic diagram

of tensile testing is displayed in Fig. 5.

3. Results and discussion

The HEA coating used for *in situ* TEM tensile testing was mainly composed of a B2 HEA phase and (Co, Ni)Ti₂ compounds (FCC) [25] shown in Fig. 2a. Fig. 2b gives the intuitive evidence to prove the complex coating containing two phases, namely, HEA phase and (Co, Ni)Ti₂ compounds. Fig. 2c is the TEM image of interface between HEA phase and (Co, Ni)Ti₂ phase. The SAED patterns of HEA phase and (Co, Ni)Ti₂ compounds show that HEA phase along [001] zone axis confirms a B2 structure (Fig. 2e) and (Co, Ni)Ti₂ compounds along [011] zone axis confirms a FCC structure (Fig. 2f). From Fig. 2d, the interplanar spacing of BCC HEA phase is ~0.220 nm and the fast Fourier transform (FFT) image (Fig. 2g) of BCC HEA phase is in agreement with the SAED pattern (Fig. 2e). In a word, it can be deduced that the interface between BCC HEA phase and (Co, Ni)Ti₂ phase is incoherent or semi-coherent interface. As known to us, the incoherent or semi-coherent interface, which owns high interfacial energy, is easy to generate defects. Thus, the interface between BCC HEA phase and (Co, Ni)Ti₂ phase may be the initial failure place under the tensile force.

According to the process of tensile specimen preparation (Fig. 1), a large-scale dumbbell-shaped sample of approximate 4 μm × 700 nm × 90 nm (length × width × thickness) in observation region was obtained. Fig. 3 shows the TEM images and corresponding SAED images before and after tensile testing. From Fig. 3a, two obvious phases (marked 1 and 2, respectively) are shown and proved to be BCC HEA phase and (Co, Ni)Ti₂ phase, respectively, according to corresponding SAED images. That is, it agrees with the result of microstructure characterization [25]. Seen in Fig. 3b, it indicates the occurrence of the fracture phenomenon. The SAED image was gained near the area of fracture (white circle in Fig. 3b), which contains BCC HEA phase (blue quadrangle) and (Co, Ni)Ti₂ phase (red quadrangle). Referring to the yellow arrow in Fig. 3b, an interesting phenomenon, a diffraction ring occurs, can be clearly seen, which declares that amorphous phase is produced. For mechanical tests of materials with metallic bond carried out inside TEM, no obvious e-beam effect has been observed so far [17]. So the

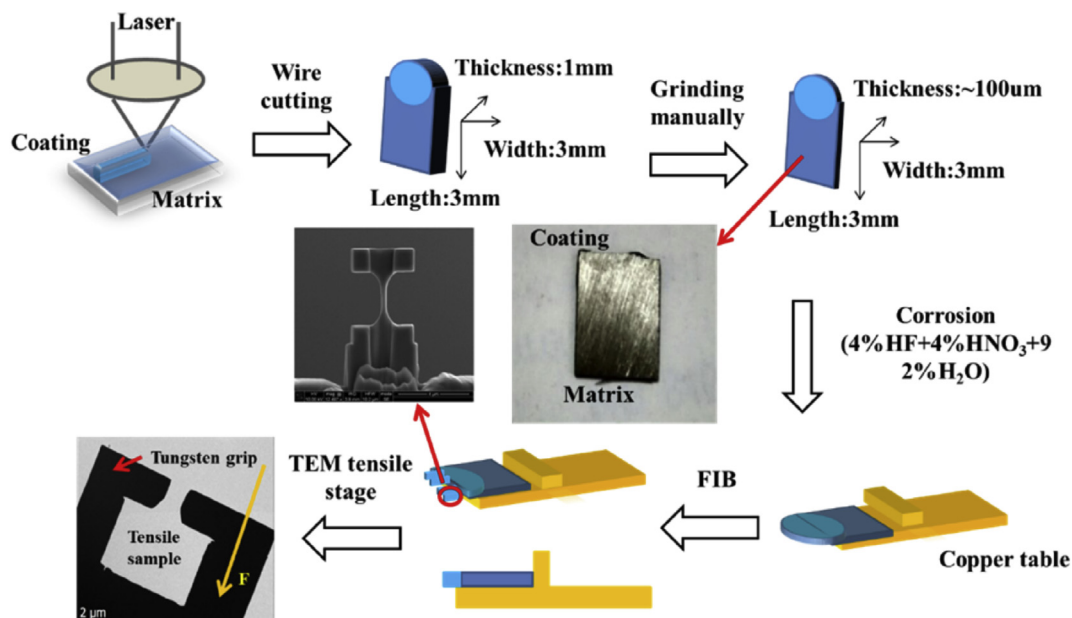


Fig. 1. Schematic diagram of tensile specimen preparation.

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