Nanoindentation response of zinc titanate thin films deposited by co-sputtering process

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Article history:
Received 4 October 2011
Received in revised form 16 February 2012
Accepted 16 February 2012
Available online 21 March 2012

Keywords:
Radio frequency magnetron co-sputtering
Hardness
Atomic force microscopy
X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy

A B S T R A C T

In this study, ZnTiO₃ films were grown by radio frequency magnetron co-sputtering using a sintered ceramic target on silicon substrates, we used nanoindenter techniques under a CSM mode to evaluate the hardness (H) and elastic modulus (E) of the films after annealing in temperature range of 520–820 °C. The measured values of hardness and elastic moduli of the ZnTiO₃ films were in the range from 8.5 ± 0.4 to 5.6 ± 0.4 GPa and from 171 ± 2.3 to 155 ± 2.5 GPa, respectively. It is evident that an increase in the roughness due to high annealing temperature using atomic force microscopy. The XRD patterns were observed that as-deposited films are mainly amorphous, however, the hexagonal ZnTiO₃ phase was observed with the ZnTiO₃ (1 0 4), (1 1 0), (1 1 6), and (2 1 4) peaks from 620 to 820 °C, indicating that there is highly (1 0 4)-oriented ZnTiO₃ on the silicon substrate. The X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy core level analyses of the ZnTiO₃ films have been measured for O 1s that can be attributed the weaker bonds and lower resistance at the film based on the higher annealed temperature. The H, M, Rm, and Rn were altered due to the grain growth and recovery to result in a relax crystallinity at ZnTiO₃ films.

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1. Introduction

ZnO–TiO₂ system is attractive because of their outstanding performance as an inorganic compound. Above of them, ZnTiO₃ film was found to be zinc metatitanate with a hexagonal structure and titanium dioxide while the film of Zn/Ti ratio is lower than 1. The zinc titanate phases found in the films depend primarily on the film stoichiometry. The introduction of three compounds existing in the ZnO–TiO₂ system has been reported in previous study [1], such as-Zn₂TiO₄ (cubic), ZnTiO₃ (hexagonal), and Zn₂Ti₃O₈ (cubic). Fundamental studies is concerned because of its diverse electrical and chemical properties, leading to the commercial applications, such as white pigment, catalytic sorbent [2–4], microwave dielectric materials [5–7], gas sensor [8], and high performance catalysts [9–11]. Beside, the luminescent application could be induced by the ZnTiO₃ doped with some transition metal ions [12,13]. ZnTiO₃ preparation by solid state reaction, was reported by means of sol–gel [12,14,15], bulk manufacture [16,7,17], and chemical vapor deposition [18]. However their studies are limited to the analyses of phase, composition, and microstructure of the film. There are few reports concerning the nanohardness of ZnTiO₃ system in literatures, except these properties–structures, grain sizes, and morphologies that can be enhanced through their extrinsic properties.

In this study, the authors have attempted to synthesize ZnTiO₃ film by RF magnetron co-sputtering process. We employed nanoindentation techniques to discover the response of ZnTiO₃ film; their surface roughness, crystallization, and chemical bonding were analyzed by using atomic force microscopy diffraction, X-ray diffraction, and X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy. The qualities of the resulting ZnTiO₃ films, in terms of phase present under annealing treatment, were examined.

2. Experimental details

The ZnTiO₃ films were prepared by RF magnetron co-sputtering system using 4-inch-diameter sintered ceramic target (Zn and Ti). In order to obtain stoichiometric deposit ZnTiO₃ films on Si substrate, Ar–O₂ flow (8:2) with a purity of 99.999 gas of 50 sccm was introduced into the chamber with mass flow controllers and, RF powers at 200 W were used. In addition, the sputtering pressure was 2 × 10⁻², the substrate temperature was set at 250 °C, and
the duration of the deposition was 1 h. To remove the contaminants formed on the target surface and to stabilize the sputtering conditions, it was necessary for pre-sputtering to be performed for 5 min prior to each deposition process. Those specimens were subsequently subjected to ex situ thermal treatment in a furnace under N\textsubscript{2} gas for 2 h with a heating rate of 5 °C/min at 520, 620, 720, and 820 °C, respectively. The detailed deposition conditions of the ZnTiO\textsubscript{3} films are listed in Table 1.

After deposition, the surface roughness and microstructure are analyzed using AFM (Veeco Dimension 5000, Scanning Probe Microscopy, D5000). The values of \( H \) and \( M \) of the ZnTiO\textsubscript{3} films were determined using a Nano Indenter XP instrument (MTS Cooperation, Nano Instruments Innovation Center, TN, USA). The nanoindentation was performed using a diamond Berkovich indenter tip (tip radius: ca. 50 nm); plastic deformation was generated at very small loads. The continuous contact stiffness measurement (CSM) mode, which is executed by superimposing small oscillations on the force signal to measure displacement responses, offers a direct measurement of dynamic contact stiffness during the loading process in the indentation test [19]. Chemical bonding states and chemical compositions of the films were analyzed by X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS, VG Scientific Microlab 310F). Inductively coupled plasma-mass ICP spectrometer was applied to determine the elements concentrations in the films, which confirmed the stoichiometry of ZnTiO\textsubscript{3}. Crystallinity of the films were analyzed by X-ray diffraction (X'Pert Pro, MRD), with Cu K\alpha (\( \lambda = 0.154 \) nm) radiation for \( 2\theta \) from 20° to 80° at a scan speed of 2° min\textsuperscript{-1}, and a grazing angle of 0.5° under 30 kV and 30 mA.

3. Results and discussion

Fig. 1 shows AFM inspections of ZnTiO\textsubscript{3} films deposited with silicon substrate. The surface roughness of ZnTiO\textsubscript{3} films is increased from 3, 3, 3.9, and 5.8 to 20.6 nm as the annealing temperature increased from RT to 820 °C. Clearly, as the annealing temperature was increased, surface morphologies of the samples became rough and grains grew. The corresponding AFM observations demonstrate that there are many small cavities and bright particles in the film after annealing treatment, particular start at 620 °C. From previous articles [20–22], the similar phenomenon was observed that the cavities are due to the evaporation of Zn, and the white particles are TiO\textsubscript{2}. Furthermore, it appears that a high annealing temperature

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target</th>
<th>ZnTiO\textsubscript{3}</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Target size in diameter (in.)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target to substrate distance (mm)</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RF power (W)</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chamber pressure (Torr)</td>
<td>( 5 \times 10^{-6} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working pressure (Torr)</td>
<td>( 2 \times 10^{-6} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sputtering gas</td>
<td>Ar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ar–O\textsubscript{2} flow (seem)</td>
<td>50 (8:2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substrate temperature (°C)</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deposition time (min)</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1. 3D-AFM images of the surfaces of ZnTiO\textsubscript{3} films: (a) RT, (b) 520, (d) 620, (e) 720, and (f) 820 °C.
favors a particle with larger grain sizes at 820 °C and more densely than that of low annealing temperatures. The experiments clearly demonstrated that the crystalline structure and surface roughness of ZnTiO$_3$ film can be clearly changed. It suggests that a high annealing temperature enhanced the atomic mobility and caused the grain recovery to result in a relax crystallinity. The subsequent results of XRD will be discussed as well.

To study the nanomechanical properties of the ZnTiO$_3$ film, nanoindentation was employed to measure the values of $H$ and $E$ upon varying conditions. Fig. 2(a) and (b) display the variation in nanohardness $H$ (GPa) and Young’s modulus $E$ (GPa) with respect to the ZnTiO$_3$ film. It is determined that the values of $H$ and $E$ of the ZnTiO$_3$ film with respect to the indentation depth, following the method proposed by Oliver and Pharr [20]. For indentation depths up to 5 nm, the values of $H$ increased upon increasing the indentation depth; this can be attributed to the transition between purely elastic and elastoplastic contact, whereas the value of $H$ is actually equal to the contact pressure [16]. While the indentation depths over 50 nm, the $H$ tends to constant. We respect that a strengthening effect is dominated from the strain or strain rate hardening. The $H$ and $E$ were calculated by averaging measurements at indentation depths ranging from 80 to 180 nm. The depths of the film thickness not exceeding 20% that can be attributed to access a fully plastic zone and to avoid the substrate effect [19]. For thermal treatment at RT, 520, 620, 720, and 820 °C, the values of $H$ of the ZnTiO$_3$ film were 8.5 ± 0.4, 11.4 ± 0.4, 10.5 ± 0.4, 9.6 ± 0.5, and 5.6 ± 0.4 GPa, respectively, while those of $E$ were 171 ± 2.3, 178 ± 2.4, 202 ± 3.5, 198 ± 3.2, and 155 ± 2.5 GPa, respectively. Markedly, in metal oxides the intrinsic defects such as oxygen vacancies and metal ion interstitials usually coexist. We conclude that the lower values of $H$ and $E$ of the ZnTiO$_3$ film can be induced by some reason, including the packing factor, stoichiometry, residual stress, preferred orientation, and grain size [23]. A low value of $R_{rms}$ is beneficial to a ZnTiO$_3$ film because it can be used to provide information regarding its morphology; the surfaces morphologies of our films were relatively rough and non-uniformly distributed. In addition, the grain size in the ZnTiO$_3$ film increases obviously when annealing temperature is higher, casing many gaps between grain boundaries due to the abnormal grain growth. We indicate that the structure of ZnTiO$_3$ films changes with annealing atmosphere, which induces the variation of the concentration of intrinsic defects. Fig. 2(c) presents the load/displacement $P$–$h$ curve recorded during the indentation process; it reached a maximum indentation load of 9 mN. We obtained discordant curves and irregularities appeared in the course of plastic deformation, which is characterized by the continuities at penetration depths, for the typical loading/unloading process. It is suggested that the curve implies a trend of gradual elastic deformation. We also observed a larger deviation in the $P$–$h$ curves of the ZnTiO$_3$ films that had been subjected to various loading/unloading. Nanoindentation result reveals a variation of compressive stress transition around the indentation regions of the ZnTiO$_3$ films. The initial deformation, elastic deformation, and residual deformation of the ZnTiO$_3$ films were evaluated based on the thermal treatment. The elastic modulus is a fundamental property that is influenced by bonding between atoms. The stiffness or elastic modulus of a film depends upon the interatomic distances [23–25].

The constituent elements of the ZnTiO$_3$ films were measured. The chemical compositions of the films deposited at various annealing temperature were shown in Fig. 3. Jung et al. [28] conducted that a main phase ZnTiO$_3$ into Zn$_2$TiO$_4$ and TiO$_2$ occurred in association with the increase of annealing temperature. From earlier reports [27,28], the ceramic powder reaction can be displayed that the ZnTiO$_3$ phase decomposed to from Zn$_2$TiO$_4$ and rutile TiO$_2$ above 945 °C with increasing the annealing temperature. The trend of the increase in oxygen content (65–70%) is similar in our results while

![Fig. 2. (a) Hardness, (b) elastic moduli, and (c) displacements of loading–unloading curves of ZnTiO$_3$ films samples with respect to the variation of annealing condition: RT, 520, 620, 720, and 820 °C.](image-url)
chemical compositions are changed based on annealing temperature. At the same time, chemical bonding states in the ZnTiO₃ films were characterized by XPS measurement, as shown in Fig. 4. The XPS spectra have been changed corrected to the adventitious O 1s. The binding energy of the O 1s state is located from 530 to 538 eV, which depended on the annealing temperature that splits in their peaks under various growth procedures of ZnTiO₃ films are clearly examined. One can observe a part of O–Zn bond formation (binding energy at 529.4 eV and 531.5 eV) at the annealing temperature from RT to 520 °C that the peak positions are in good agreement with the Zn–O bond and some Ti–O bond [1,29]. Apparently, the annealing temperature from 620 to 720 °C is evidence that the main chemical bonding may be coexisting as Zn–O (binding energy at 531.5 eV) and Ti–O (binding energy at 533 and 536 eV). We can compare O 1s state at the 820 °C, the curve is significant shift into other zone due to more chemical impurity from Zn–O and Ti–O bond. In addition, O 1s state at the RT to 520 °C, the peak at 530.1 eV may be due to Zn–O bonds and significant peak at 531.8 eV is attributed as MnCl₂. The broad binding energy at 532–534 eV seen in O 1s spectrum is considered to be due to residual oxygen at the film surface, of which the binding energy is reported to be 532.8 eV [29,30]. Phani et al. [31] has discussed that stoichiometric change of ZnTiO₃ thin films could be treated by conventional annealing. The annealed films have shown ZnTiO₃ cubic phase formation at and above 620 °C substrate temperature. The chemical 532.0 eV peak for ZnTiO₃ films are attributed to O–H bonds due to absorbed H–O molecules on the films. In addition, the peak appeared at 533.1 eV has been assigned to O 1s in SiO₂ that presented on the surface of the annealed films on Si substrate.

In Fig. 5, the XRD patterns of the ZnTiO₃ films: (a) as-deposited and the annealing treatment was (b) 620 °C and (c) 820 °C. It was observed that there were no diffraction peaks in the XRD pattern for as-deposited films (Fig. 3(a)). It is suggested that the film structure is mainly amorphous [16]. Herein, as the annealing treatment sample was 620 °C, the hexagonal ZnTiO₃ phase was observed with the ZnTiO₃ (1 0 4), (1 1 0), (1 1 6), and (2 1 4) peaks (Fig. 5(b)). The intensities of the (1 0 4) peak was higher than the other peaks of ZnTiO₃ films at 820 °C, indicating that there is highly (1 0 4)-oriented ZnTiO₃ on the silicon substrate. From recent reports [16], the preferred orientation tends to reduce its free energy to reach a stable state, this is the same case in our experimental data. The ZnTiO₃ structure is also comparable with the XPS that Zn–O and Ti–O binding energy at 533 and 536 eV is strongly as the annealing treatment sample was 620 °C. However, the low Zn–O and Ti–O binding energy is displayed due to more chemical impurity from XPS analysis; thus the ZnTi (1 1 0) structure has a weak diffraction peak in the XRD pattern at the 820 °C. We attributed that the hexagonal ZnTiO₃ decomposed into cubic Zn₂Ti₄O₉ and TiO₂ (rutile), even the ZnTiO₃ phase remained stable at the temperatures of 820 °C [34].

Table 1 lists the summaries of H, M, Rms, and Rr. ZnTiO₃ films often have different thermal properties, resulting in strain when the films are annealed under elevated temperatures. The crystal texture of ZnTiO₃ films can influence their mechanical properties at different annealing treatment stage; the comparison of phase transformation of ZnTiO₃ films was performed by XRD pattern as well. Grain growth and strain energy are processed in the inner film that can often be a dominant factor. Although we obtained appropriate information from XPS analysis, the deposition conditions affected not only depended on annealed temperature but also the Ti, Zn, and O compositions during the growth by RF magnetron
co-sputtering process. We attributed that oxygen chemisorbs with metal bond and cases a surface layer of adsorbed oxygen (Table 2).

4. Conclusion

We have characterized RF magnetron co-sputtering ZnTiO$_3$ films using AFM and nanoindenter techniques. The measured values of hardness and elastic moduli of the ZnTiO$_3$ films were in the range from 8.5 ± 0.4 to 5.6 ± 0.4 GPa and from 171 ± 2.3 to 155 ± 2.5 GPa, respectively. Slight oscillations and discontinuous phenomena in each hardness curve due to the relaxing in ZnTiO$_3$ structure. The XRD patterns of the ZnTiO$_3$ films observed that there were no diffraction peaks in the XRD pattern for as-deposited films due to the film structure is mainly amorphous. The hexagonal ZnTiO$_3$ phase was observed with the ZnTiO$_3$ (104), (110), (116), and (214) peaks at 620°C. The intensities of the (104) peak was higher than the other peaks of ZnTiO$_3$ films at 820°C, indicating that there is highly (104)-oriented ZnTiO$_3$ on the silicon substrate. The XPS core level analysis of the ZnTiO$_3$ films have been measured for O 1s, the change due to Zn–Ti complex compound that alter the $H$, $M$, $R_{ms}$, and $R_s$ from annealing treatment. The average nanoindentation depth increased significantly upon increasing the annealing temperature, implying that higher annealing temperature resulted in weaker bonds, lower resistance, and decreased in strain energy at the film.

References