Ton-scale Metal-Carbon Nanotube Composite: the Mechanism of Strengthening while Retaining Tensile Ductility

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One-dimensional carbon nanotubes (CNT), which are mechanically strong and flexible, enhance strength of the host metal matrix. However, the reduction of ductility is often a serious drawback. Here, we report significantly enhanced plastic flow strength, while preventing tensile ductility reduction, by uniformly dispersing CNTs in Al matrix. Nanoscale plasticity and rupturing processes near CNTs were observed by *in-situ* mechanical tests inside Transmission Electron Microscope (TEM). CNTs act like forest dislocations and have comparable density ($\sim 10^{14}/\text{m}^2$), and such 1D nano-dispersion hardening is studied in detail by in situ TEM and molecular dynamics simulations. Non-uniform elongation was further extended by multi-step rupturing process. We adapt an integrated Taylor-dispersion hardening model for the metal matrix into the shear lag model for the composite.

In this paper we show how the Nano can impact the Macro at 10^3 kilogram level, fifteen years after the highly speculative concept of carbon nanotube (CNT) cables for space elevator was proposed¹. Metal+CNT composites (MCC), specifically Aluminum+CNT composite, can now be mass produced (Fig.1) at less than twice the cost of bulk Al (including raw material cost of CNTs and processing costs), with 150% the mechanical strength of Al but with no loss in tensile ductility (Fig. 2a). Analyzing its mechanism is the subject of this Letter, based on our *in situ* mechanical deformation experiments inside Transmission Electron Microscope (TEM), molecular dynamics (MD) simulations, and standard dislocation mechanics modeling. The shear lag models⁴ commonly used for fiber-(polymer)matrix composites are unlikely to work very well here, as the CNTs are dispersed at approximately the same length scale as the dislocations, and therefore strengthen the composite not only by carrying the load themselves (direct effect,

described by the shear lag model), but also by strengthening the metal matrix through 1D nano-dispersion hardening (indirect effect, based on size-dependent metal plasticity⁵).

Individual CNTs possess the ultimate mechanical properties, for example, ~1TPa Young's modulus, 100GPa level tensile strength, nm-scale diameters, high bending flexibility and large surface area.⁶ Dispersing CNTs in metals has an aesthetic appeal, because both dislocations and CNTs are flexible 1D microstructures in the metal matrix. As far as mobile dislocations are concerned, CNTs act pretty much as impenetrable “forest dislocations” (see our MD simulations below), so CNT-induced strengthening *of the metal* should be similar to the Taylor hardening mechanism:

$$\Delta\sigma_{\text{metal}} = A\mu b(B\rho_{\text{CNT}} + \rho)^{1/2}, \quad (1)$$

where σ_{metal} is the flow stress of the metal matrix, μ is the metal's shear modulus, b is its full Burgers vector length, ρ and ρ_{CNT} are the total length of dislocations and CNTs per volume (with the same unit of $1/\text{m}^2$), and A, B are dimensionless constants on the order of 1, where B converts CNT line length to an equivalent dislocation line length. A rough order of magnitude can be estimated on how much CNTs would be needed for significant strengthening, if we assume $B=1$. A baseline level of dislocation density in well-annealed metal is $\rho=10^{12}/\text{m}^2$. A mediumly cold-worked face-centered cubic (FCC) Cu has dislocation density $\rho=4\times 10^{14}/\text{m}^2$. The dislocation density upper bound that can be reached through severe plastic deformation is of the order $\rho_{\text{max}} \sim 10^{16}/\text{m}^2$.⁷⁻¹⁰ If we assume CNT radius $r\sim 10^{-9}$ m, we get an estimated volume fraction of CNT

$$\phi_{\text{CNT}} = \rho_{\text{CNT}}\pi r^2, \quad (2)$$

that ranges between 0.1% (corresponding to mediumly cold-worked FCC Cu) to 3% (corresponding to dislocation density upper bound⁷, $\rho_{\max}$), which is right within the range of processing and economy: that is, ϕ_{CNT} is not so big that the raw cost of CNT dominates over the bulk metal cost, and CNTs can be dispersed quite uniformly. So, here we have a case of carbon nanotubes meeting physical metallurgy, which intriguingly was not for the first time.¹¹

It is important to note that Eq(1) is a lengthscale-aware plasticity model *on the metal side*. To get the composite strength, one needs to take into account the load-bearing capabilities of both the metal (volume fraction $1-\phi_{\text{CNT}}$) and the CNTs (volume fraction ϕ_{CNT}), where σ_{metal} is the strength of metal matrix and σ_{CNT} is the strength of CNTs.:

$$\sigma_{\text{composite}} = f(\sigma_{\text{metal}}, \sigma_{\text{CNT}}, \phi_{\text{CNT}}), \quad (3)$$

For ϕ_{CNT} of less than a few percent, however, it is a reasonable approximation to write

$$\Delta\sigma_{\text{composite}} \approx \Delta\sigma_{\text{shear lag}} + \Delta\sigma_{\text{metal}}, \quad (4)$$

where $\Delta\sigma_{\text{shear lag}}$ is contributed by the transfer of stress from matrix to fiber by means of interfacial shear stresses and can be expressed as $\sigma_{\text{metal}}(1 - \phi_{\text{CNT}}) + C\sigma_{\text{CNT}}\phi_{\text{CNT}}$ using the conventional shear lag model for fiber-matrix composites without size effect in the constitutive law for the matrix, and $\Delta\sigma_{\text{metal}}$ comes from Eq(1), which treats the dispersion strengthening due to 1D CNTs as the equivalent forest dislocation strengthening.

One common issue in CNT-reinforced metal composites is the reduced ductility when mechanical strength is improved. This trend becomes even more severe when the dispersion of CNTs is poor.¹² The reduction of ductility has been prevented by improving dispersion and

wetting of CNTs in Al matrix.^{11,12} However, the underlying mechanism has not been analyzed carefully.

Typical stress–strain curves for samples with different ϕ_{CNT} are shown in Fig. 2a. The curves are divided into uniform and non-uniform elongation regimes separated by the necking point based on Considère criterion¹³ (Figs. S1a and b). The maximum engineering stress (tensile strength) increases in proportional to ϕ_{CNT} , while the uniform elongation strain is slightly reduced. The fracture strains are not degraded appreciably even for high CNT concentration (up to 2 vol% CNT). Young’s modulus also increases in proportional to ϕ_{CNT} , which is a clear evidence of efficient load transfer (Figs. 1a, left inset and 2b).¹⁴ The broken CNTs in the fracture area indicate the efficient load transfer at the interface (right inset in Fig. 2a). TEM observations confirm that CNTs are dispersed inside Al grains, as shown in Fig. 3a. The structural state of CNTs in Al grain are characterized by Raman spectra in Fig. 3b. Although a broad D band, indicating the structural damage of CNTs during dispersion process, is observed after fabrication of the composite, the presence of sharp G band verifies graphitic sp^2 carbons. A slight upshift of the G band is ascribed to the doping effect caused by the formation of interfacial chemical bonds (Fig.2d).¹⁵ Confocal Raman mapping of G band further demonstrates that relatively fine dispersion of CNTs is achieved throughout the whole Al matrix (Fig. 3c).¹⁶ Taking $\phi_{\text{CNT}}=0.02$ and $r = 7.5 \text{ nm}$ for the multi-walled CNTs used here, ρ_{CNT} has an order of magnitude of 10^{14} m^{-2} , which is comparable to the measured dislocation density of cold worked FCC metal. The CNTs (ρ_{CNT}) may also have similar degree of fractal aggregation as the dislocations (ρ) at μm resolution¹⁷. The two fundamental criteria for making a high-performance composite¹⁸, good dispersion and interfacial strength, should be reasonably satisfied here. The relationship between

tensile strength and fracture strain for different CNT concentration is shown in Fig. 2c. The CNTs in the composite significantly improve the tensile strength (for example, 50.2% enhancement at 2 vol% CNT), while maintaining the fracture strain.

The comparable magnitude of ρ_{CNT} and ρ implies high possibility of interaction between dislocations and CNTs in our materials, as these 1D string defects are co-mixed together. *In-situ* TEM observation on deformation of the Al+CNT composite clearly verified that CNTs can resist dislocation motion, as shown in Figs. 4a-d (see experimental details in suppl.). Under tensile deformation, a dislocation splits into α and β , moving towards a CNT nearby (Figs. 4 a and b). The dislocation α is firstly pinned by the CNT while β keeps moving (Fig. 4c), and eventually both dislocations are pinned (Fig. 4d). Further evidence of dislocation pinning by CNTs can be found in Fig. S4.

We use molecular dynamics simulation to study the interaction between a discrete dislocation and a CNT under shear loading (Fig. S5). Fig. 4E shows a snapshot whereby an edge dislocation driven by shear stress meets a CNT 1.5 nm in diameter. Unlike conventional nano-sized precipitates (0D) in Al alloys, CNTs cannot be sheared through by dislocations, due to the high strength of C-C bonding. Furthermore, we know that due to the large aspect ratio of CNTs, it would be extremely difficult for dislocations to bypass the 1D CNTs via climbing or the Hirsch mechanism involving cross slip of screw segments.¹⁹ Consequently, simple Orowan looping would be the dominant mechanism for dislocation bypassing of CNTs. As a result, the increase of the yield strength of our Al+CNT composites can be formulated by the Orowan model²⁰ (see SI and Fig. S6 for details), which actually fits the experimental data well up to 4 vol% (Fig. 4F).

Deviation for higher CNT concentration probably originate from the limited dispersion ability of CNTs within the Al matrix, as ρ_{CNT} may become even more fractally aggregated¹⁷.

The uniform elongation and ultimate tensile strength of our Al+CNT composites are compared with other materials, including pure Al, Al alloys with precipitates^{21,22} and other Al+CNT composites²³⁻²⁹, as shown in Fig. 5A. It is clear that Orowan looping increases the resistance to dislocation motion, which accounts for the improved strength of our composites over the pure Al. Besides, compared with other Al/CNTs composites, the uniform elongation does not degrade significantly even for high concentration of CNTs. This can be attributed to the enhanced strain hardening rate $\left. \frac{\partial \sigma}{\partial \varepsilon} \right|_{\dot{\varepsilon}}$ (Fig. 5b), as evidenced by the increase of the micro-strain of the post-elongation samples measured with X-ray diffraction (XRD) (Fig. S7), resulting from better dispersion of CNTs inside the Al grains³⁰ and thus more dislocation accumulation due to co-mixing and pinning by CNTs. Furthermore, for some traditional Al alloys, introduction of alloy elements may reduce the uniform elongation, which may not recover even after aging whereby secondary-phase particles precipitate out. In comparison, CNTs do not affect the bonding chemistry of the background Al matrix significantly, and the damage tolerance of pure Al at atomic level can thus be inherited.

However, it should be pointed out that, different from the traditional dispersion strengthening³¹, higher concentration of CNTs does not yield larger uniform elongation for our materials. This may partly result from limited geometrically necessary dislocations (GNDs) generated around CNTs during elongation. Unlike non-shearable precipitates³², CNTs are elastically flexible, which alleviates lattice mismatch on the Al-CNTs interfaces. This gets

verified by our direct MD simulation of multiple dislocation bypassing of a CNT (Fig. S8). Although CNT should become more resistive to surrounding plastic flow after undergoing significant shear strain due to its nature of nonlinear elasticity, the actual deformation is somewhat localized in the vicinity of the slip plane, and the rest of the CNT still maintain flexible.

The deformation after non-uniform elongation were studied under *in-situ* deformation TEM (see SI for the details of sample preparation and the holder). We observed and analyzed the role of CNTs during the rupturing process to fracture. A rupture front is generated on the surface of the sample after slight necking under 25% tension (Fig. S10). It continuously propagates inwards under tension till prevented by a CNTs cluster, and further tension blunts it. Subsequently, a 2nd rupture front initiates and propagates alongside the CNTs zone (Fig. S10), and a 3rd rupture front is found to be generated on the other side before fracture. We then plot the length of the first two rupture fronts versus the displacement in Fig. 6a. The propagation of the 1st rupture tip gets faster as displacement increases. However, the CNTs cluster blocks its further propagation, and later generation of the 2nd front extends the damage. This event will create the major rupture/crack split, resulting in the delaying of the fracture, which explains the non-uniform elongation on the bulk tensile test increasing with higher content of CNTs, as shown in Fig. 6b. Such damage-tolerant feature is quite rare in small-scale samples, after sustaining sample size-dependent hardening.

In conclusion, we found that well-dispersed CNTs inside Al grain improve strength without sacrificing ductility. The mechanisms are investigated by MD simulation and *in-situ* TEM tensile rupture tests. The MD simulation verifies CNTs serve as impenetrable 1D nano-dispersions,

inducing dislocation accumulation in front of CNT. This contributes to strain hardening. Based on the above, we propose a composite strength model Eq(1)-(4), hereon named Taylor-dispersion hardening model, for the plastic flow strength of metal-CNT nanocomposites. We also demonstrate that non-uniform elongation was improved by multi-step rupturing process after necking point, by observing the microscopic damage evolution, that indicates rupturing front jumps. The retained tensile ductility on top of significantly enhanced strength is attributed to good dispersion and interfacial strength of the embedded CNTs, which are 1D nano-dispersions akin to forest dislocations.

References and Notes: <http://li.mit.edu/S/td/Paper/>

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Figure legends:

Fig. 1. | The proof-concept of the mass produced Al-CNT composite. (a) A picture of the proof-concept “as-casted mass produced Al+CNT composite billet”, inset: Al wheels for vehicles.

Fig. 2. | Mechanical properties of Al+CNT composite after power metallurgy and extrusion.

(a) The stress vs. strain curves for different CNT contents (ASTM E8 tensile specimen). (b) Young’s modulus (c) tensile strength and fracture strain at different CNT contents.

Fig. 3. | Dispersion of CNT in Al matrix. (a) Dispersion of CNT inside Al grains in TEM. (b) Raman spectra of Al-CNT composite and (c) confocal Raman mapping image of G band.

Fig. 4. | The observation and simulation of the dislocation pinning by CNT. *in-situ* TEM observation of dislocation pinning by CNT under deformation: (a) location of CNT and two dislocations, (b) dislocation splits into α and β after deformation. (c) Dislocation α is pinned by CNT while β keeps moving, (d) both dislocations are pinned by CNT. (e) Simulation of the dislocation pinning and (f) comparison of the yield strength improvement between simulation and experiments. The detailed parameter for in-situ observation and MD simulation are described in Supplementary.

Fig. 5. | Improvement of necking point and strain hardening rate. (a) Tensile strength versus uniform elongation. The data are compared with the current published Al-CNTs composite and precipitation hardened Al. Each processes are grouped in light blue circles. The open circle indicates the control pure Al in the process. (b) Strain hardening rate ($d\sigma/d\epsilon$). The higher

concentration of CNTs shows higher strain hardening rate. (c) Microstrain at different CNTs content.

Fig. 6. *in-situ* TEM observation of the rupturing process. (a) Rupture tip length and displacement at rupture. CNTs cluster make rupture tip split into two. The generation and propagation of 1st and 2nd rupture tip are indicated in the inset. (b) Non-uniform elongation at different CNT contents. Higher CNTs contents increase the non-uniform elongation.

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