

Samarium monoxide epitaxial thin film as a possible heavy-fermion compound

Yutaka Uchida,^{1,2} Kenichi Kaminaga,^{1,2} Tomoteru Fukumura,^{2,3,4,*} and Tetsuya Hasegawa¹

¹Department of Chemistry, The University of Tokyo, Tokyo 113-0033, Japan

²Department of Chemistry, Tohoku University, Sendai 980-8578, Japan

³World Premier Institute (WPI)-Advanced Institute for Materials Research, Tohoku University, Sendai 980-8577, Japan

⁴Center for Spintronics Research Network, Tohoku University, Sendai 980-8577, Japan

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SmO (001) epitaxial thin films were grown on YAlO₃ (110) substrates by pulsed laser deposition method. X-ray photoemission spectroscopy indicated coexistence of Sm²⁺ and Sm³⁺, suggesting a valence fluctuating state. A SmO thin film showed a metallic conductionlike SmO polycrystal in a previous study. However, a SmO thin film showed nonmonotonical temperature dependence at low temperature in contrast with the polycrystal. A local resistivity minimum was observed at 16 K, probably caused by the dense Kondo effect, and the resistivity below 2 K was proportional to T^2 . These features suggest the heavy-fermionic nature of SmO.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Several rare earth compounds involving Ce, Yb, Pr, and Sm are heavy-fermion compounds possessing unique properties, such as the Kondo insulating state [1] and unconventional superconductivity [2,3], and are recently proposed as topological insulators, e.g. SmB₆ [4]. Rock-salt structure samarium monochalcogenides, SmS, SmSe, and SmTe, showed insulating-to-metal transition with the application of high pressure [5]. The insulator-to-metal transition was interpreted as a change in band structure due to the lattice shrinkage. The shrinkage induced the lowering of a $5d$ conduction band minimum with respect to the $4f^6$ level, resulting in the electronic configuration of Sm ions being $4f^6 \rightarrow 4f^5 + 5d$, in which $5d$ electrons are delocalized. This state corresponds to the valence fluctuating state of the Sm ion between Sm²⁺ and Sm³⁺, in which the valence of each Sm ion is not fixed but varied spatially and temporally [6,7]. Hence, SmS is a “black phase” semiconductor with fixed valence of Sm²⁺ under ambient pressure and turns into a “golden phase” metal with valence fluctuation between Sm²⁺ and Sm³⁺ under high pressure [5]. The average valence of Sm ions in the golden phase SmS was reported to be about +2.8 at 2.9 GPa [8]. The metallic SmS behaves as a heavy-fermion compound, exhibiting a large specific heat coefficient and T^2 -linear resistivity at low temperature [9,10].

An alternative method for the insulator-to-metal transition is to decrease the anion size of samarium monochalcogenides owing to the systematic decrease in bandgap with decreasing anion size. From SmTe to SmO, the $5d$ conduction band minimum is lowered; thus, SmO is expected to be a heavy-fermion metallic system even at ambient pressure, like the golden phase SmS (Fig. 1) [7,11,12]. So far, SmO has been only available in polycrystalline form with high pressure synthesis [11–13], and metallic conduction was observed [11]. In order to further investigate the intrinsic properties of SmO, we evaluated the valence of a Sm ion and measured the electrical transport property down to 0.5 K for SmO epitaxial thin film on lattice matched substrate.

II. EXPERIMENTAL SECTION

SmO epitaxial thin films were grown on YAlO₃ (110) substrates ($a = 0.518$ nm, $b = 0.531$ nm, $c = 0.735$ nm) by the pulsed laser deposition method using a KrF excimer laser ($\lambda = 248$ nm). The lattice mismatch was -5.2% along SmO[110] \parallel YAlO₃[001]. A commercial Sm metal (99.9%) pellet was used for a target. Prior to growth, YAlO₃ substrates were preannealed in a furnace at 1000 °C for 5 h in order to obtain an atomically flat surface. For thin film growth, a Sm seed layer was firstly grown on YAlO₃ (110) substrate at 400 °C in vacuum ($\leq 5.0 \times 10^{-8}$ Torr) for 50 min at a pulse repetition rate of 1 Hz. Subsequently, SmO film was grown on the seed layer at 400 °C in Ar and O₂ mixed gas (Ar : O = 99 : 1, 5.0×10^{-8} Torr in total) for 90 min at a pulse repetition rate of 10 Hz. In order to prevent the film from oxidization, an AlO_x capping layer was *in situ* grown in vacuum at room temperature after thin film growth. The typical thickness of SmO film was 70 nm. The crystal structure of SmO thin films was identified by x-ray diffraction (XRD) measurements (Bruker Discover with General Area Detector Diffraction System [GADDS]). For a reference, 28-nm-thick cubic Sm₂O₃ (001) epitaxial thin film was also grown on SrTiO₃ (001) substrate [14]. The valence of Sm in SmO and Sm₂O₃ was evaluated by x-ray photoemission spectroscopy (XPS), in which the C 1s peak at 284.8 eV was used as a reference. Electrical resistivity was measured for 0.5–300 K at 0 T and for 2–300 K at 0–9 T using Hall-bar patterned films. The carrier was n type, and the carrier concentration was 7.4×10^{21} cm⁻³ at 300 K.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 2(a) shows out-of-plane θ - 2θ XRD patterns of SmO thin films grown at 400 °C on YAlO₃ (110) substrates with and without a seed layer [15]. Both films showed SmO 002 and 004 peaks, indicating the formation of SmO (001) epitaxial thin films. The film without a seed layer contained a Sm₃Al phase whose properties have been unknown [16], while the film with a seed layer was single phase with the full width at half maximum of the 002 rocking curve 2.25°. The seed layer might protect interdiffusion of Al at the surface of YAlO₃. Figure 2(b) shows a SmO 111 diffraction spot on an asymmetric plane

*tomoteru.fukumura.e4@tohoku.ac.jp

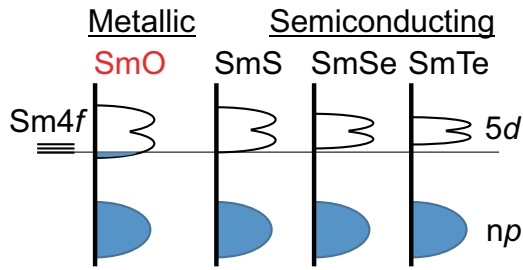


FIG. 1. Schematic energy band diagrams of samarium chalcogenides under ambient pressure, modified from Ref. [7].

($\chi = 35^\circ$) measured with a two-dimensional detector. This result represents the epitaxial relationship of SmO (001) on YAlO₃ (110) and SmO [110] || YAlO₃ [001]. The crystal structure was a uniaxially distorted rock-salt structure with lattice constants of $a = 0.496$ nm and $c = 0.502$ nm. The larger lattice constants than that of cubic SmO ($a = 0.494$ nm) [11,12] were probably due to the presence of oxygen vacancies and/or the effect of tensile strain from substrates.

Figures 3(a) and 3(b) show XPS Sm $3d_{5/2}$ spectra of Sm₂O₃ and SmO thin films, respectively. The spectrum of SmO was deconvoluted into two spectra of Sm³⁺ and Sm²⁺, whose

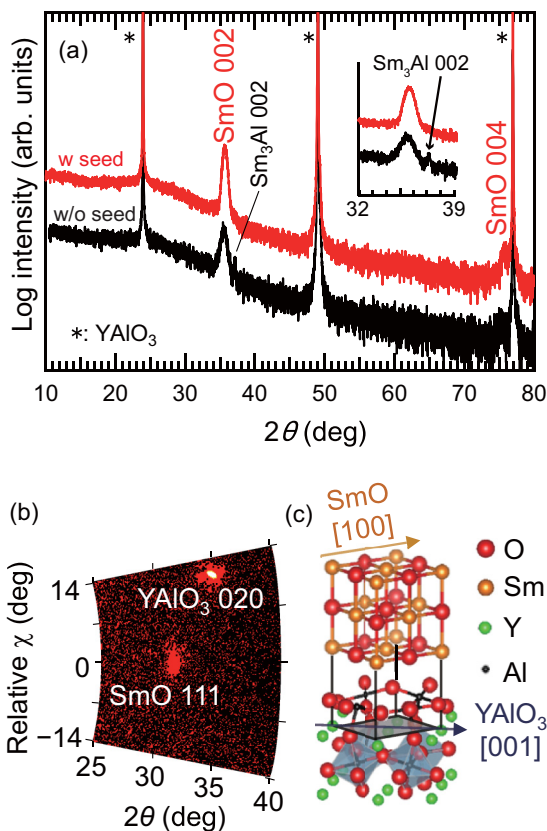


FIG. 2. (a) Out-of-plane θ - 2θ XRD patterns of SmO thin films on YAlO₃ substrates with (red) and without (black) a seed layer. Inset shows a magnified view. (b) Two-dimensional XRD pattern of the asymmetric plane ($\chi = 45^\circ$) for SmO thin film. (c) A schematic crystal structure of SmO (001) thin film epitaxially grown on the YAlO₃ (110) substrate.

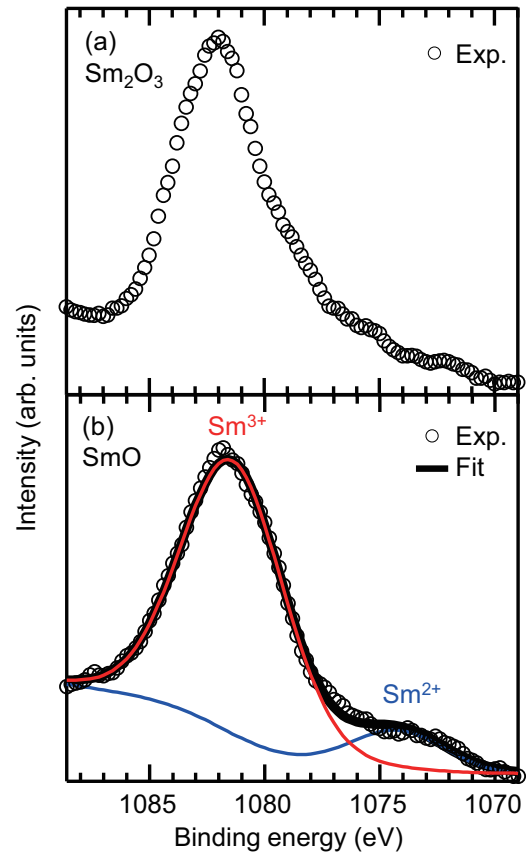


FIG. 3. Sm $3d_{5/2}$ XPS spectrum for (a) Sm₂O₃ thin film and (b) SmO thin film (circle). The deconvoluted Sm³⁺ (red) and Sm²⁺ (blue) spectra and their sum (solid curve) are also shown.

maximum peaks are at 1081.4 and 1074.2 eV, respectively [17]. The former and the latter peaks showed good coincidence with those of Sm₂O₃ [Fig. 3(a)] and semiconducting SmS [18], respectively. The spectrum of SmO was similar to that of metallic SmS [18], indicating a valence fluctuating state between Sm²⁺ and Sm³⁺ in SmO. The average valence of the Sm ion in SmO was +2.9 calculated from the XPS areal peak intensity ratio, consistent with that of a SmO polycrystal evaluated from its lattice constant, x-ray adsorption spectrum, and magnetic susceptibility [12]. From the XPS depth profile, Al content in the film was below detection limit. Thus, the influence of the Sm₃Al phase on electric properties described below was negligible.

Figure 4(a) shows temperature dependence of resistivity for SmO thin film. From 30 to 300 K, the resistivity showed almost T -linear dependence. With decreasing temperature, the resistivity decreased with local minimum at 16 K, then increased down to 10 K, and again decreased as shown in Fig. 4(b). These features were reproducible for different samples. This local resistivity minimum, that is rather indistinct due to the large residual resistivity, could be attributed to the dense Kondo effect owing to an interaction between Sm³⁺ ions and conduction electrons as seen in Sm T M₂Al₂₀ ($TM = \text{Ti, V, Cr}$) [19], although such behavior has not been observed in a SmO polycrystal [11]. From 0.5 to 2 K, the resistivity was proportional to T^2 with T^2 -coefficient A of $0.06 \mu\Omega\text{cm}/\text{K}^2$ as shown in the inset of Fig. 4(b) [20]. This T^2 law is a

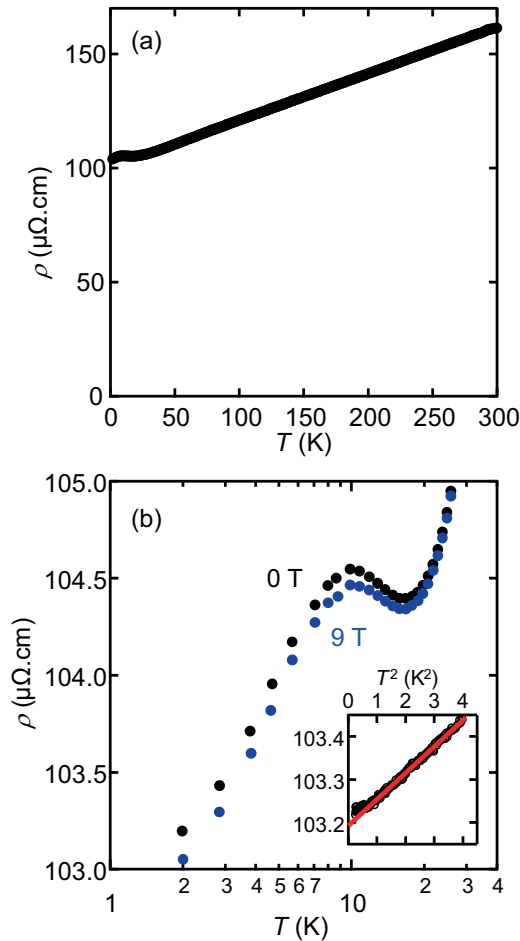


FIG. 4. (a) Temperature dependence of electrical resistivity for SmO thin film from 2 to 300 K. (b) Enlarged view of (a) from 2 to 30 K. The inset shows the resistivity from 0.5 to 2 K. Solid line denotes $\rho \propto T^2$.

characteristic of heavy-fermion compounds [21], in which a heavy-fermion-like quasiparticle is formed by the coupling of conduction electrons and localized f electrons. The obtained A value was as large as those of well-known heavy-fermion compounds, e.g. $\sim 0.08 \mu\Omega\text{cm}/\text{K}^2$ for UPt [22,23].

It is noted that the dense Kondo effect was preserved even at 9 T with small negative magnetoresistance [Fig. 4(a)]. Such a magnetic-field-insensitive Kondo effect was attributed to valence fluctuation of Sm ions in several Sm-based ternary compounds [19,24–26], and the negative magnetoresistance was also observed [26]. The small lattice constants of SmO might contribute to the emergence of seemingly heavy-fermionic state even without high pressure in contrast with the other Sm monochalcogenides [27]. The simple binary SmO with rock-salt structure in contrast with existing heavy-fermion compounds would enable us to explore novel functionalities by designing, for example, heteroepitaxial structure. Indeed, a recent theoretical study proposed that SmO is a topological semimetal possibly exhibiting the quantum anomalous Hall effect in an interface between EuO [28].

IV. CONCLUSIONS

We obtained SmO epitaxial thin films and studied their electrical transport property. A valence fluctuating state was observed at ambient pressure in contrast with SmX ($X = \text{S, Se, Te}$). Different from the SmO polycrystal in previous studies, both the dense Kondo effect and T^2 law below 0.5 K were observed in the ρ - T curve, indicating that SmO is a heavy-fermion compound. This compound with the rather simple rock-salt structure will be useful not only for improving our understanding of heavy-fermion compounds, but also for exploration of novel functionality by tailoring heteroepitaxial structure.

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