Phosphorus-Based Alloy Materials for Advanced Potassium-Ion Battery Anode

Wenchao Zhang, Jianfeng Mao, Sean Li, Zhixin Chen ...+1 more authors

Institutions: University of Wollongong, University of New South Wales

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Phosphorus-Based Alloy Materials for Advanced Potassium-Ion Battery Anode

Wenchao Zhang  
*University of Wollongong, wz990@uowmail.edu.au*

Jianfeng Mao  
*Chinese Academy Of Sciences, jmao@uow.edu.au*

Sean Li  
*University of New South Wales, University of Queensland, sean.li@unsw.edu.au*

Zhixin Chen  
*University of Wollongong, zchen@uow.edu.au*

Zaiping Guo  
*University of Wollongong, zguo@uow.edu.au*

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Abstract
Potassium-ion batteries (PIBs) are interesting as one of the alternative metal-ion battery systems to lithium-ion batteries (LIBs) due to the abundance and low cost of potassium. We have herein investigated Sn4P3/C composite as a novel anode material for PIBs. The electrode delivered a reversible capacity of 384.8 mA h g⁻¹ at 50 mA g⁻¹ and a good rate capability of 221.9 mA h g⁻¹, even at 1 A g⁻¹. Its electrochemical performance is better than any anode material reported so far for PIBs. It was also found that the Sn4P3/C electrode displays a discharge potential plateau of 0.1 V in PIBs, slightly higher than for sodium-ion batteries (SIBs) (0.01 V), and well above the plating potential of metal. This diminishes the formation of dendrites during cycling, and thus Sn4P3 is a relatively safe anode material, especially for application in large-scale energy storage, where large amounts of electrode materials are used. Furthermore, a possible reaction mechanism of the Sn4P3/C composite as PIB anode is proposed. This work may open up a new avenue for further development of alloy-based anodes with high capacity and long cycle life for PIBs.

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Phosphorus-based alloy materials for advanced potassium-ion battery anode

Wenchao Zhang, a, b‡ Jianfeng Mao, b‡ Sean Li, c Zhixin Chen, a, * Zaiping Guo a, b*

a Engineering Materials Institute, School of Mechanical, Materials & Mechatronics Engineering, University of Wollongong, NSW 2500, Australia.
b Institute for Superconducting & Electronic Materials, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia.
c School of Materials Science and Engineering, The University of New South Wales, NSW 2052, Australia.

Supporting Information

ABSTRACT: Potassium-ion batteries (PIBs) are interesting as one of the alternative metal-ion battery systems to lithium-ion batteries (LIBs) due to the abundance and low cost of potassium. We have herein investigated Sn P/C composite as a novel anode material for PIBs. The electrode delivered a reversible capacity of 384.8 mAh g$^{-1}$ at 50 mA g$^{-1}$ and a good rate capability of 221.9 mAh g$^{-1}$, even at 1 A g$^{-1}$. Its electrochemical performance is better than any anode material reported so far for PIBs. It was also found that the Sn P/C electrode displays a discharge potential plateau of 0.1 V in PIBs, slightly higher than for sodium-ion batteries (0.01 V), and well above the plating potential of metal. This diminishes the formation of dendrites during cycling, and thus, SnP$_3$ is a relatively safe anode material, especially for application in large-scale energy storage, where large amounts of electrode materials are used. Furthermore, a possible reaction mechanism of the Sn P/C composite as PIB anode is proposed in this paper. This work may open up a new avenue for further development of alloy-based anodes with high capacity and long cycle life for PIBs.

The demand for energy storage materials is high and increasing with the rapid development of electronic devices, electric vehicles, and large-scale energy storage systems (ESS). The widespread use of lithium-ion batteries (LIBs) for these applications is seriously limited by the uneven distribution and the short supplies of lithium minerals (0.0017 wt. %) around the world. Sodium-ion batteries (SIBs) have recently attracted increasing interest due to the natural abundance of sodium. Unfortunately, their relatively high standard hydrogen potential (-2.71 V vs. $E^\circ$) compared to LIBs (-3.04 V vs. $E^\circ$) makes the energy density of SIBs relatively low and limits their potential industrial applications.

Considering the similar positions of Li, Na, and K in the periodic table and the natural abundance of potassium, the potassium-ion battery (PIB) system could be considered as well. Since the standard hydrogen potential of K (-2.93 V vs. $E^\circ$) is lower than that of Na and closer to that of Li, PIBs have potential as low-cost batteries with high energy density and high voltage. Nevertheless, it is challenge to develop suitable electrodes to accommodate the large size of the K-ions (1.38 Å) compared to Na-ions and Li-ions. Carbonaceous materials have been investigated as PIB anodes, although the highest reported capacity is 273 mA h g$^{-1}$ for soft carbon at C/40.

Although there have been few investigations of alloy-based anode materials in PIBs, an investigation of Sn/C composite anode in a PIB was recently reported, which delivered only 150 mA h g$^{-1}$ after 30 cycles at a current density of 25 mA g$^{-1}$. Not much better than for carbon anode materials, Phosphorus (P) has a high theoretical capacity of 2594 mA h g$^{-1}$, since it can form K$_3$P$_2$, a binary phase with K. Herein, we have investigated the electrochemical performance of P/C and SnP$_3$/C composites as anode materials for PIBs. The P/C anode delivered a high capacity, but it decayed very fast. In contrast, the SnP$_3$/C electrode delivered a reversible capacity of 384.8 mAh g$^{-1}$ at a current density of 50 mA g$^{-1}$ and good rate capability of 221.9 mAh g$^{-1}$, even at a current density of 1 A g$^{-1}$, the best electrochemical performance reported so far for any anode material for PIBs. Moreover, the reduction potential of the SnP$_3$ electrode in the PIBs was measured to be 0.1 V, higher than its 0.01 V in SIBs. The K-alloy reactions thus occur at a higher potential than the Na-alloy reactions, so that the PIBs with the SnP$_3$/C electrode will have a lower risk of short-circuiting due to dendrite growth.

Figure 1. Characterization of SnP$_3$ powder: a) XRD pattern compared with Sn/C and P/C, b) FESEM image, c) TEM image, with the red outlines indicating the SnP$_3$ nanoparticles, d) HRTEM image and FFT pattern of the red area (inset), e) SAED pattern, and f-i) EDS maps of SnP$_3$/C powder.
Figure 1a shows the X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns of the as-prepared Sn$_3$P$_3$/C, Sn/C, and P/C powders ball milled under the same conditions. All the diffraction peaks in the XRD pattern of the Sn$_3$P$_3$/C composite and the as-prepared sample is virtually pure Sn$_3$P$_3$ (ICSD No. 15014). Figures 1b-i display field-emission scanning electron microscopic (FESEM) and transmission electron microscopic (TEM) images of the Sn$_3$P$_3$/C powder. The powder mainly consists of irregular agglomerated micrometre sized particles, as shown in Figure 1b. The agglomerated micro-particles consist of many crystalline nanoparticles around 20-50 nm, distributed evenly in the amorphous carbon matrix (Figure 1c and d). Figure 1d shows the lattice fringes of the (107) planes of Sn$_3$P$_3$. The selected area electron diffraction (SAED) pattern and high resolution TEM (HRTEM) image clearly demonstrate that the Sn$_3$P$_3$ nanoparticles are uniformly distributed in the amorphous carbon matrix, which could act as a buffer to suppress the volume changes during the potassiation/depotassiation. Figure 1f-i presents energy dispersive spectroscopy (EDS) elemental mapping images of a nano-Sn$_3$P$_3$

Figure 2. Cyclic voltammograms (CVs) for the first 5 cycles of a) Sn$_3$P$_3$/C in PIBs and b) Sn$_3$P$_3$/C in SIBs at the scanning rate of 0.05 mV s$^{-1}$. The initial, second, and third discharge/charge profiles of c) Sn$_3$P$_3$/C in PIBs and d) Sn$_3$P$_3$/C in SIBs at the current density of 50 mA g$^{-1}$. e) Cycling performance of the Sn$_3$P$_3$/C, Sn/C, and P/C electrodes in PIBs at the current density of 50 mA g$^{-1}$. f) Rate performance of Sn$_3$P$_3$/C electrode in PIBs at various current densities from 50 mA g$^{-1}$ to 1000 mA g$^{-1}$. g) Rate capacities of the Sn$_3$P$_3$/C anode and the other reported anodes in PIBs.

Figure 3. Ex-situ XRD patterns of cycled a) Sn$_3$P$_3$/C and enlarged area (65°-70°) at 0.01 V at discharged potential (inset), b) Sn/C, and c) P/C electrodes in PIBs at different potentials.
Scheme 1. The potassiation/depotassiation process in Sn$_3$P$_4$/C electrode.

larger globules, and the cracks in the Sn$_3$P$_4$/C electrode become much bigger during the cycling process (Fig. S10), mostly after 30 cycles, indicating large strain caused by large volume changes in the Sn$_3$P$_4$ electrode during cycling, and loss of integrity of the electrode due to particle pulverization leads to decreased capacity.

The rate capability of the Sn$_3$P$_4$/C electrode in PIBs was also characterized, as shown in Figure 2f. The potassiation capacity decreased from 399.4 to 221.9 mA h g$^{-1}$ when the current density increased from 50 mA g$^{-1}$ to 1000 mA g$^{-1}$. The rate capacities of all the reported anodes used in PIBs (graphite, soft carbon, hard carbon microsphere, carbon nanofibers, reduced graphene oxide, and K$_2$TiO$_3$) are presented in Figure 2g. It is clear that the rate capability of the Sn$_3$P$_4$/C electrode is the best among the reported anode materials.

To understand the possible reaction mechanisms during the discharge and charge processes, ex-situ XRD was used to identify the possible phases. As shown in Figure 3a, after the Sn$_3$P$_4$/C electrode was discharged to 0.4 V, XRD signals from the Sn$_3$P$_4$ electrode decreased notably, and XRD signals from K$_3$P could be detected. When the Sn$_3$P$_4$/C electrode was further discharged to 0.2 V, Sn phase appeared and became the main phase at the expense of the Sn$_3$P$_4$, indicating a conversion reaction. Meanwhile, several new peaks of K$_3$Sn$_{23}$ (ICSD No. 25301) were observed. After the Sn$_3$P$_4$/C electrode was discharged to 0.01 V, KSn phase (ICSD No. 409435) and minor Sn peaks could be detected, indicating the alloying of potassium with tin. The same results were also obtained in the Sn/C anode, where K$_3$Sn$_{12}$ and KSn phases were also observed after discharging to 0.2 and 0.01 V, as shown in Figure 3b. It is well known that the binary K-P system has the following phases: K$_3$P (ICSD No. 14010), K$_2$P$_3$ (ICSD No. 64625), K$_2$P$_7$ (ICSD No. 36590), and K$_3$P (ICSD No. 25550). As for the cycled P/C electrodes, which were discharged to 0.5 or 0.01 V (Figure 3c), two new peaks in addition to the peaks of copper were detected at 25.38° and 65.91°, which correspond to the (102) and (116) of the layered structured K$_3$P phase with space group P6/mmc (Fig. S11). The strongest peak of K$_3$P is missing, possibly due to partial potassiation, so the final discharge product could be a non-stoichiometric K$_3$P compound or amorphous. Based on this discussion, we believe that KSn and K$_3$P are the two possible final products after the discharge of the Sn$_3$P$_4$/C electrode in PIBs, with the theoretical capacity of Sn$_3$P$_4$ as high as 620 mA h g$^{-1}$, which is more than 2 times the capacity of carbon anode materials. In the charging process, a new peak at 31.4° was detected after charging to 2.0 V, representing the reformation of the Sn$_3$P$_4$. Therefore, the potassiation/depotassiation of Sn$_3$P$_4$ via conversion and alloying reactions is partially reversible. The reaction mechanism of Sn$_3$P$_4$ as anode material for SIBs was previously thoroughly investigated, and in some cases, the Sn$_3$P$_4$ phase was found to be restored as well, even after desodiation at 1 V. Accordingly, the potassiation and depotassiation mechanism may be described by the following equations:

\[ \text{Sn}_3\text{P}_4 + (9-3x) \text{K} \rightarrow 4\text{Sn} + 3\text{K}_3\text{P} \quad (1) \]

\[ 23\text{Sn} + 4\text{K} \rightarrow \text{K}_2\text{Sn}_{23} \quad (2) \]

\[ \text{K}_3\text{Sn}_{23} + 19\text{K} \rightarrow 23\text{KSn} \quad (3) \]

The superior electrochemical performance of the Sn$_3$P$_4$/C composite compared to Sn/C and P/C can be firstly understood from the active nature of the Sn$_3$P$_4$ itself, where the Sn and P components in the Sn$_3$P$_4$/C are combined to give a synergistic K-storage reaction. The reaction mechanism of Sn$_3$P$_4$ during potassiation/depotassiation is schematically shown in Scheme 1. Upon potassiation, a conversion reaction first occurs, where the Sn$_3$P$_4$ breaks into small Sn particles and a K$_3$P matrix (Reaction (1)). Upon further potassiation, K is inserted into Sn to form K$_3$Sn$_{23}$ (Reaction (2)) and finally KSn (Reaction (3)) through the alloying reaction. During the depotassiation, KSn dealloys first to form Sn, and then the Sn reacts with K$_3$P to convert it back to Sn$_3$P$_4$. Thus, the stepped formation of K-Sn (K$_3$Sn$_{23}$, KSn) and K-P alloy (K$_3$P) phases during the discharge process creates mutual buffers to alleviate the volume changes during cycling. The conductive carbon matrix provides a further buffering effect against volume changes during cycling, thus maintaining the integrity of the electrode and enhancing the electrical conductivity, leading to improved cycling stability of the electrode.

In summary, Sn$_3$P$_4$/C composite, introduced for the first time as an anode material for the potassium-ion battery was synthesised by a conventional and scalable ball-milling technique. Compared with Sn$_3$P$_4$/C in SIBs, Sn$_3$P$_4$/C electrode in PIBs could deliver a discharge voltage plateau (0.1 V) that is low enough for an anode, but slightly higher than the plating potential of the corresponding metal (0.01 V), thus avoiding the formation of dendrites and improving the safety of the battery. Our investigation of the reaction mechanisms of the Sn$_3$P$_4$ indicates that K-Sn (K$_3$Sn$_{23}$, KSn) and K-P alloy (K$_3$P) phases are formed during the discharge process, with these phases acting as mutual buffers to alleviate the volume changes during cycling. The conductive carbon matrix enhances the electrical conductivity of the electrode and works as a buffer matrix to accommodate the volume changes in the active materials during cycling, maintaining the integrity of the electrode and the cycle life. This work may help in the search for a safe, high-energy-density, and low-cost rechargeable K-ion battery for large-scale energy storage applications.

ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications website.

Experimental section; additional data from Raman spectroscopy, XPS of Sn$_3$P$_4$/C, SEM, CV curves, discharge-charge profiles of Sn/C and P/C, XRD, Raman and electrochemical results for bare Sn$_3$P$_4$, ex-situ TEM and SEM images of Sn$_3$P$_4$/C electrode after cycling, enlarged ex-situ results, ex-situ EDS maps and diffraction patterns, cycling performance with different voltage ranges, crystallography data on K$_3$P phase.
AUTHOR INFORMATION

Corresponding Author

*zchen@uow.edu.au
*zguo@uow.edu.au

Author Contributions

†These authors contributed equally.

ORCID

Zaiping Guo: 0000-0003-3464-5301

Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interests.

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Supporting Information

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Wenchao Zhang, a, b ‡ Jianfeng Mao, b ‡ Sean Li, c Zhixin Chen, a, * Zaiping Guo a, b, *

a Engineering Materials Institute, School of Mechanical, Materials & Mechatronics Engineering, University of Wollongong, NSW 2500, Australia.
b Institute for Superconducting & Electronic Materials, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia.
c School of Materials Science and Engineering, The University of New South Wales, NSW 2052, Australia.

* Corresponding authors: zchen@uow.edu.au (Z. Chen)

zguo@uow.edu.au (Z. Guo)

‡ These authors contributed equally to this work.
Experimental Section

Preparation of Sn₄P₃/C binary composites

Sn₄P₃/C powder was synthesized by a ball-milling process using elemental Sn (Aldrich, ≥ 99.8%), red phosphorus (Aldrich, ≥ 99%), and carbon black as the raw materials in the weight ratio of Sn: P: C = 73.1: 14.4: 12.5 (with Sn and P in the molar ratio of 4:3, respectively). The ball milling was conducted in a planetary QM-1SP2 ball mill for 30 h, and the elemental mixture was milled at 500 rpm using stainless steel balls of 10 mm in diameter and with a powder-to-ball weight ratio of 1:30. For comparison, Sn/C and P/C were also synthesized under the same conditions with the weight ratios Sn: C = 87.5: 12.5 and P: C = 87.5: 12.5, respectively. All sample storage and handling were performed in an Ar filled glove box (MBraun Unilab).

Materials characterization

The crystal structures of the as-prepared powders were characterized by powder X-ray diffraction (XRD) on a GBC MMA diffractometer with a Cu Kα source at a scanning rate of 1° min⁻¹. Raman spectra were collected on a JobinYvon HR800 Raman spectrometer. X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) was conducted on a VG Multilab 2000 (VG Inc.) photoelectron spectrometer using monochromatic Al Kα radiation under the vacuum of 2 × 10⁻⁶ Pa. The morphology of the synthesized powders was characterized on a JEOL JSM-7500FA field-emission scanning electron microscope (FESEM) and a JEOL ARM-200F cold-field-emission and aberration-corrected transmission electron microscope (TEM).
**Electrochemical measurements**

Electrodes were fabricated using a slurry-coating method. The synthesized materials (Sn₄P₃/C, Sn/C, and P/C) were mixed with Super P carbon black and carboxymethyl cellulose (CMC) in the weight ratio of 8:1:1, respectively. Deionized (DI) water was used as the dispersing agent. Then, the slurry was coated on copper foil and dried in a vacuum oven at 80 °C overnight. Coin-type (CR2032) cells were assembled in an argon-filled glove box with oxygen and water content lower than 0.1 ppm. K half-cells were assembled with potassium metal and 0.8 M KPF₆ in an ethylene carbonate (EC) – diethyl carbonate (DEC) solution (EC: DEC = 1:1) as electrolyte. Na half-cells were assembled with sodium metal and 0.8 M NaPF₆ in EC-DEC solution (EC: DEC = 1:1) as electrolyte. The mass loading of active material (Sn₄P₃) was over 0.78 mg cm⁻², corresponding to a total mass loading of 1.11 mg cm⁻². Cyclic voltammetry (CV) tests were conducted on a VMP-3 electrochemical workstation at a scan rate of 0.05 mV s⁻¹. The cells were galvanostatically charged-discharged between 0.01 and 2.0 V versus K/K⁺ or Na/Na⁺ at various current densities on a Land battery tester. The specific capacity was calculated based on the weight of Sn₄P₃. The mass loading of active material was increased to over 1.7 mg cm⁻² for ex-situ XRD experiments.
Raman spectroscopy was used to identify the carbon black in the three samples, as shown in Figure S1a. The two peaks at 1355 cm\(^{-1}\) and 1580 cm\(^{-1}\) correspond to the disordered (D) band and the graphitic (G) band of carbon black, respectively. The X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) results for the Sn\(_4\)P\(_3\)/C composite are presented in Figure S1b-d and they show a metallic feature (Sn) and metal phosphide for the P component. This explains the high electrical conductivity of Sn\(_4\)P\(_3\) (30.7 S cm\(^{-1}\) for Sn\(_4\)P\(_3\) vs. 3.5 \(\times\) 10\(^{-5}\) S cm\(^{-1}\) for P/C composite).\(^1,2\) No chemical bonding between carbon and P or Sn is evidenced by the XPS results.
Figure S2. SEM images of a) P/C, b) Sn/C powders.
Figure S3. CV curves for the first 5 cycles at the scanning rate of 0.05 mV s⁻¹ for a) Sn/C in PIBs, b) Sn/C in SIBs, c) P/C in PIBs, and d) P/C in SIBs.
Figure S4. Discharge/charge profiles for the first 3 cycles of a) Sn/C in PIBs, b) Sn/C in SIBs, c) P/C in PIBs, and d) P/C in SIBs at the current density of 50 mA g\(^{-1}\).
Figure S5. a) XRD patterns and b) Raman spectra of the as-prepared Sn₄P₃/C and Sn₄P₃ powders.
Figure S6. Cycling performance of a) Sn₄P₃/C and Sn₄P₃ electrodes, and b) carbon black (Super P) electrode.
The long-term cycling performance of the Sn₄P₃/C electrode for PIBs is shown in Fig. S7. After 50 cycles, the capacity of the Sn₄P₃/C decreases very rapidly. The fast capacity drop is mainly due to the large particle size and the non-uniform distribution of Sn₄P₃ particles in the carbon black due to the limitations of the ball-milling technique. Figure S8a and S8b present digital photographs of separators after the 1st cycle and the 50th cycle. After 50 cycles, many particles have fallen off the copper foil, which will cause a huge loss of active materials and carbon, as well as leading to capacity loss.
Figure S9. Ex-situ TEM images of Sn₄P₃/C electrodes: a) pristine, and after b) the 10th cycle, c) the 30th cycle, and d) the 50th cycle. The red circles identify the Sn₄P₃ nanoparticles in the carbon matrix.
Figure S10. Ex-situ FESEM images of Sn₄P₃/C electrodes: a) pristine, and after b) the 10th cycle, c) the 30th cycle, and d) the 50th cycle.
Figure S11. Schematic diagrams of the crystal structure of K$_3$P
Figure S12. a) Ex-situ XRD patterns of cycled Sn₃Pₓ/C electrode in PIBs at different potentials, and b) enlarged area (65°-70°) at 0.01 V discharge potential.
Figure S13. EDS maps of cycled Sn₄P₃/C electrode after it was discharged to 0.01 V.

Figure S14. SAED pattern of cycled Sn₄P₃/C electrode after it was discharged to 0.01 V.

Figure S13 presents energy dispersive spectroscopy (EDS) elemental mapping images of a cycled Sn₄P₃/C electrode with uniform distributions of the Sn, P, C, and K. Figure S14 shows the selected area electron diffraction (SAED) pattern of cycled Sn₄P₃/C electrode. The d-spacings of the diffraction rings can be measured as 0.486, 0.352, 0.292 and 0.144 nm, which correspond to (202) of KSn, (102) of K₃P, (200) of Sn, and (116) of K₃P, respectively, which is consistent with the XRD results.
Figure S15. EDS maps of cycled P/C electrode after it was discharged to 0.01 V.

Figure S16. SAED pattern of cycled P/C electrode after it was discharged to 0.01 V.

Similar \( d \)-spacing of diffraction rings from \( K_3P \) was also observed in the SAED pattern of a cycled P/C electrode, further confirming the existence of \( K_3P \) in the cycled \( Sn_4P_3/C \) electrode after potassiation. Figure S16 shows the selected area electron diffraction (SAED) pattern of the cycled P/C electrode. The \( d \)-spacings of the diffraction rings can be measured as 0.502, 0.352 and 0.144 nm, corresponding to (002), (102), and (116) of \( K_3P \), respectively. The diffuse diffraction ring is due to the carbon in the composite and the supporting carbon film.
Figure S17. Cycling performance of the Sn₄P₃/C electrode in PIBs in the voltage range of 0.1-2 V (compared with 0.01-2 V)
Table S1 Crystallography data on K$_3$P phase

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