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OPEN Superconductivity of novel tin hydrides (Sn_nH_m) under pressure

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With the motivation of discovering high-temperature superconductors, evolutionary algorithm USPEX is employed to search for all stable compounds in the Sn-H system. In addition to the traditional SnH₄, new hydrides SnH₈, SnH₁₂ and SnH₁₄ are found to be thermodynamically stable at high pressure. Dynamical stability and superconductivity of tin hydrides are systematically investigated. Izm2-SnH₈, C2/m-SnH₁₂ and C2/m-SnH₁₄ exhibit higher superconducting transition temperatures of 81, 93 and 97 K compared to the traditional compound SnH4 with Tc of 52 K at 200 GPa. An interesting bent H₂-group in IZm2-SnH₈ and novel linear HZ in C2/m-SnH₁₂ are observed. All the new tin hydrides remain metallic over their predicted range of stability. The intermediate-frequency wagging and bending vibrations have more contribution to electron-phonon coupling parameter than high-frequency stretching vibrations of H2 and H3.

Molecular hydrogen's phase transition to a metallic state has been subject of many experimental and theoretical studies^{1,2}. Although reaching the metallic state in pure solid hydrogen proved elusive, it is in the main focus of many groups and recently, the progress of bringing pure hydrogen to nearly 400 GPa has been reported³⁻⁵. Following the pioneering work of Ashcroft⁶, nearly room-temperature superconductivity was predicted in metallic molecular hydrogen^{7,8}

An alternative approach to metalize hydrogen is to use chemical alloying as a means to exert additional pressure on hydrogen atoms⁹. Hydrogen-rich compounds such as SiH₄ can be metalized at a much lower pressure¹⁰. For metallic hydrogen, high Debye temperature and strong electron-phonon coupling are anticipated. The same is expected for hydrogen-rich compounds and it has been suggested that hydrogen-rich compounds are good candidates for high-temperature superconductivity9 Theoretical studies confirm this idea with predicting superconductivity in high-pressure hydrides such as H-Se¹¹, Ca-H¹², Sn-H¹³, Pt-H¹⁴ and B-H¹⁵. A series of hydrogen-rich compounds have been predicted to have remarkably high T, values (e.g. 235 K for CaH₆ at 150 GPa¹², 191 K for H₃S at 200 GPa¹⁶, 64 K for GeH₄ at 220 GPa¹⁷) while the highest T_c that had been achieved experimentally was in the complex mercury cuprate (138 K at ambient pressure¹⁸ and 166 K at high pressures¹⁹). The new record of high T_c was established for H_3S , a compound whose existence and superconductivity at 200 K were first predicted theoretically¹⁶ in 2014 using USPEX and then observed experimentally²⁰ in 2015, and started a new wave of interest in hydrogen-rich superconductors.

In a previous theoretical study, Tse et al. reported a high-pressure metallic phase of SnH₄ with hexagonal P6/mmm symmetry group, which is a layered structure intercalated with H₂ units, and is a superconductor with Tc close to 80 K at 120 GPa²¹. Later, by using evolutionary algorithm USPEX, Gao et al.¹³ reported two novel metallic phases of SnH₄ with space groups P6₃/mmc and Ama2, which both have hexagonal layers of Sn atoms with semi-molecular H_2 units. The reported stability ranges are 96–180 GPa for Ama2, and above 180 GPa for P6₃/mmc; with T₂ values of 15-22 K at 120 GPa and 52-62 K at 200 GPa for Ama2 and P6₃/mmc, respectively¹³.

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Figure 1. Thermodynamics of the Sn-H system. (a) Predicted formation enthalpy of Sn_nH_m compounds. Solid red lines denote the convex hull and green dashed line shows the effect of ZPE inclusion at 250 GPa. (b) Predicted pressure-composition phase diagram of the Sn-H system.

While SnH₄ was shown to be a relatively high-T_c superconductor, the possibility of existence of other tin hydrides were not explored so far. At the same time, by now it is proven²² that totally unexpected compounds become stable under pressure, and this gives hope of finding even better superconductors. Hence, in this study, we systematically search for the stable compounds using the highly efficient variable-composition evolutionary searches (VCES). Apart from the previously reported phases of SnH₄, there is one metastable tetragonal phase of stannane with higher superconducting critical temperature. Other stable superconducting compounds, SnH₈, SnH₁₂ and SnH₁₄, are found to become stable at high pressure. Moreover, we found a semi-molecular group H₃– in the I $\overline{4}$ m2 structure of SnH₈. Novel H₄–is also present in C2/m-SnH₁₂. We calculate a high T_c of 81 K at 220 GPa in the newly predicted compound SnH₈, 93 K for SnH₁₂ at 250 GPa, 97 K for SnH₁₄ at 300 GPa and 91 K for the metastable phase of SnH₄ at 220 GPa.

Results

Evolutionary variable-composition searches for stable compounds and their structures with up to 20 atoms in the primitive unit cell were performed at 150, 200, 250 and 300 GPa. To further investigate the newly found compounds, fixed-composition structure predictions for the most promising compounds were performed, with one to three formula units per cell. Candidate low-enthalpy structures are metastable I4/mmm-SnH₄, stable I $\overline{4}$ m2-SnH₈, C2/m-SnH₁₂ and C2/m-SnH₁₄. In the I $\overline{4}$ m2-SnH₈ structure predicted to be stable at pressures above 220 GPa, Sn atoms are packed between H₂ and H₃ molecular groups, in which the bent H₃ units are perpendicular to one another and sepated by 1.35 Å. In C2/m-SnH₁₂, Sn atoms form well-separated close-packed layers intercalated with blocks of H₂ and H₄ semi-molecules.

Figure 1(a). shows the enthalpy of formation (ΔH) of Sn-H compounds at selected pressures. Significantly, in addition to reproducing various structures of solid SnH₄^{13,21}, Sn²³ and H₂²⁴, novel compounds SnH₈, SnH₁₂ and SnH₁₄ are found to be stable in a wide pressure range in our systematic evolutionary structure search. It can be seen from Fig. 1(a). that at around 200 GPa the tetragonal SnH₈ with the space group of I4m2 lies above the convex hull, therefore, is metastable with respect to decomposition to P6₃/mmc-SnH₄ and C2/c-H₂. Between 150 to 300 GPa, we predict stable phases of H₂, SnH₄, SnH₃, SnH₁₂, SnH₁₄ and Sn²³. Some metastable forms of SnH₆, SnH₉ and SnH₁₆ are also shown in Fig. 1(a) by open symbols.

 SnH_4 is thermodynamically stable at pressures above 108 GPa as was predicted in previous report¹³. It goes through a phase transition at 160 GPa. Upon increasing pressure, at 220 GPa we predict stabilization of SnH_8 . SnH_{12} and SnH_{14} reach stability at the pressures of 250 GPa and 280 GPa, respectively, and remain stable at least up to 300 GPa. The structures of SnH_n compounds are found to be dynamically stable within pressure ranges of their stability. In the I4m2-SnH₈ structure, Sn atoms occupy the 2a Wyckoff site and the H atoms are on the 4e, 8i and 4f sites (detailed structural information is provided in Table 1).

We checked the effects of zero-point energy using phonon calculations²⁵ at 250 GPa. The inclusion of zero-point noticeably lowered the formation enthalpy of SnH_8 with respect to SnH_4 and H_2 (Fig. 1(a)), implying that this compound can be formed at lower pressure. At the same time, SnH_{12} moves above the convex hull at 250 GPa, suggesting that higher pressure is needed to stabilize C2/m-SnH₁₂. In accord with what we expect, zero-point energy does not change the topology of the phase diagram, but shifts transition pressures.

In I $\overline{4}$ m2-SnH₈ structure, the H atoms are split into two categories. Some H atoms form H₃ groups, which were previously observed in solid phases of BaH₆²⁷, in an unstable structure of H₅Br ([H₃]Br[H₂])²⁸, and in an intriguing linear form with the bond length of 0.92 Å in H₅Te₂²⁹. In contrast to H₅Br, which has approximately an equilateral triangle form of H₃, here we report the formation of H₃ in a bent geometry with the angle of 146.2° and bond length of 0.86 Å at 220 GPa in the I $\overline{4}$ m2 structure. The other type of H atoms form H₂ groups which are aligned parallel to each other.

I4m2 structure can be presented as Sn[H₂][H₃]₂ as shown in Fig. 2(a,b). The bond length in H₃ unit is 0.86 Å, whereas H₂ has a longer bond length of 0.87 Å. Contrary to isolated H₂ molecule, which only has a filled σ bonding orbital, in the H₂ and H₃ semi-molecules, population of anti-bonding orbitals causes lengthening and

Phase	Lattice parameters	Atom	x	у	z
I4m2	a = 3.076 Å	Sn(2a)	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
SnH ₈	c = 5.523 Å	H ₁ (8i)	0.2729	0.0000	0.3331
	at 220 GPa	H ₂ (4e)	0.0000	0.0000	0.6208
		H ₃ (4f)	0.0000	0.5000	0.1701
C2/m	a = 5.191 Å	Sn(2d)	0.0000	0.5000	0.5000
SnH ₁₂	b = 3.065 Å	H1(4i)	0.0495	0.0000	0.6553
	c = 7.388 Å	H ₂ (4i)	0.4564	0.0000	0.7226
	$\beta = 148.95^{\circ}$	H ₃ (4i)	0.3428	0.0000	0.8832
	at 250 GPa	H ₄ (8i)	0.3810	0.2399	0.1123
		H ₅ (4g)	0.0000	0.1233	0.0000
C2/m	a = 7.129 Å	Sn(2b)	0.0000	0.5000	0.0000
SnH ₁₄	b = 2.730 Å	H1(4i)	0.3651	0.0000	0.7031
	c = 3.673 Å	H ₂ (4i)	0.1857	0.0000	0.9852
	$\beta = 60.71^{\circ}$	H ₃ (4i)	0.0732	0.0000	0.6252
		H ₄ (4i)	0.8063	0.0000	0.8090
		H ₅ (8i)	0.2365	0.2808	0.4035
	at 300 GPa	H ₆ (2d)	0.0000	0.5000	0.5000
		H ₇ (2c)	0.0000	0.0000	0.5000

Table 1. Predicted crystal structures of SnH₈, SnH₁₂ and SnH₁₄ at 220, 250 and 300 GPa, respectively.



Figure 2. Predicted structures of (**a**,**b**) SnH₈ [I $\overline{4}$ m2], (**c**) SnH₁₂ [C2/m] and (**d**) SnH₁₄ [C2/m]. Large and small spheres represent Sn and H atoms, respectively. Electron localization functions (ELF) for (**e**) SnH₈ [I $\overline{4}$ m2] at 220 GPa and (f) SnH₁₂ [C2/m] at 250 GPa.





weakening of the covalent bond. The slightly longer H-H bond length compared to isolated H₂ molecule (0.74 Å) is caused by charge transfer of 0.42 e⁻ and 0.48 e⁻, as computed using Bader theory²⁶, from Sn to each H₂ and H₃ unit, respectively. Charge transfer is an important factor in the formation of H_2 and H_3 units in the H_4 Te, GeH₄, SnH₄, CaH₄, H₅Te₂, H₅Br, BaH₆^{12,17,27-29}

Analysis of electron localization function (ELF) shows a high ELF value of 0.88 between H atoms within the unit, indicating strong covalent bonding features (Fig. 2(e)). At the same time, the ELF value on the Sn-H bond is very low, reaching just 0.37.

In C2/m-SnH₁₂, intriguing formation of novel H₄ semi-molecules are observed; at 250 GPa, they can be represented as two H2-groups separated by just 0.99 Å. Higher pressure of 300 GPa decreases the distance to 0.88 Å, leading to a strong covalent bond in the H_4^- units. Fig. 2(f). demonstrates covalent bonds in the linear H_4 units with the ELF magnitude of 0.85.

The calculated phonon dispersion curves and phonon density of states for $I\overline{4}m2$ structure of SnH_8 at 220 GPa are shown in Fig. 3(a). Dynamical stability is clearly evidenced by the absence of any imaginary frequencies in the whole Brillouin zone. The low-frequency bands below 250 cm^{-1} are mainly from the vibrations of Sn atoms. Modes between 300 and 1700 cm⁻¹ are mainly from the H-H wagging vibrations, and higher frequency vibrations above 2300 cm⁻¹ are due to H-H stretching vibrations in H₂ and H₃ units.

Low-frequency translational modes, mostly from Sn atom, contribute 23.7% (9.2%) to the total λ . Intermediate H-H wagging vibrations make a significant contribution of 65.7% (67.9%), and the rest is from stretching H vibrations, which contribute 10.6% (22.9%) for SnH_8 (SnH_{12}). This is different from superconductivity in Cmcm-H₂Br²⁸, where Br translational modes make the largest contribution to the total λ and similar to the R³ $m-H_4Te^{29}$ and P4/mmm-BaH₆²⁷, where medium-frequency H-wagging and bending modes contribute the most to the EPC. In accord with our expectation, λ increases almost linearly with hydrogen content, where we found 60.2%, 72.2% and 77.1% contribution of H vibrations to the total λ of SnH₄, SnH₈ and SnH₁₂, respectively. This highlights the dominant role of H in the superconductivity of H-rich compounds.

Electronic band structure of $I\overline{4}m2$ -SnH₈ is depicted in Fig. 4. Occurrence of flat and steep bands near the Fermi level has been suggested as a condition for enhancing electron-phonon coupling (EPC) and the formation of Cooper pairs.

We can calculate T_c based on the spectral function $\alpha^2 F(\omega)$ and taking advantage of Allen-Dynes modified McMillan equation (Eq. 1.) by using Coulomb pseudo-potential μ^* of 0.10 and 0.13 as widely accepted values (see Table 2). At 220 GPa, the predicted T_c values for $I\overline{4}m2$ -SnH₈ are 81 K and 72 K using μ^* values of 0.10 and 0.13, respectively. The calculated T_c slightly decreases with pressure (82 K at 200 GPa and 79 K at 300 GPa using $\mu^* = 0.10$) with a pressure coefficient of $-0.023 \text{ K/GPa}\left(\frac{dT_c}{dP}\right)$. Reported λ is comparable to H₃Se ($\lambda = 1.09$) at 200 GPa¹¹, but in I4m2-SnH₈ structure, we have a lower $\left\langle \omega_{log} \right\rangle$ of 919 K (1477 K for H₃Se), resulting in a lower T_c value.

In conclusion, we explored the energetically stable/metastable high-pressure phases of the Sn-H system in detail by means of *ab initio* evolutionary structure prediction. The results demonstrate that SnH₈, SnH₁₂ and SnH₁₄, reported for the first time in this work, are thermodynamically stable compounds that coexist stably with solid Sn, H₂ and SnH₄ in a wide pressure range starting from 220 to at least 300 GPa.

EPC calculations indicate that high-pressure SnH₈, SnH₁₂ and SnH₁₄ are phonon-mediated superconductors with T_c values of 81, 93 and 97 K at pressures of 220, 250, and 300 GPa, respectively. λ is high for SnH_n compounds, comparable with H_3M -Im³m, where M = S and Se¹¹. Structures of SnH_n compounds contain H_2^- , bent H_{4}^{-} , and linear H_{4}^{-} groups. Further experimental studies on the formation of SnH*n*, n = 8, 12 and 14 at high pressure are needed, and present results will serve as a guide for future experiments.





Pressure (GPa) $T_{c}(K)$ Structure λ $\omega_{log}(\mathbf{K})$ 91 ($\mu^* = 0.10$) I4/mmm 220 1 180 1025 SnH₄ 80 (µ*=0.13) 81 ($\mu^* = 0.10$) I4m2-SnH. 220 1.188 919 $72 (\mu^* = 0.13)$ 93 ($\mu^* = 0.10$) C2/m-SnH₁₂ 250 1.250 991 83 ($\mu^* = 0.13$) 97 ($\mu^* = 0.10$) 300 1.187 1099 C2/m-SnH14 86 ($\mu^{\star} = 0.13$)

Table 2. The calculated EPC parameter (λ), logarithmic average phonon frequency (ω_{log}) and critical temperature (T_c) (with $\mu^* = 0.10$ and 0.13) for metastable SnH₄, stable SnH₈, SnH₁₂ and SnH₁₄ at 220, 220, 250 and 300 GPa, respectively.

Methods

To find stable and low-enthalpy metastable structures, we took advantage of evolutionary algorithm implemented in USPEX code³⁰⁻³², which has been extensively used to predict stable crystal structures with just a knowledge of the chemical composition and without any experimental information^{15,33-35}.

In this method, the initial generation of structures and compositions is produced with the random symmetric algorithm³⁴, and subsequent generations are produced by carefully designed variation operators. In order to find all stable stoichiometric compounds and the corresponding stable and metastable structures in the Sn-H binary system, we used VCES method implemented in USPEX^{30,31}.

Structure relaxations were carried out using VASP package³⁶ in the framework of density functional theory (DFT) and using PBE-GGA (Perdew-Burke-Ernzerhof generalized gradient approximation)³⁷. The projector-augmented wave approach (PAW)³⁸ was used to describe the core electrons and their effects on valence orbitals. The plane-wave kinetic energy cutoff was chosen as 1000 eV for hard PAW potentials, and we used Γ -centered uniform *k*-points meshes to sample the Brillouin zone.

Phonons and thermodynamic properties of Sn-H compounds are calculated using the PHONOPY package^{25,39}. The supercell approach is used with supercell dimensions greater than 10 Å (typically $3 \times 3 \times 3$ replication of the primitive cell). We used valence electron configurations of $4d^{10}$ 5s² 5p² and 1s¹ for tin and hydrogen, respectively. Phonon frequencies and electron-phonon coupling (EPC) coefficients are calculated using DFPT as implemented in the Quantum ESPRESSO (QE) code⁴⁰. In the QE calculations, we employed ultrasoft pseudopotentials and PBE-GGA exchange-correlation functional³⁷. A plane-wave basis set with a cutoff of 70 Ry gave a convergence in energy with a precision of 1 meV/atom. The EPC parameter was calculated using $4 \times 4 \times 3$, $5 \times 5 \times 4$ and $5 \times 5 \times 4$ *q*-point meshes for I $\overline{4}$ m2-SnH₈, C2/m-SnH₁₂ and C2/m-SnH₁₄, respectively. Denser *k*-point meshes, $8 \times 8 \times 6$, $10 \times 10 \times 8$ and $10 \times 10 \times 8$ were used for convergence checks for the EPC parameter λ . The superconducting T_e, was estimated using the Allen-Dynes modified McMillan equation⁴¹:

$$T_c = \frac{\omega_{log}}{1.2} exp\left(\frac{-1.04(1+\lambda)}{\lambda - \mu^*(1+0.62\lambda)}\right)$$
(1)

where ω_{log} is the logarithmic average frequency and μ^* is the Coulomb pseudopotential, for which we used 0.10 and 0.13 values, which often give realistic results. The EPC constant and ω_{log} were calculated as:

$$\lambda = 2 \int_0^\infty \frac{\alpha^2 F(\omega)}{\omega} d\omega \tag{2}$$

and

$$\omega_{log} = \exp\left[\frac{2}{\lambda} \int \frac{d\omega}{\omega} \alpha^2 F(\omega) \ln(\omega)\right]$$
(3)

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Author Contributions

M.M.D.E. performed all the calculations presented in this article with help from Z.W., Q.Z. and H.D. Research was designed by A.R.O. S.W, M. R. and X-F. Z. analyzed data. M.M.D.E., A.R.O. and Z.W. wrote the first draft of the paper and all authors contributed to revisions.

Additional Information

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