Electronic Phase Diagram of Single-Element Silicon “Strain” Superlattices

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The evidence that the band gap of Si changes significantly with strain suggests that by alternating regions of strained and unstrained Si one creates a single-element electronic heterojunction superlattice (SL), with the carrier confinement defined by strain rather than by the chemical differences in conventional compositional SLs. Using first-principles calculations, we map out the electronic phase diagram of a one-dimensional pure-silicon SL. It exhibits a high level of phase tunability, e.g., tuning from type I to type II. Our theory rationalizes a recent observation of a strain SL in a Si nanowire and provides general guidance for the fabrication of single-element strain SLs.

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Since the concept of superlattice (SL) was introduced by Esaki and Tsu 40 years ago [1], this artificially engineered structure has created much interest in its fundamental physics (becoming by now a textbook example for studying quantum confinement and tunneling phenomena), and inspired a wide spectrum of technological advances in quantum devices, such as quantum cascade lasers [2] and new generations of solar cells [3].

Strain is well known for band engineering and has been widely used to improve the performance of Si devices by eliminating the low-mobility bands. A number of efforts to predict the relationship between strain and the band structure of Si have been made [4]. An amount of strain that is readily achievable in Si, of the order of 1%, leads to reduction in the band gap of approximately 20% [5]. The recognition that the band gap changes with strain suggests that if one could put strained Si next to unstrained Si, one would in essence create an electronic junction, and if one could put alternate strained and unstrained Si layers in sequence, one would produce a “single-element strain SL” with the band offsets defined by strain rather than by composition difference as in the case of conventional SLs.

The single-element strain SL has several unique advantages. One is the tunability of the band offset configuration (SL phases). In principle, all possible electronic band offset configurations can be achieved in the same SL by tuning the magnitude, sign, and period of strain. In compositional SLs the configuration of band offsets is chemically defined between any two given materials; changing composition can only change the magnitude of the band offset but not the type of SL phase. A second advantage of the single-element strain SL is that it can in principle be made in any material. The pure-Si SL is furthermore directly compatible with current Si technology. Additionally, strain tunes not only the electronic properties, but also the photonic and phonon properties. For example, if the strain period is made comparable to the wavelength of light in a single-

FIG. 1 (color online). Schematic illustration of a single-element strain SL and a conventional compositional SL. (a) Strain SL, in which the band offsets are provided by strain differences. (b) Compositional SL. Band alignments for either may be (c) type I, or (d) type II.
element strain SL, it automatically evolves also into a pho-
tonic crystal. As a novel form of low-dimensional nano-
structure, the single-element strain SL offers a wide range
of potential applications that combine the functionalities of
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modulators [8] and thermoelectric devices [9].

In this Letter, using first-principles calculations, we map
out the electronic phase diagram for a pure-Si strain SL.
We find that the SL phase can prevail only at sufficiently
large strain magnitude and period, below which it will form
a “strain” alloy phase. We also show that the SL phase can
be tuned from type I to type II by changing the sign of the
strain (compressive vs tensile). Our theory provides im-
portant guidelines for future experiments. For example, it
shows that the Si nanowire structure created in Huang’s
experiment [6] using SiGe nanostressors is a partial SL that
confines only electrons but not holes.

In the single-element SLs, it is clear that the strain
magnitude and period play the same roles as layer compo-
sition and thickness do in the conventional compositional
SLs. A key parameter to characterize an electronic junction
is the discontinuity of electronic bands at the interface, i.e.,
the band offsets. When the band gap of one layer lies
entirely within that of the other layer, electrons and holes
are both confined in the same layer (type I SL) [Fig. 1(b)].
In contrast, a “staggered” band lineup will confine elec-
trons and holes in different layers (type II SL) [Fig. 1(d)].
However, when the layer thickness is very small, band
offset can no longer confine the carriers. In such “short-
period” SLs, the states from different layers are strongly
hybridized and not distinguishable. Then, the concept of
band offsets is actually meaningless and the SL behaves
like an alloy [10]. Therefore, to characterize a single-
element strain SL, one needs to construct its electronic
phase diagram by self-consistent calculations to fully
quantify the degree of carrier confinement as a function
of strain magnitude ($\epsilon$) and period ($L$).

We have calculated band structures and charge distribu-
tions of a Si strain SL, in which uniaxial strain along the
(100) direction is periodically applied [see Fig. 2(b)]. By
evaluating the degree of carrier confinement in terms of
band-edge local density of states (BELDOS) as well as
single-valley wave functions, we are able to construct an
electronic phase diagram for the Si strain SL, shown in
Fig. 3. We see that the Si strain SL exhibits a very rich
phase diagram that consists of four different phases in five
separate regions in the parameter space of $\epsilon$ and $L$, in-
cluding the phases of “strain alloy,” type I, type II, and partial
SL. It demonstrates a high level of phase tunability, as all
the phases can be achieved by tuning $\epsilon$ and $L$. Similar
calculations can be performed for any other single-element
strain SLs. In the following we discuss in detail the calcu-
lations of the electronic phase diagram and its physical
implications.

Our calculations are performed within the framework of
density functional theory with a linear-combination-of-
atomic-orbital basis as implemented in the SIESTA code
[11]. The exchange-correlation functional is approximated
using the Ceperley-Alder data parameterized by Perdew
and Zunger [12]. Core electrons are replaced by ab initio
norm-conserving Troullier-Martini pseudopotentials. For
valence electrons, we use a double zeta polarization basis
set. An equivalent plane-wave cutoff of 150 Ry is chosen to
mesh the real-space grid. A fine $k$-space mesh in the
Monkhorst-Pack scheme is chosen to ensure convergence.
For Si, spin-orbital splitting of the valence bands is
0.044 eV, an order of magnitude smaller than strain-
induced band splitting and thus reasonably neglected in
our calculation.

The smallest unit cell of Si with one lattice vector along
the (100) direction contains 4 atoms, as indicated by the
dashed-line rectangles in Fig. 2(b). To model the strain
effect, a supercell is constructed containing equal numbers
of strained and unstrained cells. The lattice parameter for
unstrained Si is calculated to be 5.417 Å, which is used as
the reference of the strain-free lattice constant throughout
the calculation. The lattice vector of the strained cells
along the (100) direction is set to the desired strain magni-
tude, while the other two lattice vectors remain unchanged.

![FIG. 2 (color online). (a) A top-view scanning electron micro-
scope (SEM) image of 1D Si strain SLs fabricated by depositing
Ge quantum dots (dark area) on Si (001) nanoribbons [6].
(b) The supercell structure of a Si strain SL containing two
unit cells of unstrained Si and two unit cells of strained Si.](image)

![FIG. 3 (color online). Electronic phase diagram of the Si strain
SL. Region (a) Strain alloy; (b) type I SL; (c) type II SL;
(d) Partial SL. Light grey bands (unlabeled) are transition
regions between the phases.](image)
The atom positions in the cells simply scale with the lattice vectors. We should point out that this model neglects the strain relaxation around the interface and the Poisson effect, constrained by the supercell geometry and periodic boundary conditions. The inclusion of relaxation is beyond current computational capacity. On the other hand, finite-element analysis [6] shows that the change of axial strain magnitude at the interface is very sharp, so we expect relaxation would slightly broaden the phase boundaries, but without substantially modifying our results.

As shown by Van de Walle and Martin [13], the band offsets at the nonpolar $A/B$ interface can be fully determined by the bulk bands of materials $A$ and $B$, i.e., lining up the two sets of bands relative to a common reference level. So, the band offsets in the strain SL are fully determined by the strain-induced band shifting, i.e., the deformation potential, which has been widely studied for Si [5,14–16]. In general, the uniaxial strain, tensile or compressive, reduces the band gap of Si and leads to a type I alignment at the interface of Si and the strained Si. However, the composition of the edge states of the valence band maximum (VBM) and the conduction band minimum (CBM) changes with the sign of strain. This will embody much richer physical behavior in carrier confinement that cannot be characterized by just band offsets.

By examining the BELDOS of electrons and holes as a function of $\epsilon$ and $L$, in particular, the LDOS within 30 meV from the VBM and CBM, we define a phase indicator, $\text{PI} = \overline{D_{Si}}/\overline{D_{Si}}$, the ratio of average BELDOS in the unstrained layer ($\overline{D_{Si}}$) and strained layer ($\overline{D_{Si}}$, to quantify the degree of electron or hole confinement. The limiting case of a confined phase has $\text{PI} \approx 0$ or $\text{PI} \approx \infty$. For an extended carrier distribution without confinement, $\text{PI}$ is around 1. Figures 4(a) and 4(b) show the PI results in a 2D contour as a function of $\epsilon$ and $L$. The light grey area ($\text{PI} \approx 1$) indicates that the electrons or holes are extended. For these values of $\epsilon$ and $L$, the band structures are found to be almost identical to those of $\epsilon/2$ uniformly strained Si, suggesting that the carriers “feel” the average strain rather than the periodic strain, which is similar to the alloy phase in a compositional SL [10]. In this sense, the strain SL in this region can be viewed as a “strain” alloy.

A clear crossover from the extended-carrier distribution phase to the confined-carrier phase can be found. The most significant confinement occurs for electrons under compressive strain. When $\epsilon$ is higher than $-2\%$ and $L$ larger than 4 nm, $\overline{D_{Si}}/\overline{D_{Si}}$, is an order of magnitude smaller than $\overline{D_{Si}}$, which suggests that the electrons can be well confined down to a 2 nm strained layer (half of $L$) by compressive strain. This results from a relatively large band offset at the CBM, and also because the CBM consists of the $\Delta_T$ valleys in the strained layer [Fig. 4(c)], which have a large effective mass in the confinement direction. In contrast, under tensile strain, the CBM comes from the $\Delta_T$ valleys in the strained layer [Fig. 4(d)], which have a small effective mass in the confinement direction, so that no noticeable confinement is observed from the PI plot, even though there is still band offset at large tensile strain. The anisotropy of the effective mass of holes is not as strong as that of electrons, so that both compressive strain and tensile strain can confine holes. Typically, when the magnitude of the strain is larger than 4%, holes can be confined down to a 4 nm strained layer.

By combining the PI plot for electrons and holes, we can draw the conclusion that compressive strain with $\epsilon < -4\%$ and $L > 5$ nm leads to a type I SL, in which electrons and holes are both strongly confined in the strained layer. As shown in Fig. 4(c), both the CBM edge states, consisting of Kronig-Penney subbands of $\Delta_L$ valleys, and the VBM edge states localize in the strained region. In contrast, tensile strain with $\epsilon > 4\%$ and $L > 5$ nm leads to a $\Delta_T$-valley type II SL, in which the electrons from the $\Delta_L$ valley are confined in the unstrained layer while holes are confined in the strained layer. As shown in Fig. 4(d), the CBM edge states consist of a $\Delta_T$ valley in the strained layer but a mixture of $\Delta_T$ and $\Delta_L$ in the unstrained layer. Because only the electrons in the $\Delta_L$ valley are localized in the unstrained layer ($\Delta_T$ electrons are extended) and all the holes are confined in the strained layer, it forms a $\Delta_T$-valley type II SL, in which the localized $\Delta_E$ electrons and holes are spatially separated. We note that in both Figs. 4(c) and 4(d), there is only one single valley along the $\Delta_T$ direction in both the strained and unstrained layers. This is a result of strong band mixing so that $\Delta_T$ valleys always remain in the alloy phase within the calculated range.

FIG. 4 (color online). Calculated isovalue contours of PI for (a) electrons and (b) holes as a function of $\epsilon$ and $L$. Band diagrams of (c) type I ($\epsilon = -4\%$, $L = 5.4$ nm) and (d) type II ($\epsilon = 4\%$, $L = 5.4$ nm) Si strain SLs. The insets in (c) and (d) are schematic (not to scale) band lineups and isosurface ($\leq 0.06 e/\AA^3$) plots of wave functions at the direct band edge, as indicated by the two dots at the $\Gamma$ point.
The outcome of the $\Delta L$-valley type II phase under tensile strain [Fig. 4(d)] is achieved also because the inter-valley scattering, from the $\Delta L$ valley in the unstrained layer to the $\Delta T$ valley in the strained layer, is forbidden by the selection rules. The $\Delta L$-valley states in the unstrained layer have a nearly zero momentum along the (010) and (001) (transverse) directions, while the $\Delta T$-valley states in the strained layer have large transverse momenta. Because the periodic uniaxial strain does not break the translational symmetry in the transverse directions, the hopping of carriers between the strained and unstrained layers can proceed only if their transverse momenta are conserved. Hence, it is forbidden for an electron to hop from the $\Delta L$ valleys in the unstrained layer to the $\Delta T$ valleys in the strained layer. We also note that in the unstrained layer all 6 conduction valleys are populated because the $\Delta L$ and $\Delta T$ valleys are separated by a very small energy difference (for $e = 4\%$, $L = 5.4$ nm, it is $35$ meV), while in the strained layer only $4\Delta T$ valleys are populated because the $\Delta L$ valleys are of much higher energy. This makes PI to be roughly 1.5 under large tensile strain [Fig. 4(a)].

Finally, using all the calculations, including band offsets, BELDOS, and single-valley wave functions, we construct the electronic phase diagram of the Si strain SL by defining specific PI isovales as the phase boundaries (Fig. 3). Because the crossover between different phases is gradual, the boundaries should be viewed as transition regions rather than critical points. In Fig. 3, we use PI $< 0.2$ to identify the fully confined phase with carriers confined in the strained layer, and PI $> 1.45$ to identify the solely $\Delta L$ valley confined phase with electrons confined in the unstrained layer. The width of the transition region is chosen to be $\Delta PI = 0.2$. After plotting the contours for both electrons and holes, the entire $e - L$ parameter space is divided into five regions defining four distinct electronic phases. (a) Alloy. When either $e$ or $L$ is small, the system behaves like a strain alloy. (b) Type I SL. Compressive strain ($|e| > 4\%$, $d > 8$ nm) confines both electrons and holes in the strained layer. (c) ($\Delta L$ valley) Type II SL. Tensile strain ($e > 3\%$, $d > 5$ nm) confines the $\Delta L$ electrons in the unstrained layer, while holes are confined in the strained layer. (d) Partial SL. In these intermediate strain regions, only electrons are confined but not holes, because electrons reach the confined phase first with the increasing strain.

The phase diagram provides a useful basis for further investigations of this new type of SL. It suggests various possibilities for strain engineering to modulate the electronic properties of Si. For example, a recent experiment has shown the possibility of fabricating a strain superlattice in a SiGe nanoribbon without using the nanostressors of a second material [17]. By choosing specific combinations of strain magnitude and period, we can realize confinement for specific carriers, e.g., electrons vs holes, or $\Delta L$ valleys vs $\Delta T$ valleys. In Huang’s experiment [6], the periodic strain is created on the 50–100 nm scale, but the strain magnitude induced by the Ge quantum dots is less than 2%, so the system should stay in the partial SL phase and confinement effects can only be observed for electrons. However, type I or type II SLs are expected to be accomplished by choosing other nanostressors or using different materials as the host.

Our systematic analysis of the 1D Si strain SL has allowed us to draw some general conclusions to expand the concept of strain SL to other materials and 2D structures. In a given strain SL, the carrier confinement is a result of three factors: (1) the deformation potential, which determines the band shifting; (2) the band-edge valleys, which determine the coupling between layers; and (3) the effective mass, which determines the confinement sensitivity. All three factors are material dependent and will give rise to a material’s characteristic electronic response to a periodic strain. Furthermore, in a 2D strain SL, the periodic potential is introduced in two directions; hence, the in-plane anisotropy of the effective mass of carriers is expected to result in even more interesting confinement behaviors. The unique properties of this class of low-dimensional nanoscale strain SLs, based on new fundamental physical phenomena, may enable a wide range of possible applications.

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