Dimensionality-dependent charge transport in close-packed nanoparticle arrays: from 2D to 3D

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Charge transport properties in close-packed nanoparticle arrays with thickness crossing over from two dimensions to three dimensions have been studied. The dimensionality transition of nanoparticle arrays was realized by continually printing spatially well-defined nanoparticle monolayers on top of the device in situ. The evolution of charge transport properties depending on the dimensionality has been investigated in both the Efros-Shaklovskii variable-range-hopping (ES-VRH) (low temperature) regime and the sequential hopping (SH) (medium temperature) regime. We find that the energy barriers to transport decrease when the thickness of nanoparticle arrays increases from monolayer to multilayers, but start to level off at the thickness of 4–5 monolayers. The energy barriers are characterized by the coefficient $b_D$ at ES-VRH regime and the activation energy $E_a$ at SH regime. Moreover, a turning point for the temperature coefficient of conductance was observed in multilayer nanoparticle arrays at high temperature, which is attributed to the increasing mobility with decreasing temperature of hopping transport in three dimensions.

Nanoparticle arrays are composed of close-packed monolayer-encapsulated metallic or semiconductor nanoparticles arranged into one- (1D)1–3, two- (2D)4,5, and three- (3D) dimensions6–10. The controllability of parameters of nanoparticle arrays11 makes them appropriate for investigating physical properties of granular electronic systems12–15. It has been found that the collective properties of nanoparticle arrays are determined not only by the properties of individual nanoparticles, but also by the coupling between each other16–22. Particularly, extensive effort has been devoted to study the charge transport in nanoparticle assembles and composite films12,14,16,23–27. In these studies, the Coulomb charging energy is one of the most important energy scales in determining the charge transport behavior11,28,29.

On the other hand, dimensionality is critically important in determining the electronic structure and properties of materials30. As a typical example, although graphite, graphene, and carbon nanotube are composed of the same carbon atoms, they have entirely different electronic structure and properties due to their different dimensions31. In the field of nanoscience, one important and interesting issue is to study and understand the evolution of material properties during the crossover of dimensions32–35. For nanoparticle arrays, various techniques have been developed to fabricate 1D, 2D, and 3D nanoparticle arrays so that their physical properties can be investigated14,16,26–38. Particularly, Heath and his coworkers have made an impressive progress33 in the study of dimensionality transition of nanoparticle assembles. They fabricated nanoparticle arrays that continuously crossover from 2D to 1D. The transport properties of these nanoparticle arrays were investigated and some unexpected behaviors were found solely in 1D nanoparticle arrays. Despite this exciting progress, it remains a great challenge to fabricate nanoparticle arrays that can crossover from 2D to 3D continuously39. As a consequence, the evolution of the transport properties of nanoparticle array during the transition of the dimensionality from 2D to 3D is unclear up to now. In this paper, we overcame the difficulty of preparing nanoparticle arrays continuously crossing over from 2D to 3D. The thickness of the nanoparticle array under test could be increased monolayer by monolayer in situ. This enables us to investigate the evolution of the charge transport properties of nanoparticle arrays during dimensionality transition.

Figure 1 illustrates the sample preparation method used in this paper, with which we can fabricate spatially well-defined nanoparticle arrays and increase their thickness layer by layer. The method is based on the technique to fabricate patterned nanoparticle arrays developed by our group previously40. In brief, 2D nanoparticle monolayers were self-assembled at the air/water interface by spreading several drops of solution containing octanethiol-capped 13 nm gold nanoparticles (Fig. 1a) on the water surface. After evaporation of the solvent (chloroform), the
Figure 1 | Schematic diagram of fabrication of two-dimensional to three-dimensional patterned close-packed nanoparticle arrays and SEM characterization of one measured device. (a), Several drops of chloroformic solution containing octanethiol-capped gold nanoparticles were cast onto a slightly convex deionized water surface in a Teflon container. (b), With the evaporation of the solvent, nanoparticles self-assembled into an ordered compact 2D monolayer at the air/water interface, as shown in the top inset. (c), A flat PDMS stamp was used to transfer the nanoparticle sheet from the air/water interface onto the substrate surface with designed electrodes prepared using lithographic techniques. (d), Schematic of the device with one nanoparticle superlattice. By simply repeating the same transferring process, devices with a continuous change of the number of monolayers were obtained. (e), SEM image of a typical device used for the electrical measurements, which contains 15 identical nanoparticle monolayers. Magnified SEM image of the area framed by the rectangle in (e) is shown in (g). (f), Tilted SEM image of the device shown in (e). Magnified SEM image of the area framed by the rectangle in (f) is shown in (h).
of the data sets is that the conductance increases obviously from monolayer to few multilayers, but starts to level off after stacking 4–5 monolayers. For fewer multilayers, the zero-voltage conductance is beyond the limit of our measurement system at low temperature. This explains that there are fewer data points for thinner multilayers.

The linear relationship between $\ln G_0$ and $T^{-1/2}$ indicates the charge transport mechanism at low temperature. Two theoretic models have predicted similar results: the ES-VRH model and the elastic/inelastic cotunneling model. Here, we choose ES-VRH model to interpret our data. The ES-VRH model was developed to explain the hopping transport in weakly doped semiconductors with taking account of the Coulomb interactions. Now, this model has been widely applied in artificial solids made from metallic or semiconductor nanoparticles. According to the ES-VRH model, the zero-voltage conductance and the temperature follow the formula:

$$G(T) \propto \exp\left[-(T_0/T)^{1/2}\right], \quad T_0 = \frac{\beta_D e^2}{4\pi\hbar a k_B}$$

where $\beta_D$ is the coefficient depending on the system dimensionality $D$, and $a$ is the localization length of carriers. The slopes of the data set shown in Fig. 2a were extracted and shown in the inset of Fig. 2b with respect to the number of printed nanoparticle monolayers. In weakly coupled nanoparticle arrays, the localization length is estimated by the diameter of the nanoparticle, which is $\sim 13$ nm in our system. Considering that the coefficient $\beta_D$ is 6.5 in 2D systems suggested by theory and simulations, an effective dielectric constant $\varepsilon = 4.8$ for octane-ethiol-capped gold nanoparticle arrays has to be assumed. Based on this assumption, the coefficient $\beta_D$ can be obtained as a function of the thickness of nanoparticle arrays. Intuitively, $\beta_D$ is expected to decrease with increasing the dimensionality from 2D to 3D by printing more and more nanoparticle monolayers. However, to our surprise, the coefficient $\beta_D$ decreases deeply in the first 4–5 nanoparticle layers, and starts to fluctuate in thicker arrays. In detail, the coefficient is 6.5 for the 2D array and decreases to 2.8 for the tetrayeral array, which is nicely consistent with that suggested by theory and simulations for 3D systems. When the number of layers is more than 4, the coefficient fluctuates between 2.4 and 3.0 up to 15 layers.

Note that although the specific value of the coefficient $\beta_D$ depends on the effective dielectric constant that we use, the ratio between coefficients does not change. The dimensionality-dependent coefficient characterizes the energy barrier for conductance by establishing percolating hopping paths through the arrays. The transition of the coefficient suggests that the energy barrier for arrays with 4–5 nanoparticle layers is similar to that of 3D nanoparticle arrays. The data indicates that the energy barrier decreases very fast for the first few layers and levels off for more layers. The crossover from 2D to 3D happening in a few monolayers analogies to that from 1D to 2D, which happens in a few lines of nanoparticles.

To characterize the transition of the energy barrier during the change of the dimensionality, we turn our eyes to the transport properties in the medium temperature range. Our data suggest that the zero-voltage conductance between 75 K and 130 K follows Arrhenius behavior, as shown in the inset of Fig. 3a (also see Supporting Information). In the VRH model, this happens when the nearest neighbor hopping is most favored. According to the thermally activated Arrhenius model, the zero-voltage conductance and the temperature follow the formula:

$$G(T) \propto \exp\left(-\frac{E_a}{k_B T}\right)$$

where $E_a$ is the activation energy, which is supposed to be a good estimation of the Coulomb charging energy in metallic nanoparticle arrays. The activation energies determined by data fitting are shown in Fig. 3a as a function of the number of printed monolayers. Our data show that the activation energy decreases deeply with increasing the thickness of the nanoparticle array for the first four layers from 15.1 meV to 10.1 meV. Afterward, the activation energy fluctuates between 9 meV and 10 meV with increasing more nanoparticle monolayers.

The change trend of the activation energy reminds us to compare it with that of the coefficient $\beta_D$ presented in Fig. 2b. Interestingly, both of them have similar change trend, i.e., decreasing rapidly with increasing the first four monolayers and leveling off for printed more monolayers. The reason for the similarity might be attributed to the physical meaning of these two parameters. On one hand, the coefficient $\beta_D$ is dimensionality-dependent and should increase with
decreasing the dimensionality, meaning that the energy barrier for conductance is higher to percolate through the system with reducing the dimensions. On the other hand, the activation energy $E_a$ is used to estimate the Coulomb charging energy of nanoparticles, which is the energy needed to add an extra electron onto an electronically neutral nanoparticle. The similar change trend of $E_a$ and $E_{\text{aq}}$ indicates that both of them characterize the same energy barrier in the system, but at different temperature ranges. In other words, the energy barrier for conductance in weakly coupled nanoparticle arrays stems from the Coulomb charging energy.

For an individual nanoparticle, the Coulomb charging energy might be influenced by several parameters, including the size of the nanoparticle, the inter-particle distance, the dielectric constant of the surroundings, and the nearest-neighbor-number ($N$)\(^4\). In our case, the nanoparticles are from the same batch, indicating the same average size. The capping ligands are octanethiols, suggesting the similar inter-particle distance and the same dielectric constant of the surroundings. The only dramatically changed parameter is the dimensionality of the system, by which we expect to change $N$. For a nanoparticle in a 2D array, $N$ is approximately 6. However, it increases to 9 in a bilayer and 12 in a multilayer. The inset in Fig. 3b schematically shows the change of $N$ in a monolayer (left), bilayer (middle), and multilayer (right). The relation between the Coulomb charging energy $E_a$ and $N$ is bridged by the capacitance $C_{\text{total}}$ of the nanoparticle.

$$E = \frac{e^2}{2C_{\text{total}}} \Rightarrow C_{\text{total}} = C_{\text{self}} + N C_{\text{mutual}}$$

where $C_{\text{self}}$ is the self-capacitance and $C_{\text{mutual}}$ is the capacitance between two neighboring nanoparticles. From the measured activation values for monolayer and tetrayer, the ratio of $C_{\text{self}}$ to $C_{\text{mutual}}$ can be determined, $C_{\text{self}} = 3.13C_{\text{mutual}}$. The measured and calculated normalized activation energies are shown in Fig. 3b. The same change trend and good satisfaction between measured data and calculated data infer that our model is reasonable. The increase of the dimensionality lowers the activation energy, therefore the energy barrier for conduction, by changing the mutual capacitance of nanoparticle through $N$.

In the high temperature region, new feature appears in the relationship between the zero-voltage conductance and the temperature.

As shown in the shaded box in Fig. 4a, the temperature coefficient of conductance turns from positive to negative for multilayer arrays thicker than 4 or 5 monolayers. In the literature, similar transition of the temperature coefficient of conductance has been reported for 2D or 3D nanoparticle arrays\(^{52-57}\). The mechanism of the transition has not been clearly understood, although Mott-Hubbard metal-to-insulator transition\(^{52,54-56}\), polaron transport\(^{53}\), and thermal expansion of the substrates\(^{57}\) have been proposed. However, our data can be understood in the frame of hopping transport instead of mentioned mechanisms above.

Generally, the relation between mobility and diffusion in three dimensions can be described by Einstein’s equation:

$$\mu = \frac{ed^2}{6\tau_{\text{hop}}k_BT}$$

where $\tau_{\text{hop}}^{-1}$ is the effective hopping rate. Suppose hopping is a thermally activated process,

$$\tau_{\text{hop}}^{-1} = \tau_0^{-1}e^{\frac{-E_a}{k_BT}}$$

where $\tau_0^{-1}$ is the attempt frequency of hopping\(^{50}\). The number of carrier in nanoparticle arrays is also thermally activated, which gives $n_e \sim e^{\frac{-E_a}{k_BT}}$. Consequently, the conductivity of the system can be expressed as: $\sigma \sim e^{-2E_a/k_BT}$. Based on this relation, we expect that the conductivity, therefore the conductance, increases with decreasing temperature up to $T = 2E_a/k_B$. Figure 4b shows four curves plotted according to the above relationship between conductance and temperature. The activation energy values for these four curves correspond to that of nanoparticle arrays from monolayer to tetrayer. The transition point in the curve with the smallest activation energy (10.1 meV) is at the temperature of 234 K. From the measured $E_a$ values presented in Fig. 2a, the transition temperature is estimated to be in the range from 208 K to 232 K, considering the fluctuation of the activation energy between 9 meV and 10 meV. In fact, Fig. 4a shows that the transition temperature is $190 \pm 20$ K, which satisfactorily agrees with the estimation value and the analytical value.

In summary, charge transport properties of nanoparticle arrays were measured when the dimensionality was continuously changed from 2D to 3D. The evolution of the transport properties has been
Figure 4 | The turning point of the temperature coefficient of conductance at high temperatures in 3D nanoparticle arrays. (a), The zero-voltage conductance of nanoparticle arrays with different thickness is plotted as a function of temperature. To see the turning point more clearly, a semi-log scale is used. The shaded box indicates the temperature region where the turning point appears when the thickness of nanoparticles is more than 4–5 nanoparticle monolayers. (b), Curves plotted according to the relationship between the conductance and temperature shown in the inset. Here, the conductance is not in real unit, but in arbitrary unit (a.u.). To make the curves more readable, the blue, red, and black curves have been divided by 10, 8, and 5, respectively. The activation energy, \(E_a\), is treated as a variable. Curves plotted with different activation energy are using different symbols: 15.1 meV (■), 13.7 meV (▲), 11.5 meV (●), and 10.1 meV (○).

Methods

Self-assembly of two-dimensional nanoparticle arrays at the air/water interface. Octanethiol-capped gold nanoparticles (~13 nm in diameter) were prepared and dispersed in chloroform using the colloidal method described in the literature).

Firstly, a homemade Teflon container was cleaned carefully using the tube brush and washed several times with deionized water to remove the ion. Then, the container was filled with ~20 ml deionized water, and a slightly convex water surface was produced. The self-assembly process was performed, when ~400 µl nanoparticle solution was cast onto the water surface. After 10 minutes, the chloroform evaporated, leading to the formation of ordered 2D nanoparticle arrays.

Micro-contact printing of 2D nanoparticle arrays. Flat PDMS Stamps were prepared using clean silicon chips in accordance with the procedure described in the literature.

After the PDMS was peeled off the template, a scalpel was used to cut it into suitable size. Then, one of such PDMS stamps was cleaned ultrasonically in ethanol and dried by nitrogen gas. As it is described in the Langmuir-Schaefer technique, the cleaned stamp was brought to contact the nanoparticle film for 10 s and lifted carefully away from the film. A piece of clean soft paper was used to absorb away the water drops at the edge of the PDMS stamp. After that, the inked stamp was gently placed on the pre-fabricated substrates and lifted slightly from one end to another ten seconds later. The close-packed 2D nanoparticle array was printed on the substrate.

Device fabrication on a SiO\(_2\)/Si substrate. Devices with designed structures on a SiO\(_2\)/Si substrate were fabricated using micro-nanofabrication techniques. At the very beginning, the gap between two electrodes was defined by photolithography (SUSS MicroTec, MJ84). Metals of 5 nm Ti, 20 nm Au, and 50 nm Cr were deposited by an electron beam evaporator (Kurt J. Lesker AXSIS). After the lift-off process in acetone, another photolithography was done to define the width of trenches of devices, followed by the deposition of 70 nm Cr. After lift-off, dry etching was performed by an inductively coupled plasma machine (TRION). Removal of Cr layers was carried out by wet etching in Chromium etchant (pursed from ALDRICH).

Characterization and charge transport measurements. Structures and devices were mainly characterized by SEM (FEI Quanta 600). The charge transport properties of devices were measured with a homemade electronic measurement system. The main component of the channel was a cycling refrigerator (CRYOEMEC) with helium as the refrigerant to lower ambient temperature of the device down to 4 K. The I-V curves were collected using a data acquisition card. A current amplifier (Keithley 428) was used to amplify the current. The temperature of the devices was controlled by a temperature controller (Lake Shore, Model 332).

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Acknowledgments
This work was financially supported by the Ministry of Science and Technology of the People’s Republic of China (No. 2011CB933001, 2012CB932702) and the National Natural Science Foundation of China (no. 60971001).

Author contributions
Y.W. and J.L. designed the research; J.L. supervised the project; Y.W. and C.D. performed electronic measurements; Y.W. carried out all experiments; Y.W. and J.L. analyzed data and wrote the main manuscript text. L.P. analyzed data. All authors reviewed the manuscript.

Additional information
Supplementary information accompanies this paper at http://www.nature.com/scientificreports

Competing financial interests: The authors declare no competing financial interests.

How to cite this article: Wang, Y.; Duan, C.; Peng, L. & Liao, J. Dimensionality-dependent charge transport in close-packed nanoparticle arrays: from 2D to 3D. *Sci. Rep.* **4**, 7565; DOI:10.1038/srep07565 (2014).