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Jian Sun, Russell S. Deacon, Xiaochi Liu, Jun Yao, and Koji Ishibashi

COLLECTIONS

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Lock-in Amplifiers up to 600 MHz
Spin filtering in germanium/silicon core/shell nanowires with pseudo-helical gap

Jian Sun,1,2,a) Russell S. Deacon,2,3 Xiaochi Liu,1 Jun Yao,4 and Koji Ishibashi2,3

AFFILIATIONS
1School of Physics and Electronics, Central South University, 932 South Lushan Road, Changsha 410083, China
2Advanced Device Laboratory, RIKEN, 2-1 Hirosawa, Wako, Saitama 351-0198, Japan
3Center for Emergent Matter Science, RIKEN, 2-1 Hirosawa, Wako, Saitama 351-0198, Japan
4Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, Institute for Applied Life Sciences, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts 01003, USA

a)Author to whom correspondence should be addressed: jian.sun@csu.edu.cn

ABSTRACT

Semiconductors with strong spin–orbit interactions can exhibit a helical gap with spin-momentum locking opened by a magnetic field. Such a gap is highly spin selective as a result of a topologically protected spin-momentum locking, which can be used for spin filtering. We experimentally demonstrate such a spin filtering effect in a quasi-ballistic $p$-type germanium/silicon core/shell nanowire (NW), which possesses a pseudo-helical gap without the application of magnetic field. Polarized hole spin injection to the NW is achieved using cobalt ferromagnetic contacts with controlled natural surface oxide on the NW as a tunnel barrier. Local and nonlocal spin valve effects are measured as the verification of polarized spin transport in the NW outside the helical gap. We electrically tune the NW into the helical gap by scanning its chemical potential with a gate. A hysteresis loop with three resistance states is observed in the local spin valve geometry, as an evidence of spin filtering in the helical gap.

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Germanium/silicon core/shell nanowires (NWs) are a promising material platform for spintronics. Owing to a large valence band offset of $\sim 0.5 \text{ eV}$ between Ge and Si, holes of the concentration of $\sim 10^{17} \text{ cm}^{-3}$ are naturally accumulated in the Ge core and strongly confined by the interface with the Si shell.1–3 The dopant-free growth leads to high mobility with the mean free path up to $\sim 500 \text{ nm}$. As group IV semiconductors, Ge and Si have a low density of nuclear spins or can be grown with zero net nuclear spin, which may highly suppress the hyperfine coupling induced spin relaxation. A long spin relaxation on the order of milliseconds has been reported.4 In addition, the hole system offers several potential advantages for spintronics. Having an effective spin number of $3/2$, hole spin and momentum are strongly coupled to enable electric field-mediated spin manipulation. Moreover, hole spin lifetimes can be further prolonged in the presence of confinement.5,6 More importantly, Ge/Si NWs possess a strong dipole-coupled Rashba type spin–orbit interaction as a result of the quasi-degeneracy in its low energy valence bands.7 In one-dimensional channels possessing strong Rashba spin–orbit interaction, two spin-degenerate subbands are shifted laterally in momentum space, therefore lifting the spin degeneracy. By applying a magnetic field perpendicular to the spin–orbit field, a helical gap is opened at the band touching point, inside of which spin-momentum locking is topologically protected.8 By tuning the chemical potential electrostatically using a gate, the transport in the NW can be effectively set inside and out of the helical gap. In one-dimensional ballistic NWs, such a helical gap is detected as a re-entrant conductance feature on quantized conductance plateaus of integer multiples of $2e^2/h$ in transport measurements.9–11

The spin-momentum locking allows the helical gap to be employed for spin filtering. This has been predicted in a different system, i.e., topological insulators with edge helical states.12,13 So far, we are not aware of any reports on polarized spin transport in the Ge/Si NW. Such measurements are challenging as fields required to open a helical gap can be of order of a few tesla. Fortunately, in Ge/Si NWs, the strongly correlated two-particle backscattering induces a pseudo-helical gap at zero magnetic field, enabling its potential applications in spintronics at low fields.10,11

In this study, we realize polarized hole spin injection into a 300 nm-long quasi-ballistic Ge/Si core/shell NW by using cobalt ferromagnetic (FM) contacts with controlled natural oxide on the NW as a
tunnel barrier. A spin valve effect is measured in both nonlocal and local configurations, revealing the polarized spin transport, when the NW is gated outside the helical gap. By electrically tuning the transport in the NW inside the pseudo-helical gap with a gate, a hysteresis loop is observed in the local spin valve, which is ascribed to the spin filtered transport.

Epitaxial Ge/Si core/shell NWs were synthesized by a two-step vapor–liquid–solid method, which has been described elsewhere.\textsuperscript{14} The typical Ge/Si NWs used in this work have a single crystalline germanium core of \( \sim 7 \) nm in diameter and \( \sim 5 \) nm-thick silicon shell. Figure 1(a) shows an example high resolution transmission electron microscope (HRTEM) image of a NW. The interface between the Ge core and the Si shell can be clearly identified from the electron transmission contrast. The relatively rough surface is due to the amorphous native silicon oxide formed naturally. Device fabrication starts from dry-transferring a commercial available h-BN flake (Momentum, Polartherm grade PT110) of \( \sim 30 \) nm-thickness onto a 15 nm pre-defined gold gate on a SiO2/Si substrate using a home-made mechanical manipulator with a viscoelastic membrane (Gelfilm, Gelpak).\textsuperscript{15,16} Gold electrodes and pads for wire bonding are defined from Ti/Au (10 nm/60 nm) using e-beam lithography and evaporation. Then, the NW was transferred onto the h-BN using a PMMA stamping technique described in detail elsewhere.\textsuperscript{17} Figure 1(b) shows a transferred NW on h-BN/gate with gold electrodes nearby. Finally, four 80 nm-thick cobalt ferromagnetic (FM) contacts with various widths were deposited on the NW. A 20 nm-thick gold capping layer is used to protect cobalt from oxidation. Before evaporation, a short dip in buffered hydrofluoric acid is carried out to strip the thick natural oxide from the surface of the NW. The different widths of the FM contacts ensure that their magnetization will be reversed at different fields. A larger width gives a lower exchange energy barrier and hence a smaller coercive field.

Figure 1(c) shows one as-fabricated NW device. The key geometric parameters are indicated in the upper cross section schematic. Short NW channels of 300 nm are defined between four contacts.

The inner cobalt contacts C1 and C2 having the widths of 1.2 \( \mu \)m and 0.5 \( \mu \)m are designed for the spin injection and detection, respectively. The outer two wide contacts having the width \( > 5 \) \( \mu \)m are expected to have a negligibly low coercive field compared to the inner two. Measurements were performed in a pumped He-4 refrigerator at 1.5 K. The device is mounted on the sample insert with the long axes of its FM contacts aligned with the external B field as illustrated in Fig 1(c). The differential conductance \( G \) was measured using standard lock-in techniques with a low frequency of 74.7 Hz.

It is known that a huge conductivity mismatch exists between metal contacts and semiconductors, which makes it challenging to detect the spin-polarization of electrons/holes flowing across a typical contact.\textsuperscript{18} One of the commonly employed approaches to address this issue requires a tunnel barrier made using molecular beam epitaxy or atomic layer deposited thin insulating layers at the contact interface, which is technically challenging, especially on a nanowire.\textsuperscript{9,20} Here, we demonstrate that a thin natural oxide formed on the NW by a controlled air exposure after HF etching could act as a tunnel barrier for spin injection. Figure 2(a) shows the differential conductance measured between C1 and C2 as a function of DC bias at various gate voltages. The non-linearity highlights the tunneling nature of the contacts, while the symmetric curve reveals that the identical barriers are induced at the Co/NW interfaces by the natural oxidation. Figure 2(b) plots the gate dependence of differential conductance. The p-doping characteristic is noted by the enhanced conductance with negatively ramped gate voltage. Compared to the Ohmic contacted 300 nm-long NWs reported previously,\textsuperscript{11} the conductance is one order of magnitude lower due to the existence of the tunnel barrier. We emphasize

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{(a) HRTEM image of a Ge/Si core/shell nanowire with a 7 nm single crystalline Ge core and a 5 nm-thick Si shell. A clear interface between Ge and Si is noted and highlighted by the red dashed lines. Scale bar: 10 nm. (b) Optical microscopy photo of a nanowire transferred on the h-BN flake covered pre-defined-gate, which is identified as a dark line. Pre-defined gold contact electrodes are also shown. (c) Optical microscopy photo of a fabricated lateral spin valve device of Ge/Si core/shell nanowire. Scale bar: 5 \( \mu \)m. Upper panel: schematics showing the key dimensions of the device.}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure2.png}
\caption{(a) Differential conductance \( G \) vs DC bias \( V_{sd} \) between terminals 3 and 4 with various gate voltages \( V_g \). (b) Gate dependence of differential conductance \( G \) at various DC biases \( V_{sd} \). (c) Charge stability diagram showing the differential conductance \( G \) measured at various \( V_g \) and \( V_{sd} \). Lozenge patterns are noted as the signature of Fabry–Pérot interference, which are highlighted by the red dashed lines. Light blue dashes indicate the identified perimeters of the blurry diamonds. Red and green dots indicate the measured points at a bias of 10 mV with the gate voltages of \(-9 \) V and \(-7.5 \) V, respectively.}
\end{figure}
that a low spin injection efficiency is anticipated with this suboptimal tunnel barrier.

Periodic oscillations are found superimposed on the transport curves, especially at zero bias. To understand the origin of the oscillations, we measure the charge stability diagram by scanning both gate voltage and DC bias [Fig. 2(c)]. The oscillations forming the lozenge shapes near zero bias resemble Fabry–Pérot interference.11 Previously, the “diamonds” corresponding to quantized conductance plateaus and helical gaps have been observed in the charge stability diagram measured in the Ohmic contacted 300 nm-long NWs.11 Also considering the long mean free path of >500 nm of the NW, we infer that the ballistic transport is still realized in this 300 nm-long short NW junction. However, the FM contacts with tunnel barriers required for spin injection hinder the clear measurements of quantized conductance and helical states, for which high quality Ohmic contacts are necessary. With these Schottky contacts, the quantized conductance plateaus are inevitably smeared out heavily by the high resistance background and severe oscillations.22 Hence, when holes propagate phase coherently in the NW, they experience multiple partial reflections at the contact interfaces, therefore leading to Fabry–Pérot oscillations. We note that the observation of a visually clear re-entrant conductance is not a prerequisite for investigating the spin filtering effect. The spin-momentum locking is topologically protected anyway in the quasi-ballistic NW. Nevertheless, the re-entrant conductance feature if observable would make it easier to locate a helical gap. Otherwise, careful scanning of the gate voltage is compulsory to search for the distinct features originating from the helical gap. An Ohmic contacted NW device with a similar geometry and h-BN dielectric in our previous work,11 we speculate that there is only one conduction channel. However, the FM contacts with tunnel barriers required for spin injection with the anti-parallel magnetization between C1 and C2. Figures 4(a) and 4(b) present the results of these two measurements. The relative resistance change at magnetic field B, the so-called MR ratio which is defined as (R(B) – R(0))/R(0), is also provided for both measurements. Large backgrounds are found in both measurements, which mainly originate from the Schottky contact with natural oxide as a barrier. A difference of 0.37 × 2e²/h between two background signals is consistent with the conductance re-entrant of the helical gap considering a finite temperature and superimposed Fabry–Pérot oscillations.11,22

More interestingly, two completely distinct magnetic field dependences are noted. The one measured at Vg = −9 V exhibits the typical peak-like local spin valve signal. Due to the parallel and anti-parallel magnetizations in the two FM contacts, low and high resistance backgrounds are found in both measurements, which mainly originate from the Schottky contact with natural oxide as a barrier. A difference of 0.37 × 2e²/h between two background signals is consistent with the conductance re-entrant of the helical gap considering a finite temperature and superimposed Fabry–Pérot oscillations.11,22
transport inside the helical gap with a low spin injection efficiency. Scanning the channel by spin-momentum locking. Although up-spins can still be injected, they are fully blocked in the NW, leading to a spin selective transport. Here, we consider the situation that only the down-spins are allowed to transport in the NW.

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

FIG. 4. Magnetoresistance measured between C1 and C2 with a constant DC bias of 10 mV at (a) Vg = -9 V [red dot in Fig. 2(c)] and (b) Vg = -7.5 V [green dot in Fig. 2(c)]. The shadowed regions indicate the field range of the antiparallel magnetization in C1 and C2. The right y-axes show the MR ratio. (c) Upper: schematic showing the spin filtering in the helical gap with a fixed momentum direction k. Lower: illustrations of three resistance states I, II, and III in the up scan of B when the channel is in helical gap (gray area in the above energy diagram) with a right-pointing momentum. The wide arrows in the contacts indicate the polarization direction as well as the majority spin orientation, while the narrow arrows indicate the minority spin due to the low spin injection efficiency. The large and small size spin cartoons denote the major and minor spins injected at the left FM contact, respectively. The thickness of the arrows indicates the strength of the corresponding spin flow.

See the supplementary material for the charge stability diagram, nonlocal spin valve measurements at various gate voltages and in a different device, spin filtering effect measured with the local configuration at a gate voltage of -7.7 V, and nonlocal measurement inside the helical gap at a gate voltage of -7.5 V.

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DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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