Superconductivity at 41 K and its competition with spin-density-wave instability in layered CeO$_{1-x}$F$_x$FeAs

G. F. Chen, Z. Li, D. Wu, G. Li, W. Z. Hu, J. Dong, P. Zheng, J. L. Luo, and N. L. Wang
Beijing National Laboratory for Condensed Matter Physics, Institute of Physics, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100080, Peoples Republic of China

A series of layered CeO$_{1-x}$F$_x$FeAs compounds with x=0 to 0.20 are synthesized by solid state reaction method. Similar to the LaOFeAs, the pure CeOFeAs shows a strong resistivity anomaly near 145 K, which was ascribed to the spin-density-wave instability. F-doping suppresses this instability and leads to the superconducting ground state. Most surprisingly, the superconducting transition temperature could reach as high as 41 K. The very high superconducting transition temperature strongly challenges the classic BCS theory based on the electron-phonon interaction. The very closeness of the superconducting phase to the spin-density-wave instability suggests that the magnetic fluctuations play a key role in the superconducting pairing mechanism. The study also reveals that the Ce 4f electrons form local moments and ordered antiferromagnetically below 4 K, which could coexist with superconductivity.

PACS numbers: 74.70.-b, 74.62.Bf, 74.25.Gz

The recent discovery of superconductivity with transition temperature of 26 K in LaO$_{1-x}$F$_x$FeAs system has generated tremendous interest in the scientific community. Except for a relatively high transition temperature, the system displays many interesting properties. Among others, the presence of competing ordered ground states is one of the most interesting phenomena. The pure LaOFeAs itself is not superconducting but shows an anomaly near 150 K in both resistivity and dc magnetic susceptibility. This anomaly was shown to be caused by the spin-density-wave (SDW) instability. Electrondoping by F suppresses the SDW instability and recovers the superconductivity. Here we show that similar competing orders exist in another rare-earth transition metal oxypnictide Ce(O$_{1-x}$F$_x$)FeAs. Most surprisingly, the superconducting transition temperature in this system could reach as high as 41 K. Except for cuprate superconductors, T$_c$ in such iron-based compounds has already become the highest.

The very high superconducting transition temperature has several important implications. First, the T$_c$ value has already reached the well-accepted limit value of classic BCS theory. Considering the small carrier density and rather weak electron-phonon coupling estimated from first-principle calculations, the observation result strongly challenges the BCS theory based on the electron-phonon interaction. Second, the rare-earth Ce-based compounds usually show hybridization between localized f-electrons and itinerant electrons. This often leads to a strong enhancement of carrier effective mass at low temperature. Even for 4d transition metal oxypnictide with the same type of structure, a recent report indicates that the electronic specific heat coefficient of Ce-based CeORuP (γ=77 mJ/mol K$^2$) is 20 times higher than the value of La-based LaORuP (γ=3.9 mJ/mol K$^2$). The hybridization also tends to cause various ordered states at low temperature, like ferromagnetic (FM) or antiferromagnetic (AFM) ordering. Although superconducting state could occur in Ce-based materials, the superconducting transition temperature is usually very low. The highest superconducting transition temperature is only 2.3 K achieved in CeCoIn$_5$. The extremely high superconducting transition temperature obtained here on Ce(O$_{1-x}$F$_x$)FeAs offers an opportunity to examine the role played by Ce 4f electrons. Third, the superconducting phase is very close to the spin-density-wave instability. This indicates that the magnetic fluctuations plays a key role in the superconducting pairing mechanism.

A series of layered CeO$_{1-x}$F$_x$FeAs compounds with x=0, 0.04, 0.08, 0.12, 0.16 and 0.20 are synthesized by solid state reaction method using CeAs, Fe, CeO$_2$, CeF$_3$, Fe$_2$As as starting materials. CeAs was obtained by reacting Ce chips and As pieces at 500 °C for 15 hours and then 850 °C for 5 hours. The raw materials were thor-

![Figure 1](https://example.com/fig1.png)

FIG. 1: (Color online) X-ray powder diffraction patterns of the pure CeOFeAs and CeO$_{0.84}F_{0.16}$FeAs compounds.
overall resistivity decreases and the 145 K anomaly shifts to the lower temperature and becomes less pronounced. At higher F-doping, the anomaly disappears and a superconducting transition occurs. The highest $T_c=41$ K is obtained at $x=0.16$, which can be seen clearly from an expanded plot of the temperature-dependent resistivity curve. $T_c$ drops slightly with further F-doping. The bulk superconductivity in F-doped CeOFeAs is confirmed by ac magnetic susceptibility measurements. Figure 2 (c) shows the real part $\chi'$ of ac susceptibility in a temperature range near $T_c$ for the $x=0.16$ sample. Figure 3 (a) is the phase diagram showing the resistivity anomaly (circle) and superconducting transition (square) temperatures as a function of F content. (b) The resistivity vs temperature curves under several selected magnetic fields. The lower inset shows the temperature dependence of upper critical field. The solid line indicates the slope. The upper inset is a fit to the equation described in the text.

FIG. 2: (Color online) (a) The electrical resistivity vs temperature for a series of CeO$_{1-x}$F$_x$FeAs. (b) T-dependent resistivity in an expanded region for $x=0.16$ sample. The superconducting transition with sharp onset temperature at 41 K is seen. (c) Real part of T-dependent ac magnetic susceptibility.

FIG. 3: (Color online) (a) The phase diagram showing the anomaly (circle) and superconducting transition (square) temperatures as a function of F content. (b) The resistivity vs temperature curves under several selected magnetic fields.

Standard 4-probe dc resistivity and ac susceptibility measurements were preformed down to 1.8K in a Physical Property Measurement System (PPMS) of Quantum Design company. Figure 2 (a) shows the temperature dependence of the resistivity. The pure CeOFeAs sample has rather high dc resistivity value. The resistivity increases slightly with decreasing temperature, but below roughly 145 K, the resistivity drops steeply. After F-doping, the overall resistivity decreases and the 145 K anomaly shifts to the lower temperature and becomes less pronounced. At higher F-doping, the anomaly disappears and a superconducting transition occurs. The highest $T_c=41$ K is obtained at $x=0.16$, which can be seen clearly from an expanded plot of the temperature-dependent resistivity curve. $T_c$ drops slightly with further F-doping. The bulk superconductivity in F-doped CeOFeAs is confirmed by ac magnetic susceptibility measurements. Figure 2 (c) shows the the real part $\chi'$ of ac susceptibility in a temperature range near $T_c$ for the $x=0.16$ sample. Figure 3 (a) is the phase diagram showing the resistivity anomaly (circle) and superconducting transition (square) temperatures as a function of F content.

An important parameter to characterize superconductivity is the upper critical field $H_{c2}(0)$. In our earlier study on LaO$_{0.9}$F$_{0.1-4}$FeAs superconductor with an onset $T_c=26$ K, we already found a rather high upper critical field $H_{c2}(0) \sim 54$ T [9]. Here we would expect much higher $H_{c2}(0)$ in Ce-based compounds owing to their sub-
spectra in the far-infrared region at different temperatures for the pure CeOF eAs sample.

FIG. 4: (Color online) The reflectance (a) and conductivity (b) spectra in the far-infrared region at different temperatures for the pure CeOF eAs sample.

significantly higher $T_c$. For this purpose, we measured the temperature-dependent resistivity of a $x=0.12$ sample with $T_c$ onset close to 40 K under different magnetic fields. As shown in Fig. 3 (b), $T_c$ was suppressed only by several Kelvins at 14 T (which is the highest magnetic field available in our PPMS system). The critical field vs. temperature ($H_{c2}-T$) curve near $T_c$ was plotted in the lower inset. Here the $T_c(H_{c2})$ is defined as a temperature at which the resistivity falls to half of the normal state value (middle transition). As described in our earlier work[9], the $H_{c2}(0)$ could be extracted from two different methods: (i) by using the Werthamer-Helfand-Hohenberg (WHH) relation, $H_{c2}(0)\approx 0.691[dH_{c2}/dT] \times T_c$, with a critical-field slope near $T_c$ (being about -3.86 T/K), (ii) from a fit to the equation $H_{c2}(T)=H_{c2}(0)[1-(T/T_c)^2]/[1+(T/T_c)^2]$, as shown in the upper inset. Then, we obtain $H_{c2}(0)\approx 107$ T and 112 T, respectively. We remark here that those rather high estimated values of $H_{c2}(0)$ are still at the lower limit for the upper critical field, because the criteria for the $T_c(H_{c2})$ in above analysis is defined at the middle transition, not at the onset transition temperature, which actually shows smaller shift with field. Additionally, the multiple bands effect was not taken into account.

The resistivity behavior of the pure CeOF eAs is very similar to that of LaOF eAs, except for the difference that a resistivity upturn was observed in the later compound at lower temperature. As we demonstrated earlier, the anomaly at 150 K is caused by spin-density-wave instability, and a gap opens below the transition temperature due to the Fermi surface nesting. To confirm the same origin for the anomaly, we performed infrared measurement on Bruker 66v/s spectrometer in the frequency range from 40 cm$^{-1}$ to 15,000 cm$^{-1}$ at different temperatures, and derived conductivity from Kramers-Kronig transformations. Figure 4 shows the reflectance and conductivity spectra in far-infrared region. As expected, CeOF eAs shares very similar optical response behavior as LaOF eAs. Most notably, the reflectance below 400 cm$^{-1}$ is strongly suppressed at low frequency below the phase transition temperature, which is a strong indication for the formation of an energy gap. However, the low-frequency reflectance still increases fast towards unity at zero frequency, indicating metallic behavior even below the phase transition, being consistent with the dc resistivity measurement which reveals an enhanced conductivity. The data indicate clearly that only partial Fermi surfaces are gapped.

We noticed that, among different reported superconducting systems in such layered transition metal oxypnictides, the LaO$_{1-x}$Fe$_x$FeAs and CeO$_{1-x}$Fe$_x$FeAs systems share remarkably similar phenomenon: the presence of competing ground states. When the SDW order is destroyed by electron doping, superconductivity could occur at a much higher temperature. This gives a hint where to search for materials with potentially higher $T_c$. The interplay between superconductivity and spin-density-wave instability thus is of central interest in those systems.

To get insight into whether the rare-earth element Ce 4f electrons hybridize with the itinerant Fe 3d electrons at low temperature, we measured the low-T specific heat. To our surprise, another magnetic ordering was revealed in those Ce-based samples. Fig. 5 shows the plot of C/T as a function of temperature for pure CeOF eAs at H=0
and 5 T, and 16% F-doped CeO$_{0.84}$F$_{0.16}$FeAs at H=0, respectively. For non-superconducting CeOFeAs, a sharp \( \lambda \)-shape peak at 3.7 K is observed under zero magnetic field. The peak shifts to 2.8 K under a magnetic field of 5 T. This clearly indicates that an long-range antiferromagnetic ordering transition occurs at low temperature. There is a very weak effect in dc resistivity at the AFM transition temperature. For LaOFeAs without rare earth 4f electrons, there is no such specific heat anomaly at low temperature\(^2\), indicating unambiguously that the AFM transition for CeOFeAs is originated from the ordering of Ce 4f moments. No significant enhancement of electronic specific coefficient is observed from the high T specific heat. For the 16% F doped superconducting sample, we also observe the onset signature of the AFM transition down to 1.8 K, the lowest measured temperature. The AFM transition must occur below this temperature. The data strongly suggest that the high-temperature superconductivity coexists with the AFM ordering of Ce 4f local moments. This coexistence implies that the exchange interaction between the Ce 4f moments and the itinerant Fe 3d electrons is very weak. So, there is no appreciable mixing or hybridization between them in the present systems.

To summarize, we have synthesized a series of rare-earth based transition metal oxypnictide CeO$_{1-x}$F$_x$FeAs compounds. The superconducting transition temperature could be as high as 41 K. This very high superconducting transition temperature strongly challenges the pairing mechanism based on the electron-phonon interaction. Similar to the LaOFeAs, the pure CeOFeAs shows a strong resistivity anomaly near 145 K, which was ascribed to the spin-density wave instability. F-doping suppresses this instability and leads to the superconducting ground state with rather high \( T_c \). The very interesting interplay between the superconducting phase and the spin-density-wave instability strongly suggests that the magnetic fluctuations play a key role in the superconducting paring mechanism. Furthermore, the study reveals that the Ce 4f electrons form local moments and ordered antiferromagnetically below 4 K which could coexist with superconductivity.

We acknowledge the support from Y. P. Wang and Li Lu, and valuable discussions with Z. Fang and T. Xiang. This work is supported by the National Science Foundation of China, the Knowledge Innovation Project of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and the 973 project of the Ministry of Science and Technology of China.

Note added: After we completed this work, we learnt an independent work on another rare-earth Sm-based SmFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ (x=0.1) by Chen et al., arXiv:0803.3603v1.

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