Direct evidence for the suppression of charge stripes in epitaxial \( \text{La}_{1.67}\text{Sr}_{0.33}\text{NiO}_4 \) thin films

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We have successfully grown epitaxial \( \text{La}_{1.67}\text{Sr}_{0.33}\text{NiO}_4 \) films with a small crystalline mosaic using pulsed laser deposition. With synchrotron radiation, the x-ray diffraction peaks associated with charge stripes have been successfully observed for relatively thick films. Anomalies due to the charge-ordering transition have been examined using four-point probe resistivity measurements. X-ray scattering provides direct evidence for suppression of the stripe phase in thin samples; the phase disappears for film thicknesses \( \leq 2600 \) Å. The suppression appears to be a result of shrinking the stripe phase domains. This may reflect the stripe phase progressing from nematic to isotropic.

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The real space ordering of charges, spins, and electronic orbitals in correlated electron materials has been a major topic in condensed matter physics in recent years. Such behavior has been found in a variety of transition metal oxides that exhibit a range of physical properties. A typical situation occurs when antiferromagnetic insulators of these oxides are electronically doped, the charge carriers tend to localize and order \([1,2]\). One of the most important types of order is generally known as stripes. This is best known in doped compounds of the \( \text{La}_2\text{CuO}_4 \) family of high temperature superconductors. At a particular density of doped holes, \( n_h = 1/8 \), there is a static, ordered arrangement of spins and charges forming stripes along the Cu-O bond direction \([3]\). The isostructural system \( \text{La}_{2-x}\text{Sr}_x\text{NiO}_4+y \) shows a similar stripe structure but with an orientation rotated by \( 45^\circ \) with respect to the Ni-O bond direction in the planes. However, it does not exhibit superconductivity and even remains insulating for a wide doping range \([4]\). Furthermore, a variety of manganese oxide materials appears to show various types of charge, spin, and orbital ordering, some of which are stripe-like \([5,6]\). More recently, a short-range charge ordering in Ho-doped \( \text{SrCoO}_3-z \) cobaltite with charge-ordered clusters size down to 50 Å is observed for a broad compositional range \([7]\). As more examples of charge inhomogeneity are discovered, one might think that the spin-charge ordering may be a ubiquitous property of transitional metal oxides. However, there are certainly many examples of charge-doped transition metal oxides where no such charge inhomogeneity has been reported. It is thus important to understand the nature of charge ordering correlations, their effect on physical properties, and under what situations they will occur. To further such a goal, it would be very helpful to find a single materials system where the charge orders through an external tuning parameter that does not affect the charge concentration itself.

There have been several efforts to investigate the correlation between the stripe phase and lattice distortion by applying mechanical strain in cuprate materials. The static stripe phase in \( \text{La}_{1.875}\text{Ba}_{0.125}\text{CuO}_4 \) and \( (\text{LaNd})_{1.875}\text{Sr}_{0.125}\text{CuO}_4 \) is accompanied by a structural phase transition from a low temperature orthorhombic (LTO) to a low temperature tetragonal (LTT) phase and an anomalous suppression of superconductivity \([8,9]\). It appears that the application of hydrostatic pressure to materials with the 1/8 doped stripe phase causes the LTO to LTT structural phase transition to be suppressed and superconductivity to be partially recovered, with a transition temperature (\( T_C \)) of 15 K. \([10,11,12,13]\) Studies of similar cuprate films with an in-plane compressive strain have shown a similar effect \([14,15]\). However, since none of these studies provide direct information about the behavior of stripe phase, their interpretation may be questioned. Typically, it has been assumed that the static charge stripe phase requires the presence of the LTT structural phase. However, it is possible that the stripe phase can form without the structural phase transition and indeed some recent studies have found just such a case \([16]\). Therefore, direct evidence is important to understand the nature of the stripe phase under these conditions.

In this letter, we report studies of the behavior of the stripe phase in \( \text{La}_{1.67}\text{Sr}_{0.33}\text{NiO}_4 \) (LSNO) films as a function of film thickness. The nickelate films were chosen for study because the appropriate stoichiometry is relatively stable and the stripe ordering is pronounced, with relatively strong diffraction peaks and a high stripe ordering temperature of 240 K. Using direct evidence from x-ray diffraction (XRD) and resistivity measurements, we demonstrate that the stripe phase in LSNO films is suppressed as the films become thin. By examining the scattering profiles and the full temperature dependent resistivity we can understand how the stripes disappear and
what short range order remains.

Epitaxial LSNO films were deposited on SrTiO$_3$ (STO) substrates using a pulsed laser deposition technique. The substrate temperature was kept at 780 °C in 100 mTorr oxygen during the deposition. After the deposition, the samples were slowly cooled down to room temperature in 200 Torr oxygen. The thicknesses of the LSNO films range from 480 Å to 8000 Å. X-ray diffraction showed excellent epitaxy with mosaics ranging from 0.27° to 0.36° and no detectable disoriented regions. XRD measurements were carried out at beamline X22A and X22C at the National Synchrotron Light Source, Brookhaven National Laboratory. A graphite (002) single bounce analyzer was used for suppressing the background counts and eliminate high order harmonics to reveal the charge stripe peaks. Finite thickness oscillations were observed in reflectometry measurements, indicating a smooth surface and also giving a measurement of the film thickness. The samples were cooled in a closed-cycle refrigerator between 15 K \( \leq T \leq 300 \) K with a temperature control better than 0.5 K. A standard four-probe technique was utilized to obtain the electrical transport properties of the films as a function of temperature ranging from 140 K to 340 K in a Quantum Design MPMS system equipped with a Manual Insertion Utility Probe and External Device Control software package.

The stripe phase in La$_{2-x}$Sr$_x$NiO$_4$ can be studied through the examination of magnetic and nuclear superlattice peaks observed in diffraction experiments [17]. With synchrotron XRD, we are able to directly study the charge stripe phase in films by the inspection of incommensurate superlattice peaks associated with the charge stripe order. These peaks in diffraction techniques result from a slight periodic lattice distortion in response to the ordered inhomogeneity of doped holes, and are typically $10^8$ weaker in magnitude than a Bragg peak. We have successfully observed the charge ordering peaks in relatively thick LSNO films. Fig. 1 presents linear scans over the stripe peaks (0.67, 0, 9) and (1.33, 0, 9) of an 8000 Å LSNO film on a STO substrate along H, K, and L directions in reciprocal space, respectively. The observed peaks are well developed at a low measurement temperature of about 15 K. The solid lines represent the best fit with a Lorentzian function, from which the intensity and peak width can be derived. The width of the charge stripe peaks in the H and K directions are approximately equal, with the full width at half maximum (FWHM) of 0.049 and 0.033 reciprocal lattice units (r.l.u.), respectively. However, the peak is much broader along the L direction, with FWHM of 0.28 r.l.u. The inverse correlation length $\xi^{-1}$ is defined as $\xi^{-1} = \frac{2\pi}{w}$, where w is the half width at half maximum (HWHM) of the reflection and d is the lattice constant. According to this, the charge order has a correlation length of approximately 7 and 10 unit cells in the H and K direction, respectively. The correlation length is only 1 unit cell in the L direction. This suggests that the charge ordering is primarily two dimensional in nature. Our result is in agreement with that from a bulk LSNO crystal sample, though the correlation lengths are smaller in our films [18].

The intensity of the charge stripe peak (0.67, 0, 9) as a function of temperature is shown in Fig. 2, for a series of LSNO films on STO substrates with different thicknesses. The stripe ordering temperature is about 240 K for all films, in agreement with experiments on bulk materials [19]. It appears that the ordering temperature does not change with the film thickness. Upon cooling, the peak intensity increases steadily and reaches a maximum at about 140 K and then decreases slightly for lower temperatures. The loss of intensity at low temperatures appears to be universal for all our LSNO films. This phenomenon is also seen in bulk crystals when investigated.
using x-ray diffraction [20].

Fig. 3 shows the thickness dependence of the integrated intensity of stripe peaks (0.67, 0, 9) and their width, all at 100 K. The integrated intensity decreases in a roughly linear manner, as we would expect from a simple scattering volume argument for progressively thinner films. Thus the disappearance of the stripe peak is primarily through the broadening of the peaks. For samples where the stripe peaks can be detected, the peak intensity per scattering volume remains roughly constant and there is very little change in the stripe ordering temperature. The broadening of the stripe peak width suggests that the domain size of the stripe phase shrinks as the film thickness decreases. An examination of the (2, 0, 8) Bragg peak for the same films suggests that the main structural peaks are much narrower, about 0.01 r.l.u., and more importantly do not broaden as the films become thin. Thus, the crystallinity of the films themselves is similar for the different thicknesses and we can attribute the increased width of the charge order peak directly to domain size. Compared with the 8000 Å thick film, the stripe peak from the thin film, 3500 Å, has broadened such that the correlation length of the stripe phase has decreased by about 50% to nearly 3 unit cells. For thinner films, we could not observe any stripe peak, suggesting further reduction of the correlation length. Thus the charge stripes disappear as their domain size is reduced to levels below which stripes cannot be measured and stripe order may no longer be meaningful.

The films which show stripe order disappearing in Fig. 3 do not have a significant strain as they are all thick enough to be fully relaxed. Thus the suppression of stripe order is not a direct effect of strain or microscopic parameters that depend on bond length. However, these films are epitaxially constrained to remain in registry with the substrate. This clamping effect will tend to suppress any transition with a structural reconstruction. The effect has been known to alter structural phase transitions in various ways [23]. The energy cost of any interface mismatch varies with the area of the interface, but energy cost of suppressing the bulk transition varies with the entire film volume. Thus we expect the clamping effect to be more important for thinner films but still be fairly long range. The elastic effects of epitaxy increase the free energy of any phase on the low temperature side of a phase transition with a structural component and thus may be expected to suppress the phase transition. This result uniquely demonstrates that the stripe phase can be switched off through the influence of a structural control parameter, suggestive of the sensitivity of the stripes to the lattice distortion [8].

We also studied the temperature dependence of the resistivity of LSNO films. The first derivative of resistivity versus temperature measurements for a thick film (4600 Å) and a thin film (480 Å) on STO(100) substrate are displayed in Fig. 4(a) and Fig. 4(b), respectively.

Fig. 3: Integrated intensity and peak width of the stripe phase (0.67, 0, 9) versus film thickness. The dashed line shows a sudden drop of the peak intensity, which indicates the suppression of the stripe phase. All LSNO films are measured at 100 K.

The thick sample was measured to have stripes as shown in Fig. 3, the thinner sample did not. The insets of Fig. 4 show the resistivity as a function of temperature. Insulating behavior is demonstrated in both films. For the thick sample, there is a perceptible kink in the slope (Fig. 4(a)). This becomes clearer in the derivative curve, with a minimum near 220 K. This kink appears to be associated with the charge ordering transition, and has been identified as such in transport measurements conducted on bulk samples [21]. The anomaly in transport properties is thus indicative of the formation of charge stripes in the film. As shown in Fig. 4(b), the development of the resistivity as a function of temperature for thin films with no stripe ordering is smooth, without a dip in the derivative curve. Unlike 1/8-doped cuprates, there is no structural phase transition for LSNO that is related to the formation of the stripe phase [22]. Thus this anomaly in resistivity is not related to any change in atomic structure, such as the transition from LTO to LTT in cuprates, but must be due to the ordering of doped charges themselves. The absence of the anomaly in the resistivity confirms that the stripe phase itself is truly suppressed in thin films. The transport measurements are consistent with the stripe phase disappearing through a collapse of the correlation length or domain size. Away from the transition, the actual resistivity values for the thick and thin films are similar. We would expect little change in parameters such as the hopping energy of the doped holes if in fact the local order is unaffected and only longer range ordering is suppressed. Therefore, at low temperatures the stripe-like order of the doped holes is not simply gone. The stripe phase is suppressed as the size of the stripe domains collapses. However, the local hopping environment for the holes remains essentially unchanged.

A popular model to describe the stripe-like charge ordering has been that of an electronic liquid crystal
Within this model there is a direct analogy between the various stripe-like features found in the layered transition metal oxides and the crystalline, smectic, nematic, and isotropic phases of classical liquid crystals. According to Kivelson et al. [24], it appears that the stripes we measure are most likely in a nematic or a disrupted smectic phase. The diffraction profile for the thicker films is much like that found in (LaNd)$_{2-x}$Sr$_x$CuO$_4$ but with considerably broader peaks in the in-plane directions. Such a profile may arise from a disrupted smectic phase with significant disorder as one might expect in a film. However, the peaks further broaden as the film thickness decreases while the film main Bragg peaks remain sharp. The broadening of the charge order peaks as a function of decreasing film thickness is qualitatively similar to the broadening seen as a function of temperature in classical liquid crystals [26]. When the scattering peaks disappear for very thin films, the stripes may be entering an isotropic or may still be nematic with peaks too broad to measure here. The fact that the low temperature resistivity has not changed substantially would indicate that the stripes maintain their local integrity in the samples measured. It is of great interest that the changes induced through the film-substrate interactions as the films become thinner appear to be opposite to those of a magnetic field on bulk samples of the cuprates. Neutron diffraction has revealed that the magnetic peak associated with stripe-like ordering grows in intensity with an applied magnetic field [27]. That was explained as a nematic to smectic transition by Zaanen et al. [23]. While the transition studied here moves in the opposite direction, nematic to isotropic, both data sets are characterized by a transition temperature that does not change while the intensity is altered by the tuning parameter.

Finally, we note an apparent similarity between the topography of stripes we infer and that measured in recent scanning tunneling microscopy (STM) studies [29]. Diffraction has been the main tool for identifying charge-ordered phases, striped phases for layered perovskite oxides. However, only a limited number of materials have shown appropriate diffraction peaks. The clearest cases are La$_{2-x}$Sr$_x$NiO$_4$ [22] and the 1/8th doped cuprates [8, 9]. Another possible candidate for stripe phases identified through diffraction is superoxygenated and phase separated La$_{2-x}$Sr$_x$CuO$_{4+y}$ [16]. Some other cuprates have shown magnetic diffraction consistent with striped phases but without the charge order peaks [27, 28]. Our work shows that even when diffraction does not detect an ordered striped phase, and where resistivity does not detect a transition, the layered nickelates may still support at least an incipient form of electronic stripes. This might be similar to the phenomenon seen in underdoped cuprates [29], where STM images revealed features of stripe phase but with short range order correlation length $\sim 4a_0 \times 4a_0$, where the $a_0$ is the lattice constant of the sample. Those samples are not known to show diffraction peaks associated with stripes, but are in a similar doping region to samples that do show stripes. Taken together, this is evidence that at least an incipient form of electronic stripes might be more prevalent in layered transition metal oxides than previously believed. While measurement of non-ordered phases is difficult, it would be valuable to investigate a wider range of layered, transition metal oxides for possible short-ranged stripe order.

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