Molecular Dynamics Calculation of Thermal Conductivity of Graphene Nanoribbons

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Abstract. We have used classical molecular dynamics based on the Brenner potential to calculate the thermal conductivity of rectangular graphene nanoribbons up to 30 nm long. We have employed the Debye model to make the quantum correction of the classical molecular dynamics temperature. The calculated thermal conductivity is on the similar order of magnitude of the experimentally measured value for graphene. The edge chirality dependence of thermal conductivity shows that nanoribbons with zigzag long edges have larger thermal conductivity than that of nanoribbons with armchair edges. Our investigation of the size dependence of the thermal conductivity indicates that the calculated value is limited by the finite length of nanoribbons.

Keywords: Graphene nanoribbons, molecular dynamics, thermal conductivity, quantum correction, chirality dependence, size dependence.

PACS: 62.30.+d, 63.20.-e, 63.22.-m.

INTRODUCTION

Graphene, a two dimensional monolayer of graphite with sp\textsuperscript{2} carbon bonds, has drawn much attention due to its extraordinary electronic properties \cite{1-5}. Graphene nanoribbons (GNRs), strips of graphene with few or few tens of nm in size, have been considered as excellent candidates of future carbon-based nanoelectronics. For example, it has been shown that many electronic properties of GNRs may be tuned by their width or edge structures \cite{6-9}. Graphene also has exceptional thermal properties with fundamental and practical importance. Recently, it has been experimentally shown \cite{10, 11} that graphene has an unusual high thermal conductivity, comparable or possibly even superior to those well-known materials with high thermal conductivity, such as carbon nanotubes (CNTs) \cite{12, 13} and graphite \cite{14} (ab-plane). This will enable us to use graphene nanostructures for nanoscale thermal management. In this work, we have used classical molecular dynamics to simulate thermal transport in GNRs of few nanometers in size. We have found that the thermal conductivity of GNRs depends on the edge-chirality.

We also studied the size effect of GNRs on their thermal conductivity. In the calculation, we have taken the quantum effect into account by considering the occupation number and density of states (DOS) of phonons. GNRs can be potentially used in nanoscale thermal management such as on-chip cooling and energy conversion.

MOLECULAR DYNAMICS

In our simulation, we have used classical molecular dynamics (MD) based on the Brenner potential \cite{15}. The Brenner potential is a many-body potential that considers the coordination number of each atom. The anharmonic effects, causing the phonon scattering and consequently leading to finite value of thermal conductivity, have been automatically embedded in the Brenner potential. The carbon atoms denoted by triangles in Figure 1 at the two ends of the GNR are placed in the Nosé-Hoover thermostats \cite{16, 17} (obeying equation (1)) at temperatures \(T_L\) (left-pointing triangles) and \(T_R\) (right-pointing triangles) respectively. The absolute value of
the temperature difference is $\Delta T = |T_L - T_R|$. The equations of motion for atoms in either the left or right Nose-Hoover thermostat are:

$$\frac{d}{dt}p_i = F_i - \gamma p_i,$$

$$\frac{d}{dt} \gamma = \frac{1}{\tau^2} \left[ \frac{T(t)}{T_0} - 1 \right], T(t) = \frac{2}{3Nk_B} \sum_i p_i^2$$

where the subscript $i$ runs over all the atoms in the thermostat, $p_i$ is the momentum of the $i$-th atom, $F_i$ is the total force acting on the $i$-th atom, $\gamma$ and $\tau$ are the dynamic parameter and relaxation time of the thermostat, $T$ is the instant temperature of the thermostat at time $t$, $T_0$ ($=T_L$ or $T_R$) is the set temperature of the thermostat, $N$ is the number of atoms in the thermostat, $k_B$ is the Boltzmann constant and $m$ is the mass of the carbon atom. We used the 3rd-order prediction-correction method to integrate these equations of motion. The time step is 0.5 fs and the simulation is run for $10^7$ time steps (the total MD time is 5 ns). The relaxation time $\tau$ is 1 ps. We did the time averaging of the temperature and heat current from 2.5 ns to 5 ns. The heat current injected to the thermostat is given by [18]

$$J = \sum_i (-\gamma p_i) p_i / m = -3\gamma N k_B T(t)$$

In Figure 1, the atoms denoted with squares at the ends are fixed to avoid the spurious global rotation of the GNRs in the simulation [19]. The atoms denoted with circles obey the Newton’s law of motion of equation (3):

$$\frac{d}{dt} p_j = F_j$$

where $j$ runs over all atoms neither fixed nor in any thermostats.

![FIGURE 1. Rectangular armchair GNR of 1.5 nm x 5.7 nm used in this study.](image)

Thermal conductivity is ideally defined as the limit $k = \lim_{\Delta T \to 0} J d(\Delta Twh)$ according to Fourier’s law, where $d$, $w$ and $h$ (=0.335 nm) are the length, width and thickness of the GNR respectively. In non-equilibrium MD simulation, however, this mathematical limit cannot be realized due to the fluctuations in both the temperature difference $\Delta T$ and the resulting heat current $J$. If $\Delta T$ is too small to dominate its fluctuations, the calculation of thermal conductivity could become problematic. To address this problem, we defined $\alpha = \Delta T / 2\Delta T$ where $\Delta T = (T_L + T_R) / 2$ and examined the thermal current as a function of $\alpha$ for the GNR in Figure 1. The result is shown in Figure 2. We found that it is still in linear response region up to $\alpha = 10\%$, so we set $\alpha = 10\%$ in all following simulations. At steady state, in principle $J_L + J_R = 0$ because there is no energy accumulation. However, $J_L + J_R$ slightly fluctuates around zero. Therefore, the heat current and its error are defined as $J = (J_L - J_R) / 2$ and $\Delta J = J_L + J_R / 2$ (corresponding to the error in the thermal conductivity $\Delta k = \Delta J d(\Delta Twh)$).

![FIGURE 2. Thermal current versus $\alpha$ (solid line) and its linear fit (dashed line).](image)

We corrected the temperature calculated from equation (1) by considering the phonon occupation number and DOS of 2-dimensional graphene lattice. We only consider phonons of three acoustic branches and assume linear dispersion with phonon sound velocities $v_L = 19.5$ km/s, $v_T = 12.2$ km/s and $v_A = 1.59$ km/s. Therefore, the phonon DOS is $D(\omega) = 3\pi v^3/2\omega^2$, where $\nu$ is the effective phonon sound velocity satisfying $\nu^2 = v_L^2 + v_T^2 + v_A^2$ and $n$ is the number of carbon atoms in unit area of graphene. The phonon energy per carbon atom at temperature $T$ from the Debye model should equal to the kinetic energy per carbon atom $3k_B T_{MD}$, i.e.,

$$\int_0^{\infty} D(\omega) n(\omega, T) d\omega = 3k_B T_{MD}$$

$$n(\omega, T) = (e^{\hbar \nu / k_B T} - 1)^{-1}$$

where $\hbar$ is the reduced Planck constant, $k_B$ is the Boltzmann constant and $T_{MD}$ is the Debye temperature.
where \( \omega_D = \frac{\hbar}{k_B} \) \((\omega_D = \frac{4\pi n}{k_B})\) is the Debye frequency, \( n(\omega, T) \) is the phonon occupation number and \( T_MD \) is the classical MD temperature. The scheme of quantum correction of temperature can be obtained from equation (4):

\[
T_{qMD} = \frac{2T^3}{T_D^2} \int_0^{T_D/T} \frac{x^3}{e^x - 1} dx
\]

where \( T_D = \frac{\hbar \omega_D}{k_B} \) is the Debye temperature (322 K). It is worthy to note that the zero-point-energy is not included in the phonon occupation number because the corresponding temperature is one third of the Debye temperature (107 K), which means that there is no corresponding quantum corrected temperature if the classical MD temperature is below 107 K. Figure 3 shows the difference after introducing the zero-point-energy during the quantum correction. In all of the following MD results, the temperature axis represents quantum corrected temperature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We have calculated the thermal conductivity of the rectangular GNR in Figure 1. The solid line in Figure 4 shows the thermal conductivity of this 5.7-nm long and 1.5-nm wide GNR as a function of temperature. The thermal conductivity is around 1700 W/m-K at 400 K (Figure 4), on the same order of magnitude with the experimental measured value (~3000-5000 W/m-K) of graphene [10, 11].

We studied the effect of the finite size of GNRs on their thermal conductivities. In Figure 4, When the length of this GNR is doubled (the width remaining unchanged), the calculated thermal conductivity almost doubles (dashed line). It is probable that our calculated thermal conductivity is limited by the finite length of GNRs, which is consistent with the large phonon mean free path (MFP) in graphene extracted from the experiment (775 nm) [11]. The size of GNRs in this study is only up to ~30 nm. Therefore, our calculated thermal conductivity is not corresponding to the value for graphene of macroscopic size. In addition, we have also found that the calculated thermal conductivity remains nearly the same after doubling the width of GNRs (the length remains unchanged), as indicated by the dash-dotted line of Figure 4. As we see from Figure 4, the thermal conductivity monotonically increases with temperature (7), in the range we studied (180-400 K), for GNRs up to ~10 nm long. Our results are consistent with a recent theory by Nika et al. on small graphene flakes (e.g., 5 μm long) where the important roles of phonon scattering by graphene edges in the temperature dependence of thermal conductivity have been discussed [20].
SUMMARY

In summary, we have used classical molecular dynamics to calculate the thermal conductivity of rectangular GNRs of few nanometers in size. The calculated thermal conductivity, although limited by the size of the GNR, is on the same order of magnitude as the value of experimentally measured for graphene. We showed that the thermal conductivity depends on edge chirality and the zigzag-edged GNRs have larger thermal conductivity than the armchair-edged GNRs. We also studied the size dependence of the thermal conductivity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is supported by the Semiconductor Research Corporation (SRC) - Nanoelectronics Research Initiative (NRI) via Midwest Institute for Nanoelectronics Discovery (MIND). We thank Dr. Gang Wu (National University of Singapore) for helpful communications on the MD code and Mr. Yaohua Tan (Purdue University) for insightful discussions on graphene.

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