Novel Orientational Ordering and Reentrant Metallicity in $K_xC_{60}$ Monolayers for $3 \leq x \leq 5$


Department of Physics, University of California at Berkeley, and Materials Sciences Division, Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory, Berkeley, California 94720-7300, USA

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STM studies on $K_xC_{60}$ monolayers reveal new behavior over a wide range of the phase diagram. As $x$ increases from 3 to 5, $K_xC_{60}$ monolayers undergo metal-insulator-metal reentrant phase transitions and exhibit a variety of novel orientational orderings, including a complex 7-molecule, pinwheel-like structure. The proposed driving mechanism for the orientational ordering is the lowering of electron kinetic energy by maximizing the overlap of neighboring molecular orbitals. In insulating (metallic) $K_xC_{60}$, this gives rise to orbital versions of the superexchange (double-exchange) interaction.

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Orientational ordering is a classic example of spontaneous symmetry breaking. The highly symmetric icosahedral structure of a $C_{60}$ ball makes the fullerenes ideal systems for studying novel orientational phases [1]. Orientational order also plays a key role in shaping the rich electronic phase diagram of the fullerenes that involves superconducting, metallic, insulating, and magnetic phases [2]. Many basic properties of these phases, such as superconductivity and metal-insulator transition, are controversial due to the difficulty of disentangling the interactions between orientational order and other degrees of freedom, such as intramolecular vibration and intermolecular hopping [3].

Monolayers (MLs) of K-doped $C_{60}$ provide an excellent two-dimensional laboratory for exploring fulleride physics [4–11]. The effect of molecular orientation on electronic structure was seen in recent angle-resolved photoemission spectroscopy measurements that reveal significant differences between metallic $K_3C_{60}$ MLs on Ag(111) and Ag(001) [12]. Long-range orientational ordering in an insulating phase was also observed in $K_xC_{60}$ MLs on Au(111) by scanning tunneling microscopy (STM) [13]. $K_xC_{60}$ MLs were shown to be insulating due to a molecular Jahn-Teller (JT) distortion that is accompanied by crosslike orientational ordering. The local properties of higher-doped $K_xC_{60}$ MLs with $x > 4$, however, have not been explored, and the effects of adding electronic charge to the JT-insulating cross phase are unknown.

In this Letter, we report STM studies of the orientational order and electronic structure of $K_xC_{60}$ MLs over a wide range of K contents in the higher-doped regime. We find that $K_{4+\delta}C_{60}$ MLs with $0.1 < \delta < 0.5$ exhibit $C_{60}$ molecules that retain the JT-insulating state but display a new complex, 7-sublattice pinwheel-like orientational ordering. At $x = 5$ the system reenters a metallic phase that exhibits a novel orientational structure strongly related to the $x = 3$ metallic phase. In the JT-insulating $K_xC_{60}$ MLs a novel superexchange-like mechanism is proposed to be a crucial driving force for the cross and pinwheel phases. In the metallic phases the dominant mechanism for orientational ordering is the maximization of the overlap of occupied electron wave functions, analogous to the double-exchange interaction.

Our experiments were conducted using a homebuilt cryogenic STM. $C_{60}$ molecules were deposited onto a clean Au(111) surface from a Knudsen cell evaporator. K atoms were dosed onto the $C_{60}$ ML from a K getter. Both K and $C_{60}$ evaporators were calibrated by directly counting the number of atoms or molecules in STM images. $K_xC_{60}$ ML was annealed at 200 °C for 20 min before being cooled to 7 K for STM experiments. After STM measurements at one doping, higher dopings were obtained by adding more K atoms onto the existing ML followed by reannealing. For highly doped MLs with $x > 4.5$, lower annealing temperatures of ~140 °C were used to avoid K loss. This method enabled us to fabricate $K_xC_{60}$ MLs with average K contents between 0 ≤ $x ≤ 5$.

Figure 1(a) shows a typical STM image of the new “pinwheel” phase that occurs in $K_{4+\delta}C_{60}$ ($0.1 < \delta < 0.5$) MLs. K deposition in the regime 4 < $x < 5$ induces a rearrangement of the $C_{60}$ molecules that destroys the long-range cross phase previously observed in stoichiometric $K_4C_{60}$ [Fig. 1(a) inset], leading to a novel pinwheel-like local structural unit (highlighted in blue). $dI/dV$ spectroscopy of the pinwheel molecules [Fig. 1(b)] reveals an electronic structure very similar to that of the insulating $K_4C_{60}$ cross phase. This suggests that the pinwheel molecules in $K_{4+\delta}C_{60}$ still retain the energetically favorable $C_{60}^{4-}$ JT-insulating charge state seen in the stoichiometric $K_4C_{60}$ cross phase [13]. Thus the difference between the cross and pinwheel phases lies purely in the $C_{60}$ lattice structure and intermolecular orientational order.

As shown in Fig. 2(b), each pinwheel consists of six “wheel” $C_{60}$ molecules arranged hexagonally around a central “pin” molecule (each wheel molecule is rotated by ~60° relative to its neighbor). The seven molecules sit on a close-packed triangular lattice, which is a denser packing (by ~5%) than the more open cross phase. Figure 2(a) shows an ordered domain of the 7-sublattice pinwheels forming a $\sqrt{7} \times \sqrt{7}R40.9^\circ$ hexagonal super-
structure. This suggests that the pinwheels are the structural unit of a new phase rather than merely defects. Both the number and size of the domains grow continuously as the average K content increases from $x = 0.0024\times 0.1$ to 4.5. This is accompanied by the growth of small C$_{60}$-free voids containing only K atoms on Au(111).

The orientation of the center pin molecule reveals another novel aspect of the pinwheel structure. Because of the threefold rotational symmetry of the underlying triangular lattice, the pin molecules are free to choose among three degenerate orientations. Experimentally the three possible orientations are randomly realized among the pin molecules, as shown in Fig. 2(a). This type of partial disorder is a hallmark of geometric frustration for orientational ordering on a triangular lattice.

When the K content is increased further to $x \sim 5$, a new stoichiometric, metallic phase emerges, as shown by the ordered domain of bright molecules in Fig. 3(a). $dI/dV$ spectra [Fig. 3(b)] reveals that the JT-insulating gap disappears and a finite density of states exists at $E_F$, indicating a metallic ground state. This indicates that C$_{60}$ molecules in this new phase are in a C$_{60}^{5-}$ charge state where the fifth electron occupies an upper JT split band, as illustrated in Fig. 3(b) inset. The K$_5$C$_{60}$ molecules form a triangular lattice with a prominent $2 \times 2$ superstructure. Each tri-star and its nearest neighbors form a “flowerlike” structural unit, where the tri-star (flower center) exhibits a hexagon facing up and the surrounding molecules (flower petal) exhibit a 6-6 bond facing up [Fig. 3(c)] [14].

The orientational ordering of K$_5$C$_{60}$ closely resembles that found in the metallic K$_3$C$_{60}$ ML [Fig. 3(a) inset] in which C$_{60}$ molecules form a $\sqrt{3} \times \sqrt{3}$ superstructure of bright molecules [13]. Figures 3(c) and 3(d) present schematic models of the orientational structure of K$_5$C$_{60}$ and K$_4$C$_{60}$. In both phases the C$_{60}$ molecules form a triangular lattice with all neighboring C$_{60}$ molecules (except the
central “bright” ones) contacting each other through their equatorial pentagons.

What drives these orientational orderings? The cross and pinwheel patterns are reminiscent of orderings arising from electrostatic quadrupole interactions [15], which was proposed for other systems [16–18]. It is unlikely, however, that electrostatic quadrupole interactions drive the cross and pinwheel phases seen here because (1) the strength of the quadrupole interaction is too weak (estimated to be only \(-1 \text{ meV}\) between nearest \(C_{60}\) neighbors), and (2) our extensive computer simulations cannot reproduce the experimentally observed structures using only a quadrupole-based model [15].

We propose that the main mechanism for all \(K_x C_{60}\) orientational phases is the minimization of electron kinetic energy by maximizing the overlap of relevant molecular orbitals. For the JT-insulating cross and pinwheel phases (4 \(\leq x < 5\)) this leads to a novel superexchange-like mechanism, in which virtual hopping of an electron from the HOMO of one \(C_{60}^{4-}\) to the LUMO of its nearest

FIG. 3 (color). (a) STM topograph \((V = -0.2 \text{ V}, I = 5 \text{ pA})\) of \(K_x C_{60}\) flower phase exhibiting \(2 \times 2\) reconstruction. Inset: Topograph of the \(K_3 C_{60}\) ML. (b) \(dI/dV\) spectra of molecules in \(K_x C_{60}\) flower phase show finite density of state at \(E_F\). Inset: Schematic \(K_x C_{60}\) electronic structure. (c),(d) Model structures for the \(K_x C_{60}\) and \(K_3 C_{60}\) phases. Blue dots represent pentagons on the \(C_{60}\) equatorial plane.

FIG. 4 (color). (a) Local electronic density of states for the HOMO and LUMO of a JT-distorted \(C_{60}^{4-}\) molecule calculated by tight binding. (b) Schematic diagram of the proposed superexchange mechanism between two neighboring \(C_{60}^{4-}\) molecules. (c) The orientational dependence of \(-t^2/U\) obtained from tight-binding calculations for adjacent molecules. The angle \((0,0)\) corresponds to the experimentally observed cross phase.
neighbor [Fig. 4(b)] gains an energy proportional to $t^2/U$, where $t$ is the hopping amplitude and $U$ is the HOMO-LUMO gap [19]. Here $t$ depends on the overlap between the HOMO and LUMO of adjacent molecules, and thus depends on their relative orientations.

For the stoichiometric $K_xC_{60}$ insulator, this superexchange favors the cross phase. Upon additional K deposition to $K_{x+y}C_{60}$ the new pinwheel ordering preserves the local $K_xC_{60}$ stoichiometry and benefits energetically from the JT distortion and superexchange between $C_{60}^{-}$ molecules by increasing the $C_{60}$ packing density over that of the more open $K_xC_{60}$ cross phase. This occurs via the segregation of added K atoms into the previously mentioned $C_{60}$-free voids. Adding K atoms to the $K_xC_{60}$ ML thus has essentially the same effect as applying an external pressure, a common driver for structural phase transitions.

This interpretation is supported by tight-binding calculations that we have performed to estimate the strength of intermolecular superexchange and its dependence on molecular orientations. For each carbon atom of the JT-distorted $C_{60}^{-}$ structure [13], one $\pi$ orbital was kept and only nearest neighbor hopping was allowed. The hopping integral was assumed to be $-2.3 \times (0.145 \text{ nm})^2 \text{ eV}$, where $d$ is the distance between neighboring carbon atoms [20,21]. Under this approximation the HOMO and LUMO wave functions [Fig. 4(a)] are given by linear combinations of $\pi$ orbitals located at different carbon atoms: $|\psi_{\text{HOMO}}\rangle = \sum_{i} a_i |\phi_i\rangle$, $|\psi_{\text{LUMO}}\rangle = \sum_{j} b_j |\phi_j\rangle$.

The strength of superexchange is estimated by calculating the HOMO-LUMO hopping integral for neighboring molecules as a function of their relative orientation using $t_{HL} = \langle \psi_{\text{HOMO}} | K | \psi_{\text{LUMO}} \rangle = \sum_{i} a_i |\phi_i\rangle |\langle \sum_{j} b_j |\phi_j\rangle = \sum_{i<j} a_i^* b_j t_{ij}$, where $t_{ij} = \langle \phi_i | K | \phi_j \rangle$. Following Ref. [21] we take $t_{ij} = V_0 |\vec{r}_i - \vec{r}_j \rangle \exp \left( -\frac{|\vec{r}_i - \vec{r}_j \rangle}{\lambda (d_c - d_v)} \right)$, where $\lambda(x)$ is the step function, $r_{ij} = |\vec{r}_i - \vec{r}_j \rangle$, $\lambda = 0.45 \text{ Å}$, $d_v = 1.54 \text{ Å}$, $V_0 = 6.2 \text{ eV}$, and $d_c = 6.5 \text{ Å}$ [21]. We computed the energy $-t^2/U$ between two adjacent molecules in the unit cell of the $x = 4$ cross structure. We summed the contributions from the two HOMO wave functions and used $U = 200 \text{ meV}$ (the experimental HOMO-LUMO gap). Both molecules were rotated in a plane and $-t^2/U$ values for different orientations were plotted in Fig. 4(c). Here $\Delta \phi_1$ and $\Delta \phi_2$ are the angles of the two molecules relative to the observed cross-phase orientation, whose angle is defined as $0,0)$. We find $(0,0)$ to be in the trough of a local minimum in $-t^2/U$, with a value of $-15 \text{ meV}$. This represents a significant energy gain for the cross-phase structure, and is much larger than the estimated quadrupole interaction. We take this level of agreement as an encouraging sign for our superexchange proposal.

In the metallic $K_xC_{60}$ and $K_yC_{60}$ phases the superexchange mechanism is not applicable. The likely mechanism for orientational ordering here is enhancement of first-order electron hopping via maximization of the overlap of occupied electron wave functions, analogous to the double-exchange interaction. Density-functional theory calculations suggest that in the metallic phases the occupied state density peaks near the $C_{60}$ pentagons [14,19]; hence, it is energetically favorable to have close intermolecular contact between pentagons to maximize electron hopping. As shown in Figs. 3(c) and 3(d), the orientational structures of both metallic phases indeed satisfy this requirement.

In conclusion, we find that $K_xC_{60}$ MLs undergo a reentrant metal-insulator-metal transition as $x$ is varied from 3 to 5. Each electronic phase has a novel orientational ordering associated with it. This includes a highly complex, 7-sublattice pinwheel orientational structure in the insulating $K_{x+y}C_{60}$ phase. The proposed superexchange and double-exchange mechanisms highlight the close interplay between orientational order and electronic structure in the fullerides.

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