Crystal locomotion driven by photo-triggered phase transition

Y. Hagiwara1, A. Takanabe1, T. Asahi1,2, H. Koshima2

1Graduate school of Advanced Science and Engineering, Waseda University, 3-4-1 Okubo, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo, Japan,
2Research Organization for Nano & Life Innovation, Waseda University, 513 Waseda-tsurumakicho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo, Japan.
miler-yh0514@fuji.waseda.jp

Mechanical crystals are expected to be applicable for actuators and soft robots [1]. Before the past decade, we have developed many mechanical crystals based on photoisomerization [2], and some based on phase transition [3] and photothermal effect [4]. In 2019, we have found a new kind of phase transitions, referred to as the photo-triggered phase transition [5]. The photochromic crystal exhibiting a thermal, reversible single-crystal-to-single-crystal phase transition upon heating and cooling, transform to the identical phase upon light irradiation at temperatures lower than thermal phase transition temperature. A chiral salicylidnephenylethylamine [enol-(S)-1] crystal is known to undergo photoisomerization (Fig. 1a) [6], and thermal phase transition [7]. We have found that the enol-(S)-1 crystal exhibited the photo-triggered phase transition.

Upon heating, the enol-(S)-1 crystal in the a-phase (P21) transformed to the b-phase (P212121) with the discontinuous b-angle change to 90° at 0 °C due to thermal phase transition from monoclinic to orthorhombic crystal system (yellow circles, Fig. 1b). Under UV light (365 nm) irradiation, the a-phase changed to the b-phase even at -30 °C (orange circles, Fig. 1b). The mechanism was revealed that the photo-triggered phase transition is driven by the strain near the irradiated surface produced by the photoisomerization. A thick crystal in the a-phase deformed by the photo-triggered phase transition to the b-phase upon UV light irradiation; the surface temperature did not reach the thermal phase transition temperature. Furthermore, the thin plate-like crystal exhibited two-step bending motion by the photo-triggered phase transition and then the photoisomerization (Fig. 1c). Finally, by alternate irradiation of UV and visible light (488 nm) from the left, the plate-like crystal on the glass surface locomoted in the lower right direction (Fig. 1d). This finding leads to generalize the photo-triggered phase transition phenomenon and indicates that the photo-triggered phase transition enables to create various motions of crystals such as locomotion.

Figure 1 (a) Photoisomerization of enol-(S)-1. (b) Temperature dependence of the b-angle before and under UV light irradiation. (c) Two-step bending of the thin-plate crystal. (d) Locomotion of the crystal on the glass plate.


Keywords: mechanical crystals; locomotion; photo-triggered phase transition; salicylideneamine

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