Influence of normal load and sliding speed on the tribological property of amorphous carbon nitride coatings sliding against Si$_3$N$_4$ balls in water

Fei Zhou$^a$,*, Xiaolei Wang$^b$, Koshi Adachi$^c$, Koji Kato$^c$

$^a$ Academy of Frontier Science, Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, Nanjing, 210016, PRChina
$^b$ School of Mechanical Engineering, Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, 210016, PRChina
$^c$ Laboratory of Tribology, School of Mechanical Engineering, Tohoku University, Sendai, 980-8579, Japan

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Abstract

Amorphous carbon nitride ($a$–CN$_x$) coatings were deposited on Si$_3$N$_4$ disks by an ion beam assisted deposition system. The composition, structure and hardness of the $a$–CN$_x$ coatings were characterized by Auger electronic spectroscopy, Raman spectroscopy and nano-indentation tester, respectively. The influences of normal load and sliding speed on the friction coefficients and the specific wear rates for the $a$–CN$_x$/Si$_3$N$_4$ tribo-pairs were investigated and analyzed synthetically by ball-on-disk tribometer. The worn surfaces were observed by optical microscope. The results showed that the $a$–CN$_x$ coatings contained 12 at.% nitrogen, and their structure was a mixture of sp$^2$ and sp$^3$ bonds. The $a$–CN$_x$ coatings’ nanohardness was 29 GPa. The influence of sliding speed on the friction coefficients and the specific wear rate of the CN$_x$ coatings was more obvious than that of normal load. The friction coefficients and the specific wear rate of the CN$_x$ coatings decreased as the sliding speed increased. At a sliding speed higher than 0.1 m/s, the friction coefficients were less than 0.04. The specific wear rates of the $a$–CN$_x$ coatings were higher than those of Si$_3$N$_4$ balls at a sliding speed below 0.1 m/s, while the specific wear rates of the $a$–CN$_x$ coatings and the Si$_3$N$_4$ balls all fluctuated around a lower level of 10$^{-8}$ mm$^3$/Nm as the sliding speed increased beyond 0.2 m/s. To describe the wear behavior of $a$–CN$_x$ coatings sliding against Si$_3$N$_4$ balls in water with normal loads of 3–15 N and sliding speeds of 0.05–0.5 m/s, the wear-mechanism map for the $a$–CN$_x$/Si$_3$N$_4$ tribo-pairs in water was developed.

Keywords: Amorphous CN$_x$ coatings; Si$_3$N$_4$ balls; Friction; Wear; Water lubrication; Wear-mechanism map

1. Introduction

Water lubrication systems are expected to replace conventional oil lubrication systems to protect natural environment [1]. However, water lubrication systems present some technical problems for metallic materials, such as lubricity, corrosion and reliability. The recent technical approach to water lubrication systems is to use engineering ceramics or plastics [2]. Due to insufficient strength and microstructure ageing, engineering plastics could not be applied to water lubrication system for longer period of time [3]. It is well known that the self-mated SiC (Si$_3$N$_4$) ceramics exhibit good lubricity in water environments [4–15]. Due to the longer running-in period for SiC/SiC tribo-pairs in water and the easy occurrence of hydration reaction between SiC(Si$_3$N$_4$) and water, severe wear was easily observed for the self-mated SiC(Si$_3$N$_4$) tribopair in water [8,10,13]. Currently, two methods are used to enhance anti-wear ability of SiC(Si$_3$N$_4$) ceramics in water: (1) the addition of second phase [9,12–14]; (2) surface coating [15–21]. It is evident that TiC or TiC–TiB$_2$ particles could enhance the anti-wearability of SiC ceramics in water, but worsen the friction behavior of SiC ceramics in water lubrication [9]. If short carbon fibers were added Si$_3$N$_4$ ceramics, lower friction coefficients and specific wear rates of composites were obtained simultaneously than those of the self-mated Si$_3$N$_4$ tribopairs [12,13]. Saito T. et al reported that h–BN could shorten the running-in period of the self-mated Si$_3$N$_4$ tribopairs and improve their friction property, but could not enhance their wear resistance [14]. As highly disordered or amorphous carbon /graphite layers were deposited on SiC ceramic, low friction and low wear were obtained.
successfully [16,17]. If the a–CN$_x$ coatings were deposited on SiC disk, the wear resistance of SiC ball in water was greater than that of SiC/Si$_3$N$_4$ tribo-pair in water [15]. When the a–CN$_x$ coatings slid against SiC or Si$_3$N$_4$ balls at 5 N and 0.16 m/s in water, the lower friction coefficient of 0.01–0.02 was achieved [18], and then the wear-mechanism map of the a–CN$_x$/SiC tribo-pair in water was established [19]. Under the same frictional conditions, the friction and wear properties of the a–CN$_x$/SiC tribo-couple in water are superior to those of the a–C/SiC tribo-pair [20]. Recently, the a–CN$_x$ coatings have reportedly improved the friction and wear properties of Si$_3$N$_4$ ceramics in water [21]. However, the influences of sliding velocity ($V$) and normal load ($W$) on the friction and wear property of the a–CN$_x$/Si$_3$N$_4$ tribo-couple in water have not yet been studied synthetically. Therefore, the present purpose is to investigate the variation of friction coefficients and specific wear rates of tribo-materials in the a–CN$_x$/Si$_3$N$_4$ tribo-couple with normal load and sliding velocity, and to develop the wear-mechanism map of the a–CN$_x$/Si$_3$N$_4$ tribo-couples in water.

2. Experimental procedures

2.1. Coating method

The ion beam assisted deposition (IBAD) machine (Hitachi Ltd, Japan) was used to deposit the a–CN$_x$ coatings [15]. Prior to IBAD process, Si$_3$N$_4$ disks (Ø30 mm × 4 mm) were ultrasonically cleaned in acetone and ethanol for 30 min. Then, a substrate jig containing a Si$_3$N$_4$ disk was mounted on the substrate holder with two screws and a carbon target with purity of 99.99% was also put into an electron beam evaporator. After that, the deposition chamber doors were closed and the vacuum chamber was subsequently evacuated. When the vacuum chamber pressure was lower than 2.0 × 10$^{-4}$ Pa, the deposited surface was bombarded with nitrogen ions for 5 min. The accelerated voltage and current density for nitrogen ions were 1.0 kV and 100 μA/cm$^2$, respectively. Later, the a–CN$_x$ coatings were synthesized by mixing carbon vapor and energetic N ions. Energetic N ions were produced at 1.5 kV and 90 μA/cm$^2$. Carbon vapor was formed by heating a graphite target with an electron beam evaporator. The evaporation rate was 2 nm/s, which was controlled by adjusting the carbon vapor emission current. The coating’s thickness was 0.5 μm.

2.2. Composition and microstructure analysis of a–CN$_x$ coatings

The surface atomic composition and microstructure of the a–CN$_x$ coatings were analyzed by Auger electron spectroscopy (AES) and Raman spectroscopy (Dilor-Jobin yvon-Spex, Labram), respectively.

2.3. Surface roughness and mechanical properties of tribo-materials

The surface roughness of tribo-materials such as Si$_3$N$_4$ balls (Ø8 mm), Si$_3$N$_4$ disks and the a–CN$_x$ coatings was measured by Surfcom-1500DX profilometer (Tokyo, Japan). To obtain the surface roughness accurately, at least 5 measurement tests were carried out for each specimen.

The mechanical properties of Si$_3$N$_4$ balls and Si$_3$N$_4$ disks were acquired from the balls’ manufacturer, whereas the mechanical properties of the a–CN$_x$ coatings were evaluated using ENT-1100A nano-indentation hardness tester (Elionix Co. Ltd., Japan) with a Berkovich-typed diamond indenter. The maximum load was 980 μN. The time for loading and unloading was set at 10 s. The indentation penetration depth obtained for the a–CN$_x$ coatings ranged from 50 to 60 nm.

2.4. Ball-on-disk wear test

Prior to each wear test, all samples were cleaned in acetone and ethanol ultrasonically for 30 min. The experiments were performed on a ball-on-disk apparatus which consisted of rotating disk sliding against a stationary ball at the sliding speed in the range of 0.05–0.5 m/s with a normal load of 3 to 15 N. The rubbing surfaces were submerged in distilled water at room temperature. The total sliding distance was 3000 m. The friction forces were detected by a LMA-A-10 N load cell (Kyowa Co. LTD, Japan). The load cell voltage was measured by a DPM-700B strain amplifier (Kyowa Co. LTD, Japan) and recorded by NR-110/150 data collection system (Keyence Co. LTD, Japan) with a compatible personal computer. The diameter of Si$_3$N$_4$ ball’s wear scar under each condition was measured using a Tencor P-10 surface profilometer (Kurashiki Kako Co. LTD, Japan). Thus, the specific wear rates for balls and coatings were calculated using the following equation:

$$w_{r,b} = \frac{3.14d^4}{64RWL}$$

$$w_{r,d} = \frac{2\pi r A}{WL}$$

where $R$ is the ball radius, $d$ is the diameter of the ball wear scar, $r$ is the disk wear track radius, $W$ is normal load and $L$ is total sliding distance. Moreover, the wear track on the disk and the
ball wear scar were observed using Keyence VH-8000 optical microscope.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Composition and microstructure of a–CNx coatings

According to the AES analysis shown in Fig. 1, the a–C coatings contained 12 at.% nitrogen. In comparison to the a–C coatings [22], the Auger electron energy of carbon hybridized with nitrogen in the a–CNx coating decreased. The results in Fig. 2 show that the Raman spectrum of the a–CNx coatings had a broad and skew peak ranging from 1200 to 1700 cm\(^{-1}\), which was composed of the overlapping D-peak (centered round 1300–1450 cm\(^{-1}\)) and the G-peak (centered round 1550–1580 cm\(^{-1}\)). The G-peak corresponded to graphite-like layers of sp\(^2\) micro-domains in the coating, while the D-peak was attributed to bond angle disorder in the graphite-like micro-domains induced by linking with sp\(^3\) carbon atoms as well as the finite crystalline sizes of sp\(^2\) micro-domains in the coatings [23]. Thus, it is concluded that the a–CNx coatings’ structure was a mixture of sp\(^2\) and sp\(^3\) bond. As seen in Table 1, in comparison to the a–C coatings, the G-peak of the a–CNx coatings shifted to higher frequencies while the D-peak of the a–CNx coatings shifted to lower frequencies. Furthermore, the intensity ratio of D-band to G-band (I_D/I_G) for the a–CNx coatings increased (Table 1). Zhang S. et al [24] reported that the sp\(^3\) fraction in the a–C coatings was inversely proportional to the intensity ratio (I_D/I_G). This indicates that the a–CNx coatings’ sp\(^2\) fraction increased.

3.2. Surface roughness and mechanical properties of a–CNx coatings

As seen in Table 2, the arithmetic mean roughness R_a of the a–CNx coating was a little lower than that of the Si3N4 substrate.

This indicated that the energetic particle bombardment enhanced the mobility of carbon atoms on the growing surface and induced the smooth surface. Fig. 3 displays nanoindentation load vs. indentation depth curve for the a–CNx coatings. According to the standard Oliver and Pharr approach [25], the mean values of elastic modulus (E) and hardness (H) for the a–CNx film were calculated from the nano-indentation load-displacement curve (Fig. 3) and listed in Table 2. It is clear that the a–CNx coatings offered a combination of reasonably high hardness and reduced stiffness while achieving remarkable elastic recovery. This indicates that the a–CNx coatings’ sp\(^2\) fraction increased in order to improve the tribological property of the a–CNx films (low friction coefficient and better durability).

3.3. Dependence of the friction coefficient and wear rate on the normal load

Fig. 4 shows the variation of friction coefficients with sliding distance at various normal loads for the a–CNx/Si3N4 tribopairs in water. It is evident that the running-in distance (the sliding distance as the steady-state friction coefficient is obtained) became short as the normal load increased. The phenomena were identical to Ref.[15]. At 0.05 m/s, with an increase in sliding distance, the friction coefficient first decreased gradually, then reached the stable values at 3, 6, 9 and 15 N, but at 12 N, the friction coefficient suddenly increased to 0.09, and then fluctuated around 0.093 (Fig. 4(a)). If the sliding speed was larger than 0.02 m/s, the friction coefficient decreased initially to the steady-state value, and the stable friction coefficient differences among five kinds of the normal loads became small (Fig. 4 (b)–(d)) at increasing sliding speed. At 0.5 m/s, the stable...
friction coefficient varied in the range of 0.001~0.006. Fig. 5 displays the variation of mean steady-state friction coefficient ($\mu_m$) with normal load ($W$) for the a–CN$_x$/Si$_3$N$_4$ tribo-pair in water. At 0.05 m/s, the mean stable friction coefficients varied in the range of 0.027~0.051. But at 12 N, the value of $\mu_m$ was 0.093. If the sliding speed was 0.5 m/s, the mean steady-state friction coefficient fluctuated slightly in the range of 0.001~0.006. When the sliding speed fluctuated in the range of 0.1~0.3 m/s, the variation curves of $\mu_m$ vs. $W$ zigzagged.

As seen in Fig. 6(a), the influence of normal loads on the specific wear rate of Si$_3$N$_4$ ball was not obvious. With an increase in the normal load, the specific wear rate of Si$_3$N$_4$ ball always fluctuated in the range of $6 \times 10^{-8}$~$3.6 \times 10^{-8}$ mm$^3$/Nm. But at 15 N and 0.05 m/s, the specific wear rate of Si$_3$N$_4$ ball reached peak of $9.0 \times 10^{-8}$ mm$^3$/Nm. Fig. 6(b) shows that the normal loads markedly influenced the a–CN$_x$ coatings’ specific wear rate at a sliding speed lower than 0.1 m/s. At 0.05 m/s, the curve of $w_{sc}$ vs. $W$ for the a–CN$_x$ coatings zigzagged. With an increase in the normal load, the a–CN$_x$ coatings’ specific wear rate varied in the range of $10.5 \times 10^{-8}$~$20.4 \times 10^{-8}$ mm$^3$/Nm. If the sliding speed reached 0.1 m/s, the specific wear rates of the a–CN$_x$ coatings first increased, and then decreased gradually with increasing normal load. As the sliding speed varied in the range of 0.2~0.5 m/s, the a–CN$_x$ coatings’ specific wear rate fluctuated slightly in the range of $2.5 \times 10^{-8}$~$6.5 \times 10^{-8}$ mm$^3$/Nm with an increase in the normal load. It is evident from Fig. 6 that the normal load had no obvious influence on the Si$_3$N$_4$ balls’ specific wear rate, but had marked influence on the a–CN$_x$ coatings’ specific wear rates at a sliding speed below 0.1 m/s. When the sliding speed was higher than 0.1 m/s, the normal load displayed the slight influence on the a–CN$_x$ coatings’ specific wear rates. Furthermore, the specific wear rate of the a–CN$_x$ coatings were higher than those of Si$_3$N$_4$ balls at a sliding velocity under 0.1 m/s, whereas their specific wear rates all fluctuated around the lowest level of $10^{-8}$ mm$^3$/Nm at sliding velocities above 0.2 m/s.
3.4. Dependence of the friction coefficient and wear rate on the sliding speed

Fig. 7 shows the variation of friction coefficients with sliding distance at various sliding speeds for the \( \text{a-CN}/\text{Si}_3\text{N}_4 \) tribopairs in water. The initial friction coefficient decreased as the normal load increased, and the friction coefficient at 0.05 m/s was highest in every figure. With an increase in the sliding distance, the friction coefficient decreased during running-in distance and then varied around the stable values. At 3 N, the running-in period decreased as the sliding speed increased. At a sliding speed lower than 0.1 m/s, the stable friction coefficient was above 0.01. As the sliding speed varied in the range of 0.2~0.5 m/s, the stable friction coefficient fluctuated in the range of 0.004~0.007 as sliding distance increased (Fig. 7(a)). If the normal load was 6 N, the friction coefficient decreased as the sliding speed increased. At a sliding speed lower than 0.1 m/s, the friction coefficient first decreased from 0.09 to 0.03, and then varied in the range of 0.028~0.031 as the sliding distance increased. If the sliding speed was higher than 0.1 m/s, as the
sliding distance increased, the friction coefficient initially decreased from 0.09 to different stable value, such as 0.016 at 0.2 m/s, 0.008 at 0.3 m/s and 0.001 at 0.5 m/s (Fig. 7(b)). Fig. 7(c) shows that the friction coefficient at 0.05 m/s first varied in the range of 0.065–0.07 at a sliding distance shorter than 440 m, and then increased gradually from 0.065 to 0.093 when the sliding distance varied in the range of 440–1200 m. Finally, it approached 0.093. If the sliding speed was higher than 0.05 m/s, the friction coefficient initially decreased from 0.07 to the different stable values as the sliding distance increased. At 15 N, when the sliding speed ranged from 0.1 to 0.3 m/s, the friction coefficient first decreased from 0.06 to 0.03 at a sliding distance shorter than 320 m, then fluctuated in the range of 0.032–0.034 with further sliding. But at 0.05 or 0.5 m/s, the friction coefficients first decreased from 0.06 to 0.051 or 0.004, and then fluctuated slightly around stable values as the sliding distance increased (Fig. 7(d)). Fig. 8 shows the variation of mean steady-state friction coefficient ($\mu$) with sliding speed ($V$) for the a–CN$_x$/Si$_3$N$_4$ tribo-pair in water. It is clear that the friction coefficient decreased gradually as the sliding velocity increased. The mean steady-state friction coefficients were lower than 0.04 when the sliding speed was higher than 0.1 m/s.

Fig. 9 displays the influence of sliding speed on the specific wear rates of Si$_3$N$_4$ balls and the a–CN$_x$ coatings. With an increase in sliding velocity, the specific wear rates of Si$_3$N$_4$ balls fluctuated in the range of $6 \times 10^{-8}$–$3.6 \times 10^{-8}$ mm$^3$/Nm. But at 15 N and 0.05 m/s, the specific wear rate of Si$_3$N$_4$ ball was $9.0 \times 10^{-8}$ mm$^3$/Nm (Fig. 9a). As seen in Fig. 9(b), it is clear that a downward trend of the a–CN$_x$ coatings’ specific wear rates with sliding speed was observed. The results in Fig. 9 indicate that the sliding speed had no marked influence on the specific wear rate of the Si$_3$N$_4$ balls, but had negative influence on the specific wear rates of the a–CN$_x$ coatings. At a sliding velocity higher than 0.2 m/s, the specific wear rates of the a–CN$_x$ coatings and Si$_3$N$_4$ balls all fluctuated around the lowest level of $10^{-8}$ mm$^3$/Nm.

3.5. Water-lubrication mechanism of the a–CN$_x$/Si$_3$N$_4$ tribopair

To elucidate the water lubrication mechanism of the a–CN$_x$/Si$_3$N$_4$ tribo-pair, the data in Fig. 5 were rearranged and a type of
stribeck curve is illustrated in Fig. 10. The relationship between \( \mu_n \) and the Sommerfeld number \( \eta N/P \) (\( P \) is mean contact pressure, \( N \) is rotating velocity, \( \eta \) is the dynamic viscosity of lubricant) indicated that there was a critical Sommerfeld number for the a–CN\(_x\)/Si\(_3\)N\(_4\) tribo-couple. When a Sommerfeld number was smaller than the critical value, the friction coefficient increased abruptly to 0.093 with decreasing Sommerfeld number. When the Sommerfeld number was higher than the critical value, the friction coefficient decreased gradually with an increase in Sommerfeld number. This indicated that the lubrication mechanism changed from mixed lubrication (ML) to boundary lubrication (BL) as the Sommerfeld number decreased. Xu J. et al. [8] reported that the water lubrication of silicon nitride involved both hydrodynamic lubrication (HL) by water and BL by the hydrated silica layers. But for the a–CN\(_x\)/Si\(_3\)N\(_4\) tribo-couple, at 15 N or 0.05 m/s, the water lubrication film broke down easily and solid-to-solid contact was established, so the friction coefficient increased abruptly and the lubrication mechanism was BL. With an increase in sliding speed or a decrease in normal load, the applied load was supported by both a HL film (water film) and a BL film (tribolayer), thus, the lubrication mechanism became ML.

3.6. Wear-mechanism map

After the experimental data and the worn surfaces were classified and tabulated in Table 3, the wear-mechanism map of the a–CN\(_x\)/Si\(_3\)N\(_4\) tribo-couple varied in the range of 0.032–0.093, and the specific wear rates of the a–CN\(_x\) coating and Si\(_3\)N\(_4\) ball fluctuated in the range of 6.5 \( \times \) 10\(^{-8}\)–18.9 \( \times \) 10\(^{-8}\) and 2.2 \( \times \) 10\(^{-8}\)–9.2 \( \times \) 10\(^{-8}\) mm\(^3\)/Nm, respectively. The worn surfaces on Si\(_3\)N\(_4\) ball and the a–CN\(_x\) coatings were smooth and flat aside from some deeper scratches (Fig. 14). This indicated that the a–CN\(_x\) coating had smooth and flat surface and the delamination and dissolution of hydration reaction products. This indicated that the partial tribochemical reactions between tribo-materials and water had occurred. Here the thin water lubrication film easily broke down and solid-to-solid contact was established. Then there was boundary lubrication in friction area. This led the friction coefficient to increase. Thus, the wear mechanism in the second area (II) was mechanical wear with partial tribochemical wear (MW+PTW). If the experimental parameters were located in the third area (III), the friction coefficient varied in the range of 0.004–0.029 and the specific wear rate of the a–CN\(_x\) coatings and Si\(_3\)N\(_4\) balls fluctuated in the range of 3.2 \( \times \) 10\(^{-8}\)–9.0 \( \times \) 10\(^{-8}\) and 1.4 \( \times \) 10\(^{-8}\)–3.5 \( \times \) 10\(^{-8}\) mm\(^3\)/Nm. The worn surfaces of Si\(_3\)N\(_4\) ball and the a–CN\(_x\) coating had become smooth and were covered with shallow scratches (Fig. 14). This indicated that a tribochemical reaction had occurred. Thus, the wear mechanism in here was tribochemical wear with slight partial mechanical wear (TW+PMW). If the sliding wear tests were performed at the highest sliding velocity (Area IV), friction coefficients less than 0.01 and specific wear rates lower than 6.6 \( \times \) 10\(^{-8}\) mm\(^3\)/Nm for the a–CN\(_x\) coatings and 3.0 \( \times \) 10\(^{-8}\) mm\(^3\)/Nm for Si\(_3\)N\(_4\) balls were
obtained, and smooth and flat worn surfaces were observed (Fig. 15). This made clear that the tribochemical reaction occurred easily, and the SiO$_2$$\cdot$H$_2$O gels acted as lubrication film, which was beneficial to providing super lubricity to the self-mated Si$_3$N$_4$ tribopairs in water [4, 8, 10]. Thus, the lubrication mechanism was hydrodynamic lubrication and the wear mechanism was tribochemical wear (TW) in the fourth zone.

3.7. Discussion

For the a–CN$_x$/Si$_3$N$_4$ tribo-couple, the hardness of the a–CN$_x$ coatings is 29 GPa, higher than that of Si$_3$N$_4$ balls (15.3 GPa). According to normal friction and wear theory, the specific wear rate of the Si$_3$N$_4$ balls should be higher than that of the a–CN$_x$ coatings. But in here, the specific wear rates of Si$_3$N$_4$ ball were lower than those of the a–CN$_x$ coatings. This was related to transfer of a tribo-layer from coating to the ball [26]. However, in comparison with Ref.[15, 21], it is easily found that a lower friction coefficient was obtained for SiC/SiC, Si$_3$N$_4$/Si$_3$N$_4$ and a–CN$_x$/SiC(Si$_3$N$_4$) tribo-couples, but the specific wear rates of tribomaterials in the a–CN$_x$/SiC(Si$_3$N$_4$) tribo-couples were all lower than those of tribo-materials in the SiC/SiC and Si$_3$N$_4$/Si$_3$N$_4$ tribo-couples. For the a–CN$_x$/SiC(Si$_3$N$_4$) tribo-couples in water, the wear rate of SiC ceramic ball was lower than that of Si$_3$N$_4$ ceramic ball [18]. This indicated that the hydration reaction of Si$_3$N$_4$ in water occurred easily. Thermodynamic calculations of the phase equilibrium within the interface showed that water did not react with SiC or Si$_3$N$_4$ in the presence of oxygen. Since the water was saturated with oxygen and oxygen was therefore present in the tribocontact, the following Eqs. (3) and (4) most likely took place. $\Delta G_f^{298}$ is the Gibbs free energy of formation at 298 K.

$$\text{SiC} + 2\text{O}_2 \rightarrow \text{SiO}_2 + \text{CO}_2 \quad \Delta G_f^{298} = -589 \text{kJ/mol} \quad (3)$$

$$\text{Si}_3\text{N}_4 + 3\text{O}_2 \rightarrow 3\text{SiO}_2 + 2\text{N}_2 \quad \Delta G_f^{298} = -1779.4 \text{kJ/mol}. \quad (4)$$

From Eqs. (3) and (4), it is clear that the formation of SiO$_2$ film which evolved from Si$_3$N$_4$ was expected to be more rapid than SiC tribopairs. The oxides could be hydrated by association with an undetermined amount of water molecules to form SiO$_2$$\cdot$H$_2$O gels. Such films have been described specifically in the wear experiments of SiC/SiC and Si$_3$N$_4$/Si$_3$N$_4$ tribo-couples running in moist air [4]. For SiO$_2$, a subsequent dissolution reaction in the tribo-contact would also be expected to occur:

$$\text{SiO}_2 + 2\text{H}_2\text{O} \rightarrow \text{Si(OH)}_4 \quad \Delta G_f^{298} = -237 \text{kJ/mol}. \quad (5)$$

If the hydration reaction between Si$_3$N$_4$ or SiC ceramic and water occurred directly, we could calculate from Eqs.(6) and (7)

![Fig. 12. Wear scar on Si$_3$N$_4$ ball (a) and wear track surface on the a–CN$_x$ coating (b) after sliding in water at 15 N and 0.05 m/s.](image1)

![Fig. 13. Wear scar on Si$_3$N$_4$ ball (a) and wear track surface on the a–CN$_x$ coating (b) after sliding in water at 12 N and 0.1 m/s.](image2)
that silicon nitride was more easily hydrated than silicon carbide.

\[
\text{SiC} + 4\text{H}_2\text{O} \rightarrow \text{Si(OH)}_4 + \text{CH}_4 \quad \Delta G_f^{298} = -598.91\text{kJ/mol} \quad (6)
\]

\[
\text{Si}_3\text{N}_4 + 12\text{H}_2\text{O} \rightarrow 3\text{Si(OH)}_4 + 4\text{NH}_3 \quad \Delta G_f^{298} = -1268.72\text{kJ/mol} \quad (7)
\]

This might be attributed to more wear loss on Si$_3$N$_4$ than SiC. Refs. [8, 27] proposed that, when a very low friction coefficient was obtained for self-mated Si$_3$N$_4$ tribopairs, there mainly existed Si(OH)$_4$ gels and water film between pin and disk, while for self-mated SiC tribopairs, there existed a SiO$_2$ film and water film between the two contacting surfaces. Thus, we could conclude that, after the water lubrication film broke down and the Si(OH)$_4$ gels were removed, solid-to-solid contact for the a–CN$_x$/Si$_3$N$_4$ tribopair was established. Thus, the friction coefficient increased abruptly and the lubrication mechanism changed from ML into BL. However, for the a–CN$_x$/SiC tribo-couples, the SiO$_2$ film acted as a lubricant on the worn surface to prevent direct contact of bulk materials, so HL changed into ML and then gradually changed into BL [19].

Otherwise, the a–CN$_x$ coatings offered higher values of H/E and a combination of reasonably high hardness and suitable stiffness. Hence they possessed excellent tribological properties [20]. If the Si$_3$N$_4$ disk was covered with amorphous carbon nitride coatings, friction would transform the surface layer of the a–CN$_x$ coating and give it lower shear strength, which is responsible for low friction and the transfer of material. When Tanaka A. et al. [28,29] studied the friction and wear property of DLC coatings in water, they indicated that the structure of transferred materials was very different from that of the original DLC film and similar to that of polymer-like carbon, which is softer in comparison to DLC film. The amount of transferred material with the polymer-like structure was larger in water than in air. But for a–CN$_x$ coatings, the surface structure of the a–CN$_x$ films was found to become C sp$^2$-bond-rich structures [18,20, 30–32]. Hellgren et al. [33] have reported that if operated in the presence of oxygen or hydrogen, those elements would react with a–CN$_x$ film and promote decomposition. This indicates that the decomposition of the a–CN$_x$ coatings occurred during sliding in water. After nitrogen atoms were removed from the a–CN$_x$ coatings, the sp$^2$-bonding-rich structure surface with lower shear strength was formed on the worn surface of the a–CN$_x$ films and carbon bonds could be terminated with OH$^-$ in water, which was also responsible for low friction for the a–CN$_x$/SiC(Si$_3$N$_4$) tribo-couple, and low wear rate of the SiC(Si$_3$N$_4$) ball in water.

4. Conclusions

The influences of normal load and sliding speed on the friction and wear property of a–CN$_x$ coatings sliding against
Si$_3$N$_4$ balls in water have already been investigated in detail. The main results could be summarized as:

1. The a–CN$_x$ coatings contained 12 at.% nitrogen and their structure was a mixture of sp$^2$ and sp$^3$ bonds. The nano-hardness of the a–CN$_x$ coatings was 29 GPa.

2. The influences of the sliding speeds on the friction coefficients and the specific wear rate of the CN$_x$ coatings were more obvious than those of the normal loads. The friction coefficients and the specific wear rate of the CN$_x$ coatings decreased as the sliding speed increased, while the normal load and sliding speed had no obvious influence on the Si$_3$N$_4$ ball’s specific wear rate.

3. At the sliding velocity higher than 0.1 m/s, the friction coefficient of the a–CN$_x$/Si$_3$N$_4$ tribo-pair in water was smaller than 0.04. The mean steady-state friction coefficient fluctuated slightly in the range of 0.001–0.006 at 0.5 m/s.

4. When the sliding speed was lower than 0.1 m/s, the specific wear rates of the a–CN$_x$ coatings were higher than those of Si$_3$N$_4$ balls. If the sliding speed was higher than 0.2 m/s, the specific wear rates of the a–CN$_x$ coatings and the Si$_3$N$_4$ balls all fluctuated around a lower level of 10$^{-8}$ mm$^3$/Nm.

5. The wear-mechanism map for the a–CN$_x$/Si$_3$N$_4$ tribo-pair in water was developed at the normal loads of 3–15 N and the sliding speeds of 0.05–0.5 m/s: (I) Mechanical wear; (II) Mechanical wear + Partial tribochemical wear; (III) Tribochemical wear + Partial mechanical wear; (IV) Tribochemical wear.

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