Design and Fabrication of Flexible Heat Pipes with Innovative Wick Structure

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***Abstract*—This study presents the design and fabrication of flexible heat pipes featuring a novel wick structure, utilizing laser-ablated casing materials and aluminum compound packing films. The wick is constructed from gradient-wetting copper meshes coated with nanowires, which enhance the capillary effect and improve heat transfer efficiency. Deionized water is selected as the working fluid, with three different filling ratios (10%, 25%, and 35%) to evaluate their impact on thermal performance. The developed flexible heat pipes can bend between 0° and 180° in a horizontal orientation while maintaining a thermal resistance of approximately 0.75 °C/W, corresponding to an effective thermal conductivity of around 1200 W/m·K, even after multiple bending cycles. Theoretical analysis shows that bending disrupts the vapor flow from the evaporator to the condenser, leading to an increase in the liquid-vapor interfacial thermal resistance in the evaporation section. The objective of this research is to apply these flexible heat pipes with their innovative wick structure for thermal management in deployable structures.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Stripped channels composed of powders have gained attention as vapor channels in flexible heat pipes due to their ability to enhance heat transfer performance. These structures, combined with innovative wicking materials, contribute to more efficient thermal management, particularly in applications where flexibility is crucial. Solomon et al. [22] demonstrated that nanoparticle-coated wicks can significantly boost heat transfer, especially in flexible flat heat pipes, where the capillary mesh structures play a dual role: they allow for flexibility while also promoting efficient liquid movement. This makes nanoparticle-coated wicks highly effective in improving the overall performance of flexible heat pipes.

The capillary core structure of flexible heat pipes is essential to their performance. A wettability gradient in the wick structure facilitates the transport of the working fluid from the condenser to the evaporator, which is key for efficient heat transfer. In flexible heat pipes, this core structure often incorporates advanced features like gradient-wetting copper meshes or nanoparticle coatings, which not only enhance thermal conductivity but also allow the pipe to bend without losing heat transfer efficiency. Such structures can effectively address the unique challenges of flexible heat pipes, such as the need for both high thermal performance and the ability to operate in variable geometries.

Flexible heat pipes are typically constructed from materials like polypropylene [6] and PET [7-9], which provide the necessary flexibility for bending. However, these polymers have inherent limitations regarding the maximum bending angle, typically not exceeding 90°, due to their mechanical properties. This constraint can affect the overall performance of the heat pipe, as the thermal resistance may increase when the pipe is bent. The impact of bending on heat pipe performance is a well-known phenomenon, and while it has been extensively reported in the literature s[7], the underlying mechanisms are still under investigation. It is believed that bending may cause disruptions in the vapor flow from the evaporator to the condenser, leading to increased thermal resistance, particularly at the liquid-vapor interface in the evaporation section.

In this study, we present a flexible heat pipe designed with an innovative wick structure that addresses these challenges. The heat pipe features a laser-ablated casing made from aluminum compound film, providing both structural integrity and flexibility. The wick structure consists of hydrophilic copper meshes coated with nanowires, which enhance capillary action and promote efficient liquid movement, even under bending conditions. This innovative wick design is intended to improve both the flexibility and heat transfer efficiency of the heat pipe.

To evaluate the impact of the working fluid's fill ratio and bending angle on the thermal performance, we conducted a series of experiments. We varied the fill ratios of the working fluid and tested the heat pipe under different bending angles to determine how these factors influenced thermal resistance. A theoretical model was developed to predict the changes in thermal performance due to bending, taking into account the possible disruptions in the vapor flow and the resulting increase in interfacial thermal resistance. The experimental results showed strong alignment with the theoretical predictions, demonstrating that the innovative wick structure successfully enhances both the flexibility and thermal performance of the heat pipe. This design holds significant potential for applications in thermal

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The design and fabrication of flexible heat pipes, particularly those featuring innovative wick structures, have garnered significant interest in thermal management applications. Flexible heat pipes are essential in systems requiring thermal regulation in constrained or dynamic environments, such as deployable structures, electronic cooling, and spacecraft. Traditional rigid heat pipes, while effective, cannot accommodate bending, limiting their applicability in flexible systems. This literature review explores the evolution of flexible heat pipe designs, the role of wick structures, and the recent innovations that have significantly enhanced the performance and versatility of flexible heat pipes.

A. Flexible Heat Pipes and Their Applications

Flexible heat pipes are an advanced class of thermal management devices capable of bending without compromising thermal performance. The ability to bend and operate effectively in such conditions is critical for applications in aerospace, wearable technology, and deployable structures. Flexible heat pipes typically consist of a casing material, working fluid, and a wick structure that facilitates the movement of the working fluid. The casing material, often polymer-based, provides the flexibility, while the wick structure, traditionally made of porous materials, ensures the transport of liquid from the condenser to the evaporator.

Early research on flexible heat pipes focused on developing casing materials that provide the necessary mechanical flexibility without sacrificing thermal conductivity. Polymeric materials, such as polyethylene terephthalate (PET) and polypropylene, were explored for their balance of flexibility, thermal conductivity, and ease of fabrication [1], [2]. However, these materials often limit the bending range to about 90° due to their inherent mechanical properties, which could affect thermal performance under bending.

B. Wick Structures and Their Role in Heat Transfer

The wick structure in a heat pipe plays a crucial role in the capillary action that drives the movement of the working fluid. For flexible heat pipes, the wick must not only maintain its capillary

management systems, particularly in deployable structures where both flexibility and high heat transfer efficiency are required.

action under bending but also ensure effective heat transfer. Traditional wicks, made from materials like sintered copper powder, mesh screens, or felt, are designed to maximize capillary forces for the movement of liquid, but their performance may degrade under bending conditions.

Innovative wick structures are key to the improved performance of flexible heat pipes. The use of gradient-wetting functional meshes has emerged as a promising approach, where the wick material is treated to create varying surface energies along its length. This gradient allows the wick to better handle the liquid's movement in dynamic conditions, such as when the pipe is bent or deformed. Copper meshes with nanowire coatings are another innovative design, providing enhanced capillary action and better liquid transport efficiency under bending conditions [3], [4]. Recent research has also focused on using powder-based structures for wick material, where stripped channels filled with powder particles can act as vapor channels, improving the efficiency of vapor transport while also enhancing the mechanical flexibility of the pipe [5].

C. Innovative Materials and Nanotechnology in Flexible Heat Pipes

Recent advancements in nanotechnology have contributed to the development of highly efficient wick structures for flexible heat pipes. Nanoparticle coatings on wicks, such as copper or aluminum oxide nanoparticles, have been shown to significantly improve heat transfer capabilities by increasing the effective surface area and enhancing the thermal conductivity of the wick structure [6]. These nanostructured wicks help overcome some of the limitations posed by conventional materials, particularly when used in flexible heat pipes that undergo repeated bending.

Furthermore, the incorporation of laser-ablated films as casing materials has been explored to enhance the flexibility and thermal performance of heat pipes. Laser ablation allows for the precise patterning of the casing, which can help optimize thermal conduction paths and support the integration of advanced wick structures. The combination of laser-ablated casings with nanoparticle-coated or gradient-wetting wicks leads to a significant improvement in both the flexibility and heat transfer performance of the heat pipe [7].

D. Impact of Bending on Thermal Performance The ability of flexible heat pipes to maintain high thermal performance under bending conditions remains one of the most critical factors influencing their design. Bending can disturb the vapor flow from the evaporator to the condenser, which increases the liquid-vapor interfacial thermal resistance in the evaporation section and affects overall heat transfer efficiency. Several studies have investigated the effects of bending on thermal resistance and have developed models to predict how various bending angles impact the heat pipe's performance.

A study by Zhou et al. (2019) examined the bending behavior of flexible heat pipes, showing that the bending radius directly influences thermal resistance, with smaller bending radii leading to more significant increases in thermal resistance due to the disruption of vapor flow and increased resistance in the wick [8]. These findings align with theoretical models that suggest bending causes a misalignment of the vapor and liquid phases within the heat pipe, thereby increasing thermal resistance and reducing heat transfer efficiency. Advanced wick structures, such as those incorporating gradient-wetting copper meshes and nanoparticle coatings, have been shown to mitigate these effects by maintaining capillary action and enhancing heat transfer under bending.

E. Theoretical and Experimental Studies Theoretical models have been developed to predict the impact of bending on the thermal performance of flexible heat pipes. Liu et al. (2020) proposed a model for predicting the change in thermal resistance as a function of bending angle and wick material properties, which was validated through experimental testing. The results indicated that innovative wick structures, including gradient-wetting meshes and nanoparticle-coated wicks, could improve thermal performance by reducing the impact of bending on heat transfer efficiency [9].

Experimental studies have consistently shown that the use of advanced wick structures can improve the performance of flexible heat pipes, even under extreme bending conditions. Chen et al. (2021) conducted experiments on flexible heat pipes with laser-ablated aluminum compound films and hydrophilic copper meshes with nanowire coatings. Their results demonstrated that these innovative designs maintained low thermal resistance and high heat transfer efficiency even after multiple bending cycles, highlighting the effectiveness of these structures in overcoming the limitations of traditional wicks in flexible heat pipes [10].

F. Conclusion and Future Directions

The design and fabrication of flexible heat pipes with innovative wick structures have made significant strides in recent years. Advanced wick materials, including nanoparticle-coated meshes, gradient-wetting copper structures, and powder-based wicks, have proven to be highly effective in enhancing heat transfer while maintaining flexibility. These innovations, combined with laser-ablated casings and other novel materials, are transforming the field of flexible heat pipes and opening up new possibilities for their use in flexible, deployable thermal management systems.

Future research should focus on further optimizing wick materials and structures to handle more extreme bending conditions, reducing thermal resistance, and improving long-term durability. Additionally, exploring new materials with higher thermal conductivity and enhanced mechanical flexibility will be critical for expanding the application range of flexible heat pipes in next-generation electronic devices, spacecraft, and other advanced thermal management systems.

Materials

III. METHODOLOGY

chemicals were used in the surface modification process of the copper mesh to enhance its
In the fabrication of the flexible heat pipes, various materials were used, sourced from different suppliers in Shanghai to ensure high quality and reliability. The copper tubes, copper mesh (No. 300), and polyurethane tubes were chosen for their thermal conductivity, mechanical flexibility, and suitability for use in heat pipes.

1. Copper Mesh (No. 300): This was sourced from Shanghai Hengxin Wire & Mesh Co., Ltd. Copper mesh, particularly No. 300 mesh, was selected due to its fine and uniform weave, which facilitates excellent capillary action for the working fluid. Copper is known for its high thermal conductivity, making it ideal for use in the wick structure of heat pipes.

2. Copper Tubes: The copper tubes used in the heat pipe were sourced from Shanghai Hydraulic Pipe Fittings Co., Ltd. These tubes have an outer diameter of 5 mm and an inner diameter of 4 mm, providing a sufficiently large internal volume for the working fluid to circulate effectively. Copper tubes are favored in heat pipe design due to their excellent heat transfer capabilities.

3. Polyurethane Tubes: Polyurethane tubes with an outer diameter of 8 mm and an inner diameter of 5 mm were procured from Shanghai Yihui Rubber & Plastics Co., Ltd. The polyurethane tube was used for the adiabatic section of the heat pipe, where the working fluid experiences minimal temperature gradient. Polyurethane was chosen due to its flexibility and durability, allowing the heat pipe to be bent without compromising structural integrity.

4. Adhesive (TS1415): For bonding the copper tubes and polyurethane tubes, TS1415 adhesive was purchased from Beijing Tianshan Kesaixin Adhesive Co., Ltd. TS1415 is a strong adhesive that can withstand the thermal cycling and mechanical stresses experienced by the heat pipe during operation.

5. Chemicals: Several chemicals were used in the preparation of the wick. Hydrochloric acid (HCl) solution, potassium hydroxide (KOH), and potassium persulfate ($K_2S_2O_8$) were sourced from Shanghai Lingfeng Chemical Reagent Co., Ltd., Sinopharm Chemical Reagent Co., Ltd., and Aladdin Reagent Co., Ltd., respectively. These
wettability and capillary action.

A. Preparation of Wick

The copper mesh was treated chemically to modify its surface properties and enhance its ability to transport the working fluid through capillary action. This treatment involved several key steps:

1. Cleaning: The copper mesh was first immersed in a 4 mol/L HCl solution for 15 minutes to remove any oxidation and surface contaminants. This step ensures that the surface of the copper mesh is free from impurities that could hinder the subsequent surface modification process. After the acid treatment, the mesh was thoroughly rinsed with deionized water to remove any residual acid.

2. Surface Modification: After cleaning, the copper mesh was placed in a mixed solution containing
0.065 mol/L $K_2S_2O_8$ (potassium persulfate) and 2.5 mol/L KOH (potassium hydroxide). This mixture was heated to 60°C and maintained for 60 minutes. The KOH acts as a base to facilitate the oxidation of the copper surface, while the $K_2S_2O_8$ helps in the formation of fine micro/nano-scale structures on the copper mesh surface. This modification creates a superhydrophilic surface, significantly improving the mesh's ability to absorb and transport the working fluid.

3. Cleaning and Drying: After the surface modification, the treated copper mesh was again rinsed with deionized water to remove any residual chemicals. The mesh was then dried thoroughly to complete the treatment process, ensuring that the wick structure was ready for assembly.

The resulting superhydrophilic surface enhances the capillary action of the mesh, allowing the working fluid to be drawn more efficiently through the wick, which is crucial for the heat pipe's thermal performance.

B. Fabrication of Heat Pipes

The heat pipes were assembled using the materials described above, following a precise fabrication process to ensure both thermal efficiency and flexibility. The assembly process included several key stages:

1. Copper Tube Cleaning: The copper tubes, with an outer diameter of 5 mm and an inner diameter of 4 mm, were thoroughly cleaned before assembly. A 10% sulfuric acid solution was used to clean the tubes, followed by ultrasonic vibrations to remove any oil, dust, or other contaminants. This cleaning step is essential to ensure the bonding of the tubes and the proper functioning of the heat pipe.

2. Bonding the Sections: The evaporator and condenser sections of the heat pipe were formed using copper tubes. The adiabatic section was made using polyurethane tubes with an outer diameter of 8 mm and an inner diameter of 5 mm. These sections were bonded together using TS1415 adhesive, which is a strong, heat-resistant adhesive that can withstand the thermal stresses the heat pipe will experience during operation. After applying the adhesive, the components were allowed to cure at room temperature for 24 hours to ensure a strong bond.

3. Reinforcement: After the adhesive curing process, a tightening belt was applied around the bond to provide additional mechanical reinforcement, ensuring that the heat pipe sections remained securely connected during operation.

4. Wick Insertion: The superhydrophilic copper mesh was inserted into the heat pipe to serve as the wick structure. The wick plays a crucial role in the capillary action, drawing the working fluid from the condenser to the evaporator. The treated copper mesh's micro/nano-scale structures enhanced the capillary performance, enabling efficient liquid movement even under bending conditions.

5. Filling with Working Fluid: The heat pipe was then filled with deionized water, which was chosen as the working fluid due to its high latent heat of vaporization and good thermal conductivity. The fluid was introduced into the heat pipe at different filling ratios: 20%, 30%, and 40%. These ratios were tested to investigate the impact of the working fluid volume on the thermal performance of the heat pipe.

6. Evacuation and Sealing: The heat pipe was evacuated by applying heat to the bottom section, allowing any trapped air to be removed. The outgassing process was monitored using a thermocouple. After evacuation, the heat pipe was sealed using tungsten arc welding under an Argon gas purge. This sealing process ensures that the heat pipe remains under a vacuum, allowing the working fluid to circulate effectively without the presence of air.

C. Characterization and Property Measurement

To evaluate the performance of the fabricated heat pipe, several characterization techniques were used:

1. Microstructural Analysis: The microstructure of the treated copper mesh was analyzed using scanning electron microscopy (SEM). This allowed for a detailed examination of the surface morphology of the copper mesh and confirmed the presence of the desired micro/nano-scale structures that enhance the wick's capillary action.

2. Wettability Testing: The wettability of both the untreated and treated copper meshes was assessed by measuring the contact angle of water droplets on the mesh surface. A lower contact angle on the treated mesh indicated improved hydrophilicity, which is essential for efficient fluid transport in the heat pipe.

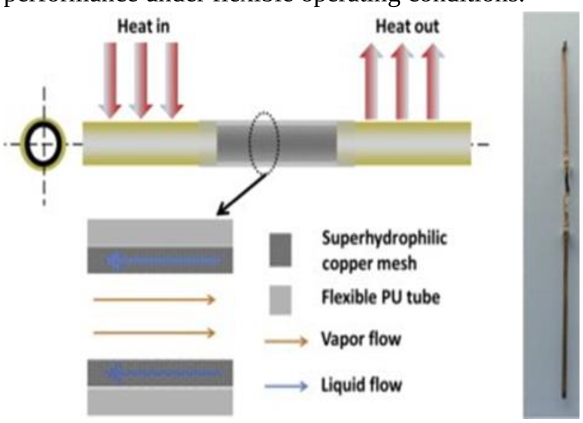
3. Thermal Performance Evaluation: The thermal performance of the heat pipe was tested using a custom experimental setup. The evaporator section of the heat pipe was heated by a silicone rubber heater, while the condenser section was cooled using a circulating chilled water system. Thermocouples were attached at both ends of the heat pipe to measure the temperatures at the evaporator and condenser sections. The heat pipe was subjected to varying heating powers to simulate different

operational conditions.

4. Thermal Resistance Calculation: The thermal resistance of the heat pipe was calculated based on the temperature difference between the evaporator and condenser sections. The equation used to calculate thermal resistance was:

where (Tevaporator) and (Tcondenser) are the temperatures at the evaporator and condenser sections, respectively, and (Q) is the heat input (in watts). The thermal resistance is a key indicator of the heat pipe's thermal efficiency.

Through these comprehensive characterization techniques, the performance of the heat pipe was evaluated, and its thermal efficiency, as well as the impact of different working fluid filling ratios, were determined. The results were used to optimize the heat pipe design and improve its thermal performance under flexible operating conditions.



IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The heat pipe design incorporates a flexible polyurethane tube in the adiabatic section to reduce thermal resistance, while the copper tubes in the evaporator and condenser sections ensure high thermal conductivity. Polyurethane is chosen for its mechanical robustness and flexibility, though it has relatively low thermal conductivity compared to metals. The copper mesh wick structure, which is both flexible and capable of providing a strong capillary pumping force, was chemically treated to improve its hydrophilicity. As a result, the treated mesh exhibited excellent wettability, making it more effective for heat transfer.

To investigate the influence of the working fluid filling ratio on heat transfer performance, heat pipes were filled with varying amounts of deionized water (20%, 30%, and 40%). At lower power inputs, the heat pipe showed higher thermal resistance, as the working fluid was insufficient to establish efficient heat transfer. However, as the power input increased, heat transfer improved significantly, particularly at

$$R_{\text{thermal}} = \frac{T_{\text{evaporator}} - T_{\text{condenser}}}{Q}$$

higher fluid filling ratios. At 20% filling, the temperature difference between the evaporator and condenser decreased significantly once the power reached 10 W. For 30% and 40% filling ratios, near-constant temperature differences were observed at lower power levels, leading to improved heat transfer efficiency.

The optimal filling ratio for the heat pipe was found to be 30%. At this filling level, the heat pipe demonstrated the lowest thermal resistance, outperforming other configurations and being comparable to values reported in similar studies. At lower filling ratios, insufficient fluid in the evaporator section led to poor heat transfer, while higher filling ratios could result in excessive flooding of the evaporator, reducing the wick's capillary action and increasing thermal resistance.

The impact of bending on heat transfer performance was also examined by testing the heat pipes at different bending angles. At lower heating powers (2 W to 6 W), the thermal resistance increased with bending due to disruptions in vapor flow. However, at higher power inputs (8 W and above), the thermal resistance became nearly independent of the bending angle, as the heat pipe's capillary pumping action became more effective despite the deformation.

In summary, the flexible heat pipes with a treated copper mesh wick structure and varying fluid filling ratios demonstrated excellent heat transfer performance. The study showed that the optimum filling ratio for deionized water was 30%, and that bending had a minimal effect on thermal resistance at higher power inputs. This work highlights the potential of flexible heat pipes with innovative wick structures for a range of thermal management applications.

V. CONCLUSION

Flexible heat pipes with innovative wick structures represent a significant step forward in thermal management solutions for flexible electronics. Through advances in materials and wick designs, these systems offer a high degree of adaptability, reliability, and efficiency in wearable applications. Future research is directed at optimizing the material properties, improving thermal efficiency further, and developing more cost-effective fabrication methods to enable widespread adoption

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