



Suspension Flame Spray Construction of Porous Polycaprolactone/Hydroxyapatite Coatings for Marine Ecological Remediation

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Abstract Porous polycaprolactone (PCL)/hydroxyapatite (HA) composite coatings are deposited via suspension flame spraying for marine ecological remediation. The morphology, phase composition, chemical composition, and surface roughness are characterized by scanning electron microscopy, x-ray diffraction, Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy, and 3D optical profiler. The PCL/HA coatings exhibit porous structure, and the porosity is controlled through adjusting the content of HA. The microalgae attachment performances of *Chlorella* on the surface of 316L stainless steel substrate and the PCL/HA coatings are investigated. The PCL/HA coatings effectively increase the attachment ratio of *Chlorella*; after 7 days of incubation, the adhesion ratio is up to 69.8%. The porous structure of the PCL/HA coatings plays a significant role in promoting the attachment of microalgae, which has a valuable application in marine ecological remediation area.

Keywords marine ecological remediation · microalgae adhesion · PCL/HA composite coatings · porous structure · suspension flame spray

Introduction

The excessive exploitation of marine biological resources has caused a serious imbalance of marine ecosystem in the process of human economic development (Ref 1, 2). At present, the research on marine ecosystem restoration has become the concern of scientific researchers (Ref 3-7). Their findings show that microalgae has the potential to absorb nutrients in polluted sea areas, reduce water eutrophication, improve water quality, and repair water ecological chain (Ref 8-10). This bioremediation method is a practical, low-cost, and clean method (Ref 10). In addition, people can use high-fat microalgae known as “bio-fuel” to produce biodiesel (Ref 7).

Coral reefs are the habitat of microalgae (Ref 11, 12). However, since 1957, about half of the area of global coral reefs has been decreased, and about 60% of the biodiversity bred by coral reefs has dropped (Ref 1, 4, 5). Therefore, research on artificial coral reefs for marine ecological restoration is arising. Microalgae attachment to the surface of solid substrate (such as coral reef) is an important immobilization technology (Ref 13-15). Through this technology, building a substrate or coating to be suitable for microalgae growth is one of the effective solutions to the above problems (Ref 16-19). For example, porous artificial ceramic reefs prepared by sintering method (Ref 17), or bionic coral reefs fabricated by 3D printing technology (Ref 13) can provide a good growth matrix for microalgae. The surface properties of styrene acrylic film on stainless steel substrate by tape casting method (Ref 16) or polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE) film deposited on the glass by spraying and sintering methods (Ref 20) may also affect the growth of microalgae. Some researchers also directly design surface structure of substrate to investigate the effects of surface wettability and roughness on the

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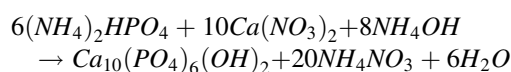
growth of microalgae (Ref 21–24). These research works have generally demonstrated that the roughness of substrate or coating surface is the main factor affecting the attachment of microalgae, since rough surface can provide more attachment points for microalgae than the smooth one.

In addition to the choice of immobilization technology, the choice of coating materials must also be considered. Hydroxyapatite (HA), a type of CaP-based bio-ceramics, has good biocompatibility (Ref 25–27). However, presently there are few reports about the growth promotion of microalgae upon HA coating materials. The preparation methods of HA coating or film include hydrothermal method (Ref 28), cold spraying method (Ref 29), plasma spraying method (Ref 30), suspension flame spraying method (Ref 31), etc. The selection of methods is usually determined by the properties of original materials (Ref 32). In this paper, HA coating is deposited on stainless steel substrate by suspension flame spraying from HA powder synthesized by liquid-phase precipitation method (Ref 33), and then the effects of its surface structure and composition on the growth of microalgae are investigated. Because of the difference of expansion coefficient between HA material and stainless steel substrate (Ref 31), HA coating may have poor adhesion to stainless steel substrate. In order to overcome the deficiency of mechanical properties, polycaprolactone (PCL) with good biocompatibility (Ref 34) is proposed to be used as the binder to improve the mechanical properties between coating and substrate.

Materials and Methods

Material Preparation

HA powders were synthesized by solution precipitation method: 2.5 mol/L $\text{Ca}(\text{NO}_3)_2$ (AR, Sinopharm Chemical Reagent Co., Ltd., China) and 1.5 mol/L $(\text{NH}_4)_2\text{HPO}_4$ (97%, Sinopharm Chemical Reagent Co., Ltd., China) were prepared as raw materials. NH_4OH (AR, Shanghai Aladdin Biochemical Technology Co., Ltd., China) was used to adjust the pH value of the two raw materials for reaction solutions. The reaction equation can be expressed as (Ref 33)



After reaction, a slurry was freeze-dried to obtain white HA powders. PCL was purchased from Shanghai Macklin Biochemical Co., Ltd., China. F/2 medium (Shanghai Guangyu Biological Technology Co., Ltd., China) was prepared by nitrate (NaNO_3 , 75 g/m³), phosphate ($\text{NaH}_2\text{PO}_4 \cdot \text{H}_2\text{O}$, 5 g/m³), trace metal ($\text{FeCl}_3 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$, 3.15 g/m³;

$\text{Na}_2\text{EDTA} \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$, 4.36 g/m³; $\text{MnCl}_2 \cdot 4\text{H}_2\text{O}$, 180 mg/m³), and vitamin (thiamine HCl, 200 mg/m³; cyanocobalamin, 10 mg/m³; biotin, 100 g/m³) (Ref 35).

Coating Preparation

Ten grams of PCL powder was added to 100 mL anhydrous ethanol to form PCL suspension, 5 g HA powder was added to 100 ml anhydrous ethanol to form HA suspension, and different proportions of HA and PCL powders (the two powders are 10g in total) were dispersed in 100 ml anhydrous ethanol to fabricate PCL/HA mixture suspensions. The prepared PCL coating, PCL/10wt%HA coating, PCL/20wt%HA coating, and PCL/30wt%HA coating are marked as P0, P1, P2, and P3, respectively. The suspensions were sprayed on the sand-blasted 316L SS surface after being stirred with a magnetic stirrer at 400 rpm for 2 hours. CastoDyn DS 8000 system is employed for suspension flame spraying with C_2H_2 pressure 0.1 MPa, O_2 pressure 0.5 MPa, feed rate 25 ml/min, and spraying distance 15 cm.

Sample Characterization

The morphologies of PCL, HA nanoparticles, and coatings were observed by scanning electron microscope (SEM, Regulus8230, Hitachi, Japan) and transmission electron microscope (TEM, JEM-2100, JEOL Ltd., Japan). X-ray diffraction (XRD, D8 ADVANCE, Bruker, Germany) was used to determine the crystal structure of powders and coatings with Cu $K\alpha$ radiation at 40 kV and scan rate of 0.047 °/s over the range of 20–60°. The chemical composition of coatings was analyzed by Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR, Nicolet iS50, Thermo Fisher Scientific, USA). Three-dimensional images of surface roughness (R_a , μm) were characterized by 3D optical profilometer (3DOP, UP-Lambda, Rtec Instruments, USA).

Characterization of Microalgae Adhesion on the Coatings

Chlorella was employed to characterize the adhesion behavior of microalgae on the different coatings. Firstly, *Chlorella* solution was added into F/2 medium and subsequently cultivated in an incubator at 25°C. The concentration of *Chlorella* solution was estimated by spectrophotometer (SpectraMax 190, Molecular Devices, USA) at a wavelength of 450 nm and marked as optical density ($\text{OD}_{450\text{nm}}$). In the next step, four parallel samples were set for each coating. The samples were dipped into the *Chlorella* solution ($\text{OD}_{450\text{nm}} = 0.8$) for 1, 3, 5, and 7 days. At specific time, the *Chlorella* solution was removed and the samples were washed with deionized water to

remove the unattached *Chlorella* and then immersed in 2.5% glutaraldehyde at 4°C for 2 hours to fix the attached *Chlorella*. Finally, the fluorescence images of microalgae were obtained by confocal laser scanning microscopy (CLSM, TCS SP8, Leica, Germany). The adhesion ratios were calculated by using software ImageJ (version 1.53a).

Statistical Analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted with software IBM SPSS Statistics (version 26) at a confidence level of 95%. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test was conducted to assess the difference between different groups.

Results and Discussion

SEM image (Fig. 1a) shows that the majority of HA powder is consisted of agglomerated microparticles (highlighted by white circle) with the size of 0.3~3 μm and part of them is flaky (highlighted by black rimmed). TEM image of HA powder exhibits that it is of rodlike shaped with 15~25 nm in diameter and 50~100 nm in length. The agglomerated powders are formed by the aggregation of these nano-rodlike-shaped HA particles. The PCL powders are irregular block particles with a size of 20~70 μm (Fig. 1b).

Crystal structure of HA powders, pure HA coating, and the PCL/HA composite coatings on 316L SS substrate are analyzed according to the XRD patterns (Fig. 2). The HA powder prepared through solution precipitation method conforms to the characteristic peaks marked by HA powder diffraction card PDF 09-0432, which means that HA nanopowder with high purity can be obtained by this method. In PCL/HA composite coatings, all characteristic peaks of HA appear, indicating that HA has no phase transition and retains the same phase of the original powders in the process of suspension flame spraying. With the increase in HA

content in the PCL/HA composite coatings, the intensity of HA diffraction peaks slightly increases (Fig. 2d-f); the peak of 43.5° represents the characteristic peak of 316L substrate, which has a certain influence on the characteristic peak strength of HA in the coatings. All the coatings contain this characteristic peak of the substrate, which means the density or thickness of the coating is not enough; x-ray may penetrate the coating and measure the peaks of substrate. In addition, no new phase is found in the composite coatings, indicating that HA does not decompose into other chemical such as tri-calcium phosphate or octa-calcium phosphate during thermal spraying. XRD diffraction peaks for PCL are not observed due to its amorphous state (Ref 36).

The FTIR spectrums of P0, P1, P2, and P3 coatings show the peaks at 2959, 2849, and 1726 cm^{-1} position (Fig. 3), which means the asymmetric CH_2 stretching, symmetric CH_2 stretching, and carbonyl absorption peaks, respectively, indicating that the PCL retains original

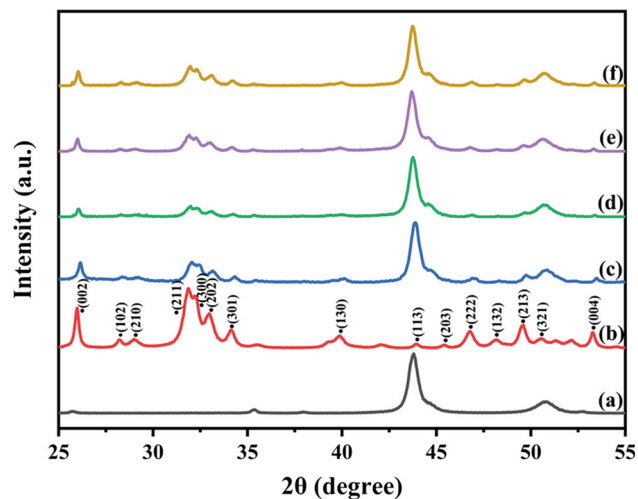


Fig. 2 XRD patterns of (a) 316L substrate, (b) HA powders, (c) HA coating, (d) P1, (e) P2, and (f) P3 coatings

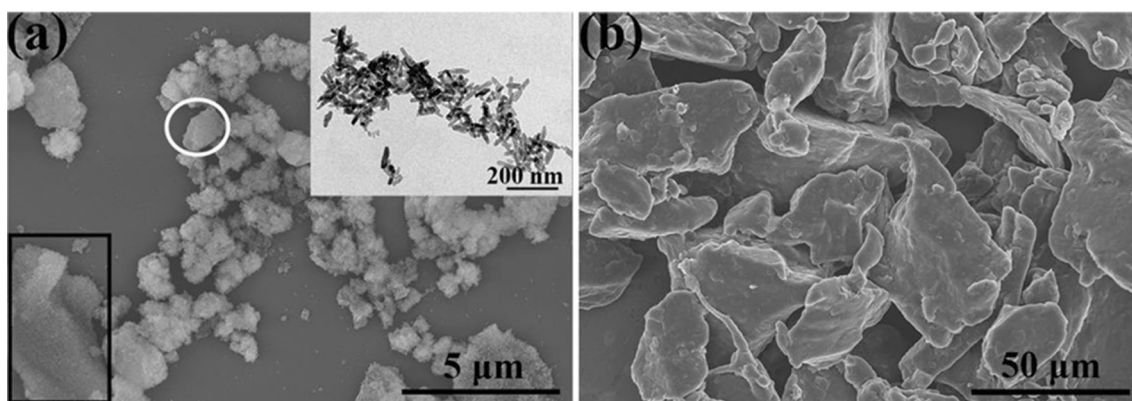


Fig. 1 SEM and TEM images (a) of HA powders, and SEM image (b) of PCL powders

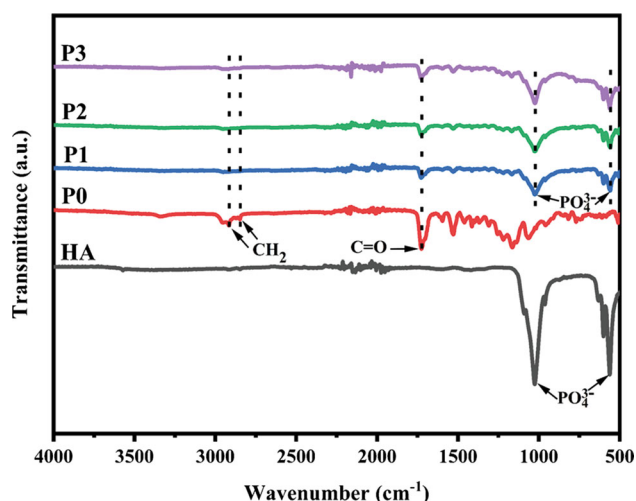


Fig. 3 FTIR spectra of HA, P0, P1, P2, and P3 coatings

components in the composite coating during the thermal spraying process. The FTIR spectrums of the HA, P1, P2, and P3 coatings show the peaks at 560 cm^{-1} and 1044 cm^{-1} , which represents the PO_4^{3-} vibration absorption peak (Ref 37), indicating that the HA is remained in the composite coating; this analysis result is consistent with the XRD conclusion.

Surface morphology and cross section view of HA, P0, P1, P2, and P3 are shown in Fig. 4. The surface of pure PCL coatings is relatively smooth and has no obviously visible pores (Fig. 4b-1-2). At high magnification image of pure HA coating, it is obvious that the coating contains unmelted HA particles (Fig. 4a-2) (Ref 38). On the contrary, P1, P2, and P3 coatings show obvious porous structure (Fig. 4c-e-1, highlighted by white arrow). The surface porosities of these composite coatings are calculated by software Image J; the porosity ratio is about 7.6% for P1, 20.1% for P2 and 22.2% for P3 coatings, respectively. The surface porosity of the PCL/HA composite coatings is increasing with the increasing HA content. During the thermal spraying process, the deposition states of HA and PCL are different due to the different melting points (HA 1500°C ; PCL $59\text{--}64^\circ\text{C}$) and different densities (HA 3.16g/cm^3 ; PCL 1.02g/cm^3) (Ref 39, 40). Generally, the unmelted or semi-molten HA particles will be embedded inside the melting PC coating and formed a protrusion or hole surface, which may result in roughness surface or porous surface. Moreover, the HA wrapped in PCL droplets may restrict flow of liquid PCL into pores, and the roughness and pore become obviously with the increasing of HA content (Fig. 4c-e-2) (Ref 41). Therefore, the porosities of the PCL/HA composite coatings are

increasing with the increase in the HA content in suspension. The thickness of HA coating can be measured from the cross-sectional morphology, P0, P1, P2, and P3 coatings is about 4-9, 22-33, 19-25, 27-33, and 41-43 μm , respectively (Fig. 4a-e-3). The amount of HA particles wrapped in PCL increases with the increase in the amount of powder in original powder, so the thickness of the coating gradually increases. However, as the amount of HA powder in coating increases, the adhesion between the coating and the substrate deteriorates and the coating is easy to flake off. At present, HA original powder content is only added to 30%, to ensure that adhesion of the coating and matrix binding force is more than 10MPa.

The adhesion properties of *Chlorella* attached on the surface of 316L and all coatings after 1, 3, 5, and 7 days are investigated through CLSM technology. For all the coatings, the adhesion amount of the *Chlorella* is increasing with the increase in adhesion time, and the distribution of the *Chlorella* on the coatings surface is uniform (Fig. 5). However, the adhesion amount on the composite coating is significantly higher than the *Chlorella* on 316L substrate, when HA and P0 coatings have the same adhesion days. Furthermore, with the increase in HA content, the adhesion increment of *Chlorella* on composite coating is also increasing. P2 and P3 coatings show a good ability to promote the growth microalgae.

The adhesion rate of microalgae over time is calculated by software Image J. The adhesion ratios of *Chlorella* on the 316L substrate, HA, and P0 coating keep a low value after 7 days of incubation, about 6.17, 7.2, and 16.1%, respectively. However, for P1, P2, and P3 coatings, the adhesion ratio reaches 46.1, 51.4, and 69.8%, respectively (Fig. 6a). The order of *Chlorella* adhesion ratios on these coatings is $\text{P3} > \text{P2} > \text{P1} > \text{P0} > \text{HA} > \text{316L}$. Through the statistical analysis of many samples, the adhesion amount of *Chlorella* significantly increases on the surface of P1, P2, and P3 (Fig. 6b). These results indicate that the PCL/HA coatings prepared by suspension flame spraying promote prominently the adhesion of *Chlorella*.

In order to analyze the adhesion behavior of *Chlorella* on the composite coating, we observe the surface of P2 coating after 7 days *Chlorella* incubated. It can be clearly found that *Chlorella* are not attached to the smooth areas (highlighted by the black oval) (Fig. 7a), but in the protruding position of the coating (highlighted by the white arrow) (Fig. 7b), the protruding parts increase the surface roughness and consequently enhance microorganism adhesion as the anchoring points for *Chlorella* (Ref 42-44). Moreover, some *Chlorella* are observed on pores of the surface (highlighted by the black arrow) (Fig. 7b). The micropores may encapsulate microalgae when they are

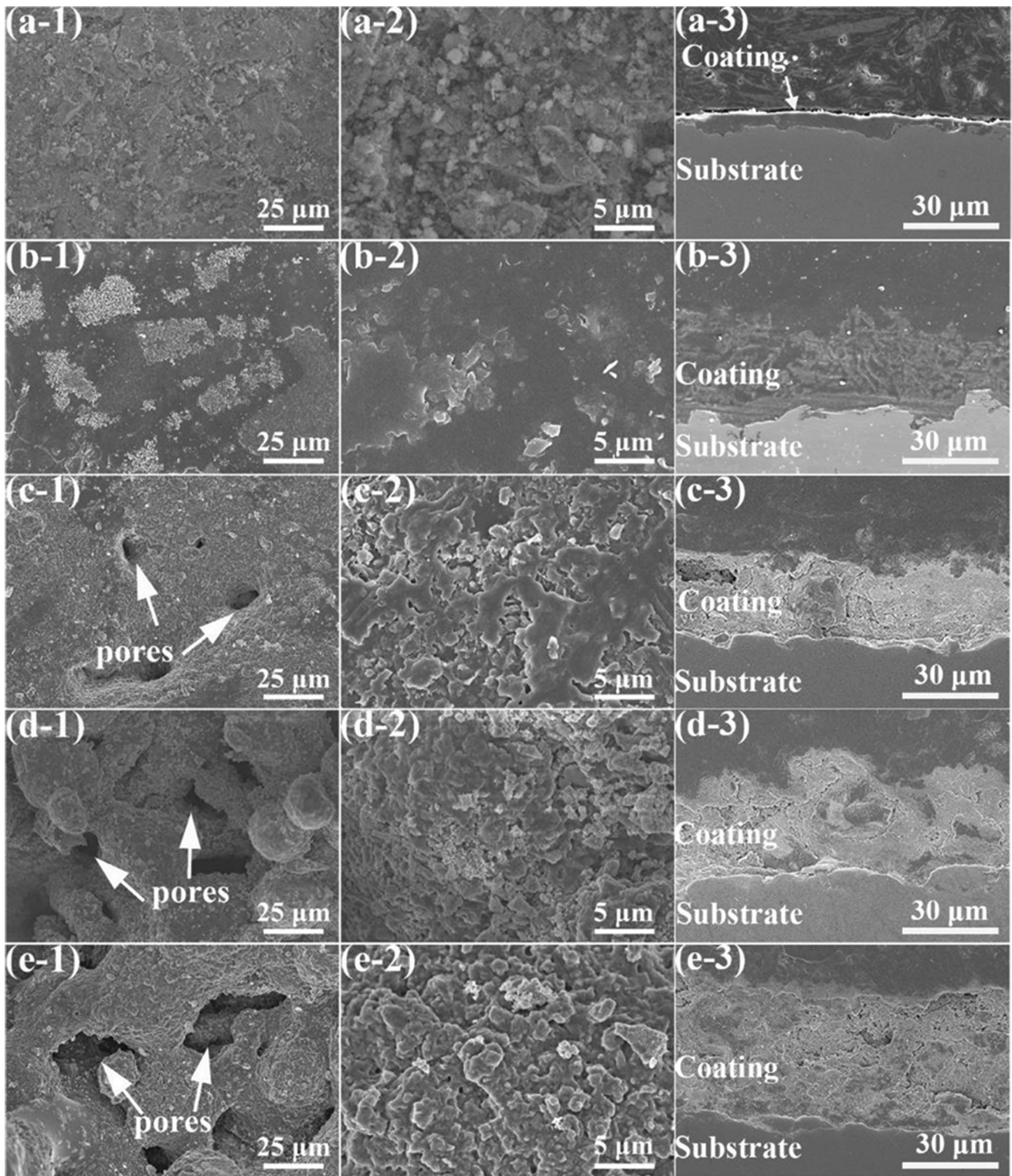


Fig. 4 SEM image of surface morphologies (1: low magnification, 2: high magnification) and (3) cross section image of (a) HA, (b) P0, (c) P1, (d) P2, and (e) P3 coatings.

attached to the surface; this surface feature influences the attachment and colonization of the microorganism (Ref 20, 45-48). Special surface structures such as microgroove

(Ref 24), mesh pore (Ref 22), ridge, pillar, and groove (Ref 49) often provide larger attachment points for microalgae, which is conducive to the attachment of the microalgae. In

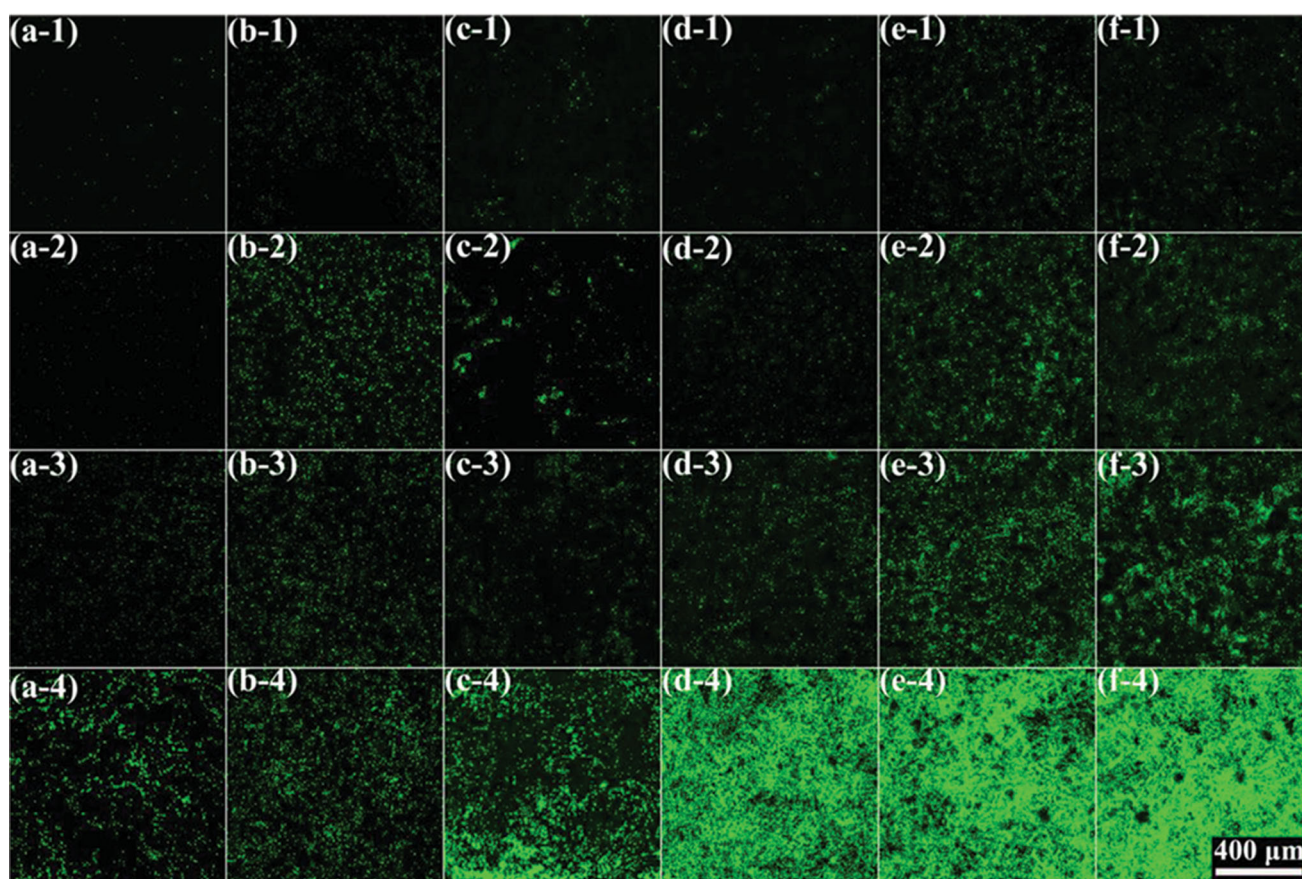


Fig. 5 CLSM images of *Chlorella* adhesion on (a) 316L, (b) HA, (c) P0, (d) P1, (e) P2, and (f) P3 coatings (1 means 1 day incubated, 2 means 3 days, 3 means 5 days, and 4 means 7 days, scale bar 400 μm)

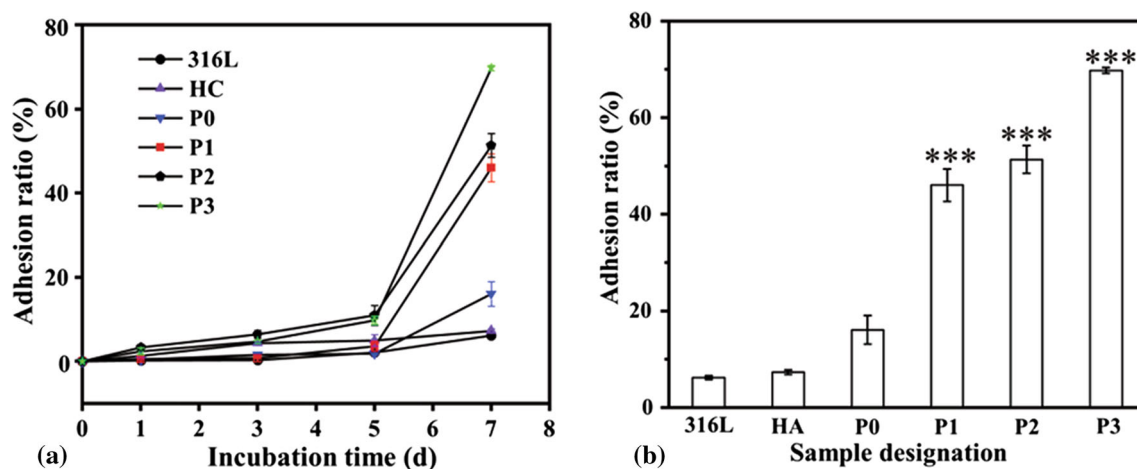


Fig. 6 (a) Variation chart of adhesion rate with time, (b) statistical chart of adhesion rate after 7 days *Chlorella* incubated, *** $p < 0.05$ compared with P0. Error bars are shown as \pm SD ($n = 4$)

short, porous structure of the composite coatings enhances microalgae attachment and is the crucial factor for colonization of microalgae.

The three-dimensional images further indicate the surface rough structures of all coatings (Fig. 8). The surface of

P0 coating is very smooth, which is consistent with SEM image (Fig. 4b). During the spraying process, PCL is melted into liquid under a high temperature (up to 2000°C) of flame (Ref 50) and then impacted to the substrate to form a flat surface. Therefore, the roughness of the P0

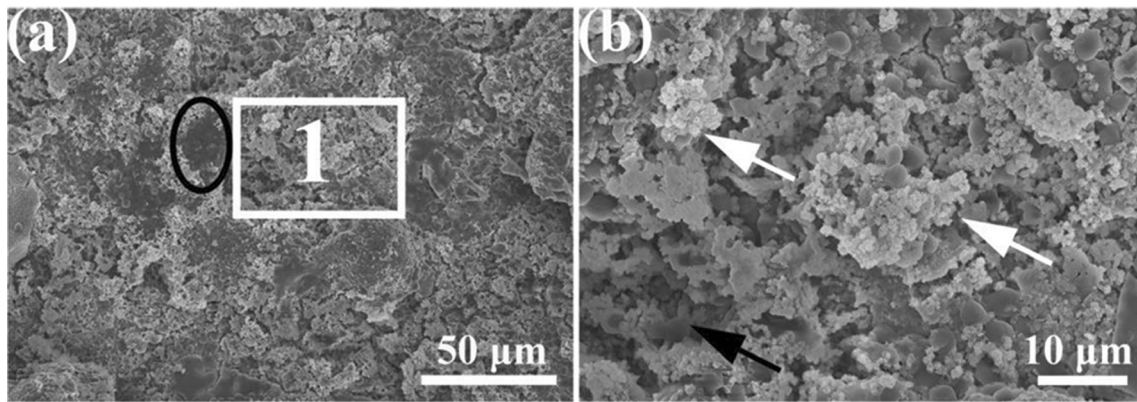


Fig. 7 SEM images of *Chlorella* adhered on P2 coating after 7 days of incubation, (b) enlarged view of the selected area 1 in (a)

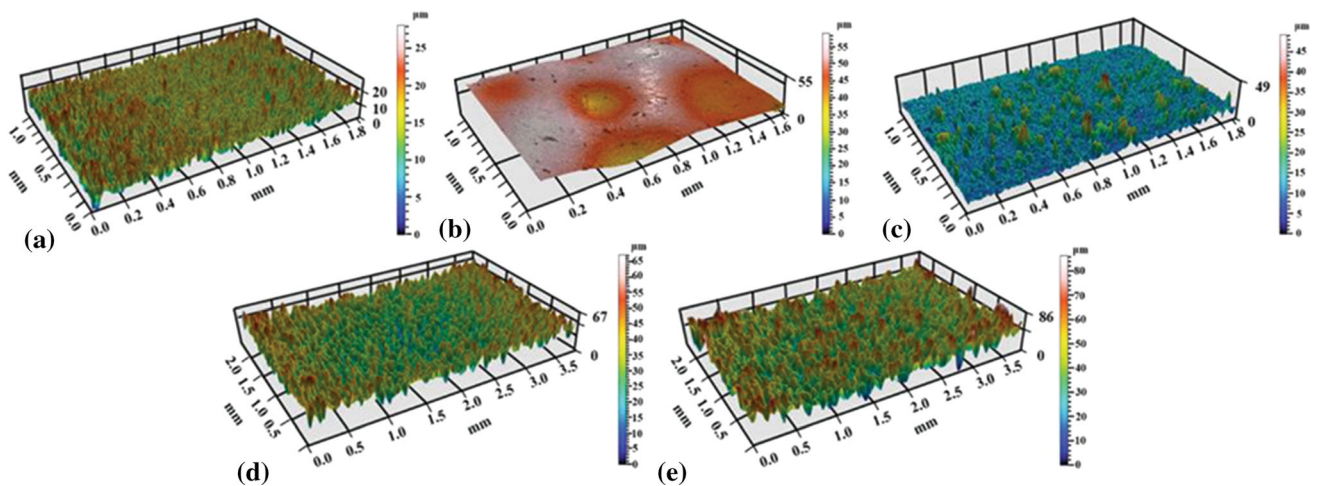


Fig. 8 Three-dimensional images of roughness for (a) HA, (b) P0, (c) P1, (d) P2, and (e) P3 coatings

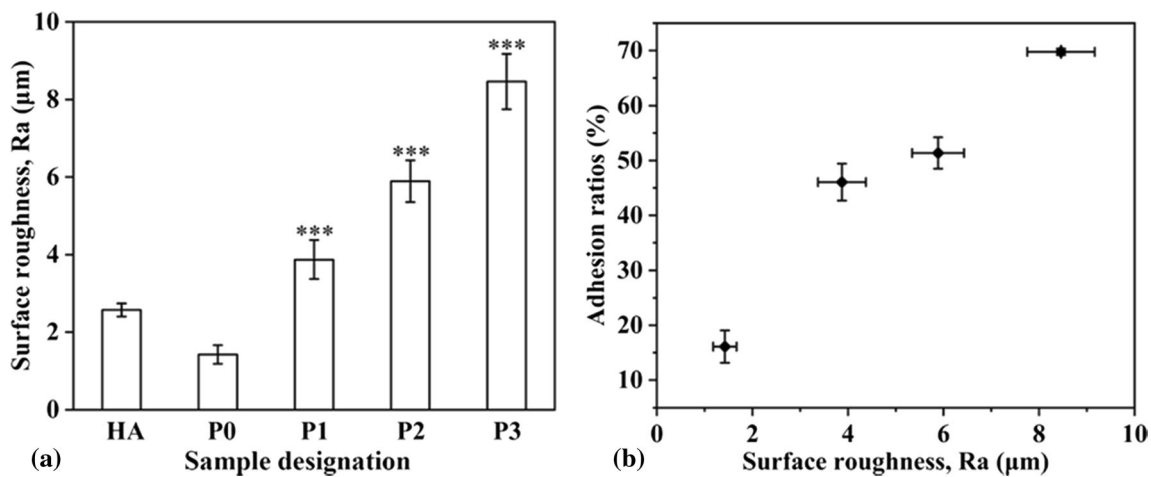


Fig. 9 (a) Surface roughness (Ra, μm) of all coatings, error bars are shown as \pm SD ($n = 3$), *** $p < 0.05$ compared with the P0 coating; (b) variation curve between adhesion rate and surface roughness of

P0, P1, P2, and P3, error bars of the adhesion ratios and surface roughness are shown as \pm SD ($n = 4$ and $n = 3$, respectively)

coating is about $1.42 \pm 0.24 \mu\text{m}$ (Fig. 9b). Due to the high melting point of HA, during thermal spraying, HA particles are half-melted; therefore, the HA particles on the substrate

present a rough surface. The surface roughness of HA coating is about $2.57 \pm 0.17 \mu\text{m}$ (Fig. 9a). May be due to the alternating deposition of liquid and solid particles, the

composite coatings show more pores (Fig. 4c-e). The roughness of P1, P2, and P3 composite coatings is about $3.87 \pm 0.50 \mu\text{m}$, $5.89 \pm 0.54 \mu\text{m}$, and $8.46 \pm 0.71 \mu\text{m}$, respectively. Compared with P0 coating, the roughness of composite coating increases with the increase in HA contents.

The linear fitting of the adhesion ratios of P0, P1, P2, and P3 coatings after the 7th incubation day with the surface roughness is plotted in Fig. 9(b). A linear increment of adhesion ratios is obtained with the increase in the surface roughness, which means that the surface roughness has an important effect on the adhesion behavior of micro-algae; the results are consistent with other reports.

Conclusion

PCL/HA composite coatings are fabricated through suspension flame spraying, and the coatings have typical porous structure with a rough surface. The contents of HA of the coatings will adjust the surface roughness and porosity. The porous structure can enhance the attachment and colonization of *Chlorella*. There is a linear growth relationship between coating surface roughness and microalgae adhesion rate. In the composite coatings, the roughness of P3 coating can reach 8.46 and the *Chlorella* adhesion ratio on this coating is about 69.8% after incubation for 7 days. The study results suggest that PCL/HA composite coatings prepared by suspension flame spraying may have prospect in the field of marine ecological remediation.

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