

IMPROVEMENT OF STEEL PROPERTIES BY HEAT TREATMENT

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Abstract: Heat treatment is a critical process used to enhance the properties of steel, thereby optimizing its performance for various industrial applications. This process involves controlled heating and cooling of steel to achieve specific mechanical and physical characteristics such as hardness, tensile strength, ductility, and toughness. Common heat treatment methods, including annealing, quenching, tempering, and normalizing, alter the microstructure of steel, influencing the distribution and morphology of phases like pearlite, martensite, and bainite. The goal of heat treatment is to fine-tune these microstructures to improve properties such as wear resistance, fatigue strength, and corrosion resistance. This paper reviews the various heat treatment techniques applied to steel, examines the changes in mechanical properties associated with each method, and explores the optimization of treatment parameters to achieve desired results. Through a better understanding of heat treatment processes, the steel industry can produce materials with enhanced performance tailored for specific engineering applications.

Keywords: Steel, Heat treatment, Annealing, Quenching, Tempering, Normalizing, Microstructure.

Introduction: Steel is one of the most versatile and widely used materials in various industries due to its excellent mechanical properties and adaptability. However, the inherent properties of steel are not always sufficient to meet the specific requirements of different applications. To improve these properties, heat treatment processes are employed to alter the microstructure of steel, thereby enhancing its performance for a wide range of uses. Heat treatment involves controlled heating and cooling processes that induce phase changes in the steel,

influencing factors such as hardness, tensile strength, ductility, toughness, and wear resistance. The most common heat treatment techniques used for steel include annealing, quenching, tempering, and normalizing, each of which produces distinct microstructural changes and improves specific mechanical characteristics. The choice of heat treatment method depends on the type of steel, the desired properties, and the intended application. For instance, quenching and tempering are often used to achieve high hardness and strength, while annealing is typically employed to improve ductility and relieve internal stresses.

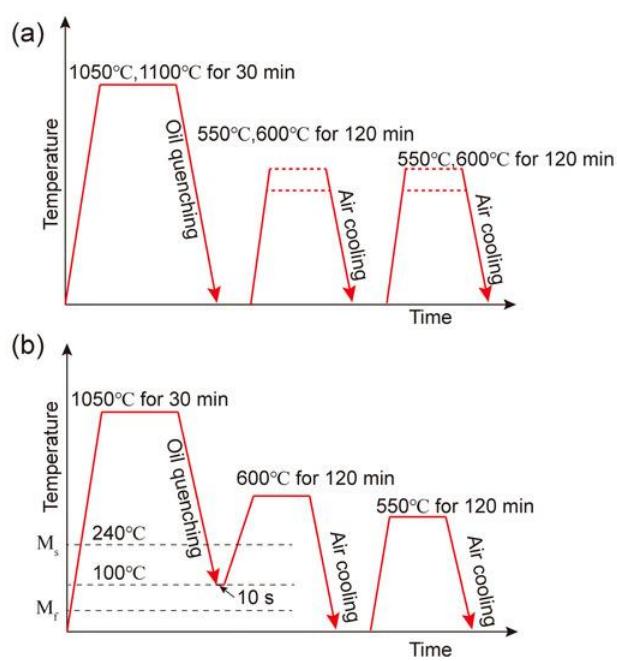
Normalizing also known as normalization is a process used to achieve uniformity of grain size and composition in alloys. The steel is heated to a certain degree before being cool by air. The resulting steel is free of impurities and has increased strength and hardness. Normalizing is often used to manufacture harder and tougher steel, but it is less ductile than annealing. Since the procedure improves this attribute, the normalizing process is typically done on products that may be exposed to machining[1].

Steel and other alloys are hardened to enhance their mechanical property. During hardening, the steel is heated to a high temperature and kept there until a proportion of the carbon has been melted. The steel is then put out, which means it is quickly cooled in oil or water. Hardening results in an alloy with high strength and wear-resistant. Hardening, on the other hand, makes it more brittle and is thus unsuitable for industrial application. Surface hardening is used where the surface of a part has to be hard enough to prevent wear and degradation while preserving ductility and resilience to withstand impact and shock loading[2].

Tempering is used to increase the ductility of steel. Untempered steel is very strong, but it is too porous for the majority of practical applications. Tempering is a low-temperature heat treatment technique used to achieve a desired hardness/toughness ratio after hardening (neutral hardening, double hardening, ambient carburizing, carbonitriding, or induction hardening). To reduce some of

the excess hardness, steel is heated to a lower temperature. After that, the steel is able to cool in still air, resulting in a harder and less brittle material[3].

Firstly, the specimens were heated to either 1050 °C or 1100 °C and held at these temperatures for 30 min. Subsequently, they were quenched in oil, as shown in picture 1a. After the quenching process, the specimens underwent pre-tempering and tempering treatments. In the pre-tempering stage, the specimen was reheated to a temperature of either 550 or 600 °C and hold for 120 min, followed by air cooling. Subsequently, the specimen was reheated to a temperature that was equal to or lower than the pre-tempering temperature (550 or 600 °C). Then, an intercritical quenching method was proposed to produce a mixed structure of pearlite and martensite in the 5CrNiMoV steel. This method involves quenching the specimen after isothermal holding at 1050 °C for 30 min. The quenching process was performed by rapidly immersing the specimen into a quenching oil at a temperature of about 100 °C for a duration of 10 s. Subsequently, the intercritically quenched specimen underwent pre-tempering and tempering treatments, as shown in picture 1b.



Picture.1. Schematic diagrams of heat treatments: (a) quenching and tempering, (b) intercritical quenching and tempering.

Conclusion: In conclusion, heat treatment plays a pivotal role in enhancing the mechanical and physical properties of steel. Through processes like annealing, quenching, tempering, and carburizing, heat treatment enables steel to achieve optimal hardness, tensile strength, ductility, and resistance to fatigue and wear. Each process affects the microstructure of the steel, which directly influences its overall performance in different industrial applications. Heat treatment also allows manufacturers to tailor steel for specific applications by adjusting the hardness and strength characteristics, making it crucial for industries like automotive, aerospace, construction, and toolmaking. Moreover, it can also improve the machinability and formability of steel, offering better control over its properties during subsequent manufacturing processes[4]. However, achieving the desired results requires careful monitoring of the parameters such as temperature, cooling rate, and time. If these factors are not precisely controlled, unwanted defects such as distortion, cracking, or residual stresses may occur. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that the heat treatment process is optimized for the specific steel grade and its intended use. Ultimately, heat treatment remains one of the most effective and cost-efficient ways to improve steel properties, contributing to the development of more durable, efficient, and high-performing materials in a wide range of industries.

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