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Coexistence of Pinning and Moving on a Contact Line

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Abstract

Textured surfaces are instrumental in water repellency or fluid wicking applications, where the pinning and depinning of the liquid-gas interface plays an important role. Previous work showed that a contact line can exhibit non-uniform behavior due to heterogeneities in surface chemistry or roughness. Here, we demonstrate that such non-uniformities can be achieved even without varying the local energy barrier. Around a cylindrical pillar, an interface can reside in an intermediate state where segments of the contact line are pinned to the pillar top while the rest of the contact line moves along the sidewall. This partially pinned mode is due to the global non-axisymmetric pattern of the surface features and exists for all textured surfaces, especially when superhydrophobic surfaces are about to be flooded or when capillary wicks are close to dryout.

Introduction

Rough, structured surfaces are used to manipulate the liquid-gas interface primarily for two purposes: fluid repellency¹⁻³ for self-cleaning⁴⁻⁵, water harvesting⁶, anti-icing⁷, antifouling⁸, and enhancing condensation⁹⁻¹²; and capillary wicking for thermal management¹³⁻¹⁶, microfluidics¹⁷⁻¹⁹, and fluid separation²⁰. In both cases, liquid and gas are separated by a capillary surface²¹ which self-regulates its shape in response to the interfacial pressure difference. Prior work has recognized the importance of the capillary surface evolution and the contact line pinning/depinning in these applications, where the contact line has been commonly considered to be either fully pinned or mobile²²⁻³².

In this work, we show through experiments and modeling a hybrid wetting state during which contact line pinning and motion coexist. Similar coexistence behavior has been reported in literature for a sessile drop placed on a substrate with heterogeneities in surface chemistry or roughness³³⁻³⁷. In these cases, the local energy barrier, which governs the pinning/depinning or contact angle hysteresis in general, is manipulated by along the contact line. However, we demonstrate that the contact line can exhibit non-uniform behavior simply due to the global non-axisymmetric pattern of the surface features, without variation in the local energy barrier. Since this non-axisymmetry is present for all textured surfaces, the current work is relevant for all of the fluid repellency and wicking applications described above. In this study, with a regular pillar array system³⁸⁻⁴⁴, as we varied the interfacial pressure difference, we observed the fully pinned mode of the contact line in Fig. 1 (a) and (b) and the fully mobile mode in Fig. 1 (e) and (f); additionally, between these two modes, we show the existence of the previously unexplored partially pinned mode in the absence of local energy barrier variation in Fig. 1 (c) and (d).

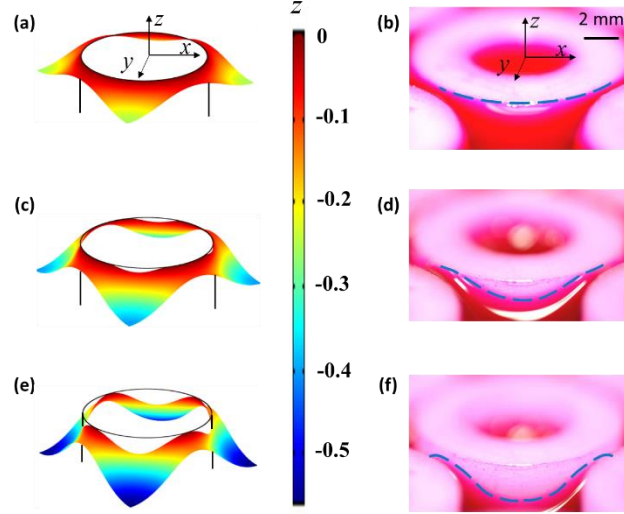


Fig. 1 Model solution and experimental observation of the capillary surface around a cylindrical pillar in a square array: (a) and (b) Regime (I) fully pinned mode; (c) and (d) Regime (II) partially pinned mode; (e) and (f) fully mobile mode. The colors in (a), (c), and (e) represents the z coordinates of the capillary surface. The blue dash lines in (b), (d) and (f) indicate the contact line position. The major difference between the model ((a), (c), and (e)) and the experiment ((b), (d) and (f)) is the Bo . The former assumes $Bo \ll 1$ while the latter corresponds to $Bo = 6.3$. Nevertheless, the same three regime behavior was observed in both the model and the experiment. Noting that gravity only tends to flatten the interface, the experimental observations qualitatively support the modeling results.

Model Formulation

To understand the interface behavior during the transition from a pinned to mobile contact line, we established a model framework based on first principles, where we examined the capillary surface in a unit cell of a square-patterned cylindrical pillar array, representative of structures on engineered surfaces. We denote the pillar radius as r , center-to-center spacing as L , and gap between pillars as $s = L - 2r$, and establish a Cartesian coordinate system at the center of one of

the pillars (Fig. 2 (a) and (b)). The shape of the interface is described by $z = f(x, y)$. Due to symmetry, we restrict the problem domain to one eighth of the unit cell and consequently apply symmetry boundary conditions on boundaries 1, 2 and 3 in Fig. 2 (c). By the pressure balance across the interface,

$$\Delta P_0 + \Delta \rho g z = 2\sigma\kappa \quad (1)$$

where ΔP_0 is the interfacial pressure difference from phase 2 to phase 1 in Fig. 2 (a) evaluated at the highest point of the interface ($z = 0$), σ is the surface tension, κ is the interface mean curvature, $\Delta \rho$ is the density difference from phase 1 to phase 2, and g is the gravitational constant. Normalizing the both sides of Eq. (1) to the characteristic capillary pressure σ/r , we have

$$\frac{\Delta P_0}{\sigma/r} + \text{Bo} \cdot \frac{z}{r} = 2\kappa r \quad (2)$$

where $\text{Bo} = \Delta \rho g r^2 / \sigma$ is the Bond number²¹ of the system. From this dimensionless equation, it is clear that the system's behavior is dominated by Bo and the ratio between the interface geometry and pillar radius. Note that when $\text{Bo} \gg 1$, gravity dominates, resulting in a flat interface as the right hand side of Eq. (2) becomes negligible, so any non-uniform behavior of the contact line should be caused by capillarity. When $\text{Bo} \ll 1$, κ remains constant in a unit cell as the gravitational term diminishes, reducing Eq. (2) to the Young-Laplace equation. Applying concepts from differential geometry⁴⁵, κ , which is positive when phase 2 curves into phase 1, can be determined from the outward-pointing unit normal vector of the interface $\hat{n} = \nabla f / \|\nabla f\|$ (Fig. 2 (a)):

$$\nabla \cdot \hat{n} = 2\kappa. \quad (3)$$

Applying the divergence theorem for the vector field \hat{n} , we have:

$$\iint \nabla \cdot \hat{n} ds = \oint_{1,2,3,4} \hat{n} \cdot \hat{n}_b dl \quad (4)$$

The left hand side is the gradient of \hat{n} integrated over the problem domain in Fig. 2 (c) and the right hand side is the dot product between \hat{n} and \hat{n}_b integrated over boundaries 1, 2, 3, and 4 in Fig. 2 (c), where \hat{n}_b is the boundary unit normal vector pointing outwards. Due to the symmetry, $\hat{n} \cdot \hat{n}_b = 0$ on boundaries 1, 2, and 3. On boundary 4, $\hat{n}_b = \hat{n}_4 = (-x, -y, 0)$. Combining Eq. (3) and Eq. (4), we have:

$$\iint 2\kappa ds = \int_4 \hat{n} \cdot \hat{n}_4 dl \quad (5)$$

Eq. (3) is a second-order partial differential equation that governs the shape of the capillary surface $z = f(x, y)$. With proper boundary conditions specified at boundary 1, 2, 3 and 4, it can be solved by the finite element method where we applied the sparse object-oriented linear equations solver⁴⁶ and used free triangular meshing with 40508 domain elements and 2124 boundary elements while the relative tolerance for convergence was set to be 10^{-6} (see Supplemental Material Section I for a comparison between the present work and the Surface Evolver⁴⁷ approach).

Modeling Results and Discussion

We set $r = 1$ to normalize the pillar array dimensions to its radius and $L = 2.5$ as a reference geometry. When the contact line is fully pinned at the top of the pillar, we have a Dirichlet condition ($z = 0$) on boundary 4, which enables us to solve Eq. (2) and Eq. (3) for a given κ . For example, setting $\kappa = 0.6$, we plot the shape of the capillary surface around one pillar in Fig. 1 (a). We evaluate the apparent contact angle θ as the angle between \hat{n} and \hat{n}_4 with $\cos \theta = \hat{n} \cdot \hat{n}_4$. When

the contact line is fully mobile along the sidewall, the boundary condition on the contact line is determined by $\theta = \theta_r$, where θ_r is the receding contact angle of phase 1 (or the advancing contact angle of phase 2) and the capillary surface generates the maximum mean curvature $\kappa = \kappa_r$. The divergence theorem in Eq. (5) then reduced to

$$2\kappa_r \frac{(L^2 - \pi r^2)}{8} = \frac{\pi r}{4} \cos \theta_r. \quad (6)$$

For example, setting $\theta_r = 30^\circ$, we obtain that $\kappa_r \approx 0.875$ and plot the capillary surface in Fig. 1 (e). Between the Regime (I) fully pinned mode and the Regime (III) fully mobile mode, there exists a partially pinned mode (Regime (II)) where part of the contact line depins and the rest remains pinned. For instance, with $L = 2.5$, $\kappa = 0.8$ and $\theta_r = 30^\circ$, we plot the $z = f(x, y)$ solution in Fig. 1 (c) for the partially pinned regime. Generally, to determine whether the capillary surface falls into the partially pinned regime given a $\kappa < \kappa_r$, first $z = f(x, y)$ is solved assuming the fully pinned mode and θ is plotted against the polar angle $\alpha = \arctan(y/x)$ along the contact line. The capillary surface stays in the fully pinned mode if and only if $\theta \geq \theta_r$ at every location of the contact line. In Fig. 2 (d), when $\theta_r = 30^\circ$ and $\kappa = 0.6$, $\theta \geq \theta_r$ for any α (Regime (I)). However, when $\kappa = 0.8$, we observe that $\theta < \theta_r$ for part of the contact line, which indicates that the contact line partially depins and transitions into the partially pinned mode (Regime (II)). Then, we need to relax the boundary condition on the contact line to be either $z = 0$ or $\theta = \theta_r$ while enforcing the continuity in z and θ . In Fig. 2 (e), the contact line location is plotted against α ($0^\circ \leq \alpha \leq 45^\circ$) for all three modes ($\kappa = 0.6$ fully pinned, $\kappa = 0.8$ partially pinned, and $\kappa = \kappa_r$ fully mobile regimes), which elaborates on the contact line behaviors as κ or equivalently ΔP_0 increases. The evolution of the capillary surface is important for determining the flooding criteria on superhydrophobic surfaces and the thermal-fluidic resistance in thermal management and microfluidic devices based on capillary wicks (see

Supplemental Material Section II). We note that the model that we developed here does not necessarily capture the dynamics of the contact line. For example, the depinning event at one point can instantly change the curvature of the capillary surface in its surrounding⁴⁸. Therefore, the evolution of the interface is depicted by this model only in a quasi-static way.

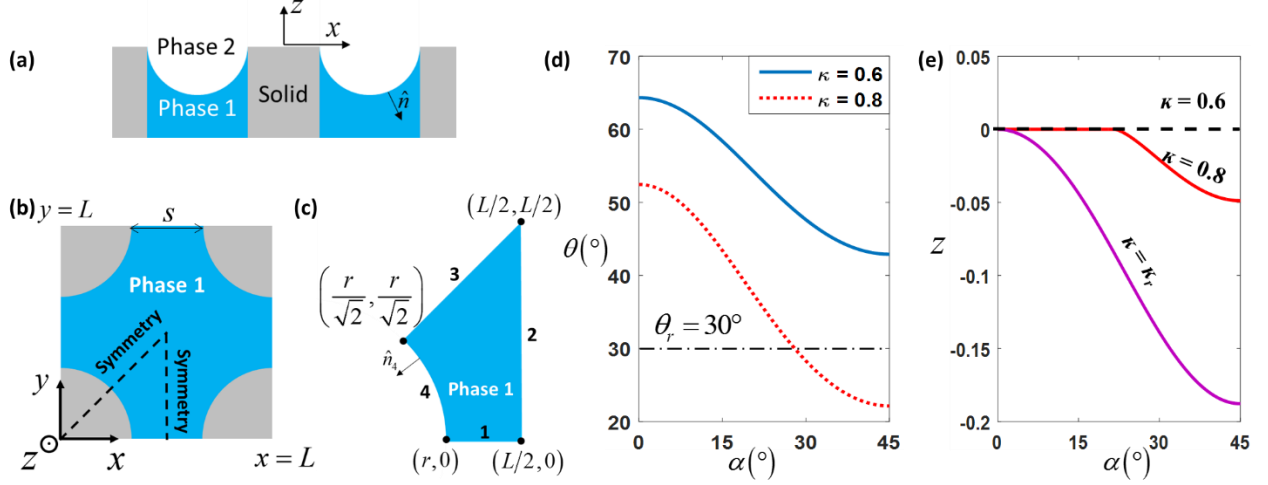


Fig. 2 (a) Schematic side view of capillary surface formed in pillar arrays. (b) Top view of a unit cell of a square pattern cylindrical pillar array. (c) Problem domain for solving the capillary surface: only 1/8 of the interface in the unit cell is simulated due to symmetry. (d) Contact angle θ plotted against polar angle α for $L = 2.5$, $\kappa = 0.6$ (blue solid line) and $\kappa = 0.8$ (red dotted line) in the fully pinned mode. (e) Contact line location as a function of polar angle α for $\kappa=0.6$, $\kappa=0.8$ and $\kappa = \kappa_r$ when $\theta_r = 30^\circ$.

In all three regimes, there is non-uniformity in either θ or z on the contact line. For example, in the fully pinned mode in Fig. 2 (d), θ is smaller where α is larger. As ΔP_0 increases, the interface becomes more curved to generate a larger capillary pressure and θ decreases down to the limit of θ_r . Consequently, where α is larger, θ will approach θ_r first. As ΔP_0 is increased further, the depinning of contact line starts from the location where $\alpha = 45^\circ$, moving in the direction of decreasing α . As a result, when the contact line fully depins, it is at a lower location for larger α , as indicated in Fig. 2 (e). We attribute this non-uniformity to the non-axisymmetry of the square

pattern of the pillar array even though the cylindrical pillar itself is axisymmetric. Due to this mismatch, not every location on the contact line transitions from pinned to mobile at the same time, which is the reason that the partially pinned regime exists. In general, Regime (II) exists for any surface which is not axisymmetric.

Experimental Results and Discussion

To verify the findings of our model, we created two square patterned cylindrical pillar arrays using nylon pillars, 12.7 mm in diameter with gap between pillars $s = 1.5$ mm and 2.3 mm, respectively. We used a solution of Rhodamine B in water (2.09 mM) as the working fluid. The surface tension was determined to be 62 mN/m using the pendant drop method⁴⁹, which agrees with literature data⁵⁰. At this length scale, the gravitational term in Eq. (2) becomes comparable to the capillary term as $Bo = 6.3$. The quasi-static receding contact angle of the solution on the pillar surface is measured to be $\theta_r = 10^\circ$ with the dynamic sessile drop method. During the experiment, we slowly pulled out the liquid from the pillar array (with a Capillary number for the receding fluid of $Ca \approx 7 \times 10^{-7}$) and observed that pinning and depinning occurred on the pillar surface as shown in Fig. 1 (b), (d), and (f). Noting that gravity only tends to flatten the interface, these observations qualitatively support our modeling results for the $Bo \ll 1$ case. To quantitatively validate our model, we solved Eq. (2) with $Bo = 6.3$ and compared its prediction to the contact line location obtained from the fully mobile mode (Fig. 1 (f)) *via* image processing (see Supplemental Material Section III). Fig. 3 (a) shows good agreement between the model and experiment, where the only model inputs are Bo , θ_r and the pillar array geometries. In fact, we also observed the same contact line behavior on microfabricated silicon micropillar arrays ($Bo < 0.01$) using an environmental

scanning electron microscope with water as the working fluid⁴⁴ (see Supplemental Material Section IV). We also note that the pillar surface in practice is not perfectly smooth and can induce local pinning. However, this only influences the contact line behavior at the length scale of the surface roughness and the non-uniform receding that we observed at the length scale of the pillar radius is caused by the non-axisymmetry of the surface structure pattern.

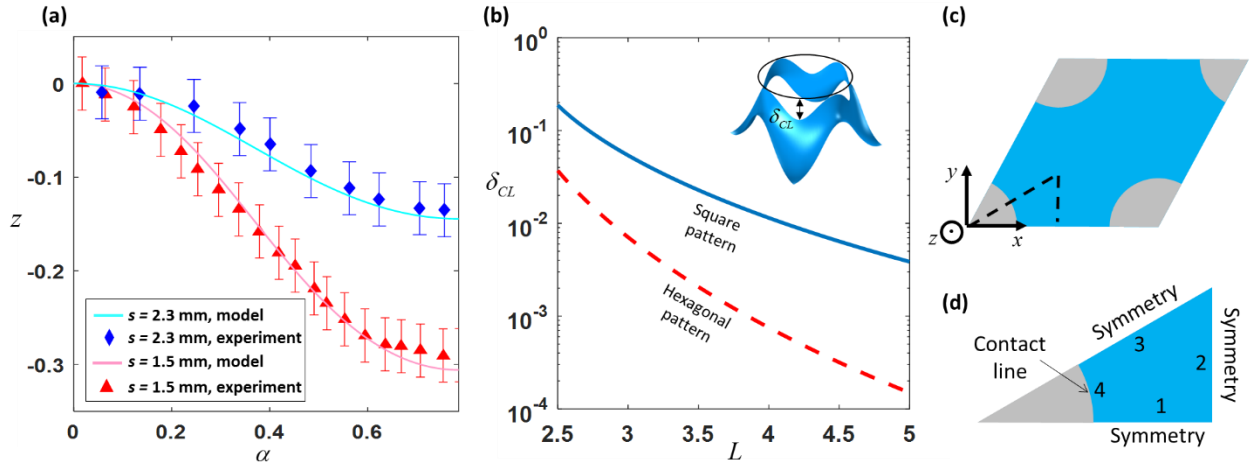


Fig. 3 (a) Model validation using the contact line location in the fully mobile mode for two sample pillar arrays ($Bo = 6.3$): the light blue curve and dark blue diamond symbols represent the model prediction and experimental data, respectively, for a square array of 12.7 mm diameter pillars with 2.3 mm gap between pillars; the light red curve and red triangle symbols represent the model prediction and experimental data, respectively, for a square array of 12.7 mm diameter pillars with 1.5 mm gap between pillars. (b) Variation in the contact line location (δ_{CL}) as a function of L for square pattern and hexagonal pattern pillar arrays for $Bo \ll 1$ (c) Top view of a unit cell of a hexagonal pattern pillar array. (d) Problem domain with boundary conditions for predicting the capillary surface in a hexagonal pattern pillar array.

Fig. 3 (a) shows that the z coordinates of the contact line vary around the pillar in Regime (III). This is because the contact line does not depin simultaneously in Regime (II), which again originates from the non-axisymmetry of the surface structure pattern. We evaluated δ_{CL} , the difference between the highest and the lowest point on the contact line (for $Bo \ll 1$), to quantify

this non-axisymmetric effect. In Fig. 3 (b), δ_{CL} is plotted as a function of L for square pattern pillar arrays (blue solid line). Note that the interaction between neighboring cells is through the non-axisymmetric periodic boundaries disturbing the capillary surface around the pillar. As L increases and the distance between the pillar and the periodic boundary is larger, this interaction becomes weaker and δ_{CL} diminishes. In the extreme case where $L \rightarrow \infty$, it corresponds to the constant mean curvature problem around a single cylindrical pillar, which is by nature axisymmetric and results in $\delta_{CL} = 0$. If we replace the square pattern with a hexagonal pattern, δ_{CL} as a function of L (red dotted line in Fig. 3 (b)) follows a similar trend. However, at the same L , δ_{CL} is smaller for the hexagonal pattern than the square pattern, as one pillar has more nearest neighbors in the hexagonal pattern. Note that in the hexagonal pattern pillar arrays, the capillary surface is still governed by Eq. (2). The unit cell is given in Fig. 3 (c) and the problem domain can be reduced to one twelfth of the unit cell due to symmetry (Fig. 3 (d)). This δ_{CL} is of significance when coatings are applied to surface structures to further tune surface wettability⁵¹⁻⁵². To achieve the desired effect, the coating must be of good quality down to the depth δ_{CL} to which the contact line extends.

Conclusion

This work investigated the capillary surface evolution as a function of the interfacial pressure difference and demonstrated an intermediate regime of the liquid-vapor interface where only part of the contact line is mobile while the rest is still pinned. This intermediate regime fundamentally originates from the non-axisymmetry of the surface structure pattern and gives rise to the extension of the contact line length when the contact line becomes fully mobile. This partially pinned mode can play an important role when the structured surface is close to dry-out in fluid wicking, or when

the trapped air layer is about to be flooded during fluid repellency. As the surface structures are packed closer, which generally enhances capillarity, we observe a more pronounced partially pinned mode. We anticipate that surface structures can be finely designed to tune this partially pinned mode, which is potentially useful for water-repellency, microfluidics, and phase change heat transfer applications.

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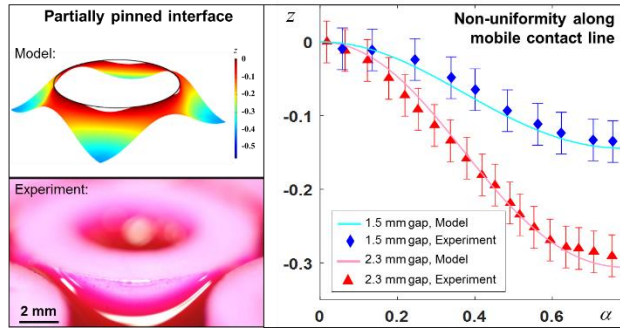
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Supplementary Information

Coexistence of Pinning and Moving on a Contact Line

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I. Comparison Between Our Method and Surface Evolver

We compare results from our current method and the more commonly used Surface Evolver (SE) approach in Fig. S1, using a unit cell from a square pattern array with cylindrical pillars as a benchmark case with $r = 1$, $L = 2.5$, $\theta_r = 30^\circ$ and $Bo \ll 1$. With our method, given a mean curvature κ , we solve for the capillary surface and calculate the liquid volume V in one unit cell. On the other hand, in SE, we choose a V , evolve the interface into a constant mean curvature surface and evaluate κ as the Lagrange multiplier. Fig. S1 gives V as a function of κ evaluated from both methods, showing excellent agreement.

Indeed, SE can handle a larger breadth of problems. Nevertheless, it is generally difficult to determine how close the surface is to the minimum energy configuration (the true solution) in SE, whereas it is easier to test the convergence and specify the relative error based on a certain mesh density using our current approach which relies on the finite element method to solve partial differential equations. Furthermore, to apply the capillary surface shape as the geometric constraint to the wicking or non-wetting applications, the interface shape has to be given as a function of pressure or κ . Following the previous approaches using SE with the volume constraint, one has to first solve for the dependence of the interface shape on the choice of V and then correlate V to κ ,

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which relates the shape to κ in an indirect manner. Meanwhile, the current approach directly gives the capillary surface shape as a function of κ , which facilitates integrating this method as a subroutine into modeling and optimization of geometric parameters for functioning of structured surfaces.

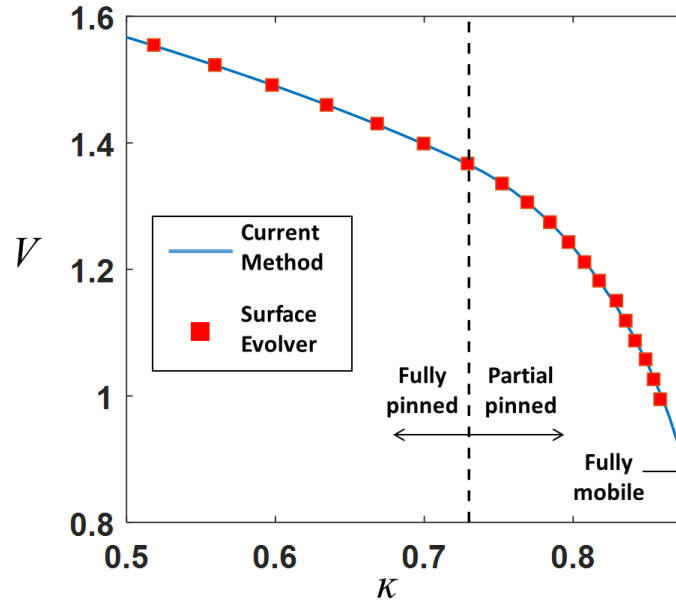


Fig. S1 Volume V as a function of curvature κ evaluated using both our current method (solid blue line) and SE (solid red squares), which are in excellent agreement.

II. Implications of Capillary Surface Evolution

As κ varies, there are also changes in the lowest location on the interface (z_{min}) and the interface surface area normalized over its projection area (A^*) (Fig. S2). When κ is small, the capillary surface is relatively flat, which makes A^* close to 1 and z_{min} close to 0. As κ increases, the interface extends into the unit cell, which causes the actual interface area to increase, i.e., $A^* > 1$, and the capillary surface to come closer to the bottom substrate (z_{min} decreases). In fluid repellency applications, the pillar height needs to be greater than $|z_{min}|$ to maintain the Cassie-Baxter state. In

the wicking process, a smaller z_{min} means larger flow resistance for liquid transport and A^* corresponds to the area for possible interfacial heat/mass transfer¹⁵. Hence, this work has important implications for superhydrophobic surfaces and fluidic-based thermal management applications which have not been well-captured in past work.

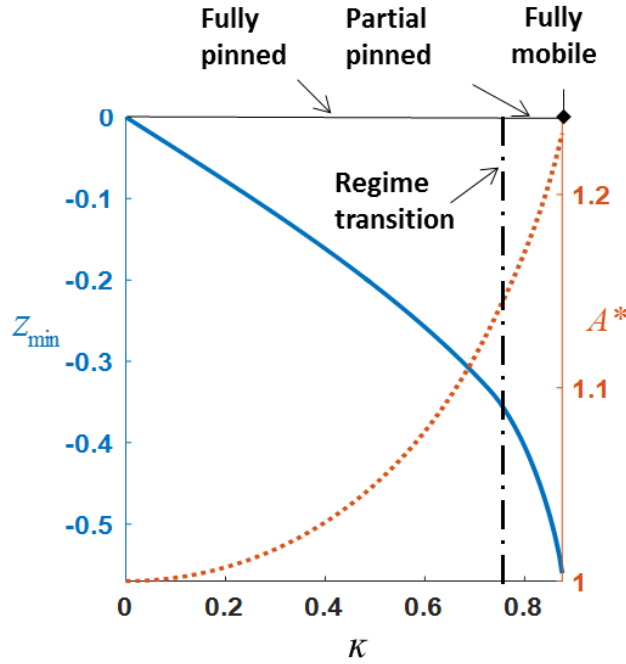


Fig. S2 Lowest location on the interface z_{min} (blue solid line) and its normalized surface area A^* (orange dotted line) as a function of κ .

III. Image Processing for the Fully Mobile Contact Line

To verify the findings of our model, we created square patterned pillar arrays using nylon pillars with the water solution of Rhodamine B as the working fluid. Using a digital camera, we captured the fully mobile mode in Fig. S3. To determine the exact contact line location, we first extracted the pillar edge coordinates (Curve 1 in Fig. S3) in pixels and fit it with an ellipse. Since this ellipse is also the projection of the circular pillar cross-section, this gives us the camera tilting angle $\alpha_c = \arccos(b/a)$, where a and b are the semi-major and semi-minor axes of the ellipse, respectively.

The ellipse fitting also provides the x -coordinate of the center of the contact line x_0 . We then export the contact line coordinates (Curve 2 in Fig. S3) in pixels. To compare Curve 2 to our model, the relative position in the x -direction has to be converted to that along the pillar circumference. The relative position in the y -direction is determined by the difference between Curve 1 and Curve 2, adjusted by α_c . Since the major axis of the ellipse is parallel to the camera projection plane, a also represents the undistorted pillar radius to which we normalize all of the dimensions.

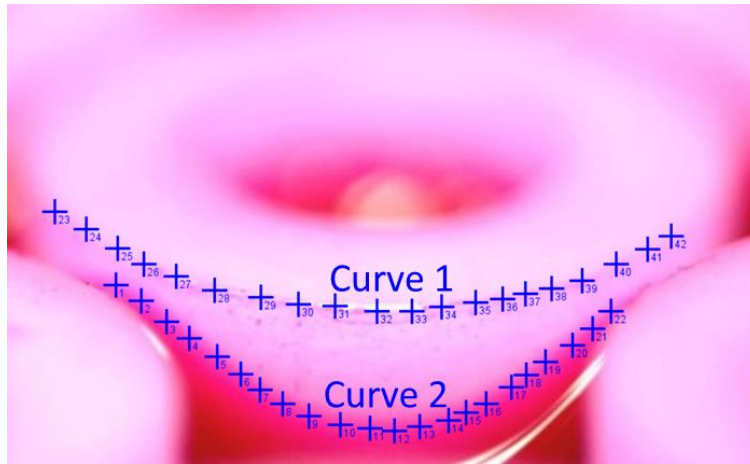


Fig. S3 Image processing on the fully receding mode to extract the contact line location.

IV. Contact Line Receding in Silicon Micropillar Arrays

We experimentally observed all three regimes (Regime (I) fully pinned regime, Regime (II) partially pinned regime and Regime (III) fully mobile regime) on microfabricated silicon pillar arrays (Fig. S4 (a)) with an environmental scanning electron microscope (ESEM, EVO 50, Carl Zeiss). Imaging was performed with a 500 μm lower aperture to allow extended water vapor pressure inside the chamber, and the backscatter detector was used to collect the image. The ESEM chamber was first purged with water vapor over five cycles to remove noncondensable gases. The pillars were then cooled to 2 $^{\circ}\text{C}$ on a Peltier stage inside the ESEM and water vapor was condensed

on the pillars at 110% relative humidity until the sidewalls were completely wetted, corresponding to Regime (I) and shown in Fig. S4 (b). The relative humidity was adjusted to 98% to promote evaporation of the water in order to observe the receding contact line behavior. Initially, the interface remained in Regime (I), but as evaporation continued and the volume of water present on the samples decreased, Regimes (II) and (III) were observed as the contact line receded down the pillar sidewall, shown in the time lapse in Fig. S4 (c), where the location of the CL started to vary on the pillar surface.

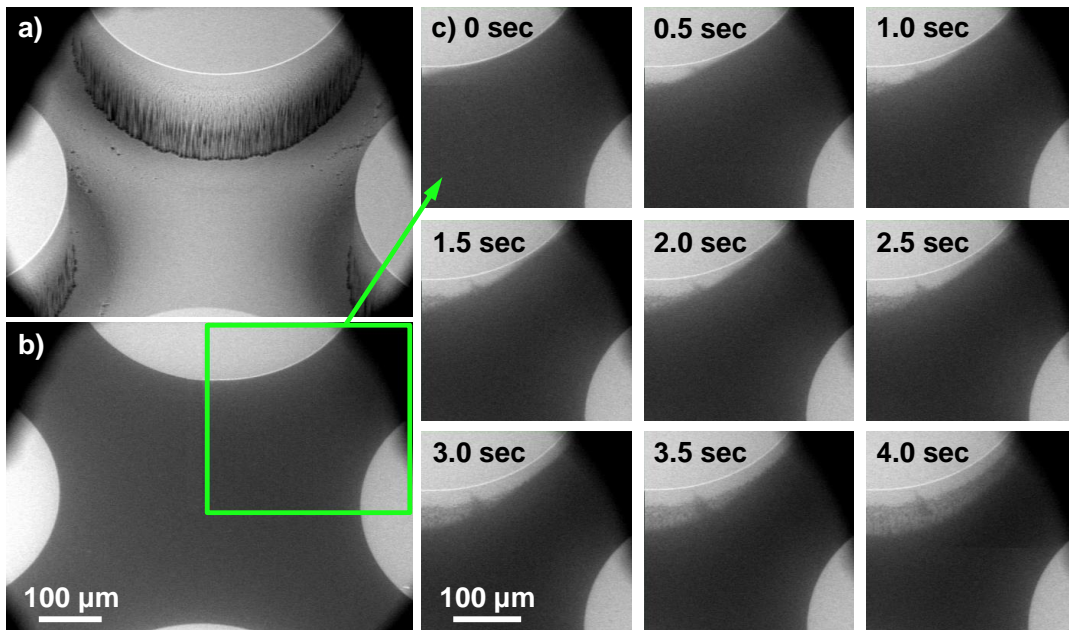


Fig. S4(a) Cylindrical silicon pillars were microfabricated for experimental imaging of the receding contact line with an environmental scanning electron microscope (ESEM). (b) The pillars were cooled and water vapor was condensed onto the pillars until their walls were completely wetted, corresponding to Regime (I). (c) This time lapse, zoomed into the sidewall of one pillar, shows the subsequent receding of the contact line during evaporation of liquid water; Regime (II) is present from 0 to 2.5 sec, after which Regime (III) is observed.

V. Capillary Surface in Square Cross-Section Micropillar Arrays

The current method can be easily extended to any micropillar array of cross-section. For example, Fig. S5 (a) shows a unit cell of a square pattern micropillar array with pillars of square cross-section. The problem domain is constrained by symmetric boundaries and the CL. We plot the capillary surface in the fully receding regime for the case where the pillar side length $a_s = 1$ and $L = 2.5$ in terms of the 2-D contour solution in Fig. S5 (b) and reconstruct the 3-D geometry in Fig. S5 (c). In Fig. S5 (c), the CL on square shape micropillars is not as smooth as the one on cylindrical micropillars due to the presence of a sharp corner which corresponds to a singularity in curvature. In reality, the micropillar corner can only contain a finite curvature, which would make the CL smoother.

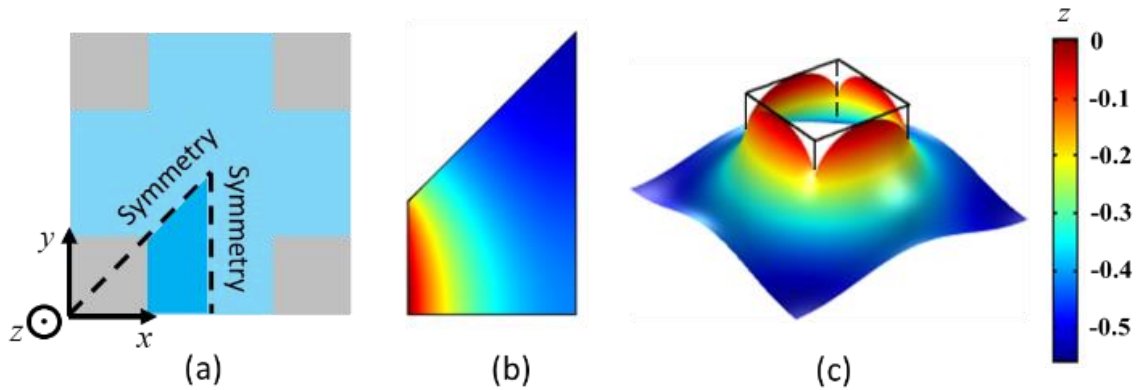


Fig. S5 (a) Top view of a unit cell of a square pattern micropillar array with pillars of square cross-section. (b) 2-D contour map of the interface shape in the problem domain. (c) 3-D reconstruction of capillary surface around one pillar in a square pattern micropillar array with pillars of square cross-section.