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Carrier formation dynamics of a small-molecular organic photovoltaic

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We investigated carrier formation dynamics in a small-molecular bulk heterojunction solar cell, 2,5-di-(2-ethylhexyl)-3,6-bis-(5′-n-hexy-[2,2′,5′,2″]-terthiophen-5-yl)-pyrrolo[3,4-c]pyrrolo-1,4-dione/[6,6]-phenyl C71-butyric acid methyl ester, with low bandgap (E_gap ≈ 1.5 eV). The photoinduced absorption (PIA) spectra of the blend film were decomposed into three PIAs, i.e., those due to donor exciton (D^0), acceptor exciton (A^−), and mobile carrier (D^−). The analysis revealed carrier conversion from D^0 with a conversion time of ~1.3 ps. © 2013 American Institute of Physics.

Among numerous photovoltaic devices, bulk heterojunction (BHJ) solar cells have attracted significant attention because a large area, efficient, and flexible photovoltaic device is expected by the role-to-role production process. The BHJ solar cells typically consist of an active layer, where the donor (D) phase is intimately intermixed with the acceptor (A) phase, a tin-doped indium oxide (ITO) anode, and an Al cathode. Reflecting the enlargement of the D/A interface area in the BHJ solar cell, the power conversion efficiency (PCE) reaches 9.2% (Ref. 3) with appropriate low bandgap donor polymer.4 The donor phase of the active layer has been dominated by polymeric materials, because their film is easy-to-make and exhibits better morphology than their small-molecule counterparts. The polymers, however, suffer from synthetic reproducibility and difficult purification procedures, which may hinder commercial viability.

Small-molecular materials have the advantage of easiness of synthesis and purification. In addition, they have greater tendency to self-assemble into order domains, which leads to high carrier mobility. These properties make small-molecules promising class of donor materials for the BHJ solar cells.5–7 Among them, deketoypyrrlpyrrole (DPP) pigments were developed in the early 1970s, and have been widely used in inks, paints, and plastics.5 Recently, Nguyen’s group reported that thiophene-based oligomers incorporating a DPP unit are excellent donor materials for the BHJ solar cells.5–7 These materials exhibit intense absorption at long wavelengths and high field-effect mobility. They demonstrated solar cells with PCEs of 3.0% using an oligothiophene-DPP molecule with ethylhexyl substituents [2,5-di-(2-ethylhexyl)-3,6-bis-(5′-n-hexy-[2,2′,5′,2″]-terthiophen-5-yl)-pyrrolo[3,4-c]pyrrolo-1,4-dione (SMDPPEH); see Fig. 1] and [6,6]-phenyl C71-butyric acid methyl ester (PC70BM). The ethylhexyl groups make the donor material soluble (≥20 mg/ml in chloroform, chlorobenzene, or toluene) and thermally stable (m.p. = 160°C).

In this letter, we investigated the carrier formation dynamics in SMDPPEH/PC70BM blend film by means of femtosecond time-resolved pump and probe spectroscopy. The power conversion processes in the BHJ solar cells involve (i) exciton formation and migration to the D/A interface, (ii) exciton dissociation into carriers (electron and hole), and (iii) slow carrier transport and collection at the electrodes. The time-resolved spectroscopy is a powerful tool to clarify the carrier formation dynamics [(i) and (ii)] in the subpicosecond region.8–13 Careful decomposition analysis of the photoinduced absorption (PIA) spectra into those due to D^0, A^−, and D^− revealed the carrier conversion from D^0 with a conversion time of ~1.3 ps. The slow conversion time is ascribed to small band offset (ΔE = 0.2 eV) of lowest

FIG. 1. (a) Current density (J)–voltage (V) curve of SMDPPEH/PC70BM BHJ solar cell. (b) IPCE spectrum of SMDPPEH/PC70BM BHJ solar cell (solid circles). Solid and broken curves are absorption coefficient (α) of SMDPPEH and PC70BM films, respectively.
unoccupied molecular orbital (LUMO). The temporal evolution of the PIA due to $D^+$, however, implies a hidden $A^+ \rightarrow D^+$ conversion process, whose conversion time is probably shorter than the time resolution ($\leq 0.2 \text{ ps}$) of the system.

We fabricated the SMDPPEH/PC$_{70}$BM solar cell in the following configuration: ITO/poly(3,4-ethylenedioxythiophene) (PEDOT): poly(styrenesulfonate) (PSS) (40 nm)/active layer (52 nm)/LiF (1 nm)/Al (80 nm). SMDPPEH was purchased from Sigma-Aldrich and used as received. A thin layer (40 nm) of PEDOT: PSS was spin-coated onto the ITO and dried at 110 °C for 10 min on a hot plate in air. An chlorobenzene solution of SMDPPEH: PC$_{70}$BM with a ratio of 1:1 by weight is subsequently spin-coated on the PEDOT: PSS surface to form the active layer. Finally, LiF (1 nm) and Al (80 nm) were deposited onto the active layer by conventional thermal evaporation at a chamber pressure lower than $5 \times 10^{-4} \text{ Pa}$, which provided the devices with an active area of $2 \times 2 \text{ mm}^2$.

For the time-resolved spectroscopy, the SMDPPEH/PC$_{70}$BM blend film was spin-coated on quartz substrates, and was dried in an inert N$_2$ atmosphere. For comparison, we prepared spin-coated SMDPPEH (PC$_{70}$BM) film on quartz substrates from chlorobenzene (chloroform) solution. The thicknesses of the SMDPPEH, PC$_{70}$BM, and SMDPPEH/PC$_{70}$BM blend films were 39, 50, and 96 nm, respectively. The time-resolved spectroscopy was carried out in a pump-probe configuration at room temperature, details of which were described in the literature. Spot sizes of the pump and probe pulses were 5 and 3 mm in diameter, respectively. The temporal evolution spectra consist of negative signals in the short-wavelength region and positive signals in the long-wavelength region. The negative signals at $\approx 600 \text{ nm}$ in the neat SMDPPEH and SMDPPEH/PC$_{70}$BM blend films are ascribed to the ground state bleach (GSB) of SMDPPEH, while that at $\approx 550 \text{ nm}$ in the neat PC$_{70}$BM film is ascribed to the GSB of PC$_{70}$BM. In the neat SMDPPEH film [Fig. 2(a)], the broad positive signal at $\sim 1100 \text{ nm}$ is ascribed to the PIA due to $D^\ddagger$. In the neat PC$_{70}$BM film [Fig. 2(b)], the broad positive signal extending above $600 \text{ nm}$ is ascribed to the PIA due to $A^\ddagger$. In the SMDPPEH/PC$_{70}$BM blend film [Fig. 2(c)], the broad positive signal in the infrared region exhibits a characteristic red-shift from $\sim 1100 \text{ nm}$ at 1 ps to $\sim 1200 \text{ nm}$ at 10 ps. We confirmed that the spectral profile becomes independent of the delay time (t) for $t \geq 2 \text{ ps}$.

Now, let us decompose the PIA spectra ($\phi_{\text{exp}}$) of the blend film into those due to $D^\ddagger$, $A^\ddagger$, and $D^+$ as

![Graphs showing current density-voltage (J–V) curve of the solar cell](image1)

![Graphs showing decomposition of the AOD spectra](image2)
We performed least-squares fitting of the PIA signal. The lifetime ($t$) of D* is significantly longer than those in regioregular-P3HT (8 ps [Ref. 8]) and in F8T2 (2.7 ps [Ref. 11]). We note that the lifetime (≈150 ps) of A* is also long in the neat PC70BM film. These long lifetimes of D* and A* suggest that their decays are governed by the radiative recombination, not by the nonradiative channel. The decay times of D* ($t_{\text{decay}} \sim 1.3$ ps) of the blend film are two-order faster than those in the neat film. The fast decay time is ascribed to the exciton dissociation process into the carriers. The PIA signal of the blend film exhibits a large constant component (C), which is ascribed to the long-lived carriers.

Let us discuss the interrelation between carrier formation dynamics and the band offset ($\Delta E$) of LUMO and highest unoccupied molecular orbital (HOMO). In the conventional D$^+$ → D$^+$ process, an electron on donor HOMO transfers to acceptor LUMO at the D/A interface. Then, $\Delta E$ of LUMO is considered to be the dominant parameter for the carrier conversion process. On the other hand, a hole (an electron) state is photogenerated at the acceptor HOMO (LUMO) in the A$^+$ → D$^+$ process. Judging from the fact that the photo-excitation at 400 nm creates considerable A$^+$ in the A phase [see Fig. 2(b)], the hidden process is probably the A$^+$ → D$^+$ process. Actually, such a process is observed in low-band gap PTB7/PC70BM blend film.12

Let us investigate the slow decay dynamics of the photogenerated particles, i.e., D*, A*, and D$. Figure 5 shows temporal evolutions of the GSB and PIA signals in (a) SMDPPEH, (b) PC70BM, and (c) SMDPPEH/PC70BM films. Solid curves are results of least-squares fitting with an exponential function, $\Delta OD = A \cdot e^{-t/\tau} + C$. The obtained parameters are listed in Table I. In the neat SMDPPEH film, the lifetime (≈52 ps) of D* is nearly the same as that of the GSB signal. The lifetime (≈52 ps) of D* is significantly longer than those in regioregular-P3HT (8 ps [Ref. 8]) and in F8T2 (2.7 ps [Ref. 11]). We note that the lifetime (≈150 ps) of A* is also long in the neat PC70BM film. These long lifetimes of D* and A* suggest that their decays are governed by the radiative recombination, not by the nonradiative channel. The decay times of D* ($t_{\text{decay}} \sim 1.3$ ps) of the blend film are two-order faster than those in the neat film. The fast decay time is ascribed to the exciton dissociation process into the carriers. The PIA signal of the blend film exhibits a large constant component (C), which is ascribed to the long-lived carriers.

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that, an electron on donor HOMO transfers to acceptor HOMO. In this case, $\Delta E$ of HOMO is the dominative parameter for the carrier conversion process. In SMDPPEH/PC$_{70}$BM, the magnitude of $\Delta E (=0.2 \text{eV})$ of LUMO is much smaller than that ($=0.8 \text{eV}$) of HOMO. The small $\Delta E$ of LUMO is responsible for the slow carrier conversion time ($\tau_{\text{decay}} \sim 1.3 \text{ps}$) from D$^*$. The large $\Delta E$ of HOMO implies a faster carrier conversion process from A$^*$, which is discernible as the constant term of the PIA due to D$^+$ (see Fig. 4).

Recently, Ohkita’s group proposed a hole transfer from donor polymer to [6,6]-phenyl C$_{61}$-butyric acid methyl ester (PCBM) on a time scale of nanoseconds. The hole transfer scenario well explains the commonly observed enhancement of hole transport in polymer/PCBM blend. The mobile carriers (D$^+$), which are photocreared on a time scale of picoseconds, reach the collecting electrode via the hopping process within the donor domain and/or the hole transfer into the acceptor molecule.

In summary, we investigated the carrier formation dynamics in SMDPPEH/PC$_{70}$BM blend film by means of femtosecond time-resolved pump and probe spectroscopy. Careful decomposition analysis of the PIA spectra into those due to D$^*$, A$^*$, and D$^+$ revealed D$^*$ → D$^+$ conversion process with conversion time of $\sim 1.3 \text{ps}$. The temporal evolution of the PIA due to D$^+$ implies a hidden A$^*$ → D$^+$ conversion process.

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