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Robust carrier formation process in low-band gap organic photovoltaics

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By means of femto-second time-resolved spectroscopy, we investigated the carrier formation process against film morphology and temperature (T) in highly-efficient organic photovoltaic, poly([4,8-bis[(2-ethylhexyl)oxy]benzo[1,2-b:4,5-b'] dithiophene-2,6-diyl][3-fluoro-2-((2-ethylhexyl)carbonyl)carbonyl][thieno[3,4-b]thiophenediyl]] (PTB7)/[6,6]-phenyl C71-butyric acid methyl ester (PC70BM) solar cells. We found that the carrier formation efficiency (φCT) from an absorbed photon is nearly independent of the film morphology, indicating that the internal quantum efficiency (φIQ) is mainly governed by the carrier transfer efficiency (φCT) to the electrodes. The activation energy (Ea = 0.5–0.8 meV) of φCT is significantly low, which suggests an extended charge-transfer state around the PTB7/PC70BM interface. © 2013 AIP Publishing LLC.

Organic photovoltaic (OPV) with bulk heterojunction (BHJ)1,2 is a promising energy conversion device with flexibility and low-cost production process, e.g., the roll-to-roll process. The BHJ active layer, where absorbed photons are converted into carriers, is the mixture of a nano level of donor (D) polymers and acceptor (A) molecules. In typical OPV, the active layer is sandwiched between an indium tin oxide (ITO) transparent anode and an Al cathode. Recently, Yu and coworkers have developed a series of low-band gap donor polymers based on alternating ester-substituted thieno[3,4-b]thiophene and benzodithiophene units (PTB7:n:n = 1–7).3–5 The usage of the low-band gap donor polymer has increased the power conversion efficiency (PCE) of the OPV to ~7–9%.3,6,7 The increase in PCE stimulates extensive spectroscopic investigations of low-band gap blend films.8–12 For example, Yonezawa et al.11,12 reported fast exciton-to-carrier conversion process (τ = 0.2–0.3 ps) in poly[[4,8-bis[(2-ethylhexyl)oxy]benzo[1,2-b:4,5-b'] dithiophene-2,6-diyl][3-fluoro-2-((2-ethylhexyl)carbonyl)carbonyl][thieno[3,4-b]thiophenediyl]] (PTB7)/[6,6]-phenyl C71-butyric acid methyl ester (PC70BM) blend film.

The generation of the photocurrent in such OPV follows multi-step processes, i.e., (i) photogeneration of an exciton, (ii) exciton migration to the D/A interface, (iii) carrier formation via exciton dissociation, (iv) carrier transport within the D and A domains, and (v) collection of the carriers at the electrodes. We tentatively classify the processes into the carrier formation [(i)–(iii)] and the carrier transfer [(iv) and (v)] processes, because the former completes within several ps, while the latter requires much longer time (≥ μs). With this classification, the internal quantum efficiency (φIQ) is expressed as φCT × φCT, where φCT and φCT are the carrier formation efficiency from an absorbed photon and the carrier transfer efficiency to the electrode. It is well-known that the φIQ value crucially depends on the film fabrication conditions, such as solvent, annealing temperature, and additive, via the modification of the film morphology.13,14

In this letter, we performed femto-second time-resolved spectroscopy on PTB7/PC70BM blend films against film morphology and temperature (T). The spectroscopy revealed that the φCT value is nearly independent of the film morphology, indicating that the φIQ value is mainly governed by the carrier transfer process to the electrodes. In addition, the activation energy (Ea = 0.5–0.8 meV) of φCT is much lower than the coulombic binding energy (~100 meV) of a localized charge-transfer state. This suggests an extended charge-transfer state around the PTB7/PC70BM interface.

We fabricated a PTB7/PC70BM device in the following configuration:15 ITO/poly(3,4-ethylenedioxythiophene) (PEDOT): poly(styrenesulfonate) (PPS) (40 nm)/active layer/LiF (1 nm)/Al (80 nm). PTB7 was purchased from Chemscitech, Inc., and used as received. The patterned ITO (conductivity: 10 Ω/square) glass was pre-cleaned in an ultrasonic bath of acetone and ethanol and then treated in an ultraviolet-ozone chamber. 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. The substrate was then transferred to an N2 glove box and dried again at 110 °C for 10 min on a hot plate. A mixed solvent of α-dichlorobenzene (α-DCB)/1,8-diiodooctane (DIO) (97.5: 2.5 vol. %) of PTB7: PC70BM with a ratio of 2:3 by weight (8:12 mg/ml) subsequently spin-coated onto the PEDOT: PSS surface to form the active layer. The spin-coated film was dried in an inert N2 atmosphere. 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 × 10⁻⁴ Pa. The active area of the solar cell was 2.5 mm². For comparison, we fabricated another PTB7/PC70BM device from a chloroform (CF) solution of PTB7: PC70BM with a ratio of 2:3 by weight (4:6 mg/ml). For drastically changing of the film morphology and the performance of the device, we chose the solvents with different boiling-points:
CF with low boiling-point (61 °C) and o-DCB/DIO with high boiling-point (181 °C for o-DCB and 167 °C for DIO). Figure 1 shows AFM images of the active layers of (a) o-DCB/DIO and (b) CF devices. The domain size (~100 nm) of the CF device is much larger than that of the o-DCB/DIO device. The thicknesses of the active layers of the o-DCB/DIO and CF devices were 107 and 98 nm, respectively.

Figure 2(a) shows current density-voltage (J–V) curves of the o-DCB/DIO and CF devices. The curves were measured using a voltage current source/monitor under AM 1.5 solar-simulated light irradiation of 100 mW/cm² (Bunkou-keiki, OTENTO-SUN III). In Table I, we summarized performances, i.e., the open circuit voltage (V_oc), short circuit current density (J_sc), fill factor (FF), and PCE of the o-DCB/DIO and CF devices. Figure 2(b) shows absorption coefficients (α) of the blend films. The spectral feature and absolute magnitude of α are almost mutually the same. The absorption edge is ~750 nm. Figure 2(c) shows incident photon to current conversion efficiency (IPCE) spectra of the devices, which was measured using a SM-250 system (Bunkou-keiki). The magnitudes of IPCE at 400 nm for the o-DCB/DIO and CF devices are 0.55 and 0.34, respectively. Considering the absorbed photon density within the active layers, the magnitudes of φ_H0 at 400 nm are estimated to be 0.87 and 0.51, respectively. The lower φ_H0 value of the CF device is ascribed to the larger domain size [see Fig. 1(b)], which may be disadvantageous for both the carrier formation (φ_CT) and the carrier transfer (φ_CT) processes. Here, we emphasize that the femto-second time-resolved spectroscopy is a powerful tool to distinguish the two processes in the time domain.

For the time-resolved spectroscopy, the PTB7/PC70BM blend films were spin-coated on quartz substrates from o-DCB/DIO and CF solvents and were dried in an inert N₂ atmosphere. The thicknesses of the blend films made from o-DCB/DIO and CF solutions were 140 and 81 nm, respectively. The time-resolved spectroscopy was carried out in a pump-probe configuration against T. The blend film was placed on a cold head of a cryostat, whose temperature was controlled with a liquid nitrogen. The wavelength of the pump pulse was 400 nm, which was generated as second harmonics of a regenerative amplified Ti:sapphire laser in a β-BaB₂O₄ (BBO) crystal. The pulse width and repetition rate are 100 fs and 1000 Hz, respectively. The excitation intensity (I_ex) was 27 μJ/cm². We confirmed that the signal intensity is proportional to I_on. The frequency of the pump pulse was decreased by half (500 Hz) to provide “pump-on” and “pump-off” condition. The white probe pulse (450–1600 nm), generated by self-phase modulation in a sapphire plate, was focused on the sample with the pump pulse. The spot sizes of the pump and probe pulses were 4.2 and 2.0 mm in diameter, respectively. The transmitted probe spectra were detected using a 256 ch InGaAs photodiode array (800–1600 nm) attached to a 30 cm imaging spectrometer. The spectral data were accumulated for 20000–50 000 pulses to improve the signal/noise ratio. The differential absorption spectra (ΔOD) is expressed as ΔOD = –log(I_on/I_off), where I_on and I_off are the transmission spectra under the “pump-on” and “pump-off” conditions, respectively. The time resolution of the system is ~0.3 ps.

Figure 3(a) shows the ΔOD spectrum for the PTB7/PC70BM blend film made from o-DCB/DIO solvent. The spectrum exhibits positive broad signal centered at 1174 nm. The positive signal is ascribed to the photoinduced absorption (PIA) due to the holes on the donor polymer. Actually, the ΔOD spectrum resembles the optical modulation spectra of the PTB7 neat film. In the earlier stage (<0.3 ps) after photo excitation, the hole component of the PIA is overlapped by the exciton component. The spectral profile is essentially unchanged above 0.6 ps, indicating that the PIA consists of only the hole component. Figure 3(c) shows signal intensity (I) at 1174 nm against time at 300 K. The magnitude of I steeply increases within the time resolution of the system, and then gradually increases with time. Figures 3(b) and 3(d) show the ΔOD spectrum and the time dependence of I for the film made from CF solvent. Their features are similar to those of the film made from o-DCB/DIO solvent [Figs. 3(a) and 3(c)], indicating that the PIA is ascribed to the holes on the donor polymer.

The abdominal CT scan revealed a 1.5 cm diameter mass located in the upper abdomen, left of the vertebral column. The mass was heterogenous in density, with areas of both high and low attenuation, consistent with a mixed solid and cystic lesion. There were no obvious signs of invasion or metastasis. The patient underwent surgical resection of the mass, which was confirmed to be a leiomyoma. The postoperative course was uneventful, and the patient is currently doing well.

### Table I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Solvent</th>
<th>V_oc (V)</th>
<th>J_sc (mA/cm²)</th>
<th>FF (%)</th>
<th>PCE (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>o-DCB/DIO</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>14.21</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>6.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CF</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>7.34</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Fig. 2. (a) Current density-voltage (J–V) curves of PTB7/PC70BM solar cells made from o-DCB/DIO and CF solvents. (b) Absorption coefficients (α) of PTB7/PC70BM blend films made from o-DCB/DIO and CF solvents. (c) IPCE spectra of the o-DCB/DIO and CF devices.*
In the CF device with large domains [Fig. 1(b)], the negligibility of the electron migration within the domain causes negligible loss even when the absolute value of the transfer process (ton dissociation process, the dissociation suffers from the bending and crossing of the polymer backbone. In the exciton migration process, the potential distribution due to the barrier formation process. In the exciton migration process, the absorption of photons (coulombic binding energy) and/or trapping.

To precisely estimate the mean values and standard deviations of \( I \), the time-resolved measurements were performed at eight different positions of the film at each temperature. The \( E_a \) value is estimated to be \( 0.8 \pm 0.2 \text{ meV} \) [straight line in Fig. 4(b)]. A similar thermal activation behavior of \( I \) is observed in the blend film made from CF solvent [Figs. 4(c) and 4(d)]. The \( E_a \) value is estimated to be \( 0.5 \pm 0.1 \text{ meV} \). The smaller \( E_a \) value of the CF device perhaps reflects more homogeneous D/A interface. Here, we emphasize that thus-evaluated \( E_a \) values (\( \approx 0.5-0.8 \text{ meV} \)) are much smaller than the expected coulombic binding energy (\( \sim 100 \text{ meV} \)) of localized charge-transfer states. In addition, the \( E_a \) values of \( \phi_{\text{CT}} \) are much smaller than that (\( =100 \text{ meV} \)) of the external quantum efficiency in PTB7/PCBM blend film.

The small \( E_a \) value suggests an extended charge-transfer state at the PTB7/PC70BM interface, which reduces the coulombic binding energy between the electron and hole. By means of ab initio calculation, Kanai and Grossman investigated the charge-transfer state at the P3HT/C60 interface, and observed an extended charge-transfer state. The state has a coulombic binding energy of \( 0.5-0.8 \text{ meV} \) for the two devices. Our time-resolved spectroscopy revealed that the \( \phi_{\text{CT}} \) values are mutually the same (\( \equiv \phi_0 \)). Surprisingly, the exciton migration within the domain causes negligible loss even in the CF device with large domains [Fig. 1(b)]. The negligible loss is probably originated in the fast carrier formation time (\( \tau = 0.2-0.3 \text{ ps} \)) as well as the highly-efficient exciton dissociation process within the BHJ active layer. On the other hand, the \( \phi_{\text{CT}} \) value is much suppressed in the CF device. The significant loss is ascribed to the slow carrier transfer process (\( \geq \mu \text{s} \)) and resultant carrier recombination and/or trapping.

Next, let us discuss on the temperature effect on the carrier formation process. In the exciton migration process, the migration suffers from the potential distribution due to the bending and crossing of the polymer backbone. In the exciton dissociation process, the dissociation suffers from the coulombic binding energy between the electron and hole. The coulombic binding energy is several hundred meV, if the electron and hole localize on the adjacent molecules at the interface (charge-transfer state). Such charge-transfer states are frequently observed in poly(3-hexylthiophene) (P3HT)/[6,6]-phenyl C61-butyric acid methyl ester (PCBM) interface and \( \pi \)-sexithiophene (6T)/C60 interface. Here, we propose that the coulombic binding energy of the charge-transfer state is detectable as the activation energy \( (E_a) \) of \( \phi_{\text{CT}} \).

Figure 4 shows temperature dependence of the AOD spectrum at 10 ps for PTB7/PC70BM blend film made from \( \alpha \)-DCB/DIO and CF solvents. The spectral weight slightly increases with \( T \), reflecting the thermal activation behavior of the exciton dissociation process. Figure 4 shows the Arrhenius plot of \( I \) at 1174 nm against inverse temperatures. To precisely estimate the mean values and standard deviations of \( I \), the time-resolved measurements were performed at eight different positions of the film at each temperature. The \( E_a \) value is estimated to be \( 0.8 \pm 0.2 \text{ meV} \) [straight line in Fig. 4(b)]. A similar thermal activation behavior of \( I \) is observed in the blend film made from CF solvent [Figs. 4(c) and 4(d)]. The \( E_a \) value is estimated to be \( 0.5 \pm 0.1 \text{ meV} \). The smaller \( E_a \) value of the CF device perhaps reflects more homogeneous D/A interface. Here, we emphasize that thus-evaluated \( E_a \) values (\( \approx 0.5-0.8 \text{ meV} \)) are much smaller than the expected coulombic binding energy (\( \sim 100 \text{ meV} \)) of a localized charge-transfer state. In addition, the \( E_a \) values of \( \phi_{\text{CT}} \) are much smaller than that (\( =100 \text{ meV} \)) of the external quantum efficiency in PTB7/PCBM blend film.

The small \( E_a \) value suggests an extended charge-transfer state at the PTB7/PC70BM interface, which reduces the coulombic binding energy between the electron and hole. By means of ab initio calculation, Kanai and Grossman investigated the charge-transfer state at the P3HT/C60 interface, and observed an extended charge-transfer state. The state has

### Table II. Internal quantum efficiency \( (\phi_0) \), carrier formation efficiency \( (\phi_{\text{CF}}) \) per an absorbed photon, carrier transfer efficiency \( (\phi_{\text{CT}}) \) to the electrode per a produced carrier for PTB7/PC70BM solar cells made from \( \alpha \)-DCB/DIO and CF solvents. The time-resolved spectroscopy revealed that the \( \phi_{\text{CT}} \) values are almost mutually the same (\( \equiv \phi_0 \)). \( \phi_{\text{CT}} \) is expressed as \( \phi_0/\phi_{\text{CF}} \).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Solvent</th>
<th>( \phi_0 )</th>
<th>( \phi_{\text{CF}} )</th>
<th>( \phi_{\text{CT}} )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>( \alpha )-DCB/DIO</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>( \phi_0 )</td>
<td>0.87/( \phi_0 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CF</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>( \phi_0 )</td>
<td>0.51/( \phi_0 )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
a significant probability distribution across the interface and a significant overlap with the lowest unoccupied molecular orbital (LUMO) state on C60. We believe that a similar extended charge-transfer state is realized at the PTB7/PC70BM interface. Recently, Collins et al. investigated the domain structure of PTB7/PC70BM blend film as well as the effect of the DIO additive. Their careful analysis revealed that the blend film consists of pure fullerene agglomerates (A domain) and a polymer-rich 70/30 wt.% molecularly mixed matrix (D domain). The addition of DIO drastically reduces the domain size, but has negligible effects on the composition and crystallinity of the domains. A similar molecular mixing is observed in naphtha[1,2–c:5,6-c]bis[1,2,5]thiadiazole (NT) material/fullerene derivative and 2,1,3-benzothiadiazole (BT) material/fullerene derivative blend films. Such a molecular mixing in the D domain is advantageous for the extended charge-transfer state, because the electronic state of the D domain approaches to that of pure fullerene domain.

In conclusion, we performed femto-second time-resolved spectroscopy on PTB7/PC70BM blend films against film morphology and T. Quantitative analysis of the PIA signal revealed that the carrier formation process is fairly robust against the film morphology. The small Ea values (>0.5–0.8 meV) suggests an extended charge-transfer state at the PTB7/PC70BM interface.

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