Spinel Formation for Stabilizing Simulated Nickel-Laden Sludge with Aluminum-Rich Ceramic Precursors

KAIMIN SHIH, TIM WHITE, AND JAMES O. LECKIE
Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, Stanford University, Stanford, California 94305-4020, and School of Materials Science and Engineering, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore 639798

The feasibility of stabilizing nickel-laden sludge from commonly available Al-rich ceramic precursors was investigated and accomplished with high nickel incorporation efficiency. To simulate the process, nickel oxide was mixed alternatively with γ-alumina, corundum, kaolinite, and mullite and was sintered from 800 to 1480 °C. The nickel aluminate spinel (NiAl2O4) was confirmed as the stabilization phase for nickel and crystallized with efficiencies greater than 90% for all precursors above 1250 °C and 3-h sintering. The nickel-incorporation reaction pathways with these precursors were identified, and the microstructure and spinel yield were investigated as a function of sintering temperature with fixed sintering time. This study has demonstrated a promising process for forming nickel spinel to stabilize nickel-laden sludge from a wide range of inexpensive ceramic precursors, which may provide an avenue for economically blending waste metal sludges via the building industry processes to reduce the environmental hazards of toxic metals. The correlation of product textures and nickel incorporation efficiencies through selection of different precursors also provides the option of tailoring property-specific products.

Introduction

It is well known that heavy metals are toxic and their discharge into receiving waters is detrimental to human health and the environment. Moreover, their elemental nature renders them more persistent in soils and aquifers than organic solvents and many other pollutants. When addressing heavy metal releases, a common strategy is to remove them from wastestreams by precipitation using processes that result in hazardous waste sludges. Among these toxic metals, nickel is a major component generated during electroplating operations. Electroless nickel plating plays an increasingly important role in manufacturing, especially for the fabrication of corrosion-resistant articles. Wastewaters generated by this important role in manufacturing, especially for the fabrication of corrosion-resistant articles. Wastewaters generated by this type of operation can contain nickel concentrations of several hundred ppm or higher (1–3). In 1992, it was estimated that the electroless nickel plating industry produced more than 20,000 tons/year of waste in the U.S. alone (4) with a growth rate of 5% per year (2). The rapid increase of this type of wastewater is of worldwide concern and is receiving considerable attention.

At present, the majority of heavy metal-laden wastes are disposed of in controlled landfills. However, the high cost of this strategy, combined with the limited number of landfills capable of accepting highly toxic heavy metal wastes, has made the development of effective and economical treatment technologies essential. Many studies have successfully demonstrated the stabilization of radioactive waste in glass and ceramic materials by thermal treatment (5–7). An added advantage of such waste forms is the significant volume reduction achieved as compared to cementitious types (8), although the radioactive nature of these products means they are limited to containment in geologic repositories.

Researchers have simulated nickel-laden sludge by using lime to precipitate nickel from its nitrate (9, 10) and chloride solutions (11), or directly via using nickel hydroxide (12). When thermally treated, these sludges decompose to nickel oxide (NiO), which is sufficiently soluble to be considered a waste compound requiring stabilization.

It has recently been found that nickel can be efficiently fixed in nickel aluminate spinel (NiAl2O4) by sintering nickel oxide with kaolinite (13), with immobilization taking place in two steps: (i) a low-temperature reaction between nickel oxide and a defect spinel, followed by (ii) a high-temperature reaction between nickel oxide and mullite. Kaolinite, consisting chiefly of kaolinite (Al2Si2O5(OH)4), is a common clay type, and most ceramics are formed from high percentages of kaolinite (40–65%) (14). Kaolinite is readily available, and the FOB (free on board) price of kaolinite ranges from 4 to 8 cents per pound (15). A major byproduct of the U.S. industry is calcined kaolin generated by heating spray-dried and finely divided kaolin particles to render them anhydrous through transformation to mullite and silica (SiO2). The price of calcined kaolin ranges from 15 to 25 cents per pound (15). In addition, aluminum oxides are inexpensive raw materials for NiAl2O4 formation as well.

The annual production of construction ceramics is of a volume sufficient to receive the ongoing generation of metal-laden sludge, even if incorporated in trace concentrations. The reasonably high firing temperatures normally used (900–1800 °C) in the brick, tile, and refractory aggregate industries may be helpful to promote an effective incorporation of waste materials into the ceramic matrix (16–18). To minimize the cost of waste blending, existing industrial production processes could be adapted to work within the limitations of precursor choice, sintering temperature, and sintering time. In this study, kaolinite, mullite (3Al2O3·2SiO2 from calcined kaolin), γ-alumina (γ-Al2O3), and corundum (α-Al2O3) were examined as possible Al-rich precursors.

NiAl2O4 formed by reactive sintering of nickel oxide and alumina (α-Al2O3) has been studied extensively. Philips et al. (19) compiled early data and published the first phase diagram of the NiO–Al2O3 system over the range of 1350–2100 °C to show the possibility of spinel formation above 1350 °C. Aluminum oxide has several common forms including α-alumina (α-Al2O3, a hexagonal crystalline structure also known as corundum), seven metastable Al2O3 phases (γ, δ, α, ρ, η, θ, and γ), and several hydrated forms, such as aluminum trihydroxide (bayerite) and monohydroxide (boehmite) (20–22). To date, oxide sintering studies of NiAl2O4 have not emphasized the role of the alumina precursor (23, 24). Therefore, in this investigation, commercially available α-Al2O3 or γ-Al2O3 was chosen as the NiAl2O4 precursor. A reliable metal fixation strategy requires detailed analysis of immobilization mechanisms and efficiencies. In this study, the reaction pathways and feasibility of stabilizing nickel-laden sludge during the manufacture of construction ceram-
ics, such as bricks, tiles, and refractory aggregates, were investigated. Using readily available and inexpensive precursors, it was demonstrated that simulated Ni-laden sludge could be successfully immobilized with high incorporation efficiency by reactions with four Al-rich additives.

**Experimental Methods**

Nickel incorporation efficiency experiments were conducted with samples prepared by firing nickel oxide with kaolinite, mullite, γ-alumina, or corundum. In most cases, the dwell time was fixed at 3 h for sintering temperatures ranging from 800 to 1480 °C. NiO powder (Fisher Scientific) gave an X-ray diffraction (XRD) crystallite size of 50–70 nm, and a surface area of 3.6 ± 0.5 m²/g after 300 °C heating and He-gas purging for 3 h to promote degassing. The surface area was measured via a Beckman Coulter SA3100 Surface Area and Pore Size Analyzer using the BET method. USP grade acid-washed kaolinite powder from Fisher Scientific yielded an XRD crystallite size of 5–10 nm and a BET surface area of 9.0 ± 2.9 m²/g. The measured BET surface area of kaolinite could be affected by the strong agglomeration of fine kaolinite platelets, although all of the other powder raw materials are also in some degree of aggregation. The chemical composition for kaolinite was determined from a solution prepared by microwave-assisted acid digestion (U.S. EPA Method 3052) in which 0.5 g of kaolinite powder preheated at 700 °C for 12 h was mixed with 40 mL of aqua regia and 10 mL of hydrofluoric acid in a Teflon vessel and microwaved to total digestion. The digestion solution was diluted to 500 mL with MilliQ water, and the metal concentrations were derived from a TJA IRIS Advantage/1000 Radial ICP spectrometer with CLARITAS certified reference solutions (SPIE CertiPrep, Inc.). The chemical composition showed low impurity levels (<3% of several metal oxides), and its XRD pattern matched that of kaolinite (ICDD PDF#78-1996) as shown in the Supporting Information. The mullite precursor was prepared by calcining the kaolinite at 1300 °C for 24 h to yield mullite (3Al₂O₃·2SiO₂; ICDD PDF#79-1455; XRD crystallite size of 5–20 nm) and cristobalite (SiO₂; ICDD PDF#76-0938), provided by the XRD pattern in the Supporting Information.

The γ-Al₂O₃ was prepared from Hi-Q-7223 alumina powder (Alcoa Corp.), which has a reported average particle size (d₅₀) of 54.8 μm. As received, Hi-Q-7223 alumina was confirmed by XRD to be boehmite (AlOOH; ICDD PDF#74-1895), which after heat treatment at 975 °C for 3 h was successfully converted to a γ-Al₂O₃ dominant material with an XRD crystallite size of 2–5 nm (20, 22). Further calcination at 1480 °C for 6 h transformed γ-Al₂O₃ to corundum (α-Al₂O₃; ICDD PDF#83-2080; XRD crystallite size of 10–20 nm), which was also used as a precursor for nickel stabilization. The XRD patterns of Hi-Q-7223 alumina and the thermally treated products are given in the Supporting Information.

NiO and the tailoring precursors were mixed by ball-milling in a water slurry for 22 h, molded into 2 × 2 × 2 cm cubes, and dried at 95 °C for 3 days. These cubes were homogenized by mortar and pestle grinding, formed into 13 mm pellets at 125 MPa, and fired. After sintering, the pellets were air-quenched for the scanning electron microscopic (SEM) investigation and ground into randomly orientated powders for XRD analysis. The SEM investigation utilized an FEI XL30 Sirion SEM with FEG source, secondary electron detector for morphological information, backscattered electron detector for compositional information, and Si(Li) detector for energy dispersive spectroscopy (EDS). The powder samples were gold coated for the observation of particle morphology by the secondary electron imaging. After being polished with submicrometer diamond lapping film, pellets were coated with carbon. The secondary electron images were used to observe sample porosity, and the backscattered electron images were collected to identify compositionally distinct phases. Points and lines EDS analyses were also carried out as needed. In practice, construction ceramics will incorporate quite low levels of metal, so that product properties are not compromised. However, to investigate the incorporation mechanism in nickel-rich phases, the raw materials in this study were prepared with a Ni/Al mole ratio of 1:2, this being the stoichiometric maximum for nickel aluminate spinel.

Phase transformations during sintering were monitored by XRD. The diffraction patterns were collected using a Rigaku Geigerflex diffractometer (Rigaku Denki Co. Ltd.) equipped with a Cu X-ray tube operated at 35 kV and 15 mA, that had been calibrated using a quartz powder standard (ICDD PDF#33-1161). Scans were collected via a MDI XRD diffractometer control and data acquisition system (Material Data, Inc.) from 10° to 80° 2θ-angle, with a step size of 0.02° and a counting time of 1 s per step. Diffraction patterns were processed using JADE (version 6.5.3) developed by Material Data, Inc., with a whole pattern fitting (WPF) function using the Pawley method (25), to determine the weight percent of each crystalline phase. The background was processed with the polynomial function in the order of 3, and the weighted (R) and expected (E) reliability values were calculated using the following equations:

\[
R (\%) = 100 \times \sqrt{\sum w(i) \times [(I(o,i) - I(c,i))^2] / \sum w(i) \times (I(o,i) - I(b,i))^2}
\]

\[
E (\%) = 100 \times \sqrt{(N - P) / \sum I(o,i)}
\]

where \(I(o,i)\) is the observed intensity of a fitted data point (\(i\)); \(I(c,i)\) is the calculated intensity at this data point; \(I(b,i)\) is the background intensity at this data point; \(w(i)\) is the weight of this data point as \(w(i) = 1/I(o,i)\); \(N\) is the number of fitted data points; \(P\) is the number of refined parameters; and \(\Sigma I(o,i)\) in \(E\) is the sum of the overall fitted data points \(N\) that are 2σ above the fitted background.

The R/E ratio or “goodness of fit” will equal one in an ideal refinement, although, practically, the background and the peak profile mismatch lead to \(R/E > 1\). To test the accuracy of this method, known percentages of NiO, corundum, and NiAl₂O₄ were subjected to WPF. The corundum used in this test was prepared by sintering γ-Al₂O₃ at 1480 °C for 6 h, while the NiAl₂O₄ was synthesized by combining NiO and γ-Al₂O₃ with a Ni/Al mole ratio of 1:2 at 1480 °C for 48 h. The results of this test with three independent replicates (Table 1) showed the maximum error in estimated phase weight percentages was about 3%. The random errors calculated by one-half of the data ranges (one-half of the difference between the maximum and the minimum values) were mostly below 2%, with the observed goodness of fit \((R/E)\) generally around 1.5–2.0.

**Results and Discussion**

XRD confirmed that Ni was quantitatively incorporated in spinels using all four precursors. Figure 1 collates the XRD patterns of the 1250 °C-sintered samples and shows that NiAl₂O₄ is the predominant product. When NiO was transformed into NiAl₂O₄ with aluminum-rich precursors, a “transformation ratio (TR)” index was devised to indicate the nickel incorporation efficiency:
The transformation of γ-Al2O3 to the δ, θ, and α forms is gradual (dependent on time and temperature) \(26\) and to avoid this a rapid 100 °C per hour temperature ramp was used. Figure 2 summarizes the transformation ratio of NiO and γ-Al2O3 over the temperature range 800−1480 °C. Below 1100 °C, the presence of poorly crystalline transition alumina, which neither incorporated the nickel to form NiAl2O4, nor transformed into corundum, led to higher uncertainty in quantification. The crossover of the curves at \( \approx 1160 \) °C suggests that the NiO and γ-Al2O3 reaction (eq \(4\)) was dominant at low temperatures, while the corundum precursor facilitates nickel incorporation at higher temperatures. The free energy of formation for γ-Al2O3 is higher than that for α-Al2O3 \(21\), from which it may be concluded that the reaction between NiO and γ-Al2O3 (eq \(4\)) is favored energetically as compared to the reaction between NiO and α-Al2O3 (eq \(5\)), and would explain the higher nickel incorporation efficiency with γ-Al2O3 at lower temperatures.

As the sintering temperature increased, the transformation rate of γ-Al2O3 to α-Al2O3 (\(k_3\)) will accelerate as shown in the Supporting Information. When the γ−α transformation rate (\(k_3\)) exceeds the spinel crystallization rate by γ-Al2O3 (\(k_4\)), the main NiAl2O4 formation mechanism is predominantly the reaction between α-Al2O3 (corundum) reacting with NiO, with physical mechanisms (e.g., grain size, shape, surface area) playing the key role in spinel development. Figure 3 shows the secondary electron images of the γ-Al2O3 and α-Al2O3 precursors and the distinct sample porosities that arise after reaction with NiO. The γ-Al2O3 occurred as solid aggregates (Figure 3a), but after sintering the resultant corundum was quite porous as crystal growth created voids with smooth subparticle surfaces (Figure 3b) and this porosity increased with higher NiO contents (Figure 3c).

The transformation of NiAl2O4 to the δ, θ, and α forms is gradual (dependent on time and temperature) \(26\) and to avoid this a rapid 100 °C per hour temperature ramp was used. Figure 2 summarizes the transformation ratio of NiO and γ-Al2O3 over the temperature range 800−1480 °C. Below 1100 °C, the presence of poorly crystalline transition alumina, which neither incorporated the nickel to form NiAl2O4, nor transformed into corundum, led to higher uncertainty in quantification. The crossover of the curves at \( \approx 1160 \) °C suggests that the NiO and γ-Al2O3 reaction (eq \(4\)) was dominant at low temperatures, while the corundum precursor facilitates nickel incorporation at higher temperatures. The free energy of formation for γ-Al2O3 is higher than that for α-Al2O3 \(21\), from which it may be concluded that the reaction between NiO and γ-Al2O3 (eq \(4\)) is favored energetically as compared to the reaction between NiO and α-Al2O3 (eq \(5\)), and would explain the higher nickel incorporation efficiency with γ-Al2O3 at lower temperatures.
TABLE 2. Nickel Incorporation Efficiency Sintered at 1250 °C for 3 h

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>precursor</th>
<th>NiO, wt %</th>
<th>spinel, wt %</th>
<th>TR, %</th>
<th>R, %</th>
<th>E, %</th>
<th>R/E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>γ-type Al2O3</td>
<td>3.7 ± 0.3%</td>
<td>92.1 ± 0.4%</td>
<td>91.3 ± 0.6%</td>
<td>13.73 ± 2.86%</td>
<td>6.97 ± 0.24%</td>
<td>1.98 ± 0.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>corundum</td>
<td>0.2 ± 0.2%</td>
<td>99.0 ± 0.2%</td>
<td>99.5 ± 0.4%</td>
<td>12.54 ± 0.19%</td>
<td>6.19 ± 0.03%</td>
<td>2.03 ± 0.02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kaolinite</td>
<td>0.9 ± 0.2%</td>
<td>98.9 ± 2.5%</td>
<td>96.4 ± 0.6%</td>
<td>20.51 ± 0.21%</td>
<td>8.47 ± 0.16%</td>
<td>2.42 ± 0.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mullite + cristobalite</td>
<td>0.2 ± 0.1%</td>
<td>95.6 ± 3.9%</td>
<td>99.3 ± 0.2%</td>
<td>19.33 ± 2.44%</td>
<td>8.02 ± 0.13%</td>
<td>2.41 ± 0.32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Corresponding to the XRD patterns in Figure 1, the transformation ratio (TR) values were calculated by the estimated nickel oxide and spinel weight percentages to evaluate the incorporation efficiency. The weighted (R) and expected (E) values from whole pattern fitting (WPF) results were also obtained to monitor the goodness of fit (R/E).

3b). This is consistent with the quite significant density difference between γ-Al2O3 (3.657 g/cm³; ICDD PDF#79-1558) and corundum (3.983 g/cm³; ICDD PDF#83-2080). The different physical forms of the precursors lead to spinel with distinct microstructures. Figure 3c shows the 1480 °C and 3-h sintered product image from γ-Al2O3 precursor to be nearly composed of fully dense NiAl2O4 grains of ~20 μm in diameter. A grain boundary is clearly visible, consistent with extensive lattice diffusion and grain growth. On the other hand, the product sintered with the same conditions but using the corundum precursor is more finely crystalline and contains numerous voids (Figure 3d). In this case, surface diffusion may be the dominant mass transfer mechanism as compared to lattice diffusion. It is reported that the growth of NiAl2O4 from nickel oxide and aluminium oxide was found to start from the interface between the two parent phases, and both Ni and Al ions counterdiffuse through the spinel lattice for growth to continue (27). Therefore, stronger surface diffusion may lead to a faster reaction rate, but smaller grains, and would be consistent with the higher nickel incorporation efficiency of corundum precursor samples sintered at high temperatures.

NiAl2O4 Spinel Formation from Kaolinite and Mullite Precursors. The phase transformation of kaolinite under thermal treatment has been extensively studied (28–31), the reaction sequence known leading to the kaolinite-to-mullite series. During this sintering process, physically bound water is removed at 110 °C, followed by decomposition of kaolinite with the loss of chemically bound water and transformation to amorphous metakaolin above 550 °C. Beyond 980 °C, the metakaolin is converted to a poorly crystalline defect spinel phase. At 1000 °C, mullite starts to form with excess amorphous silica crystallizing as cristobalite around 1300 °C, although Shih and Leckie (30) reported cristobalite crystallized at lower temperature when doped with nickel oxide. However, the kaolinite-to-mullite series is not completely understood, the most controversial point relating to the possible existence of a defect spinel phase (29). Prior work suggests that one of two reactions is operating:

\[2\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3 + 4\text{SiO}_2 \rightarrow 0.375\text{Si}_8\text{Al}_{10.67}\text{O}_{32} + 0.188\text{Al}_{13.33}\text{F}_{2.67}\text{O}_{32} + 0.33\text{SiO}_2\] (defect spinel-type structure)

\[3\text{NiO} + \text{Si}_4\text{Al}_{19.67}\text{O}_{32} \rightarrow 5.33\text{NiAl}_2\text{O}_4 + 8\text{SiO}_2\] (amorphous)

where \(\square = \text{vacancy}\), and the defect spinel phase without silicon is identical to γ-Al2O3. Therefore, in the use of kaolinite as a precursor, nickel oxide may be reacting with spinel or mullite. In the former case, either γ-Al2O3 (same as eq 4) or the defect silicon spinel will be the reactant:

\[3\text{NiO} + 3\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3 + 2\text{SiO}_2 \rightarrow 3\text{NiAl}_2\text{O}_4 + 2\text{SiO}_2\] (9)

To investigate whether a spinel phase plays a role in the reaction with NiO, low temperatures are needed to avoid the formation of mullite. Therefore, the kaolinite precursor was sintered with nickel oxide at 990 °C for 7 days. XRD showed the only phase of sintered kaolinite to be poorly crystalline spinel (Figure 4a), but NiAl2O4 was observed in the final product (Figure 4b). The broad intensity between 15° and 30° was attributed to amorphous silica (SiO2) (32, 33).

Therefore, the defect spinel phase can be used to stabilize nickel, and either reaction pathway (eq 4 or eq 8) is possible. Because of the lack of diffraction reference data for defect silicon spinel, the pattern of Figure 4a was compared to the available γ-Al2O3 reference and found to be similar. However, this study does not address the true nature of the intermediate spinel phase generated during the kaolinite-to-mullite transformation, although the nickel incorporation ability of this compound is similar to that of γ-Al2O3.

To evaluate the nickel incorporation efficiency starting from different precursors, mixtures of NiO with kaolinite and calcined kaolinite were sintered from 800 to 1480 °C for 3 h. The 1300 °C and 24-h calcined kaolinite transformed to mullite and cristobalite (SiO2). Under these conditions, silica does not react with nickel (13), and the only incorporation mechanism was through interaction between NiO and mullite as listed in eq 9. In sintering the mixtures of NiO and kaolinite, a WPF analysis that considered only NiO, NiAl2O4, mullite,
and cristobalite showed the latter phase formed at \( \sim 1150 \) °C, while below that temperature quantification was not possible due to the presence of amorphous silica. The transformation ratio of sintered samples from these two precursors indicated very high incorporation efficiency for nickel above 1200 °C (Figure 5). However, it is interesting to note the nickel incorporation efficiency decreased rapidly at temperatures <1200 °C. At 1160 °C, kaolinite displayed nickel incorporation efficiency 10% higher than mullite and may be the evidence for reaction between NiO and the defect spinel phase generated from the kaolinite-to-mullite series. Nevertheless, whether the reaction mechanism in eq 4 or eq 8 is dominant remains unresolved.

The nickel incorporation efficiencies of the kaolinite and mullite precursors are slightly higher than that of alumina precursors, because silica acted as a flux facilitating mass transfer during the solid-state reaction. After the formation of NiAl₂O₄, further sintering coarsens the grains and increases
crystallinity. The microstructures of sintered products (1450 °C and 3-h) from both kaolinite and mullite precursors are compared in Figure 6, in which the sample derived from the mullite precursor showed greater mass transfer as evidenced by coarser NiAl2O4 crystals. The aluminum-rich (NiAl2O4) and the silicon-rich (cristobalite) areas were observed in both kaolinite + NiO and mullite + NiO samples and suggest the mullite precursor facilitates greater mass transfer at high temperatures that increases spinel crystallinity and product strength. This finding may guide the synthesis of making nickel-incorporated ceramics with acceptable mechanical properties. When waste metal sludges and natural ceramic raw materials are used, the presence of other components may affect the formation of NiAl2O4 by creating new reaction pathways. For example, Fe2O3 usually exists as an impurity in most clays and may form nickel ferrite spinel (NiFe2O4) with Ni-laden sludges (34). Alternatively, if the sludge is enriched with other divalent cations (Mg2+, Zn2+, Fe2+, Mn2+, etc.), the competition between Ni2+ and the other cations to form aluminoferrite spinels may influence the nickel incorporation efficiency (35). The consideration of multi-spinel system may be worthy of future investigation to further understand the scientific basis of this promising strategy.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks are due to Professor J. F. Stebbins for the use of equipment in pelletizing and sintering, to Mr. R. E. Jones for the assistance with XRD analysis, and to Ms. Heng Joon Hua for assistance with scanning electron microscopy. The Alcoa Corp. is acknowledged for providing HiQ-7223 alumina. We would also like to thank Professor S. Fendorf, Professor J. F. Stebbins, Professor M. Reinhard, Professor Z. Dong, and Professor P. C. McIntyre for fruitful discussions. Support from the Singapore Clean Water Programme and the Singapore Stanford Partnership is acknowledged.

Supporting Information Available

One table and three figures showing the kaolinite composition, the XRD patterns of thermally treated HiQ-7223 alumina, the XRD patterns of the 990 °C sintered NiO and γ-Al2O3 mixture, and the diagram of NiAl2O4 formation rates from Al2O3 precursors. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at http://pubs.acs.org.

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Received for review November 18, 2005. Revised manuscript received April 13, 2006. Accepted April 14, 2006.

ES052324Z