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# Nature of Insulating-Phase Transition and Degradation of Structure and Electrochemical Reactivity in an Olivine-Structured Material, LiFePO<sub>4</sub>

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Synthesis time using microwave irradiation was varied to elucidate the electrochemical degradation mechanism of LiFePO $_4$  related to the evolution of Fe $_2$ P. When the amount of Fe $_2$ P was above a critical level, LiFePO $_4$  tended to change into an insulating phase, Li $_4$ P $_2$ O $_7$ . The correlation between structural analysis and electrochemical analysis attributed the initial degradation of LiFePO $_4$  to the low electronic conductivity of Li $_4$ P $_2$ O $_7$ , whereas the deficiency of P and O evolved by Li $_4$ P $_2$ O $_7$  resulted in the cyclic degradation of LiFePO $_4$ . This kind of correlation between structure and electrochemical performance in intercalation materials will significantly contribute to an explanation of their degradation mechanism for their application.

#### Introduction

LiFePO<sub>4</sub>, with an olivine structure, has been spotlighted as a promising candidate cathode material due to its excellent thermal stability, the low cost of its precursors, the high reversibility of Li insertion/extraction, and a lack of toxicity. <sup>1-3</sup> Although LiFePO<sub>4</sub> has an inherent poor kinetic property  $(\sigma_e = 10^{-8} \text{ S cm}^{-1} \text{ (low electronic conductivity)}, D_{\text{Li}^+} = 10^{-14} \text{ cm}^2 \text{ s}^{-1}$  at room temperature (rt; low Li<sup>+</sup> diffusivity)), <sup>4,5</sup> a marvelous improvement in its kinetic property was achieved during the past decade with the help of carbon coating

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(LiFePO<sub>4</sub>/C composite),<sup>6-11</sup> particle size reduction,<sup>5,12,13</sup> and supervalent cation doping.<sup>14</sup> Actually, the electrochemical enhancement coming from these strategies made LiFePO<sub>4</sub> a feasible cathode material for commercialization.

In the early stage of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> research, Fe<sub>2</sub>P, formed in a strong reductive atmosphere, was considered as a byproduct which should be prevented from forming during the synthesis of single-phase LiFePO<sub>4</sub>. However, Subramanya Herle et al. demonstrated that metal phosphocarbides or Fe<sub>2</sub>P (metallic compound,  $\sigma$ :  $10^{-1}$  S cm<sup>-1</sup> at rt) can contribute to improving the room-temperature conductivity of LiFePO<sub>4</sub>/C drastically to  $\sim 10^{-2}$  S cm<sup>-1</sup> thanks to its high electronic conductivity. Recently, Xu et al. verified the positive effect of Fe<sub>2</sub>P on the electrochemical performance of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> by showing that LiFePO<sub>4</sub> including Fe<sub>2</sub>P has the best rate capability in spite of having the largest particle size. However, our previous study demonstrated that the formation of Fe<sub>2</sub>P can result in amphoteric effects on the electrochemical performance of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> depending on its quantity. The strong result is supported by the strong result in amphoteric effects on the electrochemical performance of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> depending on its quantity.

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Generally, in previous reports, LiFePO<sub>4</sub> including Fe<sub>2</sub>P below the critical amount displayed an enhanced electrochemical performance, whereas Fe<sub>2</sub>P inclusion above the critical amount seriously deteriorated the electrochemical performance of LiFePO<sub>4</sub>. The positive effect of Fe<sub>2</sub>P below the critical amount has been easily ascribed to Fe<sub>2</sub>P-induced enhancement of electronic conductivity in LiFePO<sub>4</sub> because Fe<sub>2</sub>P is electronically conductive. The reason why LiFePO<sub>4</sub> with Fe<sub>2</sub>P above the critical amount has to undergo a significant degradation is assumed to be related to the Li<sup>+</sup> pathway being blocked by an excessive formation of Fe<sub>2</sub>P in LiFePO<sub>4</sub>. Considering that the application (HEV, plug-in HEV, and EV) of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> requires high rate capability, the detailed change of the LiFePO<sub>4</sub> structure with the variation of the Fe<sub>2</sub>P amount should be clarified in the first place for its commercialization.

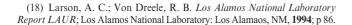
So, in this paper, the effect of  $Fe_2P$  formation on the local structure of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> was correlated with the electrochemical performance of LiFePO<sub>4</sub>. For this, the local structure of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> was comprehensively analyzed with variation of the  $Fe_2P$  amount.

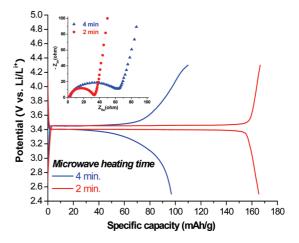
## **Experimental Section**

**Synthesis.** LiFePO<sub>4</sub> (including carbon web) was synthesized by ball-milling and subsequent microwave heating. A stoichiometric amount (1:1, molar ratio) of Li<sub>3</sub>PO<sub>4</sub> (Aldrich) and Fe<sub>3</sub>(PO<sub>4</sub>)<sub>2</sub>·8H<sub>2</sub>O (Kojundo) was ball-milled at a ball-to-powder weight ratio of 8.10:1 with 5 wt % acetylene black for 30 min under an Ar atmosphere using a vibrant-type mill (SPEX-8000 mixer/mill), and then the ball-milled mixture was microwave irradiated (750 W) for several minutes in a microwave oven.

Cell Fabrication. LiFePO<sub>4</sub> cathodes were manufactured by casting, on an Al foil current collector, a *N*-methyl-2-pyrrolidene slurry composed of 72 wt % LiFePO<sub>4</sub>—C, 20 wt % acetylene black, and 8 wt % polyvinylidene fluoride binder. A total of 2016 coin-type cells were assembled in an Ar-filled glovebox by stacking a microporous polypropylene separator (Celgard 2400) containing liquid electrolyte (1 M LiClO<sub>4</sub> in 1:1 EC/DMC) between the cathode and the lithium metal foil anode

Structural and Electrochemical Analyses. Two- and threephase Rietveld refinements for LiFePO<sub>4</sub> (including carbon web) were conducted using the General Structure Analysis System program.<sup>18</sup> The X-ray diffraction (XRD) data for Rietveld refinement were measured from 15° to 120° at a step of 0.02° using Cu Ka radiation with a graphite monochromator in the reflection geometry (Dmax2200 V, Rigaku). Si (NIST 640c) powder was used as an external standard to correct the zeropoint shift for the measured diffraction data. The coordination number of atoms around the Fe atom in LiFePO<sub>4</sub> was evaluated by extended X-ray absorption fine structure (EXAFS, R-XAS) spectroscopy. Fe K-edge X-ray absorption spectra were recorded in the transmission mode at room temperature using the lab-scale EXAFS machine equipped with a 3 kW X-ray generator, Mo target, W filament, and Ge(220) crystal. The X-ray absorption spectra were Fourier-transformed using the IFEFFIT program based on FEFF8 ab inito theory. An ex situ XRD analysis (D/max-III C, Rigaku) of the LiFePO<sub>4</sub> (including carbon web) cathode after cycling was conducted from 15° to 45° at a scan rate of 1° min $^{-1}$  using Cu K $\alpha$  radiation. Electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) analysis was conducted at room temperature using a HF frequency response





**Figure 1.** The initial charge/discharge curves of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> synthesized by microwave irradiation for 2 min (red-colored line) and 4 min (blue-colored line). Inset figure consists of Nyquist plots for 2-min-irradiated LiFePO<sub>4</sub> (red-colored sphere) and 4-min-irradiated LiFePO<sub>4</sub> (blue-colored triangle).

analyzer (SI1255, solartron instruments) connected to a potentiostat/galvanostat (273A, EG&G Princeton Applied Research). A small AC perturbation of 10 mV was applied with a frequency sweep from 0.1 Hz to 100 kHz during the measurements. The amount of iron dissolved from LiFePO<sub>4</sub> to the electrolyte in a cell was measured with an inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometer (ICP-MASS, Elan 6100, Perkin-Elmer).

#### **Results and Discussion**

The initial electrochemical reactivity of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> (including carbon web) synthesized from microwave irradiation is displayed in Figure 1. In the discharge curve for LiFePO<sub>4</sub> prepared by microwave heating for 2 min, a long, flat voltage plateau appears around 3.41 V, and then the voltage sharply drops to the cutoff value (2.5 V), leading to a high discharge capacity of 165 mAh  $g^{-1}$  (97.1% of the theoretical capacity of LiFePO<sub>4</sub>). On the other hand, LiFePO<sub>4</sub> obtained by microwave heating for 4 min shows shorter voltage plateaus, followed by a low discharge capacity (97 mAh g<sup>-1</sup>). An EIS analysis was carried out to investigate the change of charge-transfer resistance in LiFePO<sub>4</sub> with the variation of microwave heating time. As shown in the inset of Figure 1, the longer the microwave heating time for the synthesis of LiFePO<sub>4</sub>, the larger the charge-transfer resistance between the electrolyte and LiFePO<sub>4</sub> surface. Because the increase of microwave heating time was correlated with the evolution of Fe<sub>2</sub>P, an extremely conductive phase (Figure S1, Supporting Information), a surge of charge-transfer resistance in the 4 min sample may imply that there is another phase transition explanatory of the electrochemical degradation of LiFePO<sub>4</sub>.

In order to clarify the reason why the 4 min sample encountered difficulty in the charge transfer leading to its electrochemical degradation, the local structure (lattice parameter, space of Li<sup>+</sup> diffusion path, occupation of Fe atoms in the Li site) of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> was probed using X-ray Rietveld refinement. Figure 2a shows the refinement results for LiFePO<sub>4</sub> irradiated for 2 min. Herein, two phases are observed, 0.56 wt % Fe<sub>2</sub>P and 99.44 wt % LiFePO<sub>4</sub>, and the lattice parameters of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> from the refinement (Table S1, Supporting Information) are almost equal to those reported

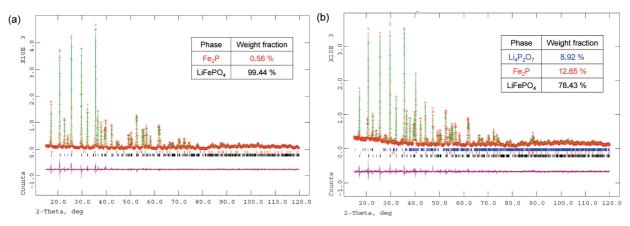


Figure 2. X-ray Rietveld refinement results for LiFePO<sub>4</sub> synthesized by microwave irradiation for (a) 2 min and (b) 4 min. Plus (+) marks represent the observed intensities, and the solid line illustrates calculated ones. A difference (obsd – cald) plot is shown beneath. Tick marks above the difference data indicate the reflection position. In 2-min-irradiated LiFePO<sub>4</sub>, the upper and lower tick marks above the difference data indicate the reflection position for Fe<sub>2</sub>P and LiFePO<sub>4</sub> phases, respectively, and in 4-min-irradiated LiFePO<sub>4</sub>, the upper, middle, and lower tick marks correspond to Li<sub>4</sub>P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>7</sub>, Fe<sub>2</sub>P, and LiFePO<sub>4</sub>, respectively.

in the literature, <sup>19–22</sup> implying that the structure of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> irradiated for 2 min is almost perfect. X-ray Rietveld refinement for LiFePO<sub>4</sub> irradiated for 4 min discloses a phase transition responsible for the electrochemical degradation observed in Figure 1. The refinement results for LiFePO<sub>4</sub> irradiated for 4 min are given in Figure 2b. Three phases were identified: 8.92 wt % Li<sub>4</sub>P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>7</sub>, 12.65 wt % Fe<sub>2</sub>P, and 78.43 wt % LiFePO<sub>4</sub>. The drastic increment in the chargetransfer resistance of the 4 min sample can be explained by the formation of Li<sub>4</sub>P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>7</sub> because it has very low electronic conductivity ( $\sim 10^{-20}$  S/cm at rt) and lithium-ion conductivity ( $\sim 10^{-21}$  S/cm at rt) compared to those of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> itself.<sup>23</sup> Actually, it has been reported that the evolution of  $\text{Li}_4\text{P}_2\text{O}_7$  deteriorates the lithium-ion conductivity of  $\text{Li}_{1+X}$ Ti<sub>2-X</sub>Al<sub>X</sub>(PO<sub>4</sub>)<sub>3</sub> with a NASICON framework.<sup>24</sup> An abrupt formation of an insulating phase, Li<sub>4</sub>P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>7</sub>, in LiFePO<sub>4</sub> irradiated for 4 min seems to be attributed to the excessive formation of Fe<sub>2</sub>P. LiFePO<sub>4</sub> exposed to highly reductive atmosphere has to undergo the reduction of Fe below +2, inducing the formation of Fe<sub>2</sub>P. Because Fe<sub>2</sub>P is an electronically conductive phase, the formation of Fe<sub>2</sub>P below a critical amount tends to help the electrochemical performance of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> become enhanced. However, an Fe<sub>2</sub>P amount above the critical level is accompanied by a deficiency of Fe and P atoms constituting the framework of LiFePO<sub>4</sub>. Naturally, LiFePO<sub>4</sub> should be changed into a mixture of several phases according to the following reaction:

$$4\text{LiFePO}_4 \rightarrow \text{Li}_4\text{P}_2\text{O}_7 + 2\text{Fe}_2\text{P} + \frac{9}{2}\text{O}_2$$

Considering that the refinement simulation assuming three phases, Li<sub>4</sub>P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>7</sub>, Fe<sub>2</sub>P, and LiFePO<sub>4</sub>, was appropriate for not the 2 min sample but the 4 min sample, we can know that the

phase transition to Li<sub>4</sub>P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>7</sub> is not mandatory when the amount of Fe<sub>2</sub>P is below 1 wt % of LiFePO<sub>4</sub>. The comparison between 4-min-irradiated LiFePO<sub>4</sub> and 2-min-irradiated LiFePO<sub>4</sub> under the refined lattice parameters made us believe that, irrespective of the formation of Li<sub>4</sub>P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>7</sub>, the formation of Fe<sub>2</sub>P hardly changes the one-dimensional structure of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> (Table S2, Supporting Information). The difference between the lattice parameters of two samples is within the error range. Furthermore, the unit cell volume of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> is almost in accordance with that (291.1 Å) of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> with the perfect olivine structure regardless of the Fe<sub>2</sub>P amount.<sup>25</sup> Even if the excessive Fe<sub>2</sub>P accompanied by the formation of Li<sub>4</sub>P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>7</sub> deteriorates the charge-transfer resistance of our LiFePO<sub>4</sub>, Fe atoms seemed to be perfectly ordered in the structure of LiFePO<sub>4</sub>, and thus, Li<sup>+</sup> motion through the onedimensional (1D) path in LiFePO<sub>4</sub> looked like it was not disturbed, irrespective of the amount of Fe<sub>2</sub>P formation. In order to examine the effect of Fe<sub>2</sub>P formation on the 1D Li<sup>+</sup> diffusion path composed of the linear chains of edge-shared LiO<sub>6</sub> octahedra, a change in the Li–O interatomic distance was also estimated. The distance between Li and O atoms in LiFePO<sub>4</sub> was also within the error range, proving that the excessive Fe<sub>2</sub>P formation does not have a mal effect on Li<sup>+</sup> diffusion path in LiFePO<sub>4</sub>.

On the basis of the structural parameters obtained from X-ray Rietveld refinement, it seemed that the local structure of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> is not influenced by Fe<sub>2</sub>P formation. However, considering that the peak intensity in XRD patterns of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> is dependent on the amount of Fe<sub>2</sub>P, as shown in Figure 2, the local structure of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> needed to be probed in detail. Therefore, an Fe-edge EXAFS analysis was conducted to determine the coordination of atoms around the Fe atom. Figure 3 displays the Fe-edge EXAFS spectra, where the peak intensity is proportional to the coordination number of atoms around the Fe atom. From the previous report, it could be known that the first sphere, second sphere, and third sphere correspond to the Fe-O bond, Fe-P bond, and Fe-Fe bond, respectively. The EXAFS spectra for 2-min-irradiated LiFePO<sub>4</sub> are very similar to those of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> having the perfect olivine structure.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, several

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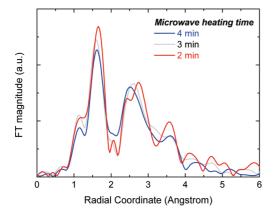
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serious changes are shown in the atomic coordination numbers of 4-min-irradiated LiFePO<sub>4</sub>. This phenomenon is because the deficiencies of O, P, and Fe atoms are significant



**Figure 3.** The radial distribution function obtained after Fourier transformation of  $k^3\chi(k)$  in the  $k^3$ -weighted Fe-edge EXAFS spectrum. First sphere (1.7–2.2 Å), second sphere (2.7–3.2 Å), and third sphere (3.7–4.2 Å) correspond to the Fe–O bond, Fe–P bond, and Fe–Fe bond, respectively.

in 4-min-irradiated LiFePO<sub>4</sub>, which has to undergo a phase transition to a mixture of Fe<sub>2</sub>P and an insulating phase, Li<sub>4</sub>P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>7</sub>. Because PO<sub>4</sub> tetrahedra are fundamental building blocks for the olivine structure of LiFePO<sub>4</sub>, a crucial structural instability can be induced by the deficiency of P and O atoms. With the absence of PO<sub>4</sub> tetrahedra, the structure of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> must collapse during the charge/discharge process. Figure 4 shows XRD patterns of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> before cycling and after 50 cycles. Even after 50 cycles, the initial structure of 2-min-irradiated LiFePO<sub>4</sub> was relatively well-maintained, whereas that of the 4-min-irradiated sample underwent a serious degradation. In accordance with EXAFS results, the structural instability of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> during cycling could be attributed to the phase transition to the mixture of Fe<sub>2</sub>P and an insulating phase, Li<sub>4</sub>P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>7</sub>. In Figure 5, it is shown how this structural instability is correlated with the electrochemical degradation of LiFePO<sub>4</sub>.

Figure 5a illustrates the electrochemical superiority of 2-min-irradiated LiFePO<sub>4</sub> compared to the 4 min sample. The 2 min sample featured a fabulous cyclic performance in spite of the variation of the charge/discharge rate, while the

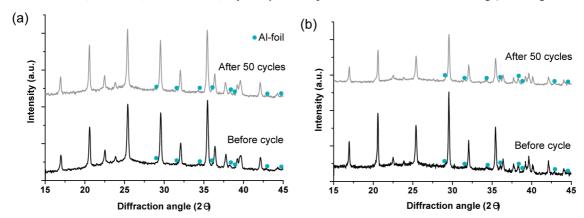
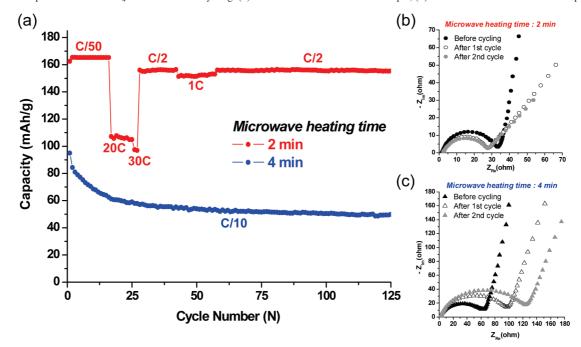


Figure 4. XRD patterns of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> before and after cycling: (a) 2 min microwave-irradiated sample, (b) 4 min microwave-irradiated sample.



**Figure 5.** (a) The cyclic properties of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> synthesized by microwave irradiation for 2 min (red-colored line) and 4 min (blue-colored line). Nyquist plots for (b) 2-min-irradiated LiFePO<sub>4</sub> and (c) 4-min-irradiated LiFePO<sub>4</sub> before or after cycling.

4 min sample exhibited poor cyclic performance even at a very sluggish charge/discharge rate (C/10). This tendency in the cyclic performance was consistent with those in the charge/discharge capacity (Figure 1) and the rate capability (Figure S2, Supporting Information). As shown in Figure 5b and c, Nyquist plots obtained during the initial three cycles may correlate the electrochemical performance of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> with its local structure. The increase in the charge-transfer resistance of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> after cycling mainly comes from Fe dissolution into the electrolyte because the Fe ion dissolved from LiFePO<sub>4</sub> goes to an anode and then increases the interfacial impedance of the anode significantly by forming an insulating film on the surface of the anode, as reported by Amine et al.<sup>27</sup> From ICP-MASS analysis (Table S3, Supporting Information), the increment of Fe dissolution is perfectly in accordance with the above-mentioned structural instability coming from the increased Fe<sub>2</sub>P formation followed by a phase-transition to Li<sub>4</sub>P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>7</sub>. Herein, Fe<sub>2</sub>P itself is not the fundamental reason for the increase in the charge-transfer resistance of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> during cycling, even if the amount of Fe ions present in the electrolyte is proportional to the amount of Fe<sub>2</sub>P. Considering that the local structure change of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> depends on the evolution of Fe<sub>2</sub>P, it seems to be more reasonable that the electrochemical degradation indicated by the increase of charge-transfer resistance is attributed to the deficiency of P and O evolved by the phase transition into a mixture of Fe<sub>2</sub>P and Li<sub>4</sub>P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>7</sub>.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolution of Fe<sub>2</sub>P in LiFePO<sub>4</sub> above a critical concentration changed LiFePO4 into an insulating phase, Li<sub>4</sub>P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>7</sub>. The insulating nature of Li<sub>4</sub>P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>7</sub> leads to the initial degradation of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> in spite of the existence of a conducting phase, Fe<sub>2</sub>P. The deficiency of P and O in the LiFePO<sub>4</sub> framework evolved by the phase transition to the mixture of Fe<sub>2</sub>P and Li<sub>4</sub>P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>7</sub> resulted in the structural instability of LiFePO<sub>4</sub>, which deteriorated its cyclic performance. As a result, the phase transition into Li<sub>4</sub>P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>7</sub> induced by excessive Fe<sub>2</sub>P formation brought out a dramatic degradation in the electrochemical properties of LiFePO<sub>4</sub>, and this degradation mechanism of LiFePO<sub>4</sub> suggests the criteria for the synthesis of high-performance LiFePO<sub>4</sub> in a reductive atmosphere.

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Supporting Information Available: Additional figures and tables. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at http://pubs.acs.org.

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