Journal of Alloys and Compounds 474 (2009) 233–236

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Alloys and Compounds

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jallcom

Synthesis and characterization of Cu_3P hollow spheres by a facile soft-template process

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 28 December 2007
Received in revised form 8 June 2008
Accepted 15 June 2008
Available online 23 July 2008

Keywords:
Metals
Nanostructures
Scanning and transmission electron microscopy

ABSTRACT

Hollow Cu_3P microspheres have been successfully synthesized by a facile ethylenediamine tetraacetic acid (EDTA) mediated solvothermal route using $CuSO_4{\cdot}5H_2O$ and yellow phosphorus as starting materials in a mixture solution of ethylene glycol (EG), ethanol and water. The formation of these hollow spheres is attributed to the oriented aggregation of Cu_3P nanocrystals around the gas–liquid interface between PH_3 and the mixture solution. The possible growth mechanism is proposed.

1. Introduction

The morphology of inorganic solid materials is an important factor to their properties, thus, the preparation of inorganic compounds with special morphologies has attracted a great deal of interest [1]. Up to now, a number of novel nano/microstructures have been prepared with different morphologies. Among these novel nano/microstructures, inorganic hollow sphere have received considerable attention because of their diverse applications, such as in drug delivery [2], heterogeneous catalysis [3], nanostructured composites [4], and the protection of enzymes and proteins [5], bioencapsulation [6]. Various methods have been developed for preparing hollow spheres. For example, hollow polymer, oxide, and glass composite microspheres with diameters generally in the micrometer-size range can be produced by spray drying techniques, which use nozzle systems to dispense individual liquid droplets of uniform size [7]. Another method for obtaining hollow spheres is involved with the direct synthesis of intact inorganic shells around various sacrificial templates, such as polystyrene latex spheres [8,9], vesicles [10], liquid droplets [11], latex templates [12], microemulsion droplets [13], silica spheres [14]. However, in most cases, the pure product was obtained only after the complete removal of the templates, which makes the experiments become more complicated. However, it still remains a challenge to develop simple methods for the fabrication of hollow nano- and microspheres of solid material. Recently, a lot of inorganic hollow spheres have been prepared via a bubble template route. The use of gas bubbles produced during the reaction to provide aggregation centers is a novel and effective method to fabricate hollow microspheres. Compared to the other template-synthetic methods, this soft-template method is very simple, convenient and avoids the introduction of impurities, and is therefore suitable for modern chemical synthesis. For example, Li and co-workers [15] prepared ZnSe hollow sphere by using N_2 bubbles as soft template. Lu and co-workers [16] synthesized ZnS hollow sphere by taking H_2S bubbles as the aggregation centers. Han et al. [17] obtained $CaCO_3$ hollow spheres by the aggregation of nano-sized spherical particles on CO_2/N_2 bubble surface.

Due to their excellent properties and potential application, transition metal phosphides have attracted more and more attention. Among these metal phosphides, Cu_3P is widely used as a potential electrode material in lithium batteries [18,19], a kind of fine solder and important alloying addition [20], a reinforcing agent in high speed steel (HSS) composite materials [21] and it can enhance the sintering behavior of 316L stainless steel [22].

In this paper, we report a facile one-pot soft-template method for the synthesis of hollow Cu_3P microspheres. In our experiment, copper sulfate ($CuSO_4 \cdot 5H_2O$) and yellow phosphorus were used as Cu source and P source, respectively, and the desired samples were obtained in a mixed solvent (EG, ethanol and water) at relatively low temperature (200 °C). EDTA is used to regulate the pH values

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doi:10.1016/j.jallcom.2008.06.052

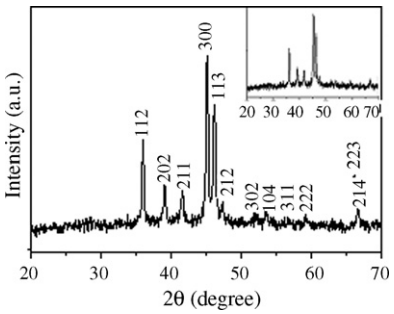

Fig. 1. Typical XRD pattern of the obtained sample.

and the rate of releasing of Cu^{2+} ions for the formation of Cu_3P hollow spheres.

2. Experimental

In a typical experiment, the desired amount of copper sulfate ($CuSO_4{\cdot}5H_2O$, 0.517 g) and 0.748 g EDTA were dissolved in 20 ml deionized water under stirring. After the solution became transparent, a mixture of 10 ml EG and 10 ml ethanol was added to the above solution. Several minutes later, the mixed solution was transferred to a 50 ml Telfon-lined stainless steel autoclave and appropriate amount of yellow phosphorus (0.45 g) was added to the above system. Then the autoclave was sealed and maintained at 200 °C for 17 h and then cooled to room temperature naturally. The resulting black precipitate was separated by centrifugation and washed respectively with distilled water, carbon disulfide (CS_2) and absolute ethanol to remove the residual reactants, excess yellow phosphorous and by-products. After that, the obtained sample was dried in vacuum at 60 °C for 6 h.

3. Results and discussion

Fig. 1 shows the XRD pattern of the obtained sample synthesized at 200 °C for 17 h and 6 h. All the diffraction peaks can be readily indexed as the hexagonal phase Cu_3P with lattice constants of $a = 6.9595$ Å and $c = 7.1467$ Å, which are close to the literature values (JPCDS Card No. 71-2261). No peaks of impurities were detected, indicating the high purity of the products.

Fig. 2 shows the scanning electron microscopy (SEM) and transmission electron microscopy (TEM) images of the products obtained at 200 °C for 17 h in presence of EDTA in the mixture solution of water, EG and ethanol. Fig. 2a is a representative TEM image of the Cu_3P hollow spheres. The contrast between the dark edge and pale inner part provides a direct proof for its hollow nature. The size and wall thickness of these hollow spheres are calculated to be approximately 0.8–1.0 μm and 50–80 nm, respectively. Fig. 2b shows a SEM image at low magnification of the as-prepared Cu_3P microspheres. It was clearly demonstrated that the majority of the products exhibited spherical morphology. The average diameter of Cu_3P spheres is about 0.8–1.0 μm. The broken shells observed on some of the spheres indicate the hollow structure of them, and a magnified image of one hollow sphere with the broken part is shown in Fig. 2c, confirming the hollow structure of these Cu_3P microspheres. From Fig. 2c, the wall thickness of the microspheres is estimated to be approximately 50–80 nm, which is consistent with the TEM observation. The agglomerates structure maybe result from the high surface energies of Cu_3P hollow spheres.

In our prior works [23], our group have successfully fabricated Cu_3P hollow sphere by a two-step solvent-assisted coordination and reduction process, in which EG serves not only as a reducing reagent, but also as a complexing solvent. This process can be described as follows:

$$Cu(OH)_2 \underset{\text{coordination}}{\overset{EG}{\underset{(1)}{\longrightarrow}}} [Cu(EG)_x]^{2+} \underset{\text{reduction}}{\underset{(2)}{\longrightarrow}} Cu \underset{\text{redox}}{\overset{P_4}{\underset{(3)}{\longrightarrow}}} Cu_3P$$

However, we have not exactly understood how on earth to form the hollow spherical structure so far. The possible formation process may be due to the Kirkendall effect.

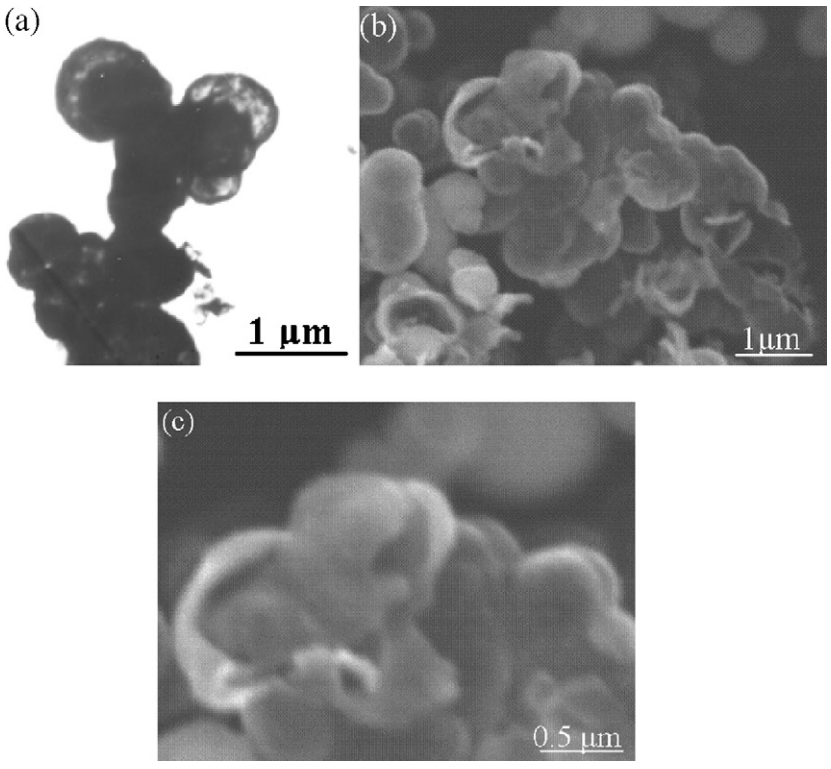

Fig. 2. TEM and SEM images of the as-obtained sample at 200 °C for 17 h.

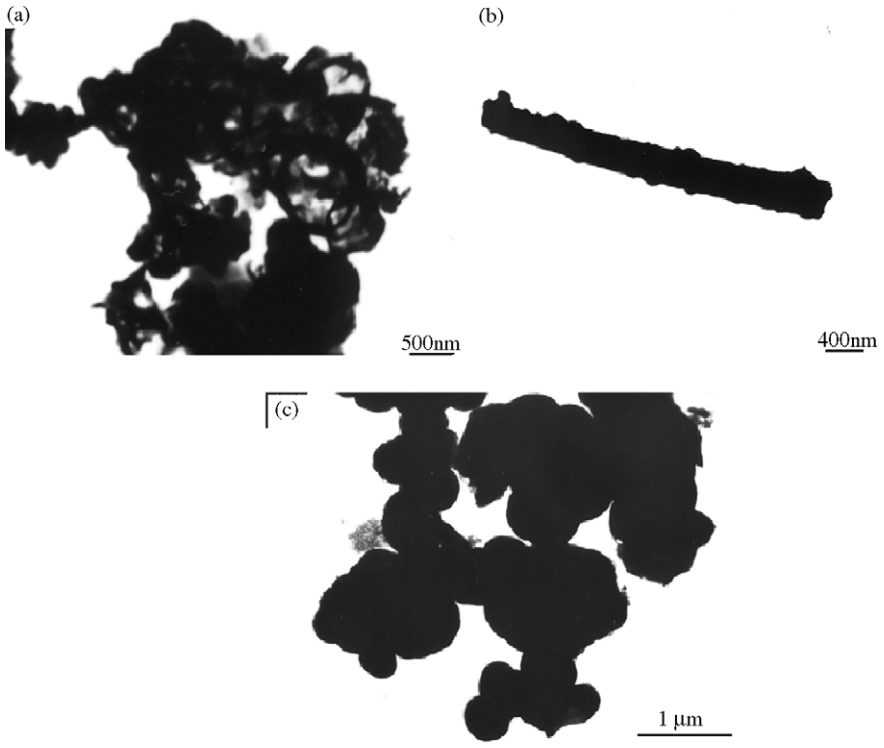

Fig. 3. The TEM images of the obtained sample synthesized at 200 °C for (a) 12 h and (b) 23 h, respectively. (c) TEM image of the sample obtained without using EDTA.

In the present paper, the solvent and Cu source is different from the prior report and the system is acid environment, which is also different from the prior report. Based on the experiment results, the possible growth mechanism of these hollow spheres may be regarded as an oriented aggregation process. The probable reaction process for the formation of Cu_3P microspheres can be summarized as follows:

$$Na_2EDTA + Cu^{2+} \rightarrow Cu\text{-}EDTA + 2Na^{+} \quad (1)$$

$$2P_4 + 12H_2O \rightarrow 3H_3PO_4 + 5PH_3 \quad (2)$$

$$P_4 + 6H_3PO_4 + 6H_2O \rightarrow 10H_3PO_3 \quad (3)$$

$$4H_3PO_3 \rightarrow PH_3 + 3H_3PO_4 \quad (4)$$

$$Cu\text{-}EDTA \rightarrow Cu^{2+} + EDTA\,(therateisslow) \quad (5)$$

$$Cu^{2+} \xrightarrow{Ph_3} Cu_2{}^{2+} \xrightarrow{Ph_3} Cu_3P \quad (6)$$

In order to investigate the reaction process, the reaction is conducted at 200 °C for 6 h, 12 h, 17 h and 23 h, respectively. When the reaction time was 6 h, the obtained product was still hexagonal phase Cu_3P, and no other impurities (such as metal copper) were detected. The XRD pattern of the sample is shown inset in Fig. 1. Therefore, we infer that copper should not be an intermediate. This result is different from our prior report [23]. When the reaction time was 12 h, the hollow structure was irregular and it was undergoing a process of oriented aggregation of the primary Cu_3P nanoparticles (as shown in Fig. 3a). It should have resulted from the slower liberation of Cu^{2+} that led to the formation of incompact hollow structure. When the reaction time was prolonged to 17 h, a large quantity of nearly uniform hollow spheres of Cu_3P was formed, as shown by the images in Fig. 2. However, when the reaction time was extended further to 23 h, the hollow spherical structure gradually grew to rod-like shapes (as shown in Fig. 3b). A possible growth process for Cu_3P nanorods involves spontaneous self-organization of adjacent particles and dominant growth mechanism of Cu_3P nanorods studied here may be mainly oriented attachment mechanism. The process is similar to the formation of ZnO nanorod reported by Ge [24]. However, the growth mechanism is still not completely understood and further studies are on the way.

EDTA is well known to form stable chelates with both transition-metal ions and main group ions at different pH values in solution [25]. Copper ions can chelate with EDTA and form stable complexes at low pH. In the present synthesis, the pH value is found to be ~2 at the initial stage without additional adjustments. With the increment of the reaction temperature, the stability of this complex weakens gradually and slowly releases the free Cu^{2+} ions. Due to the lower pH value in the reaction system, the phosphorus undergoes the reaction shown in Eqs. (2)–(4). It is similar to the reaction reported by Liu [26]. The by-products H_3PO_3 and H_3PO_4 undergo a circular reaction shown in Eqs. (2) and (3), which increase the amount of PH_3 and accelerate the reaction of PH_3 with the copper ions until one of the raw materials runs out. As there is no hard template used in the reaction system, the formation of the hollow microspheres may be attributed to the formation of PH_3 gas bubbles that evolved during the reaction. As shown in Eqs. (1)–(3), the reaction can form PH_3 gas bubbles, which may act as the temporary soft templates. Driven by the minimization of interfacial energy, small Cu_3P nanoparticles may aggregate around the gas–liquid interface between PH_3 and solution, and finally Cu_3P hollow spheres were formed.

When experiments were carried out without EDTA, no such hollow sphere morphology was produced, only irregular solid spheres were obtained (as shown in Fig. 3c). The reason may lie in the fact that the rate of releasing copper ions was slower than the rate of forming PH_3 in presence of EDTA. So the excess PH_3 could form PH_3 bubbles, which favors the formation of the hollow structure. When EDTA was absent, the PH_3 rapidly reacted with free Cu^{2+} ions to give rise to small Cu_3P particles and no temporary soft templates could help form hollow structure.

4. Conclusions

In summary, well crystalline uniform hexagonal phase Cu_3P hollow microspheres have been successfully synthesized through a novel one-step solvothermal method. We found that reaction time played important role in the synthesis of hollow spheres of Cu_3P in our experiment. Based on the results of the experiments, the growth process of Cu_3P hollow sphere was also proposed. Compared with previous methods of preparing hollow spheres, this soft-template reaction route provides a convenient path for the synthesis of high quality Cu_3P hollow spheres and special growth process of Cu_3P may provide a wider space for further studying other metal phosphides.

Acknowledgements

The National Natural Science Foundation of PR China (No. 20571025), the Natural Science Foundation of Henan Province (No. 0611020300) and Henan Innovation of University Prominent Research Talents (No. 2005 KYCX05) are greatly appreciated.

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