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Influence of LaF_3 on the crystallization and luminescence of Eu^{3+}-doped oxyfluoride glass ceramics

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Abstract

The influence of LaF_3 on the crystallization behavior and luminescence of Eu^{3+} ions in the oxyfluoride borosilicate glass ceramics was investigated in details. Differential scanning calorimetry (DSC) and transmission electron microscopy (TEM) results indicated that the addition of LaF_3 decreased the glass transition temperature and promoted the crystallization of BaF_2 nanocrystals, which distributed homogeneously in the glassy matrix. A reduction of the lattice parameters of BaF_2 nanocrystals, the obvious Stark splitting of emission peaks and long fluorescence lifetime evidenced the incorporation of Eu^{3+} and La^{3+} into the BaF_2 lattice. Furthermore, experimental results indicated the distribution of Eu^{3+} ions in the oxyfluoride glass ceramics may be modified by the addition of LaF_3 content.

Keywords: Crystallization behavior; Eu^{3+} ions; Luminescence

1. Introduction

Rare earth (RE) doped optical materials have stimulated a great deal of interest due to their potential applications such as short-wavelength solid state lasers, three-dimensional display, bio-labeling and solar cells, and so on [1–3]. It is well known that the emission efficiency of RE ions is closely related to the host matrices and their crystal structures. Among various host materials, transparent oxyfluoride glass ceramics might be an ideal choice, which combine the good optical properties of RE ions in the low phonon energy fluoride crystals and suitability for industrial production of oxide glasses [4–6]. Many investigations have been carried out since the pioneering work of Wang and Ohwaki in 1993 [7]. The significant advantage is the partition of RE into the precipitated fluoride nanocrystals, which provides a local low-phonon-energy environment and strong fluorescence emissions are expected. Spectral investigation and element analysis indicate that RE is mainly enriched in the precipitated fluoride crystalline phase after the heat treatment process [8]. Eu^{3+} is known as the most sensitive probe for the rare-earth dopant site structure or symmetry due to its unique sharp emissions. In this paper, the influence of LaF_3 on the crystallization and luminescence of Eu^{3+} ions in the oxyfluoride glass ceramics was investigated in details.

2. Experimental

The precursor glasses with molar compositions are $67SiO_2$–$15B_2O_3$–$12Na_2O$–$6BaF_2$–$xLaF_3$–$0.1EuF_3$ ($x=0$, 1, 2, 3, 4), and denoted as A, B, C, D and E. Analytical pure reagents of SiO_2, H_3BO_3, Na_2CO_3, BaF_2, LaF_3 and EuF_3 were used as raw materials. Approximate 20 g batches of the mixture of raw materials were melted in a covered alumina crucible at 1400 °C for about 30 min. Then the glass was quenched into a brass mold and annealed in a furnace to release the inner stress. All the precursor glasses except the sample E were transparent and used for further investigation. In order to obtain transparent oxyfluoride glass ceramics, the precursor glasses were heat-treated at 600 °C for 2 h. The obtained glass and glass ceramics were polished for optical measurements.

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The DSC experiments of the precursor glasses were carried out on Netzsch DTA 404PC in N_2 atmosphere at a heating rate of 10 K/min. The precipitated crystalline phases in the oxyfluoride glass ceramics were identified by X-ray diffraction (XRD) measurements on a Bruker D2 PHASER Diffractometer with Cu-K_α radiation ($\lambda = 0.154$ nm). The microstructures of the samples were analyzed by a transmission electron microscope (TEM, JEM-2100) operating at an accelerating voltage of 200 kV. The excitation and emission spectra were measured with a Jobin–Yvon Frolog3 fluorescence spectrophotometer equipped with a 450 W Xe lamp. The decay curves of Eu^{3+} ions at 611 nm were measured by this equipment excited by a pulsed spectral LED at 370 nm, operating in the multichannel scaling mode. All measurements were collected at room temperature.

3. Results and discussion

The DSC curves of the precursor glasses with different LaF_3 contents are shown in Fig. 1a. With the increasing of LaF_3 content from 0 mol% to 3 mol%, T_g decreases gradually from 538 °C to 509 °C. A new exothermic peak appears at 590 °C for samples C and D, indicative of BaF_2 crystallization from the precursor glasses confirmed by XRD results. The exothermic peaks at around 735 °C correspond to the bulk crystallization of the glass matrix. Fig. 1b shows the XRD patterns of Eu^{3+}-doped samples heat-treated at 600 °C for 2 h. The absence of sharp crystalline peaks and two broad humps confirm the amorphous nature of the sample A. However, strong diffraction peak signals are observed in the samples with the LaF_3 addition, which indicates LaF_3 acts as nucleating agents during the nucleation process. The diffraction peaks are easily assigned to cubic BaF_2 nanocrystals (JCPDS 85-1341). From the peak width of the XRD pattern and the Scherrer formula, the mean crystalline size of BaF_2 nanocrystals were calculated to be 16.8 nm, 19.1 nm and 21.5 nm for the samples B, C and D, respectively. Obviously, the increasing LaF_3 addition promotes the growing up of BaF_2 nanocrystals, which is similar to the result in the Er^{3+}-doped SiO_2–Al_2O_3–PbF_2–ZnF_2 glass system [8]. The volume fraction of the crystalline phase (crystallinity) in the glass ceramic estimated by the ratio of integrating the area of the peaks and the total area of the XRD pattern from 10° to 80° was about 35.44%, 56.59% and 65.09% for the samples B, C and D, respectively [9,10]. In comparison with BaF_2 nanocrystals, as shown in the inset of Fig. 1b, the diffraction peaks shift gradually towards the higher angle side, exhibiting the lattice shrinkage of BaF_2 nanocrystals. It is believed that the lattice shrinkage is due to the substitution of Ba^{2+} (ionic radius 1.42 Å) by La^{3+} (ionic radius 1.16 Å) and Eu^{3+} (ionic radius 1.06 Å) in BaF_2 lattice [11].

TEM analysis was carried out to obtain the information on the morphology, size and size distribution of BaF_2 nanocrystals in the oxyfluoride glass ceramics and the results were shown in Fig. 2. The dark and spherical crystallites in the TEM images correspond to BaF_2 nanocrystals, as shown in Fig. 2a, which are homogeneously distributed in the glassy matrices. Clear lattice fringes of HRTEM image in Fig. 2b indicates the high crystallinity of BaF_2 nanocrystals. The crystalline size distribution in Fig. 2c falls in a narrow range and follows a Gaussian shaped curve with an average crystalline size of 22 nm, which agrees well with the result estimated from the XRD results.

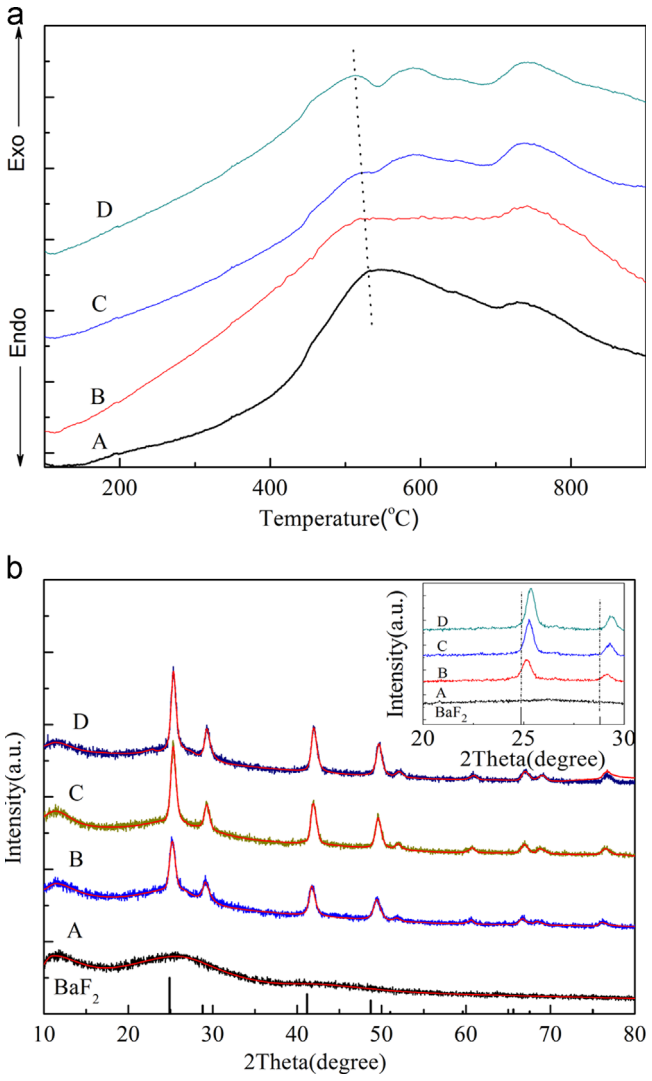

Fig. 1. (a) DSC curves and (b) XRD patterns of the samples with x mol% LaF_3 content (a) $x=0$; (b) $x=1$; (c) $x=2$; and (d) $x=3$.

In order to detect the element distribution, the energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy(EDX) with nanosized probe of an individual BaF_2 nanocrystal and the glass matrix in 3 mol% LaF_3 doped glass ceramic were recorded and shown in Fig. 3. The appearance of Cu signal is attributed to the carbon coated copper grid used in the TEM measurement. In comparison with the EDX spectrum of the glass matrix, the spectrum of an individual BaF_2 nanocrystal exhibits relatively stronger Ba, La and F signals, and no any signal of Eu^{3+} is detected due to its too small quantity. All the results indicate that BaF_2 nanocrystals have formed in the glass matrix and La^{3+} ions are embedded in the formed BaF_2 nanocrystals after heat treatment.