Organization of branched rod–coil molecules into a 3-D tetragonally perforated lamellar mesophase†

Nam-Keun Oh,*a* **Wang-Cheol Zin,****a* **Jun-Hwan Im,***b* **Ja-Hyoung Ryu***b* **and Myongsoo Lee****b*

a Department of Materials Science and Engineering, Pohang University of Science and Technology, Pohang 790-784, Korea. E-mail: wczin@postech.ac.kr; Fax: +82 54 279 2399

b Center for Supramolecular Nano-Assembly and Department of Chemistry, Yonsei University, Shinchon 134, Seoul 120-749, Korea. E-mail: mslee@yonsei.ac.kr; Fax: +82 2 393 6096

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Tetramerization of coil–rod–coil ABC triblock copolymers to a tetrabranched molecule induces an unusual 3-D tetragonally perforated layered liquid crystalline phase as an intermediate structure between 1-D lamellar and 2-D hexagonal columnar phases.

An important challenge in the preparation of self-assembling materials is to control the supramolecular structures with welldefined shapes and sizes which have potential for fundamental and practical implications in areas such as materials science, molecular electronics and biomimetric chemistry.1 An example of a selfassembling system is provided by rod–coil molecules, which have a strong tendency to self-organize into a variety of supramolecular structures in nano-scale dimensions.2

We have previously demonstrated that rod–coil molecules selfassemble into layered smectic, bicontinuous cubic, and honeycomb liquid crystalline superlattices depending on the relative length of the coil segment to the rod segment. 3 If a chemically distinct hydrophobic chain is attached to the opposite end of a rod segment, segregation of incompatible chain ends takes place and leads to an ordered phase composed of three distinct sub-layers. Coil–rod–coil ABC triblock molecules give rise to the formation of selfassembled structures with higher interfacial areas in comparison with AB diblock molecules. In a preliminary communication, we demonstrated that coil–rod–coil ABC triblock molecules were observed to self-organize into various supramolecular architectures such as layered smectic, hexagonal columnar, and spherical micellar phases depending on the coil volume fraction in the molecules.4

A novel strategy to manipulate the supramolcular nanostructure may be accessed by binding the C coil block of a coil–rod–coil ABC triblock molecule (monomer) into a tetrabranched triblock molecule (tetramer) at a specific coil volume fraction. This binding may slightly modify the entropic contribution of the coil C part in the coil–rod–coil ABC system. In comparison with the monomer, the tetramer has restriction of chain end mobility through covalent linkage. Consequently, this effect may bring about the formation of a novel supramolecular nanostructure. With this idea in mind, we have synthesized a monomer and tetramer with a specific coil volume fraction. The momomer and tetramer consist of a docosyl chain as the A block, a molecular rod containing two phenyl units connected through ester linkages as the B block, and poly(ethylene oxide) with 22 repeating units as the C block.

† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available: synthetic details, polarized optical micrographs, and characterization of XRD. See http:// www.rsc.org/suppdata/cc/b3/b317109d/

We present here that tetramerization of the molecules provides an unusual example of the formation of a 3-D tetragonally perforated lamellar liquid crystalline phase as an intermediate phase between conventional lamellar and columnar structures (Fig. 1).

The synthesis of the monomer has been reported and tetramer was performed by using a procedure described previously.† All products were characterized by 1H NMR and elemental analysis.† Purity was accessed by gel permeation chromatography (GPC), which showed a narrow molecular weight distribution with a polydispersity index 1.04, indicative of high purity.

As can be observed from Fig. 2(a), both molecules exhibit three distinct crystalline melting transitions, corresponding to poly(ethylene oxide), docosyl, and rod block. The XRD patterns of the

Fig. 1 Schematic representation of self-assemblies of monomer [(a) and (c)] and tetramer $[(a), (b),$ and $(c)]$ in (a) the lamellar crystalline phase, and (b) the tetragonally perforated lamellar (L_{tet}) and (c) hexagonal columnar (col) liquid crystalline phases.

Fig. 2 (a) DSC traces (10 $^{\circ}$ C min⁻¹) exhibited during second heating and first cooling scans of the monomer and tetramer. (b) Small-angle XRD patterns of the tetramer measured at various temperatures.

monomer and tetramer in the crystalline phases display three reflections in the spacing ratio of 1:2:3 in the small-angle region, whereas a number of sharp reflections are observed in the wideangle region, indicative of a lamellar crystalline structure [Fig. 2(b)]. The small-angle peak broadening may arise from the effect of a small crystal size induced by the formation of a large number of nuclei of rod crystals on cooling. The lattice parameters measured from the small-angle XRD experiments indicate that both molecules crystallize into a bilayered lamellar structure. The rod building blocks within the aromatic domains are considered to pack into a monoclinic symmetry, as confirmed by wide-angle XRD patterns.† In the melt state of a rod block, both molecules display a non-lamellar liquid crystalline phase. Previously, XRD studies have demonstrated that the monomer exhibits a hexagonal columnar mesophase with a lattice parameter of 12.2 nm.4 This molecule also exhbits a random micellar mesophase with a diameter of 12.3 nm as a higher temperature mesophase.4

In great contrast, the rod segments of the tetramer self-assemble into a tetragonally perforated layered structure upon melting of the rod segment, in which perforations are filled by hydrophobic docosyl chains. The small-angle XRD pattern of the tetramer at 97 °C shows a number of well-resolved reflections, which indicate the existence of a highly ordered structure as shown in Fig. 2(b). On heating, the tetragonally ordered structure transforms into a 2-D hexagonal columnar structure with a lattice constant $a = 12.1$ nm. This phase identification is further supported by polarized optical microscopic observations, showing a characteristic pseudo-focal conic texture.† Thus, the tetragonal structure in these molecules exists as an intermediate structure between the lamellar and 2-D hexagonal columnar structures. This is in contrast to the thermal behavior of the tetragonal phase exhibited by other rod–coil systems reported previously. Another interesting point to be noted is that the peak intensity associated with the (002) reflection appears to be the most intense [see Fig. 2(b)], implying that the fundamental structure is lamellar. This is also in opposition to that of the tetragonal structure based on discrete bundles exhibited by other rod–coil molecules.

Taking into account the facts described above and the thermal behavior exhibited for an intermediate structure between the lamellar and columnar structures, this 3-D structure can be best described as a system of perforated rod layers with in-plane tetragonal packing of coil perforations. Based on the lattice parameters, the calculated rod length of 2.2 nm by Materials Studio Software, and the molecular densities, the perforation size diameter is estimated to be 23.2 nm.

Fig. 3 illustrates the possible model responsible for the formation of the tetragonally perforated lamellar structure (*I*4/*mmm* space group symmetry). The supramolecular structure consists of liquid crystalline rod layers with in-plane tetragonally ordered coil perforations stacked in an AB–BA sequence. The perforations are likely to be filled by docosyl chains, most probably due to the large chemical difference between the rod and poly(ethylene oxide) coil segments. The 3-D lattice is built up of two interpenetrating centred 3-D lattices. The small-angle XRD pattern at the optically isotropic phase at high temperature above the hexagonal columnar structure exhibits a strong reflection together with a weak reflection at about 1.8 relative to the primary peak position, similar to that of monomer. Considering liquid-like micelles, the diameter of the sphere can be calculated to be 11.9 nm. The tendency of the lamellar or columnar structures to split into smaller domains on heating is consistent with the results described previously.4

These results, together with the DSC scans, demonstrate that the tetramer self-assembles into successively lamellar crystalline, tetragonally perforated lamellar, hexagonal columnar, and discrete micellar phases in a reversible way as a function of temperature. In

Fig. 3 Schematic representation of the 3-D tetragonally perforated lamellar (*I*4/*mmm* space group symmetry) structure of the tetramer: (a) top view, and (b) cross-sectional (along the dotted line) side view.

comparison with the phase behavior of the monomer, the remarkable feature of the tetramer investigated here is that attachment of coil–rod–coil molecules into a central point induces a perforated lamellar liquid crystalline phase with a 3-D tetragonal symmetry that is thermodynamically stable. Upon melting of rod segments in the monomer, there is adequate free volume for the poly(ethylene oxide) to form a 2-D hexagonal columnar mesophase. Attachment of four poly(ethylene oxide) chains to a central point, however, has the effect of reducing the freedom of movement for the flexible chains, which in turn suppresses the ability of the rod segments to form a columnar mesophase with a larger interfacial area. Consequently, certain supramolecular structures with reduced interfacial area such as a perforated lamellar structure are preferred over the columnar phase exhibited by the monomer.

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