Effect of pH on corrosion behavior of CuCrZr in solution without and with NaCl

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Abstract

CuCrZr is a high copper alloy widely used as electrical and thermal conducting material, especially in heat exchangers in nuclear reactors. In this respect, the physical and fatigue properties of CuCrZr have been extensively studied. The electrochemical behavior of CuCrZr, on the other hand, has not been adequately investigated. In the present study, the effect of pH on the corrosion behavior of CuCrZr in aqueous solutions without and with chloride (0.6 M NaCl) was studied. The pH of the solutions is found to exert significant influence on the corrosion behavior of CuCrZr. In acidic solutions without chloride, the corrosion of CuCrZr is ascribed to active dissolution with soluble products. In neutral and alkaline solutions without NaCl, the presence of oxides on the surface of CuCrZr leads to a noble shift in corrosion potential and passivation results in increased corrosion resistance. In chloride solutions at various pH values, the chloride ions influence the formation of the surface layers and the anodic dissolution process during polarization. At high pH, CuCrZr shows significant passivity and high corrosion

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resistance due to the growth of Cu$_2$O/Cu(OH) film which hinders further dissolution whereas at low pH the corrosion resistance is lowered due to active dissolution of Cu.

Keywords: Metals and Alloys; CuCrZr; Corrosion; pH; Chloride

1. Introduction

High copper alloy CuCrZr is age-hardenable, beryllium-free and dilutely alloyed with Cr and Zr. Its advantages include excellent electrical and thermal conductivities, high strength, ease of fabrication, high fatigue resistance and radiation resistance, and low toxicity. Through age-hardening, the mechanical and tribological properties of the alloy can be enhanced while high levels of electrical conductivity can be preserved [1]. CuCrZr has extensive applications such as overhead contact wires for electric railway, electrodes and holders for welding, electrical components working under mechanical stress and spark, lead frame for integrated circuit, moulds and dies for continuous casting metals, and heat sinks for nuclear power reactors. The applications of CuCrZr may involve acidic, alkaline and chloride-containing environments. Although copper is a noble metal, it reacts readily in oxygen-containing environment, with the anodic dissolution of copper electrochemically balanced by oxygen reduction [2, 3]. It was reported that the corrosion rate of copper is influenced by the pH and has the lowest value in slightly alkaline solutions. The corrosion of CuCrZr in adverse working conditions, for instance, in polluted atmosphere and in nuclear reactors with different water chemistries [4], is critical for determining the lifetime and reliability of the engineering components.
In the literature, some studies were focused on the dealloying of copper alloys with high content of Cr [5, 6] and Zr [7]. It is found that dechromisation of Cu-47%Cr [5] and Cu-50.54%Cr-0.42%Ni-1.34%Al [6] in acidic media occurs at the interface between the Cr-rich phase and the Cu-rich phase, and gradually extends to the Cr-rich phase until Cr is completely dissolved. Lu and his coworkers studied the corrosion behavior of the Cu–Zr alloys with 15%, 30%, and 66% of Zr in 0.1 M HCl [7]. The results revealed that Cu–15%Zr has the highest corrosion resistance in the potential region of selective dissolution of Zr while the Zr content has little effect on the selective dissolution rate of Zr when it is above 30%. On the other hand, report on the corrosion behavior of high copper alloys micro-alloyed with Cr and Zr is scarce. Zhang and his co-workers reported the effect of chloride concentration (0.01 to 1 M) on the corrosion behavior of CuCr, CuZr and CuCrZr [1]. Significant reduction in corrosion resistance was observed with simultaneous micro-addition of Cr and Zr, compared with addition of Cr or Zr alone. It was also shown that the element Zr plays a deteriorating role to the Cu$_2$O layer while Cr plays an offsetting role [1]. In these reports [1,5-7], the effect of pH on the corrosion behavior of CuCrZr has not been studied, though CuCrZr could be exposed to environments with different pH values.

The aim of the present work is to investigate the effect of pH on the corrosion behavior of high copper alloy CuCrZr compared with Cu, CuCr and CuZr in solution without and with 0.6 M NaCl by open-circuit potential measurement and potentiodynamic polarization. In addition, the morphology of the corroded surface was also investigated.
2. Experimental details

Wrought cylindrical bars of precipitation-hardened high copper alloy CuCrZr (C18150) was selected for present study. Annealed Cu (C11000) and precipitation-hardened CuCr (C18200) and CuZr (C15000) were included for comparison purpose and for exploring the role of the alloying elements on the corrosion behavior of the alloys. Disc specimens of diameter of 13 mm and thickness of 10 mm were prepared by a cut-off machine with coolant. The Vickers hardness of the specimens was determined using a microhardness tester at a load of 200 g and a loading time of 10 s. The designation, chemical compositions, and Vickers hardness of the tested specimens are shown in Table 1. Prior to the corrosion tests, the specimens were mechanically ground by CAMI 800-grit silicon carbide paper, degreased in alcohol, rinsed in distilled water, and finally dried in a cool air stream.

To investigate electrochemical corrosion behavior, the specimens were embedded in cold-curing epoxy resin. Epoxy resin was also applied at the interface between the specimens and the mount in order to avoid crevice corrosion as well as to expose a test area of 1 cm². In order to avoid the influence due to air exposure, the test solutions were freshly prepared by dissolving 35 g NaCl in 965 ml distilled water and the pH was varied by adding H₂SO₄ or NaOH. Open-circuit potential (OCP) measurement and potentiodynamic polarization test in the freshly prepared solutions without and with 0.6 M NaCl at pH values of 1, 3, 5, 7, 10 and 12, open to air at 25±1 °C, were performed in a three-electrode cell in a water bath using a PAR VersastatII potentiostat according to ASTM Standard G5-94 [8]. All potentials were measured with respect to a saturated calomel electrode (SCE, 0.244 V versus SHE at 25 °C) as the reference electrode. Two parallel graphite rods served as the counter electrode for current measurement. After the OCP measurement for a period of 2 hours, the final steady OCP was recorded and then
the potential was increased at a rate of 1 mV s\(^{-1}\), starting from 0.2 V below the OCP and terminated at 1 V. From the polarization curves, the corrosion current densities \(I_{\text{corr}}\) of the alloys in various test conditions were determined by the fitting to the linear region using Tafel extrapolation with the aid of commercial software (PowerCORR, V.2.42). For specimens showing pitting corrosion behavior at high pH, the pitting potentials and passive currents were also recorded.

The microstructure, morphology of the corroded surface, and chemical composition of the corrosion products of CuCrZr were investigated by scanning electron microscopy (SEM, Hitachi S-3400N) and energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDX, Horiba EX-250).

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Microstructure

The microstructure of CuCrZr consists of equiaxed, twinned grains of alpha copper solid solution as shown in Fig. 1. Typically it had been cooled rapidly so the Cr and Zr remained in solid solution. The precipitation treatment allowed the Cr and Zr to precipitate out of the solid solution, forming a dispersion of Cr and Zr precipitates throughout the matrix. The precipitates of Cr and Zr are too fine and invisible at low magnification.
3.2 Open-circuit potential measurements

The plots of OCP against time for CuCrZr and Cu in solutions at various pH without and with chloride are shown in Figs. 2 to 5. The steady values are summarized in Table 2 and plotted against the pH values as shown Fig. 6. In general, the OCPs for CuCrZr and Cu in 0.6 M NaCl solution are more active than those in the solutions without chloride. For CuCrZr in 0.6 M NaCl solution, the OCP peaks at pH 7 while in solutions without NaCl, the OCP peaks at pH 5 (Fig.6(a)). On the other hand, the OCP of Cu in 0.6 M NaCl solution increases monotonically with pH in the range pH 1 to 12, while in solution without NaCl, the OCP peaks at pH 5 (Fig. 6(b)).

The Pourbaix diagrams for Cu, Cr and Zr in water at 25 °C shown in Fig. 7 provides a thermodynamic basis for explaining the phenomena of dissolution and oxide formation in aqueous solutions under different electrochemical conditions [9]. Among these elements, Cu is the noblest but it dissolves as Cu\(^+\)/Cu\(^{2+}\) in acidic solution and oxidizes to Cu\(_2\)O/CuO/Cu(OH)\(_2\) in neutral and alkaline solutions in aerated oxidizing conditions. Cr shows corrosion resistance by passivity due to the presence of protective oxide which is stable at pH values above 3. Zr corrodes in acidic (pH < 3.5) and alkaline (pH > 13) solutions and the area of oxide stability lies between pH 3.5 and 13. Zr has the lowest redox potential which indicates a large chemical driving force for corrosion. If passivation does not intervene, Zr will react violently with the surrounding chemical species such as chloride, oxygen and water and be converted to its ionic form. Compared with Cu, the difference in standard electrode potentials of Cr and Zr in acidic medium is quite large. From Fig. 7b and 7c, the immunity region for Cr and Zr is located at lower potential regions. When the applied anodic potential is between the redox potentials of Zr/Zr\(^{3+}\)/ZrO\(^{2+}\), Cr/Cr\(^{2+}\)/Cr\(^{3+}\) and Cu/Cu\(^+\)/Cu\(^{2+}\), the dissolution is attributed to the preferential removal of Cr or Zr atoms in the alloys at low pH. The
preferential dissolution of Cr/Zr atoms may take place accompanied with hydrogen evolution due to their high electroactivity:

\[
\text{Cr} + \text{H}_2\text{O} + \text{H}^+ \rightarrow \text{Cr}^{2+} + \text{H}_2 + \text{OH} \quad (1)
\]

\[
\text{Zr} + \text{H}_2\text{O} + 2\text{H}^+ \rightarrow \text{ZrO}^{2+} + 2\text{H}_2 \quad (2)
\]

When selective dissolution occurs, the topmost layer of the alloy surface is depleted of the active elements (Cr or Zr), and preferentially enriched in the more noble element (Cu). Dealloying is largely dependent on the difference between the electrode potentials of major constituent elements, atomic percent composition and on the kinetics of the solid-state diffusion of the alloyed elements [10]. Although CuCrZr contains a small amount of Cr and Zr (lower than 1.5 wt%), dealloying of CuCrZr still occurs at low pH as a result of the selective dissolution of Cr and Zr according to the Pourbaix diagrams. Alloys containing Zr are expected to be more susceptible to dealloying than the alloys containing Cr because of the larger difference in electrode potentials. The Pourbaix diagrams can provide information for the thermodynamics of metal dissolution in aqueous environment but the information about the dissolution kinetics will be discussed based on the potentiodynamic polarization behavior of CuCrZr in the next section.

### 3.3 Polarization behavior at pH 1 to 5

The potentiodynamic polarization curves of CuCrZr and Cu in acidic solutions without and with chloride NaCl (pH 1, 3 and 5) are showed in Figs. 8 and 9 respectively and the values of \(I_{\text{corr}}\) are listed in Table 2. In the solutions without and with chloride, the anodic current density and \(I_{\text{corr}}\) increase and the corrosion potential decreases with
increase in acidity. In solutions at pH 3 to 5 without chloride, a narrow linear portion in
the anodic region is observed. The linear region is attributed to diffusion of copper ions
in oxide films. In the chloride solutions at pH 1 to 5, no clear anodic Tafel region and
no active-passive transition is observed, showing that anodic dissolution was not in an
activation regime. Formation of stable surface oxides is impossible and dissolution of
copper is dominant. Feng et al. reported that the oxide film tends to dissolve in acidic
solution and the film thickness decreases rapidly when the pH value is lower than 4 [11].
In the acidic solutions without chloride, the main anodic reaction that takes place is
active dissolution of Cu to Cu\(^+\) at the corrosion potential:

\[
Cu \rightarrow Cu^+ + e^- \quad (3)
\]

The reaction rate is driven by the cathodic reduction of oxygen in acidic solution:

\[
O_2 + 4H^+ + 4e^- \rightarrow 2H_2O \quad (4)
\]

Combining (3) and (4),

\[
4Cu + O_2 + 4H^+ \rightarrow 4Cu^+ + 2H_2O \quad (5)
\]

In the solution with chloride ions, the potential of the cathodic-anodic transition
region is shifted in the active direction. Higher \(I_{corr}\) (i.e. corrosion rates) are recorded
and peaks of anodic current density are also observed. When the applied anodic
potential is higher than the dissolution potential of Cu, dissolution of Cu occurs through
the mass-transfer controlled step in the Tafel region [12]. The initial reaction is the
formation of less soluble CuCl solid [13]:

\[
Cu + Cl^- \rightarrow CuCl(s) + e^- \quad (6)
\]
Moreover, copper oxidizes to cuprous chloride complexes and the rate is dependent on chloride concentration but independent on pH [14].

Cuprous ions can diffuse through solid state CuCl until they meet with chloride ions, and then the following reaction takes place:

$$Cu^{+} + Cl^{-} \rightarrow CuCl_{(s)}$$  \hspace{1cm} (7)

As the potential is further increased, the anodic curves exhibit small peaks due to the formation of CuCl film at a potential of about -0.05 V. At chloride concentrations higher than 0.3 M (0.6 M in the present study), the insoluble CuCl layer transforms into a soluble CuCl$_2^{-}$ complex [1] and then CuCl$_2^{-}$ hydrolyzes to form a passive Cu$_2$O layer and so a decrease in the corrosion rate can be observed.

3.4 Polarization behavior at pH 7 to 12

The potentiodynamic polarization curves of the CuCrZr and Cu in the near-neutral solution (pH 7) and alkaline solutions (pH 10 and 12) with and without NaCl are shown in Figs. 10 and 11 respectively and the corrosion parameters are extracted and summarized in Table 2.

In the solution without chloride at pH 7, passivation-like behavior is observed in CuCrZr and Cu at higher anodic potentials. However, they do not passivate in chloride solution at pH 7. It has been reported that the polarization behavior of copper in the Tafel region in chloride solutions is not activation-controlled but is a mass transport-kinetics process; thus dissolution is controlled by the rate of diffusion of CuCl$_2^{-}$ species from the electrode surface across a diffusion layer whose concentration
gradient is determined by the electrode potential [15-17]. As the potential is further increased, the anodic curves exhibit small peaks consistent with the formation of a CuCl film [16, 17] at a potential of about -0.05 V. Beyond the peaks, limiting-current behavior is observed and the rate of anodic reaction is controlled by the formation and dissolution of CuCl film [16]. The rate of the reaction is probably driven by the cathodic reduction of oxygen in neutral solution:

$$O_2 + 2H_2O + 4e^- \rightarrow 4(OH)^-$$

In chloride solution at pH 7, the $I_{corr}$ of Cu and CuCrZr are the lowest (Fig. 11). It seems their polarization behaviors in chloride solutions are dominated by the dissolution of copper to soluble cuprous chloride ion complex CuCl$_2^-$.

For CuCrZr in solution without chloride at pH 10, passivation is observed and the passive range (-0.1 to 0.25 V) is wider than that of CuCrZr at pH 7 and Cu at pH 10 (Fig. 10). Their passive current densities are of the order of $\mu$A/cm$^2$. A thin and dense Cu$_2$O layer formed on the surface of CuCrZr and Cu results in spontaneous passivation. Whereas, the polarization curves of CuCrZr and Cu show active behavior in chloride solution at pH 10 and are similar to those at pH 7 (Fig. 11). The curves for CuCrZr and Cu in 0.6 M NaCl start with similar active regions followed by active–passive transition that occurs at comparable potentials. The sudden increase of anodic currents at higher potentials is due to film breakdown, being accompanied by corrosion.

It has been shown that the potentiodynamic behavior of copper in slightly alkaline solution exhibits anodic peak associated with the electro-formation of Cu$_2$O and CuO. Formation of Cu$_2$O occurs through:

$$2Cu + H_2O \rightarrow Cu_2O + 2H^+ + 2e^-$$
and subsequent oxidation of Cu$_2$O to CuO film at higher potentials, according to:

$$Cu_2O + H_2O \rightarrow 2CuO + 2H^+ + 2e^-$$ (10)

Thus, passivity breakdown at pH 10 occurs with the formation of Cu$_2$O for CuCrZr at lower potential and with the growth of CuO film for Cu at higher potential. This is attributed primarily to the generation of H$^+$ ions at the electrode surface [18].

For CuCrZr and Cu in the solution without chloride at pH 12, the behavior at the active region appears to be influenced by high alkalinity. The noticeable Tafel region shows a large slope and wide passive range. The CuO layer formed and its thickness increases rapidly due to high alkalinity. The polarization curves (Fig. 10) exhibit a passive region with an anodic peak which corresponds to the formation of Cu(OH) / Cu$_2$O layer through the following reactions:

$$2Cu + 2OH^- \rightarrow Cu_2O + H_2O + 2e^-$$ (10)

and subsequent oxidation of Cu$_2$O to Cu(OH)$_2$ film at higher potentials, according to:

$$Cu_2O + 2OH^- + H_2O \rightarrow Cu(OH)_2 + 2e^-$$ (11)

In chloride solution, the film stability of CuCrZr and Cu is lower but the curves still show considerable passive ranges (Fig. 11). As the potential is increased above the pitting potential, breakdown becomes evident. The polarization curves show two passive regions with two anodic peaks. The first peak corresponds to the formation of the Cu(OH) / Cu$_2$O layer. The second peak is more complex and involves the formation of Cu(OH) / Cu$_2$O and Cu(OH)$_2$ / CuO [21].

3.5 Effect of pH on $I_{corr}$
The plots of corrosion rates (reflected by $I_{corr}$) against the pH value of the solutions are shown in Fig. 12. The corrosion rates of CuCrZr and Cu are the highest in chloride solution at pH 1 and lowest at pH 7. Dissolution of oxide films takes place when the pH is lower than 5. Between pH 7 and 10, Cu$_2$O film is formed and the film is not so protective. When pH is greater than 10, CuO film starts to form and excellent passivity is observed.

3.6 Effect of Cr and Zr on corrosion behavior

The polarization curves of CuCrZr and Cu are compared with those of CuCr and CuZr in chloride solutions at extreme pH values (1 and 12) as shown in Fig. 13. The anodic current densities of CuCrZr, CuCr, CuZr and Cu at pH 1 do not vary much due to active dissolution of Cu. On the contrary, at pH 12, Cu, CuCrZr and CuCr exhibit a wide passive range and high pitting potentials ($\geq 0.5$ V) whereas CuZr shows very narrow passive range and localized film breakdown occurs at relative low anodic potential (-0.04 V). The addition of more active Zr deteriorates the corrosion resistance of CuZr significantly at pH 12. Zhang and his coworkers reported that Zr plays a deteriorating role to the Cu$_2$O layer while Cr plays an offsetting role in 1 M NaCl neutral solution [1]. In the binary alloys (CuCr and CuZr), the effect of the element Zr is markedly stronger than that of Cr in chloride solution at pH 12. However, no significant reduction in pitting corrosion resistance is observed when both Cr and Zr are present in CuCrZr. It is may be attributed to its lower Zr content (0.12 wt%) compared with CuZr (0.25 wt%). Based on the value of $E_{pits}$, the pitting corrosion resistance of the alloys is ranked as:

CuZr $\ll$ CuCr $\sim$ CuCrZr $<$ Cu

Among the alloys investigated, Cu has the highest pitting corrosion resistance at pH 12.
3.7. SEM and EDX analyses

The SEM micrographs of corroded CuCrZr in chloride solutions at pH 1 and 12 with EDX spectra of the corrosion products are shown in Fig. 14. SEM examinations of CuCrZr corroded in chloride solution at pH 1 reveal uniform corrosion with corrosion products covering the entire surface (Fig. 14(a)). Small discrete pits are observed for CuCrZr corroded in chloride solution at pH 12 as shown by the arrows in Fig. 14(b). It is observed that the degree of corrosion damage is more severe in CuCrZr in chloride solution at pH 1. EDX results of the corroded surface of CuCrZr in chloride solution at pH 1 contains relatively high Cl and O with a tiny amount of Cr. It is likely that the corrosion product consists mainly of copper chlorides. On the other hand, the corroded surface of CuCrZr in chloride solution at pH 12 contains more O, and the corrosion product consists mainly copper oxides. In addition, some Cr(OH)$_2$ or Cr$_2$O$_3$ could also be formed.

4. Conclusions

1. The open-circuit potentials for CuCrZr and Cu in 0.6 M NaCl solution are more active than those in the solutions without chloride.
2. The open-circuit potentials for CuCrZr and Cu shifted to active direction as acidity increases without and with chloride due to active dissolution.
3. The corrosion rates (reflected by $I_{corr}$) of CuCrZr and Cu are the highest in NaCl solution at pH 1 and the lowest at pH 7.
4. The corrosion rates (reflected by $I_{corr}$) of CuCrZr, Cu, CuCr and CuZr at pH 1 do not differ significantly as at this low pH corrosion is controlled by active dissolution of Cu.

5. On the contrary, at pH 12, CuCrZr, Cu, and CuCr exhibit significant passivity and high pitting potentials ($\geq 0.5$ V) whereas CuZr shows very narrow passive range and localized film breakdown occurred at relative low anodic potential (-0.04 V).

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Table and Figure captions

Table 1. Designation, compositions and hardness of pure copper and various copper alloys.

Table 2. Corrosion parameters of pure copper and high copper alloys in the solutions at various pH without and with NaCl.

Fig. 1. SEM micrograph of CuCrZr.

Fig. 2. Plots of OCP vs time for (a) CuCrZr and (b) Cu in solutions pH 1, 3, 5 without NaCl.

Fig. 3. Plots of OCP vs time for (a) CuCrZr and (b) Cu in solutions pH 1, 3, 5 with NaCl.

Fig. 4. Plots of OCP vs time for (a) CuCrZr and (b) Cu in solutions pH 7, 10, 12 without NaCl.

Fig. 5. Plots of OCP vs time for (a) CuCrZr and (b) Cu in solutions pH 7, 10, 12 with NaCl.

Fig. 6. Effect of pH on OCP of (a) CuCrZr and (b) Cu in solutions without and with 0.6 M NaCl.

Fig. 7. Pourbaix diagrams for (a) Cu-H$_2$O, (b) Cr-H$_2$O and (c) Zr-H$_2$O systems at 25 °C [9].

Fig. 8. Potentiodynamic polarization curves of (a) CuCrZr and (b) Cu in acidic solutions (pH 1, 3, 5) without NaCl.

Fig. 9. Potentiodynamic polarization curves of (a) CuCrZr and (b) Cu in acidic solutions (pH 1, 3, 5) with 0.6 M NaCl.
Fig. 10. Potentiodynamic polarization curves of (a) CuCrZr and (b) Cu in neutral and alkaline solutions (pH 7, 10, 12) without NaCl.

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Fig. 12. Effect of pH on $I_{corr}$ of (a) CuCrZr and (b) Cu in solutions at various pH without and with chloride.

Fig. 13. Potentiodynamic polarization curves of various copper alloys in 0.6 M NaCl solution at (a) pH 1 and (b) pH 12.

Fig. 14. SEM and EDX analyses of corrosion product for CuCrZr in chloride solution at (a) pH 1 and (b) pH 12 after polarization tests.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Designation</th>
<th>UNS number</th>
<th>Hardness (Hv)</th>
<th>Composition (in wt%)</th>
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<tr>
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<td>----</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Without</td>
<td>NaCl</td>
<td>0.6M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCP (V)</td>
<td>I_{corr} (μA/cm²)</td>
<td>E_{pit} (V)</td>
<td>I_{pass} (μA/cm²)</td>
</tr>
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<td>-</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-0.12</td>
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<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
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Fig. 7

(a) 

(b)
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