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*The paper was published in the Proceedings of the 8<sup>th</sup> International Symposium on Deformation Characteristics of Geomaterials (IS-PORTO 2023) and was edited by António Viana da Fonseca and Cristiana Ferreira. The symposium was held from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> of September 2023 in Porto, Portugal.*

# A device to measure apparent swelling pressure of compacted bentonite using extremely thin specimen

Hailong Wang<sup>1#</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Waseda University, Global Center for Science and Engineering, 3-4-1 Ohkubo, Shinjuku-ku, Japan

<sup>#</sup>Corresponding author: [whlxy2002@aoni.waseda.jp](mailto:whlxy2002@aoni.waseda.jp)

## ABSTRACT

As a candidate material proposed for the geological disposal of the high level radioactive waste, bentonite has been studied extensively in terms of its engineering properties. One of the properties is the pressure generated during wetting compacted bentonite under rigorously confined condition. This pressure is designated apparent swelling pressure ( $p_s$ ) herein. On the other hand, due to the extremely low hydraulic conductivity (e.g.  $10^{-9}$ - $10^{-14}$  m/s) of compacted bentonite, it is often very time consuming to measure  $p_s$ . For instance, test duration is typically 1-2 month for a specimen with thickness ( $h_{sp}$ ) of 20 mm, and 1-2 weeks for  $h_{sp}=10$  mm. Though testing duration can be reduced by using thinner specimens, it becomes difficult to control measurement accuracy. Recently, the author reported a series of datasets obtained with newly developed testing method using  $h_{sp}=2$  mm specimens to measure  $p_s$ , by which testing duration was reduced to 1-2 days and data repeatability was also extraordinarily good. In this paper, the author made further developments on such testing techniques and introduced a device to measure  $p_s$  for  $h_{sp}=0.4$  mm specimen, by which testing duration can be reduced to 1-2 hours. The  $p_s$  measured by this device on a bentonite was compared with previous database, which implies that data repeatability is very good in generally, though the data scattering is observed for  $h_{sp}=0.4$  mm specimens.

**Keywords:** compacted bentonite; apparent swelling pressure; apparatus; thin specimen.

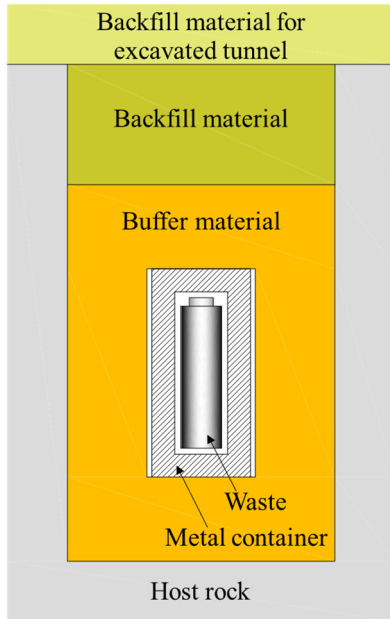
## 1. Introduction

The high-level radioactive waste generated during nuclear fuel recycle is considered to be permanently disposed in the geological disposal system, in which the waste will be isolated in a multi-barrier system under the deep ground (e.g. more than several hundred meters) for more than 10 thousand years. Fig. 1 illustrated a conceptual configuration of the barrier system in the Japanese project. The buffer material is one of the barriers, which is made by compacting bentonite-sand mixture into blocks and is placed between the other two barriers, the metal container and the host rock. The buffer material, which is unsaturated condition initially, absorbs ground water and generates a swelling pressure under the disposal condition. This pressure is designated the “apparent swelling pressure” ( $p_s$ ) to distinguish from the pressure between montmorillonite crystalline layers. Generation of  $p_s$  can firmly fix the buffer material, metal container and the host rock as a whole body, which is important for the safe design of the disposal system.

Extensive works have been conducted to study  $p_s$  for both pure bentonite or bentonite-sand mixing under various conditions (e.g. Pusch 1980; Komine and Ogata, 1994; Delage, Howat, and Cui 1998; Villar and Lloret 2008; Lee et al. 2012; Chen et al., 2016; Watanabe and Yokoyama 2021). The consolidation apparatus was often used to measure  $p_s$ , where vertical loading was adjusted to restrain swelling deformation during wetting, and recent year, new apparatuses have been developed that the specimen was confined rigidly (Sridharan et al. 1986,

Tang and Cui 2011). However it is often very expensive to conduct such tests since  $p_s$  generally increase exponentially and easily exceeds 10 MPa so that testing apparatuses have often to be designed cumbersome, and it takes very long time due to the extremely low permeability of the compacted bentonite (say, less than  $10^{-12}$  m/s). In past studies specimen diameter ( $\phi$ ) was normally 20-60 mm and height ( $h_{sp}$ ) was 10-30 mm (Villar and Lloret 2008; Lee et al. 2012; Maeda et al. 1998; Suzuki et al. 1992; Namikawa and Kanno 1997; Suzuki and Fujita 1999; Sasakura et al. 2002; Komine et al. 2009). Suzuki and Fujita (1999) and Tanai et al. (2010) examined effects of the height diameter ratio ( $h_{sp}/\phi$ ) and specimen dry density ( $\rho_d$ ) on  $p_s$  and suggested that  $h_{sp}/\phi$  should be kept low (e.g.  $\leq 0.5$ ) especially for relatively dense specimens to reduce the sidewall friction effect of the specimen ring on  $p_s$ . However even for  $h_{sp}=10$  mm, wetting duration normally takes 1-2 weeks for Na type bentonite (i.e. bentonite with the exchangeable cation of sodium mainly), though Ca type bentonite (i.e. with the exchangeable cation of calcium mainly), may be a bit faster. For  $h_{sp}=20$  mm case, a test may take 1-2 month. Attempt was made to use  $h_{sp}=5$  mm specimens by Komine and Ogata (1994), in which testing duration was reduced to several days. Specimen height reduction is not only an issue of properly preparing the specimen, it is also a challenge for measurement accuracy, such as dry density ( $\rho_d$ ) or water content ( $w$ ) etc. Recently, Wang et al. (2022a, 2022b, 2022c) developed a system to measure  $p_s$  for specimen with  $h_{sp}=2$  mm and  $\phi=28$  mm, in which, to ensure the measurement accuracy, length and

mass measurements of specimens were accurated to 1  $\mu\text{m}$  and 0.1 mg, respectively. Their results shown extremely good repeatability for powder material, and the testing duration was reduced to 1-2 days.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual configuration of the geological disposal system.

Though it is less urgent to develop technique to reduce specimen height further for directly wetting the compacted specimen by water or solutions, specimen size is still too large in case that it was wetted by water vapor, which is important to examine  $p_s$  under different humidity (i.e. suction) condition. For instance, it easily took a month to achieve equilibrium for a specimen with  $h_{sp} = 7$  mm (Likos and Wayllace 2010). It also took at least 2 weeks for  $h_{sp} = 2$  mm specimen based on the author's experience. Under such a condition, the author attempt to reduce specimen height to 0.4 mm in this study using newly developed techniques. Since these techniques are still under development,  $p_s$  measured by wetting the specimens with water is discussed in this study.

## 2. Material, apparatus and methodology

The commercial bentonite Kunigel V1 (K\_V1), a candidate material for use in the Japanese geological disposal project, was used for all tests conducted in this study. The physical properties of K\_V1 are summarized in Table 1. Note that all properties were obtained on the same batch of K\_V1 though some were reported by previous studies, and in this study, the saome batch was also used.

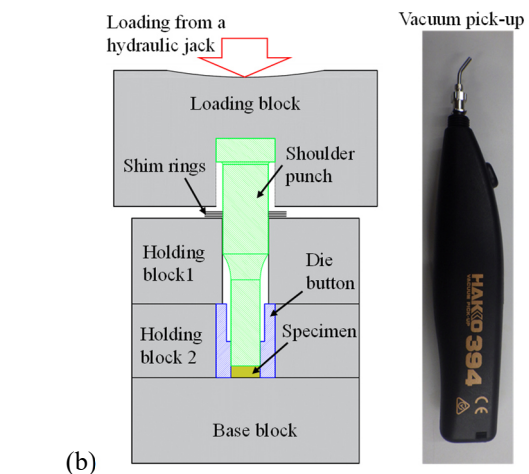
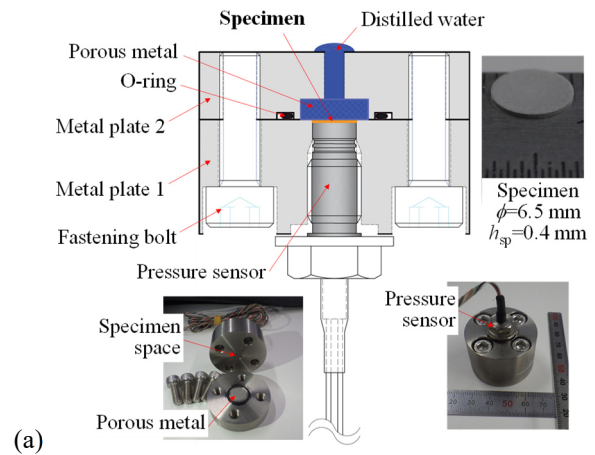
Fig. 2 shows the apparent swelling pressure apparatus and the specimen preparation device. The apparatus mainly includes two stainless plates to fasten the specimen, a stainless porous metal with a pore size of 2  $\mu\text{m}$  for water passage and a pressure sensor (measurement capacity: 20 MPa). The specimen with a thickness of  $\sim 0.4$  mm and diameter of 6.45 mm is sandwiched between the pressure sensor and the porous metal. To measure  $p_s$  of the specimen, water droplet was

injected in the opening above the porous metal to wet the specimen. Note that it was not sealed between the sensor and metal plate 1 so that pore air could escape from gaps between them during wetting. To reduce possible specimen deformation during wetting, four M6 bolts were used to fix the two metal plates, and the bottom surface of metal plate 2 was polished with a roughness of less than 0.5  $\mu\text{m}$ .

**Table 1.** Physical properties of K\_V1

Properties	Value
Specific gravity ( $G_s$ ) <sup>a</sup>	2.8 $\pm$ 0.03
Room water content ( $w_0$ ) <sup>b</sup>	5.2-7.1%
Montmorillonite content ( $C_m$ ) <sup>c</sup>	53%
Main accessory minerals <sup>d</sup>	Quartz, Feldspar, Plagioclase, Calcite
Content of particles size <5 $\mu\text{m}$ <sup>d</sup>	73%
Liquid limit ( $L_L$ ) <sup>e</sup>	505%
Plastic limit ( $P_L$ ) <sup>e</sup>	45%
Cation exchangeable capacity (CEC) <sup>e</sup>	71.9 meq/100g
Extractable cations <sup>e</sup>	Na <sup>+</sup> : 53.8
Unit: meq/100g	Ca <sup>2+</sup> : 35.5
	Mg <sup>2+</sup> : 1.6
	K <sup>+</sup> : <1.0

Note, <sup>a</sup>: reported by Wang et al. (2022a); <sup>b</sup>: for specimens in this study under relative humidity:  $\sim 50\%$  and temperature:  $\sim 23$   $^{\circ}\text{C}$ ; <sup>c</sup>: reported by Wang et al. (2022c); <sup>d</sup>: reported by Wang et al. (2020); <sup>e</sup>: reported by Shirakawabe et al. (2021)



**Figure 2.** (a) Apparent swelling pressure apparatus; (b) Specimen preparation devices.

The specimen preparation device consists of mainly four blocks. The shoulder punch (tip diameter: 6.40 mm) and the die button (bottom inner diameter: 6.45 mm) are common tools for the metal stamping. These tools are manufactured by very stiff steel usually to an accuracy of 0.01 mm. The die button was glued to the holding block 2 and bentonite powder was poured into the inner space of it. Then the shoulder was inserted into the inner space, after which static loading from a hydraulic jack was applied to compact the material for 2 minutes. Several shim rings were placed between the loading block and holding block 1, by which the thickness of compacted specimens could be adjusted to a 0.01 mm level. After compaction, the specimen was pushed out and its mass was measured to 0.01 mg and its thickness was measured to 1  $\mu\text{m}$ . To handle this tiny and fragile specimen, a vacuum pick-up was used instead of using hand. Even so, sometimes the specimen cracks and has to be prepared again. Note that the bottom inner diameter of the die button is slightly smaller than that of metal plate 1, so that the specimen can be easily placed into the hole above the pressure sensor. The dry density ( $\rho_d$ ) of the specimens after wetting was calculated based on material initial water content, specimen mass and thickness and inner diameter of metal plate 1 (not inner diameter of button because the specimen swells in the metal plate 1).

In total, 35 tests were conducted as summarized in Table 2. Specimens with  $\rho_d$  less than 1.5  $\text{Mg}/\text{m}^3$  were not largely prepared because they were too weak to be handled. Since not many data are available for relatively dense specimen from past studies for comparison, specimens with  $\rho_d$  higher than 1.8  $\text{Mg}/\text{m}^3$  were not tested.

**Table 2.** Test programs in this study

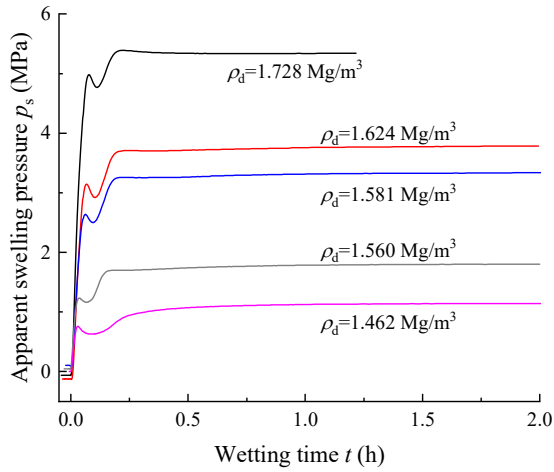
Dry density $\rho_d$ ( $\text{Mg}/\text{m}^3$ )	Water content after wetting $w_r$ (%)	Equilibrium swelling pressure $p_{eq}$ (MPa)	Degree of saturation $S_r$ (%)
1.462	38.7	1.13	118
1.513	32.0	1.51	106
1.521	33.3	1.37	111
1.552	32.0	1.96	111
1.560	31.8	1.79	112
1.561	31.2	2.17	110
1.581	28.5	3.34	103
1.586	28.8	2.24	106
1.588	29.5	2.95	108
1.594	31.7	2.10	117
1.607	28.2	2.81	106
1.608	29.1	2.70	110
1.611	27.9	3.04	106
1.613	28.5	3.00	108
1.620	28.1	2.91	108
1.622	28.0	3.78	108
1.624	28.6	2.86	111
1.634	30.8	1.47	121
1.635	26.6	2.98	104
1.645	30.6	2.76	122
1.647	28.0	2.45	112
1.654	27.4	3.13	111
1.656	28.0	3.62	113
1.662	26.1	3.26	107
1.678	23.8	4.47	100
1.678	31.3	2.47	131

1.680	26.3	4.34	110
1.681	24.6	4.64	103
1.683	25.1	3.84	106
1.698	26.3	4.48	114
1.728	24.4	5.34	110
1.752	19.8	5.54	93
1.754	25.7	5.00	121
1.763	26.5	4.66	126
1.769	24.1	5.74	116

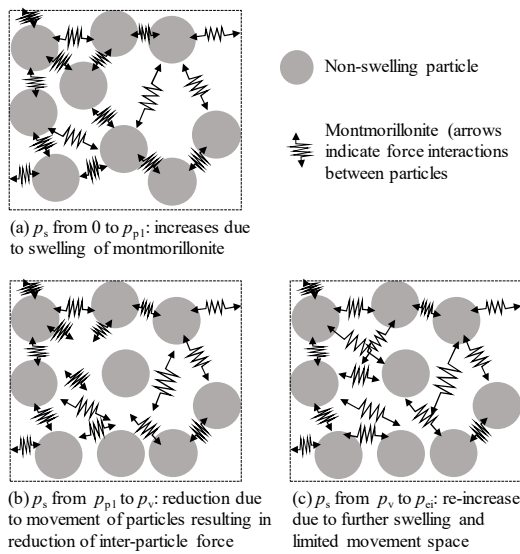
### 3. Test results and discussions

Fig. 3 shows typical time histories for specimens with different  $\rho_d$ . It can be seen that, regardless of  $\rho_d$ ,  $p_s$  first increases to a peak, then drops and increases again to finally reach an equilibrium. These are very typical behaviours for compacted bentonites as observed by many researchers (e.g. Pusch, 1980; Komine and Ogata, 1994; Villar and Lloret 2008; Lee et al. 2012; Wang et al. 2020). These behaviours were explained Wang et al. (2022a) in Fig. 4, where montmorillonite particle is symbolled by a spring with arrows and the arrows indicate inter-particle force. Initially, the skeleton of non-swelling particles maintains its initial configuration and  $p_s$  increases due to swelling of montmorillonite. When  $p_s$  reaches a certain magnitude, some particles may move to less stressed positions that results in  $p_s$  reduction (i.e. reduction of inter-particle force). When stress environment inside a specimen becomes uniform, further swelling of montmorillonite causes  $p_s$  to increase again until it reaches an equilibrium. For most tested specimens, the  $p_s$  equilibrium was technically achieved after a wetting period of 0.5 h, which is significantly shorter than the period required for the thickness of specimens typically used.

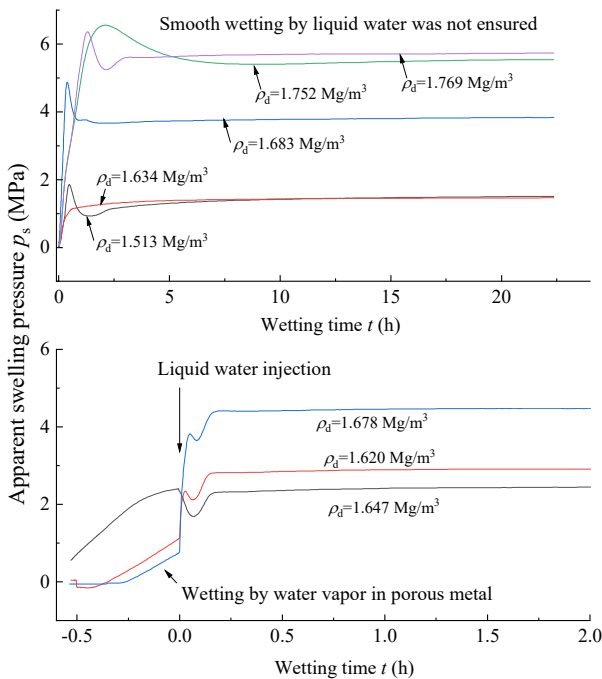
For some tests initially conducted, the time histories were chaotic as shown in Fig. 5. Initially, water droplet injection as shown in Fig. 2a was not used, rather, the apparatus was turned over and placed in a water cup. Although the water level in the cup was higher than the position of the specimen, apparently water could not smoothly enter into the water path, taking much longer testing time to reach the equilibrium. On the other hand, it was noticed that if the fine porous metal could not be well dried before the test,  $p_s$ , after inserting the specimen, gradually increased by absorbing water vapor from the porous metal. As a result, the abnormal  $p_s$  time histories were observed in Fig. 5b. Nevertheless, it seems that the equilibrium can be achieved eventually. In this study, the equilibrium swelling pressure ( $p_{eq}$ ) was defined as the last measured  $p_s$  value before terminating tests.



**Figure 3.** Typical time history of  $h_{sp}=0.4$  mm specimen.

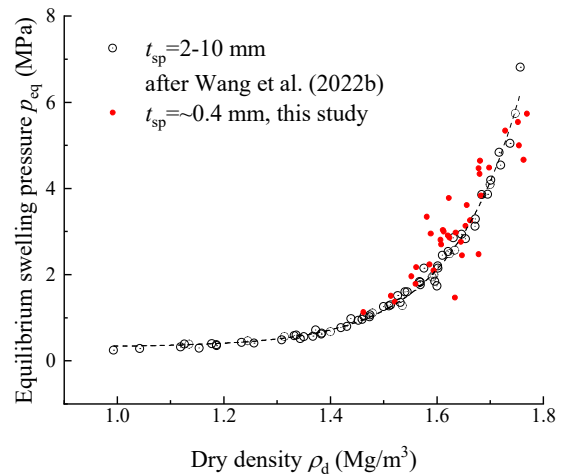


**Figure 4.** Schematic illustration on behaviors of compacted bentonite after Wang et al. (2022a) with permission.

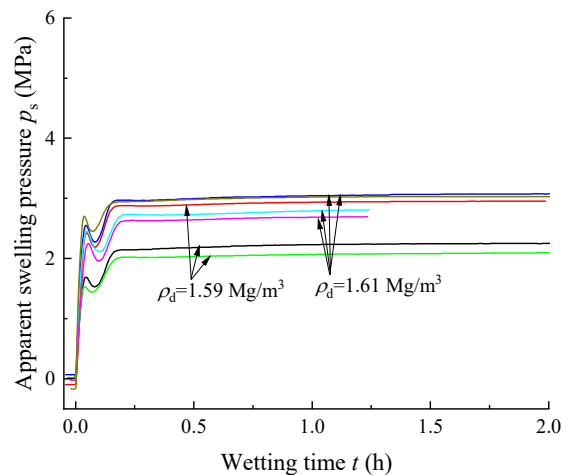


**Figure 5.** Some typical examples for specimens being not wetted normally.

Fig. 6 compares the relation between  $p_{eq}$  and  $\rho_d$  obtained in this study and that measured by Wang et al. (2022b) on specimens with thickness from 2 to 10 mm. It can be seen that data in this study are generally consistent with those of Wang et al. (2022b), however, the scatter is larger. Fig. 7 shows an example of data scattering of specimens with  $\rho_d$  of  $\sim 1.6$  Mg/m<sup>3</sup>. It can be seen that the time histories of  $p_s$  are very similar, although the final equilibrated  $p_s$  may change significantly. One reason causes scattering would be the variation of montmorillonite content ( $C_m$ ) in the specimens.  $C_m$  of K\_V1 is only 53% so that montmorillonite in these tiny specimens may differ (only about 25 mg material was used for a specimen). A second reason could be the  $\rho_d$  measurement error. Even using a scale balance with resolution of 0.01 mg for the mass measurement and a micrometer to 1  $\mu$ m resolution for the diameter and thickness measurements,  $\rho_d$  only has 3 the significant figures. There were also some sources that would cause undetectable specimen deformation, such as porous metal compression, penetration of specimen into porous metal or other spaces. These sources are either negligible or measurable for relatively larger specimens (e.g. Wang et al. 2022b), however, they can hardly be accurately estimated in the current study.

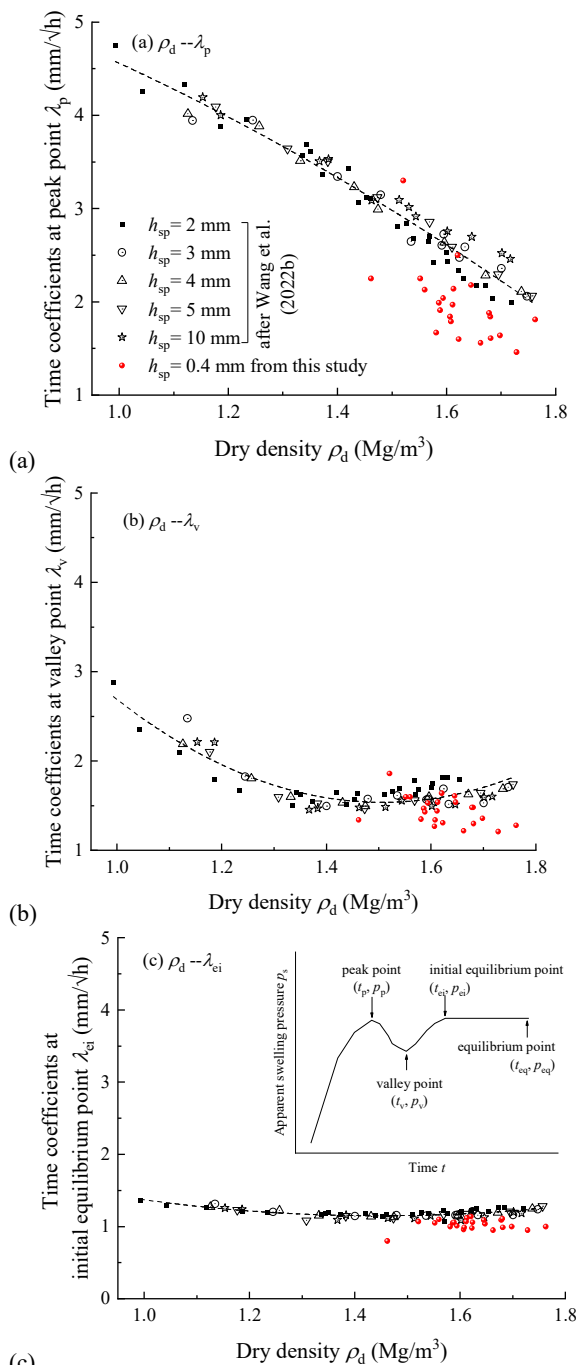


**Figure 6.** Relation between dry density and equilibrium swelling pressure.



**Figure 7.** Time history of specimens at  $\rho_d$  of  $\sim 1.6$  Mg/m<sup>3</sup>.

It was found that, though the wetting duration changes significantly with specimen height, the time scale can be well normalized by a time coefficient  $\lambda = h_{sp}/\sqrt{t}$  proposed by Wang et al. (2022b). This proposal is based on the water movement characteristics, i.e. water diffusion, in bentonite (See Wang et al. 2020 for more details). Fig. 8 reproduces the relationship between  $\rho_d$  and  $\lambda$  at some particular points, i.e. peak, valley and initial equilibrium points as defined in Fig. 8c. Note that Fig. 8,  $\lambda$  was calculated with the time corresponding to the particular points for different  $h_{sp}$  specimens. It can be seen that regardless of  $h_{sp}$ ,  $\lambda$  are very close for  $h_{sp}$  of 2 to 10 mm. Similarly data obtained in this study were added to Fig. 8, where although data of some abnormal  $p_s$  time histories (e.g. Fig. 5) were excluded.



**Figure 8.** Relation between dry density and time coefficient at (a) peak, (b) valley and (c) and the initial equilibrium modified from Wang et al. (2022b) with permission.

Fig. 8 suggests that  $\lambda$  data for  $h_{sp} = 0.4$  mm distribute on the lower bound of other data, which implies that, if the  $p_s$  time history of specimens with different height and similar dry density was drawn with the normalized time scale  $\lambda$ , these feature points will be achieved at a smaller  $\lambda$  (or longer time).

## 4. Conclusions

Apparent swelling pressure ( $p_s$ ) was defined, in this study, as the pressure generated by wetting compacted bentonite specimens when their deformation was rigidly confined. Testing techniques to measure  $p_s$  with specimen height of 0.4 mm and diameter of 6.5 mm were described in this study. It was found that the wetting duration of such tiny specimens by water takes about 1-2 hours, significantly shorter than in currently available techniques employing thicker specimens. Although some technical challenges were solved to conduct the tests and care were taken, the data repeatability is still relatively low compared to some past techniques. Nevertheless, the general characteristics of  $p_s$  history was confirmed to be the same as that of much thicker specimens.

## Acknowledgements

This work was performed as a part of the activities of the Research Institute of Sustainable Future Society, Waseda University, and supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 22K04320, Waseda University Grant for Special Research Projects (Project number: 2023C-171), and Kajima Foundation. The author expresses his deep gratitude to all those mentioned above.

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