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### Asymmetric total synthesis of (+)-ovafolinins A and B<sup>+</sup>

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(+)-Ovafolinins A and B are two homologous lignans containing unique polycyclic skeletons. Benefiting from a highly diastereoselective alkylation of (S)-Taniguchi lactone, a double Friedel–Crafts reaction, a global debenzylation and a Cu(OAc)<sub>2</sub>-enabled benzylic oxidative cyclization, we present herein an efficient synthetic approach to (+)-ovafolinins A and B.

Lignans are a large family of natural products widely existing in plants and our food sources, such as wheat, soybeans, broccoli and strawberry.<sup>1</sup> Many important biological properties including anticancer,<sup>2</sup> antiviral,<sup>3</sup> and antioxidant activities,<sup>4</sup> alleviating menopausal symptoms, and reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease<sup>5</sup> have been disclosed from biological evaluations of this family. In 2010, ovafolinin A, ovafolinin B and other three lignans were discovered during Yun and coworkers' explorations on Lyonia ovalifolia var. elliptica, a deciduous tree growing in China and Japan.<sup>6</sup> Ovafolinin B was also found in Sinocalamus affinis (Rendle) McClure (Poaceae),<sup>7</sup> a widely cultivated traditional Chinese medicine named "Ci Zhu Li" and applied in treatments for diseases including cough and phlegm in China.8 Structurally, ovafolinin A has a particular polycyclic skeleton containing an aryl tetralin unit with a tetrahydrofuran motif and a seven-membered benzoxepin bridged-ring. Ovafolinin B possesses a very similar framework except for the opening of the tetrahydrofuran ring. The first asymmetric synthesis of (+)-ovafolinins A and B was achieved by Barker and co-workers9 employing an acyl-Claisen rearrangement developed in their laboratory.<sup>10</sup> The unique polycyclic skeleton was achieved through an interesting cascade cyclization enabled by a bulky protecting group. As a pioneering work, Barker and coworkers' synthesis demonstrated an expedient pathway to the unique skeleton of (+)-ovafolinins A and B. Furthermore, based on optical rotation comparisons between the synthetic compounds (+154.8 (c = 0.16, MeOH) for (+)-ovafolinin A, +150.0 (c = 0.26, MeOH) for (+)-ovafolinin B)<sup>9</sup> and the natural samples (-37.3 (c = 0.36, MeOH) for ovafolinin A, +52.0 (c = 0.26, MeOH)<sup>6</sup> and +43.3 (c = 0.12, MeOH)<sup>7</sup> for ovafolinin B), the exploration convincingly suggested that natural ovafolinins A and B were both isolated in scalemic mixtures. Attracted by their architectural complexity, we started our synthesis with the purpose of devising a new, efficient, and asymmetric route to these lignans.

Based on our retrosynthetic analysis (Fig. 1), (+)-ovafolinin A (1) and (+)-ovafolinin B (2) could be constructed from three building blocks: phenol 5, bromide 8 and (S)-Taniguchi lactone 9. Diastereoselective alkylation between 9 and 8 will be a feasible strategy to set up initially two stereogenic centers of 1 and 2. For introduction of the top-right aromatic ring and formation of the central six-membered ring, a double Friedel-Crafts reaction process between 5 and 6 was originally proposed. Intramolecular Friedel-Crafts hydroxyalkylation of 6 could furnish the central six-membered ring first. Subsequently, intermediate 4 could be formed from a diastereoselective intermolecular Friedel-Crafts alkylation with 5. As a related precedent, Takayama and coworkers reported an expedient construction of complex bridged ring frames through a double Friedel-Crafts reaction between acetal and two different aromatic rings.<sup>11</sup> Regarding the construction of the seven-membered benzoxepin bridged-ring unit, we imagined that dehydration cyclization in 4 could be a reasonable solution. Three benzyl protecting groups were designed in 3 for the convenience of synthesis. In light of the close structural relationship of 1 and 2 and their simultaneous generation in the synthesis by Barker and coworkers, we envisaged that 1 could be obtained through benzylic oxidative cyclization of 2.

Our synthesis started with the preparation of bromide **8** (Scheme 1). The starting material was the commercially available syringaldehyde (**10**). After benzyl protection, reduction and bromination, **8** was obtained in 66% overall yield. The diastereoselective alkylation of (*S*)-Taniguchi lactone (**9**) is a reliable strategy to introduce two adjacent stereogenic centers with defined absolute and relative configurations in the synthesis of natural products.<sup>12</sup> According to Kieseritzky's approach,<sup>13</sup> **9** was prepared in

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hydroxy to the aldehyde group. The originally proposed double Friedel–Crafts reaction between 5<sup>15</sup> and 14 was then examined with various Lewis acids. However, no consumption of 5 was observed in all cases.<sup>16</sup> As a result, intermolecular Friedel–Crafts reaction seems not a feasible method to couple fragment 5 with 14.

Therefore, we moved our attention to introduce motif **5** into the molecule before the construction of the carbon skeleton. Starting again from **13**, motif **5** was readily connected with **13** through a Mitsunobu transformation (Scheme 2). Subsequent vinyl oxidation treatments established the aldehyde group in **16**. Notably, during the construction of the unique polycyclic skeletons of **1** and **2**, Barker and coworkers explored the cascade cyclization of compounds similar to **16**. The bulky *tert*-butyldiphenylsilyl protecting group on the bottom-left hydroxy was found to be pivotal to enable



Scheme 2 Total synthesis of (+)-ovafolinin B (2).



Scheme 3 Synthesis of (+)-ovafolinin A.

the expected cyclization. However, methoxymethyl protection will lead to decomposition products.<sup>9</sup> In our case, the protecting groups of the three hydroxyl groups in **16** are all benzyl groups. To our delight, treatment of **16** with trifluoroacetic acid established successfully the expected polycyclic skeleton through a double Friedel–Crafts reaction process, affording **3** in 87% yield. The subsequent hydrogenation removed all three benzyl protections and gave (+)-ovafolinin B (**2**) in quantitative yield. Noteworthily, the final de-protection process in Barker's synthesis led to the formation of not only **2** but also **1**, both in poor yields. In our synthesis, there was no formation of **1** observed during the debenzylation process of **2**.

With the successful development of an asymmetric route to 2, we focused on the synthesis of 1. We envisaged that the benzylic oxidation cyclization of 2 could lead to the formation of *p*-benzoquinone methide intermediate 17. And the subsequent conjugated addition from the vicinal hydroxy group will furnish 1 in the end. Therefore, 2 was subjected to various conditions reported for the formation of benzoquinone methide intermediates (Scheme 3). The employment of  $PhI(OAc)_2^{17}$  resulted in the generation of 1 but in poor yield. Oxidation with Ag<sub>2</sub>O<sup>18</sup> and DDQ<sup>19</sup> could significantly improve the formation of 1, respectively. The best result was obtained from the treatment with  $Cu(OAc)_{2}$ <sup>20</sup> affording 1 in 91% yield. Barker's synthesis conditions were also investigated, which led to the formation of 1 in moderate yield after complete consumption of 2. Out of curiosity, we carried out the aerial oxidation of 2 under neat conditions. Only trace amounts of 1 were formed after three days.

After the synthesis of **1** and **2** was complete, the optical rotation properties of our synthetic (+)-ovafolinins A and B were investigated. The data (+159.5, (c = 0.36, MeOH) for **1** and +166.0 (c = 0.16, MeOH) for **2**) obtained are close to those observed by Baker and coworkers, which supports Barker's conclusion that natural ovafolinins A and B were both isolated in scalemic mixtures.<sup>9</sup>

In summary, an asymmetric synthetic approach to (+)-ovafolinins A and B has been developed. The entire synthetic route features a highly stereoselective alkylation of (*S*)-Taniguchi lactone, a double

Friedel–Crafts reaction process, a global debenzylation and a  $Cu(OAc)_2$ -enabled benzylic oxidative cyclization. As a result, the synthesis of (+)-ovafolinin B has been completed in 11 linear steps and 23% total yield. And the synthesis of (+)-ovafolinin A has been achieved in 12 linear steps and 21% total yield.

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#### Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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