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Title: Biotransformation of major flavonoid glycosides in herb epimedii by the fungus *Cunninghamella blakesleana*

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Graphical abstract



Highlight:

- (1) Icariin (1), epimedin C (2), epimedoside A (3), epimedin A (4) and epimidin B (5) could be transformed to rare and bioactive products with the yield of above 95%.
- (2) Some transformed products showed exhibited the more significant antiosteoporosis activity.
- (3) Our investigation provided an efficient biotransformation approach to enrich the rare and more biological active flavonoids in herb epimedi.

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*Manuscript ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

1	Biotransformation of major flavonoid glycosides in herb
2	epimedii by the fungus Cunninghamella blakesleana
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7	China;
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9	ABSTRACT:
10	Biotransformation of icariin (1), epimedin C (2), epimedoside A (3), epimedin A (4)
11	and epimidin B (5), five major components of E. koreanum, were performed by
12	using Cunninghamella blakesleana. And they could be metabolized efficiently to
13	icariside II (1a), 2"-O-rhamnosylikarisoside II (2a), epimedoside b (3a), baohuoside
14	VII (4a) and sagittatoside B (5a) with high yields of 95.1%, 97.7%, 93.7%, 95.8%
15	and 96.4%, respectively. And these transformed products as major forms of herb
16	epimedii in vivo exhibited the more significant anti-osteoporosis activities. Our
17	method could be applied for enriching these rare flavonoids in herb epimedii, for
18	further development of anti-osteoporosis medicines or functional foods.
19	
20	Keywords: Biotransformation; Icariin; epimedin C; Cunninghamella blakesleana;
21	epimedii
22	
23	
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27	work.

1. Introduction 1

Herba Epimedii (Berberidaceae) is an important and frequently used as traditional 2 Chinese medicine [1]. Its major bioactive constituents are flavonoid glycosides with 3 the isopentene group at C-8, such as icariin, epimedin C, epimedoside A, epimedin A 4 and epimidin B [2]. Among them, icariin and epimedin C have the natural abundance 5 with the contents of 0.5% and 1% in herba epimedii, respectively [3]. However, due to 6 their hydrophilicity of sugar moieties, these flavonoid glycosides are hardly absorbed 7 from the small intestine of human, which resulting in the poor oral availabilities [4]. 8 9 Only their secondary glycosides such as icariside II and 2"-O-rhamnosylikarisoside II, could be transported into the plasma and played an important bioactive role in vivo 10 [5-8]. Meantime, these secondary glycosides, exhibited the more significant 11 12 bioactivities including differentiation and proliferation of osteoblasts [9]; anti-osteoporosis [10], immunological function modulation [11], and anti-cancer [12]. 13 So these secondary glycosides of epimedii had been paid more and more attention. 14 15 Unfortunately, their contents were very low in crude material of herba epimedii, and limited their wide application in areas of medicines and foods. In previous 16 investigation, some attempts for obtaining these secondary flavonoids had been 17 reported. The chemical hydrolysis methods usually formed the cyclization products 18 19 such as β -anhydroicaritin. And the enzymatic hydrolysis method could transform 20 icariin to icariside II with the low yield of 47.5%, however other major epimedii flavonoid glycosides such as epimedin A, epimidin B and epimedin C, could not be 21 transformed efficiently [13]. So it is very necessary to establish a systemic and 22 23 efficient method to obtain the series of rare and bioactive secondary flavonoids glycosides of epimedii for development of new drugs or functional foods. 24

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Biotransformation is a useful technique to modify structures of biologically

active compounds [14-21]. It has the advantage of high region-selectivity, mild
 reactions and avoiding the various steps for protection and deprotection to
 complicated structures and chiral centers of natural products [22-23].

In this study, biotransformation of icariin (1), epimedin C (2), epimedoside A (3), 4 epimedin A (4) and epimidin B (5) by cell suspension of C. blakesleana were 5 performed. And highly selective hydrolysis of C-7 was observed in the 6 biotransformation process. Totally, icariside II (1a) and 2"-O-rhamnosylikarisoside II 7 (2a), epimedoside b (3a), baohuoside VII (4a) and sagittatoside B (5a) were 8 prepared with high yields of 95.1%, 97.7%, 93.7%, 95.8% and 96.4%, respectively. 9 All metabolites were isolated and identified accurately by NMR and MS techniques. 10 In addition, their cell proliferation activity for MC3T3-E1 cell was also investigated, 11 12 and some metabolites (1a, 2a and 5a) exhibited the potential anti-osteoporosis activity. 13

14 **2. Materials and methods**

15 2.1. Apparatus and Reagents

¹H- and ¹³C-NMR (nuclear magnetic resonance) spectra were recorded in 16 DMSO-d6 using TMS as internal standard on a DRX-600 spectrometer (Bruker, 17 Karlsruhe). ESIMS data were obtained by API3200-MS (AB SCIEX, New York, 18 USA). Agilent 1100 series HPLC equipped with Diode array detector at 254 nm 19 20 was used (Agilent, New York, USA). Silica gel (200-300 mesh) was purchased from Qingdao Marine Chemical Group, Qingdao, China. ODS (Chromatorex, size 21 100-200 mesh) was purchased from Fujian Silysia Chemical Group, Fujian, China. 22 23 All solvents were AR grade from Tianjin Kermel Company. The crude materials of E. koreanum were purchased from Hongjiu BioTech Co. Jilin Province of China. 24

25 2.2. Microorganisms and Culture medium

C. blakesleeana was purchased from Chinese General Microbiological Culture
 Collection Center in Beijing, China. Biotransformation experiments were performed
 in potato medium, which was made by the following composition (L): 200 g potato
 and 20 g glucose.

5 2.3. Culture and biotransformation procedures

Mycelia of C. blakesleeana from agar slants (2 cm^2) were transferred to 100 mL 6 of medium and cultured at 30 °C with 175 rpm for 36 h to make a stock inoculum. 7 Then 10 mL volume of the inoculum was added to 1000 mL of liquid medium, and 8 the flask was placed on rotary shaker operating at 175 rpm and 30°C. After 36h of 9 preculture, 100 mg of icariin with 2 mL methanol added into 2L of culture medium 10 for preparative biotransformation with the final concentration of 50mg/L. The 11 incubation was continued for 5 additional days. The culture was filtered, and the 12 13 filtrate was extracted with same volume of EtOAc for five times. And the suspension cells of C. blakesleeana (5.2 g) were also extracted by using EtOAc (1000 mL). 14 Then all extraction of EtOAc were collected and concentrated under the reduced 15 pressure. The residues (1.6 g) were applied to an ODS column (200g, 10×50cm) and 16 eluted with MeOH-H₂O (in a gradient manner from 10% to 90%, at a flow rate of 2.0 17 18 mL/min). Totally, 90.1 mg of icariside II (96.5% purity) was obtained from fraction of 60% MeOH (500 mL). Similarly, 100 mg of epimedin C (2), epimedoside a (3), 19 epimedin A (4) and epimidin B (5), respectively, were added into 2L of culture 20 21 medium of C. blakesleeana. Other processes of collection and isolation for the target compounds were same with that of icariin. Finally, 2"-O-rhamnosyli- karisoside II 22 (2a, 95mg, 95% purity, Rt=16.5min), epimedoside B (3a, 83.5 mg, 94% purity, 23 24 Rt=14.1min), baohuoside VII (4a, 89.5mg, 96% purity, Rt=10.2min) and sagittatoside B (5a, 85.1mg, 95% purity, Rt=7.5min) were prepared by preparative 25

1 HPLC in an isocratic manner of 60% MeOH with a flow rate of 2.0 mL/min.

2 2.4. HPLC analysis

The samples were analyzed on a DINOEX Ultimate 3000 instrument HPLC 3 equipped with a Kromasil C-18 column, 4.6 mm \times 250 mm (5µm), and diode array 4 detector (DAD) at 270 nm, and the mobile phase was composed by solvents A 5 (methanol) and B (0.3% acetic acid) in gradient elution. The gradient program was 6 7 as follows: initial 0-5min, using a constant elution A-B (45: 55, v/v), then 5-10 min, linear change from A-B (45: 55, v/v) to A-B (80: 20, v/v); and then 10-20 min, using 8 9 a constant elution A-B (80: 20, v/v); next 20-30 min, linear change to A-B (80: 20, v/v) to A-B (90: 10, v/v); then 30-35 min, using a constant elution A-B (90: 10, v/v). 10 The flow rate was 0.8 mL/min and column temperature was 30°C. 11

12 *2.5. Bioassay*

Mouse osteoblastic cell line (MC3T3-E1, purchased from the Chinese Academy 13 of Sciences Cell Bank) was cultured under a humidified atmosphere of 5% CO₂ at 14 37 °C with the Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium (DMEM) containing 1% 15 penicillin and 1% streptomycin and 10% fetal bovine serum. In this study, cell 16 proliferation of MC3T3-E1 cell was measured by MTT assay. Briefly, cells were 17 maintained in growth media for 24 h at 5% CO₂. And then, the cells were treated 18 with the three different concentrations (1, 10 and 100µM) of the test compounds for 19 24 h. Finally, MTT (5 mg/mL) was added to the cell cultures (1:10) and samples 20 21 were incubated at 37°C for 4h. In addition, the cells in normal culture medium were treated with same volume of DMSO as control condition, the values of which was 22 23 set as 100%.

24 . The absorbance was measured in an optical 96-well microplate reader at the 25 wavelength of 570 nm. All the data was present as the mean of three experiments

1 (n=3).

2 **3. Results and discussion**

3 *3.1. Preliminary screening for biotransformation*

15 strains of filamentous fungi from nine genera were initially screened for their abilities to transform icariin by TLC and HPLC chromatography. Among the cultures screened, *M. spinosus*, *F. solani* and *P. janthinellum*, showed the ability of transforming icariin into more polar metabolites. However, *C. blakesleeana* was found to be able to convert substrates into one main non-polar metabolite with high yield and low yield of by-products. Therefore, it was selected for the preparative biotransformation of substrates including icariin (1), epimedin C (2), epimedoside A

11 (3), epimedin A (4) and epimidin B (5) in this study. (Figs 2 and 3)

12 *3.2. Time course of biotransformation of substrates*

Fig.4A showed the biotransformaton kinetic of icariin after administration of 50 13 mg/L. After incubation for 168h with C. blakesleeana it was completely transformed 14 15 to icariside II (1a) with the conversion of 95.06% by HPLC analysis. In order to investigate the capability of C. blakesleeana to metabolize icariin, the effects of pH, 16 culture temperature, substrate concentration and reaction specificity in the 17 biotransformation process were also investigated (Fig. 4). Our results suggested that 18 the optimum pH value should be at 6–7 with the highest transformation rate. And the 19 preferred temperature was 28-30°C. However, when the concentration was increased 20 to 80 mg/L, the substrates were not completely transformed with the rate of 63.18%. 21

Similarly, *C. blakesleeana* also exhibited the good ability to transform epimedin C
to 2"-O-rhamnosylikarisoside II (2a). After incubation for 120 h with *C. blakesleeana*, epimedin C was completely transformed with the yield of 97.67% by
HPLC analysis, which suggesting that *C. blakesleeana* had the high selectivity for

glucose hydrolysis of epimedium flavonoids at C-7. Finally, the optimum pH value,
 culture temperature and substrate concentration were determined at pH=7, 28-30°C
 and 100 mg/L (supplement data, Figs 4).

In order to elucidate the relationship of biotransformation ability and substrate structures of epimedium flavonoids. The ability of *C. blakesleeana* to transform epimedoside A (**3**), epimedin A (**4**) and epimidin B (**5**), three major derivatives of icariin in epimedium, were also investigated. After incubation for 168h, they were completely transformed to epimedoside B (**3a**), baohuoside VII (**4a**) and sagittatoside B (**5a**) with the yield rates of 93.7%, 95.8% and 96.4%, respectively. The results were illustrated in Fig. 3.

11 *3.3. Identification of biotransformation products*

Incubation of icariin (1) and other four flavonoid glycosides epimedin C (2), 12 epimedoside A (3), epimedin A (4) and epimidin B (5) with C. blakesleeana for 7 13 days yielded five products and their structures were identified as icariside II (1a), 14 15 2"-O- rhamnosylikarisoside II (2a), sagittatoside B (3a) baohuoside VII (4a) and epimedoside b (5a) (Fig. 1), respectively, and by comparing with the literatures [24]. 16 3.3.1. Icariside (1a): yellow needle crystal, ¹H-NMR (DMSO- d_6 , 600MHz): 17 ¹H-NMR (DMSO-*d*₆, 600MHz): 5.16 (1H,t, J=6.0 Hz, H-12), 5.27 (1H, d, J=1.6 Hz, 18 H-1^('), 6.32(1H, s, H-6), 7.13 (2H, d, J=9.2 Hz, H-3['], H-5[']), 7.87 (2H, d, J=9.2 Hz, 19 20 H-2',H-6'), 10.84(1H, br. s, 7-OH), 12.53 (1H, s, 5-OH), 3.85 (3H,s, OCH₃), 1.69 (3H, s, H-15), 1.61 (3H, s, H-14) and 0.78 (3H, d, J = 6.6 Hz, H-6⁽⁾). ¹³C-NMR 21 (DMSO-d₆, 150 MHz): 156.6 (C-2), 134.4 (C-3), 178.0 (C-4), 161.6 (C-5), 98.3 22 23 (C-6), 161.2 (C-7), 106.0 (C-8), 153.7 (C-9), 104.1 (C-10), 21.1 (C-11), 122.3 (C-12), 131.1 (C-13), 25.4 (C-14), 17.8 (C-15), 122.4 (C-17), 130.43 (C-27, C-67), 114.1 24 (C-3' and C-5'), 158.8 (C-4'), 55.5 (OCH₃), 101.1 (Rha-1'), 70.7 (Rha-2'), 70.4 25

1 (Rha-3´), 71.2 (Rha-4´), 70.4 (Rha-5´), 17.4 (Rha-6´).

3.3.2. 2"-O-rhamnosylikarisoside II (2a): vellow powder (methanol), ¹H-NMR 2 (DMSO-d₆,600MHz):12.57(1H,s,OH-5), 7.86 (2H, d, J=8.4Hz, H-2', H-6'), 7.13 3 (2H, d, J = 4.5 Hz, H-3', H-5'), 6.93 (1H, s, H-6'), 6.34 (1H,s), 5.37 (1H, s), 5.15 4 (1H, d, J = 7.0 Hz), 3.85 $(3H, s, OCH_3-4')$, 1.68 (3H, s), 1.62 (3H, s), 0.81 (3H, d, J =5 5.4Hz). ¹³C-NMR (DMSO-d₆, 150 MHz): 156.8 (C-2), 134.5 (C-3), 178.0 (C-4), 6 161.4 (C-5), 98.5 (C-6), 161.8 (C-7), 106.0 (C-8), 153.8 (C-9), 104.2 (C-10), 21.3 7 (C-11), 122.3 (C-12), 131.1 (C-13), 25.5 (C-14), 17.9 (C-15), 122.3(C-1'), 130.5 8 (C-2', C-6'), 114.2 (C-3' and C-5'), 130.5 (C-4'), 55.6 (OCH₃), 101.7 (Rha-1["]), 75.6 9 (Rha-2["]), 70.3 (Rha-3["]), 72.0 (Rha-4["]), 70.2 (Rha-5["]), 17.7 (Rha-6["]), 100.8 10 (Rha'-1""), 70.6 (Rha'-2""), 70.7 (Rha'-3""), 71.4 (Rha'-4""), 68.9 (Rha'-5"") and 17.6 11 (Rha[']-6^{'''}). 12

3.3.3 Epimedoside B (**3a**): yellow powder (methanol), ¹H-NMR (DMSO- d_6 , 13 600MHz): 12.56(1H, s, OH-5), 10.90 (1H, s, OH-7), 10.27 (1H, s, OH-4'), 7.76 (1H, 14 15 d, J=8.4Hz, H-2'), 7.14(2H, d, J= 4.5Hz, H-3', H-5'), 6.93(1H,s,H-6'), 6.32 (1H, s), 5.27 (1H, s), 5.14 (1H, t, J = 6.6Hz), 1.67(3H, s), 1.62(3H, s), 0.80 (3H, d, J=6.0 Hz).16 ¹³C-NMR (DMSO-*d*₆, 150 MHz): 157.73 (C-2), 134.2 (C-3), 178.1 (C-4), 160.1 17 (C-5), 98.4 (C-6), 161.7 (C-7), 106.1 (C-8), 153.9 (C-9), 104.2 (C-10), 21.3 (C-11), 18 122.4 (C-12), 130.5 (C-13), 25.6 (C-14), 17.9 (C-15), 120.9(C-1'), 130.7 (C-2', 19 C-6'), 115.5 (C-3' and C-5'), 160.0 (C-4'), 102.0 (Rha-1"), 70.5 (Rha-2"), 70.8 20 (Rha-3["]), 71.2 (Rha-4["]), 70.2 (Rha-5["]) and 17.6(Rha-6["]). 21

- 22 3.3.4. Baohuoside VII (**4a**): yellow powder (methanol), ¹H-NMR (DMSO- d_6 ,
- 23 600MHz): 6.34 (1H,s), 5.54 (1H,s), 5.16(1H, t, J = 7.2Hz), 4.25 (1H, d, J=7.8Hz),
- 24 3.86 (3H, s), 1.68 (3H,s), 1.62 (3H,s), 0.86 (3H, d, J = 6.0Hz). ¹³C-NMR (DMSO- d_6 ,
- 25 150 MHz): 156.7 (C-2), 134.2 (C-3), 178.0 (C-4), 161.5 (C-5), 98.5 (C-6), 161.8

1	(C-7), 106.0 (C-8), 153.9 (C-9), 104.9 (C-10), 21.4 (C-11), 122.4 (C-12), 131.1
2	(C-13), 25.5 (C-14), 17.9 (C-15), 122.4(C-1'), 130.6 (C-2', C-6'), 114.2 (C-3' and
3	C-5'), 158.9 (C-4'), 55.6 (OCH ₃), 101.8 (Rha-1 ["]), 81.2 (Rha-2 ["]), 70.4 (Rha-3 ["]), 71.3
4	(Rha-4"), 69.9 (Rha-5"), 17.6 (Rha-6"), 104.2 (Glc-1'), 73.8 (Glc-2'), 76.9 (Glc-3'),
5	69.2 (Glc-4 [']), 76.3 (Glc-5 [']) and 61.1(Glc-6 [']).
6	3.3.5: Sagittatoside B (5a): yellow powder (methanol), ¹ H-NMR (DMSO- d_6 ,
7	600MHz): 6.34(1H,s), 5.34(1H,s), 5.16(1H,t, J=6.6Hz),4.17(1H,d, J=1.8Hz), 3.86
8	(3H, s), 1.68(3H,s), 1.62(3H,s), 0.86(3H, d, J=6.6Hz). ¹³ C-NMR (DMSO- d_6 , 150
9	MHz): 156.6 (C-2), 134.6 (C-3), 178.1 (C-4), 161.5 (C-5), 98.5 (C-6), 161.8 (C-7),
10	106.1 (C-8), 153.8 (C-9), 104.1 (C-10), 21.3 (C-11), 122.3 (C-12), 131.1 (C-13),
11	25.5 (C-14), 17.8 (C-15), 122.4(C-1'), 130.4 (C-2', C-6'), 114.2 (C-3' and C-5'),
12	158.9 (C-4'), 55.5 (OCH ₃), 101.1 (Rha-1 ["]), 80.7 (Rha-2 ["]), 70.4 (Rha-3 ["]), 71.8 (Rha-
13	4"), 70.4 (Rha-5"), 17.5 (Rha-6"), 106.5 (Xyl-1"), 73.8 (Xyl-2"), 76.3 (Xyl-3"), 69.4
14	(Xyl-4 [°]) and 65.9 (Xyl-5 [°]).

15 *3.4 Bioassay*

In this study, we evaluated the effects of compounds (1-5 and 1a-5a) on the 16 osteoblast function using MC3T3-E1 cells. Our results indicated that the bioactivities 17 of secondary aglycones were more significant than these of flavonoid glycosides of E. 18 koreanum (Fig. 5). At the concentration of 100µM, the activity of transformed 19 20 products (1a-5a) exhibited the significant anti-osteoporosis activity than these of substrates (1-5), especially for 1a, 2a and 5a with the mean survival rates of 137%, 21 143% and 158%, respectively (n=3). According to our results, compounds 1a, 2a and 22 5a may be used new natural resources to develop the anti-osteoporosis agent. 23

24 **4.** Conclusions



1	icariin (1), epimedin C (2), epimedoside A (3), epimedin A (4) and epimidin B (5), to
2	produce some rare flavonoid glycosides of epimedii including icariside II (1a), 2"-O-
3	rhamnosylikarisoside II (2a), sagittatoside B (3a) baohuoside VII (4a) and
4	epimedoside b (5a), with the yield rates of above 95%. And these transformed
5	products showed more anti-osteoporosis than these of substrates (1-5). Our
6	investigation provided an efficient biotransformation approach to enrich the rare and
7	better bioactive flavonoids in herb epimedii, for further development of anti-
8	osteoporosis medicines and foods.

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4	Figure captions
5	Figure 1. The biotransoformation pathway of major epimedii flavonoids by C.
6	blakesleeana
7	Figure 2. HPLC chromatograms of the blank of M. spinosus AS 3.3450 (A) and
8	icariin (B), administrating 1 for 5 days (C), epimedin C (D), administrating 1 for 5
9	days (E). The DAD spectra of compounds 1-2 and 1a-2a.
10	Figure 3. HPLC chromatograms of compound 3 (A), administrating 3 for 120h (B),
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12	for 120h (F).
13	Figure 4. The time course and effects of pH and temperature for icariin (1) and
14	epimedin C (2) by Cunninghamella blakesleana. (A) Time course of
15	biotransformation of icariin; (B) Time course of biotransformation of epimedin C;
16	(C) Effects of pH value on the biotransformation of 1 and 2; (D) Effects of
17	temperature values.
18	Figure 5. Survival rate of compounds1-5 and 1a-5a on MC3T3-E1 cells by MTT
19	method. Comparison test, * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$
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Figure. 2. HPLC chromatograms of the blank of M. spinosus AS 3.3450 (A) and icariin (B), administrating 1 for 5 days (C), epimedin C (D), administrating 1 for 5 days (E). The DAD spectra of compounds 1-2 and 1a-2a.



for 120h (F).





Figure 4. The time course and effects of pH and temperature for icariin (1) and
epimedin C (2) by *Cunninghamella blakesleana*. (A) Time course of
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Figure 5. Survival rate of compounds1-5 and 1a-5a on MC3T3-E1 cells by MTT method. Comparison test, *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

Supplementary data

Compound 4a ¹H-NMR spectrum







Compound 5a ¹H-NMR spectrum



