



# Lipase-catalyzed hydrolysis of 2-(4-hydroxyphenyl)propionic acid ethyl ester to (*R*)-(-)-2-(4-hydroxyphenyl)propanoic acid

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## Abstract

Stereoselective hydrolysis of ( $\pm$ )-2-(4-hydroxyphenyl)propionic acid ethyl ester (2-HPPAEE) by lipase catalyzed in aqueous system was investigated. Lipase AK with higher catalytic activity and enantioselectivity was selected as catalyst. Simultaneously, factors affecting the conversion of substrate (*c*) and the enantiomeric excess of product (*ee<sub>p</sub>*) were optimized. The optimal conditions were established, involving 45 °C of temperature, 5.5 of pH, 10 mg of lipase AK dosage, 0.04 mmol of substrate dosage and 40 h of reaction time. Under the optimum conditions, *c* and *ee<sub>p</sub>* could reach up to 49% and 98%, respectively.

**Keywords** Kinetic resolution · Lipase AK · Hydrolysis · 2-(4-Hydroxyphenyl) propionic acid ethyl ester

## Introduction

Chiral drugs have taken up about one-third of the global drug market. The market of optically pure drugs is increasing dramatically, so the development of chiral separation technology is crucial. Generally, the methods to obtain single-enantiomer drugs mainly involve asymmetric synthesis and racemic resolution. Asymmetric synthesis includes fermentation, chiral source synthesis and asymmetric catalytic synthesis (Schoor et al. 2011). Although asymmetric synthesis has made impressive progress, racemic resolution is still the most common way in industry production (Ghanem and Aboul-Enein 2004). A series of chiral resolution methods have been developed, such as membrane separation (Weng et al. 2015), crystallization (Vetter et al. 2015), chromatography (Shen and Okamoto 2015), and enantioselective liquid–liquid extraction (ELLE) (Tang et al. 2011). However, these methods have some shortages, such as low capacity and high cost of chromatography (Lv et al. 2015), low yield and versatility of crystallization (Wacharineantar et al. 2010). Compared with above-mentioned methods, enzymatic resolution possesses the advantages of high

selectivity, friendly to the environment and continuous production by coupling technology (Saric et al. 2011), and it has been widely applied in pharmaceutical industry.

Lipase (Ec 3.1.1.3) belongs to carboxyl ester hydrolase, which is employed as biocatalyst for various reactions such as acylation (Li et al. 2012), esterification (Siodmiak et al. 2015), transesterification (Miyazawa and Iguchi 2013) and hydrolysis (Leśniarek et al. 2018), etc. For example, lipase from *Candida rugosa*, lipase from *Pseudomonas cepacia* and lipase from *Aspergillus terreus*, can catalyze hydrolysis of racemic arylpropionic acid drugs (Yilmaz et al. 2011; Zhang et al. 2019; Hu et al. 2015). The preparation of optically pure compounds by lipase-catalyzed has recently become a major research field due to excellent catalytic activity and high stereoselectivity of lipase.

2-Arylpropionic acid is an important class of anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) with antipyretic and analgesic effects. 2-(4-Hydroxyphenyl)propionic acid (2-HPPA) is an intermediate of 2-arylpropionic acid drugs. Usually, two enantiomers of NSAIDs differ greatly in their pharmacological activities (Gilani et al. 2017), thus the separation of these drugs has important research significance. There are many publications that have reported the separation and synthesis of 2-arylpropionic acid (Neumann et al. 2010; Ye et al. 2010). Tong et al. have reported the separation of ( $\pm$ )-2-HPPA by HPLC (Tong et al. 2016), while enzymatic resolution has not been applied. In this paper, optically pure (*R*)-(-)-2-HPPA was obtained by lipase-catalyzed

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hydrolysis of 2-HPPAEE enantiomers. Effects of different reaction conditions on lipase activity and enantioselectivity were investigated. Under the optimal conditions, 2-HPPAEE enantiomers could be separated and high purity of (*R*)-(-)-2-HPPA was obtained.

## Experimental

### Enzymes

Lipozyme from *Rhizomucor miehei* (Lipozyme RM, 250 IUN/g), lipase from *Rhizopus niveus* (RNL, 2500 U/g) and lipase from porcine pancreas (PPL, 20,000 U/mg) were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich company (USA). Novozym 40086 is lipase from *Aspergillus oryzae* (275 IUN/g), Lipozyme TL IM is lipase from *Thermomyces lanuginosus* (250 IUN/g) and CALA is lipase A from *Candida antarctica* (6000 LU/g), which were purchased from Novozymes Biopharma DK A/S (Denmark). Lipase AK is lipase from *Pseudomonas fluorescens* (20,000 U/g) and Lipase AYS (30,000 U/g) is lipase from *Candida rugosa*, which were obtained from Amano Pharmaceutical company (Nagoya, Japan).

### Chemicals

Sulfobutylether- $\beta$ -cyclodextrin (SBE- $\beta$ -CD) was obtained from Shandong Zhiyuan Biotechnology Co., Ltd (Shandong, China). ( $\pm$ )-2-HPPA was obtained from Xianju Pharmaceutical Co., Ltd (Zhejiang, China). 2-HPPAEE was prepared in the laboratory. Solvent for chromatography was of HPLC grade. All other reagents were analytical grade and obtained from different commercial suppliers.

### HPLC analysis

The concentrations of resolution products, (*S*)-(+)-2-HPPA and (*R*)-(-)-2-HPPA were analyzed on reversed-phase column of ODS-3 filled with silica gel (250 mm  $\times$  4.6 mm i.d., 5  $\mu$ m) by HPLC (waters e2695, Waters Corporation, USA). UV detection wavelength was set at 230 nm. The mobile phase was composed of methanol and aqueous solution (containing 25 mmol/L SBE- $\beta$ -CD and 0.5% glacial acetic acid) volume ratio of 15:85 (pH 3.50, adjusted with triethylamine). The flow rate of the mobile phase was kept at 1.0 mL/min. The injection volume was 10  $\mu$ L. The retention time of (*S*)-(+)-2-HPPA, (*R*)-(-)-2-HPPA, (*S*)-(+)-2-HPPAEE and (*R*)-(-)-2-HPPAEE were 10.87, 12.96, 95.38, and 99.91 min, respectively. This analytical method was adjusted by the literature (Tong et al. 2016).

The enantioselectivity (*E*) is determined by the conversion of 2-HPPAEE (*c*, %) and the enantiomeric excess of the product (*ee<sub>p</sub>*, %).

$$ee_p = \frac{[(-)\text{-acid}] - [(+)\text{-acid}]}{[(-)\text{-acid}] + [(+)\text{-acid}]} \times 100\%, \quad (1)$$

$$c = \frac{([(-)\text{-acid}] + [(+)\text{-acid}])V}{n_{2\text{-HPPAEE},0}} \times 100\%, \quad (2)$$

$$E = \frac{\ln[1 - c(1 + ee_p)]}{\ln[1 - c(1 - ee_p)]}, \quad (3)$$

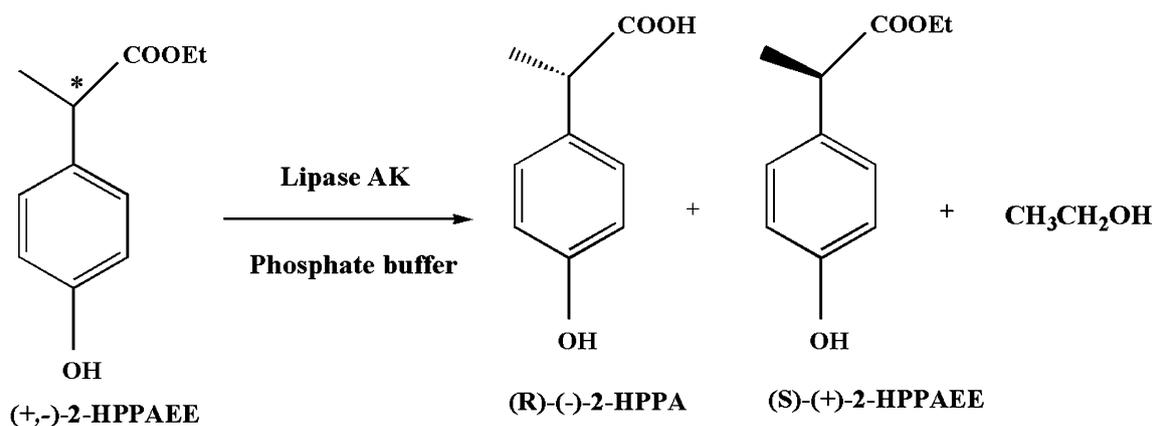
where [(-)-acid] and [(+)-acid] represent the concentration of (-)-2-HPPA and (+)-2-HPPA, respectively; *V* is the volume of reaction mixture; *n<sub>2-HPPAEE,0</sub>* is the initial amount of 2-HPPAEE (mmol).

### Synthesis of 2-HPPAEE

2-HPPAEE was synthesized by esterification of commercially available ( $\pm$ )-2-HPPA and ethanol. ( $\pm$ )-2-HPPA (3.32 g, 20 mmol) and p-toluenesulfonic acid (0.86 g, 5 mmol) were dissolved in ethanol (29 mL, 800 mmol). The mixture was added to a round-bottomed flask equipped with a condenser tube and stirred for 12 h at 80 °C in an electrothermally heated oil bath. Reaction was monitored with TLC plate until the esterification reaction was terminated. To remove the remaining substrate and p-toluenesulfonic acid, the saturated sodium bicarbonate solution was applied to wash-reactive mixture. The mixture was extracted with ethyl acetate and then washed with deionized water to neutral. Anhydrous sodium sulfate was used to dry the separated organic phase and then concentrated by distillation under reduced pressure (40 °C, 20 kPa). The spectroscopic data of product are in accordance with literature (Ushiyama and Furuya 1989). Finally, the racemic 2-HPPAEE (yield,  $\geq 90\%$ ; purity,  $\geq 98\%$ ) was obtained as slight yellow oil.

### Enzymatic hydrolysis of ( $\pm$ )-2-HPPAEE

The enzymatic hydrolysis reaction operated in a heated magnetic stirred reactor (IKA RCT basic, Germany) equipped with 25 mL schlenk tube. The agitation speed was kept 400 rpm. A certain amount of ( $\pm$ )-2-HPPAEE and lipase were added in 2 mL of 0.1 mol/L dibasic sodium phosphate buffer to initialize the reaction. The hydrolysis reaction is illustrated in Scheme 1. After the reaction was completed, 1 mL of acetonitrile was added to the reaction solution to dilute and dissolve all the substrates and products. Then, 0.45  $\mu$ m microporous membrane was used to filter the reaction mixture. The concentrations of 2-HPPA enantiomers



**Scheme 1** Lipase-catalyzed enantioselective hydrolysis of ( $\pm$ )-2-HPPAEE in buffer medium

**Table 1** Results of hydrolysis of ( $\pm$ )-2-HPPAEE catalyzed by different lipases

Enzyme species	Source	ee <sub>p</sub> (%)	c (%)	E
Lipase AYS	<i>Candida rugosa</i>	85	4	13
CALA	<i>Candida antarctica</i>	29	21	2
Lipase AK	<i>Pseudomonas fluorescens</i>	98	34	164
Lipozyme RM	<i>Rhizomucor miehei</i>	9	4	2
Novozym 40086	<i>Aspergillus oryzae</i>	40	4	1
Lipozyme TL	<i>Thermomyces lanuginosus</i>	26	2	2
PPL	<i>Porcine pancreatic</i>	–	–	–
RNL	<i>Rhizopus niveus</i>	–	–	–

Conditions: reaction temperature 45 °C, pH 6.50, 10 mg lipase, 0.04 mmol ( $\pm$ )-2-HPPAEE, 24 h, and reaction volume 2 mL

were analyzed by HPLC. All the experiments of this paper were repeated three times under identical conditions and the precision level of the replicated values was within  $\pm 3\%$ .

## Results and discussion

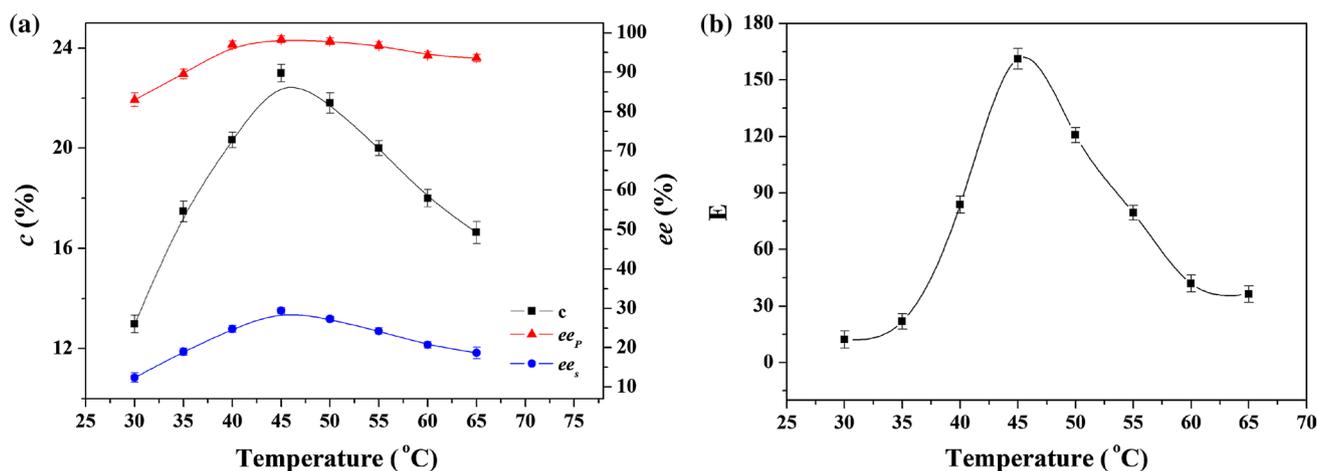
### Selection of various lipases

The catalytic efficiency of different lipases may differ greatly in enantioselective hydrolysis of racemic 2-HPPAEE. Therefore, screening of lipases is necessary to prioritize studies of other reaction conditions. The stereoselectivity and activity of nine lipases were evaluated by the conversion and enantiomeric excess under identical conditions (Table 1). Table 1 shows the results of conversion of substrate (*c*), enantiomeric excess of product (ee<sub>p</sub>) and enantioselectivity (*E*) of each lipase after 24 h of reaction. Lipozyme RM, PPL and RNL are essentially unable to catalyze the hydrolysis of ( $\pm$ )-2-HPPAEE. Lipase AYS, Novozym 40086 and Lipozyme TL have a certain

enantioselectivity, while the catalytic activity of them is not high. Lipase AK showed the highest *E* value (164) and ee<sub>p</sub> (> 98%). This may be because the substrate specificity of lipase determines that lipase AK prefers to form a complex with (*R*)-(-)-2-HPPAEE compared to other lipases. Therefore, lipase AK was chosen as the best biocatalyst for all further experiments based on the results of activity and selectivity.

### Effect of temperature

As we all know, in biocatalytic stereochemical reaction, temperature has a great impact on enzyme activity, enantioselectivity and reaction rate. Too low temperature will inhibit enzyme activity, while too high temperature will make the enzyme lose activity. Therefore, it is necessary to find the optimum temperature of lipase AK-catalyzed hydrolysis of ( $\pm$ )-2-HPPAEE reaction. As shown in Fig. 1a, b, c, ee<sub>s</sub>, ee<sub>p</sub> and *E* increased rapidly with the increase of temperature ( $\leq 45$  °C), and then they decreased with a further increase of temperature ( $\geq 45$  °C). Therefore, the maximum *c* (26%), ee<sub>s</sub> (35%), ee<sub>p</sub> (98%) and *E* (161) are obtained at 45 °C. The decrease of *c*, ee<sub>s</sub>, ee<sub>p</sub> and *E* in high temperature might be explained by the reason that high temperature could damage the three-dimensional structure of lipase AK and lead to the loss of the activity. Furthermore, the excessive high temperature could result in the conformational change of the active site (Dong et al. 2010). When the temperature decreases ( $\leq 45$  °C), the energy barrier of two enantiomers decreases, resulting in the reduction of enantioselectivity. On the other hand, the collision chance between enzyme and substrate molecules decreased which might be detrimental to form enzyme–substrate complexes and then the reaction rate was reduced at lower temperature. To maintain the activity and selectivity of the lipase, an appropriate temperature was needed. Therefore, the reaction temperature was set at 45 °C.

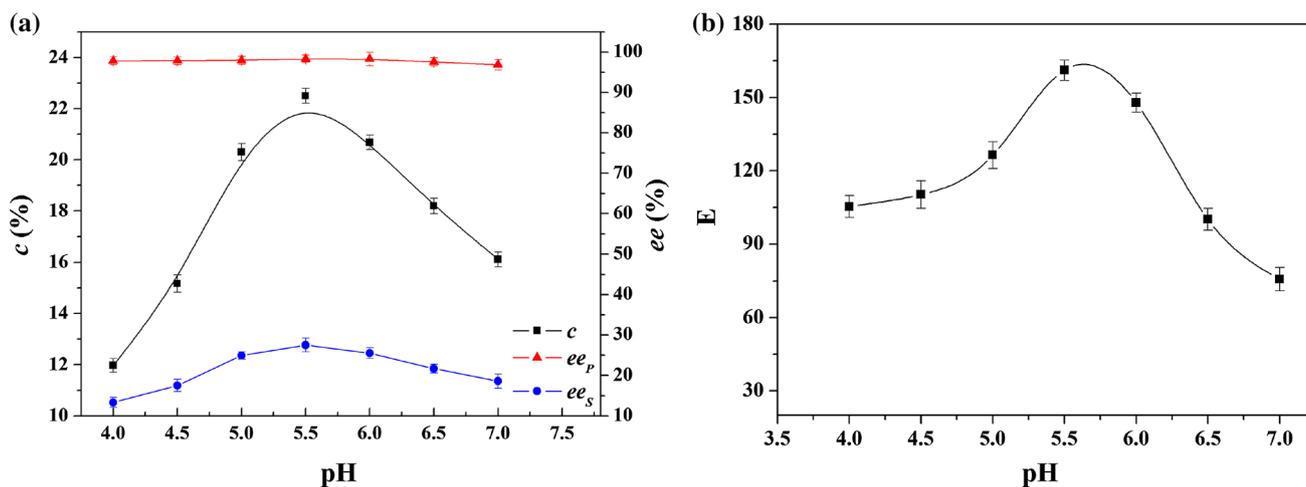


**Fig. 1** Effect of temperature on  $c$ ,  $ee_s$ ,  $ee_p$  and  $E$ . Conditions: pH 5.5, 10 mg lipase AK, 0.04 mmol ( $\pm$ )-2-HPPAEE, reaction time 6 h, and reaction volume 2 mL

### Effect of pH

The pH of buffer solution has a great effect on lipase-catalyzed hydrolysis reaction. Generally, lipases have an optimal pH, and higher and lower values can lead to partial inactivation. Therefore, it is very important to find the optimum pH for lipase-catalyzed hydrolysis of ( $\pm$ )-2-HPPAEE reaction. Figure 2a, b depicts the influence of pH on  $c$ ,  $ee_s$ ,  $ee_p$  and  $E$ . It is observed from Fig. 2 that  $c$ ,  $ee_s$  and  $E$  increased with increasing the pH of buffer solution ranging from 4.0 to 5.5. With a further increase of pH,  $ee_s$ ,  $c$  and  $E$  decreased rapidly, while  $ee_p$  decreased slightly. The maximum values of  $c$  (22%),  $ee_s$  (28%), and  $E$  (161) were obtained at pH 5.5. Lipases have been reported to possess similar “catalytic triplet” residues constructed from His, Ser and another amino

acid residue (Arpigny and Jaeger 1999). In catalytic process, the catalytic triad is converted into a tetrahedral transition state by hydrogen bonding with the substrate, which is a key step in determining the reaction rate and selectivity. Since lipase is a catalytically active biomacromolecule, the tertiary structure of the enzyme is destroyed at too high or too low pH, which leads to the loss of catalytic activity (Cho et al. 2011; Dong et al. 2010). Meanwhile, due to the destruction of the three-dimensional structure of the enzyme, the active site was reduced and then the initial reaction rate and enantioselectivity were decreased. Similar results have been reported in enantioselective hydrolysis of ( $R/S$ )-naproxen methyl ester using lipase catalyst (Erdemir and Yilmaz 2012). Based on the above results, pH of 5.5 was selected as the optimum pH.



**Fig. 2** Effect of pH on  $c$ ,  $ee_s$ ,  $ee_p$  and  $E$ . Conditions: reaction temperature 45 °C, 10 mg lipase AK, 0.04 mmol ( $\pm$ )-2-HPPAEE, reaction time 6 h, and reaction volume 2 mL

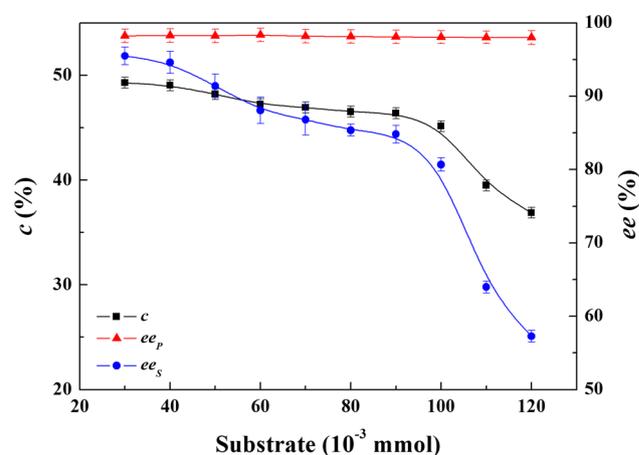
### Effect of lipase AK dosage

In lipase-catalyzed stereochemical reaction, increasing the dosage of enzyme used can shorten the reaction time required for the same conversion, but at the same time it will increase the production cost of the process. Hence, it is needed to determine an appropriate enzyme dosage. Figure 3a, b shows the effect of lipase AK dosage on  $c$ ,  $ee_s$ ,  $ee_p$  and  $E$ . As shown in Fig. 3a,  $c$  and  $ee_s$  increase rapidly with increasing the lipase AK dosage in the buffer containing 0.04 mmol of the dosage of substrate. When the enzyme dosage reaches 10 mg, they remain unchanged with a further increase of the lipase AK dosage. In addition,  $ee_p$  has no significant effect as the amount of enzyme increases. From Fig. 3b,  $E$  increases with the increase of enzyme dosage ( $\leq 10$  mg), and further increase of enzyme dosage will lead to a significant downward trend ( $\geq 10$  mg). The results show that  $E$  is decreased from 330 to 266 with the increase of enzyme dosage ( $\geq 10$  mg). This may be attributed to the use of free enzymes as catalysts to hydrolyze HPPAEE in phosphate buffers. The enzyme appears easily in an intense aggregation tendency in such a reaction system (Palomo et al. 2003; Marciello et al. 2012). The  $E$  decreased with the increase of enzyme dosage, which may be due to the mutual aggregation of enzyme molecules at a higher concentration. This result is consistent with that has been reported in the literature (Takaç and Mutlu 2007). Therefore, lipase AK dosage of 10 mg was selected with the substrate dosage of 0.04 mmol.

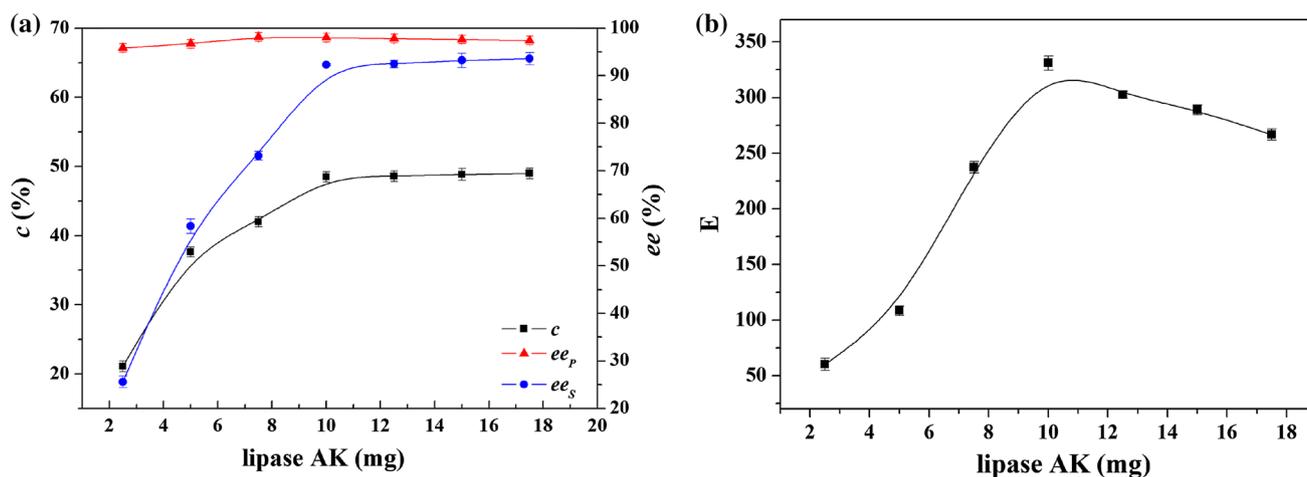
### Effect of substrate dosage

The dosage of substrate in the enzymatic reaction is a key factor affecting its potential application. Effects of

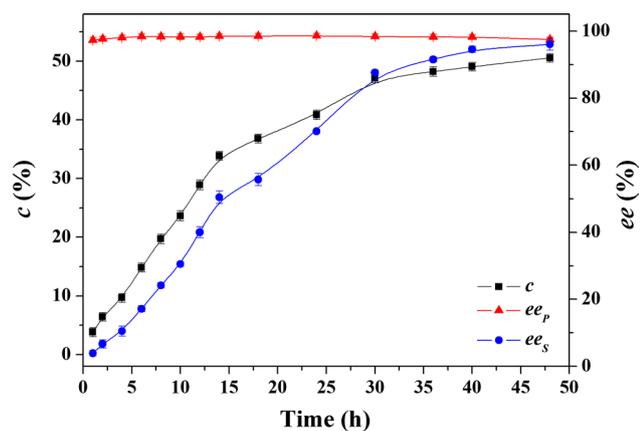
( $\pm$ )-2-HPPAEE (substrate) dosage on  $c$ ,  $ee_s$  and  $ee_p$  were investigated. As shown in Fig. 4,  $ee$  of product ( $ee_p$ ) is very high (approximately 98%) and can keep unchanged in the tested dosage of substrate. The conversion is very high (approximately 50%) with a relatively low substrate dosage ( $\leq 0.04$  mmol) and then decreases with increasing the substrate dosage ( $\geq 0.04$  mmol). The increase of substrate dosage also causes the decrease of  $ee_s$ . The above phenomenon may be explained as follows: when the substrate dosage is low ( $\leq 0.04$  mmol), enzyme only binds to (*R*)-(-)-HPPAEE to form an enzyme–substrate complex, which leads to high  $ee$  of product. When the substrate dosage is increased ( $\geq 0.04$  mmol), an inhibition occurs, which leads to the reduction of conversion rate and  $ee_s$  (Takaç and Mutlu 2007). Meanwhile, to obtain excellent conversion and  $ee_s$ ,



**Fig. 4** Effect of substrate dosage on  $c$ ,  $ee_s$  and  $ee_p$ . Conditions: reaction temperature 45 °C, pH 5.5, 10 mg lipase AK, reaction time 40 h and reaction volume 2 mL



**Fig. 3** Effect of the dosage of lipase AK on  $c$ ,  $ee_s$ ,  $ee_p$  and  $E$ . Conditions: reaction temperature 45 °C, pH 5.5, 0.04 mmol ( $\pm$ )-2-HPPAEE, reaction time 40 h and reaction volume 2 mL



**Fig. 5** Effect of reaction time on  $c$ ,  $ee_s$  and  $ee_p$ . Conditions: reaction temperature 45 °C, pH 5.5, 10 mg lipase AK, 0.04 mmol ( $\pm$ )-2-HPPAEE and reaction volume 2 mL

the enzyme loading also needs to be increased. But commercial lipases are relatively expensive, the economic benefits are reduced. Therefore, considering the above reasons, substrate dosage of 0.04 mmol in 2 mL of reaction system was selected.

### Process curve of enantioselective hydrolysis of ( $\pm$ )-2-HPPAEE

Reaction time is one of the important factors guiding industrial applications. When enzyme is at maximum activity, the required optimum reaction time will be reduced. Therefore, influences of reaction time on  $c$ ,  $ee_s$  and  $ee_p$  were investigated. From Fig. 5,  $c$  and  $ee_s$  increased rapidly with the reaction time increase ( $\leq 40$  h) and then increased slowly ( $\geq 40$  h), while the change in  $ee_p$  is small. It might be because the reaction is highly enantioselective and only one enantiomer of HPPAEE is hydrolyzed, at around 50% conversion the reaction gets slower because in the mixture there is little amount of fast-reacting enantiomer and a lot of

slow-reacting enantiomers. To meet the  $ee_p$  value of 98% and  $c$  of 49%, the reaction time required was approximately 40 h.

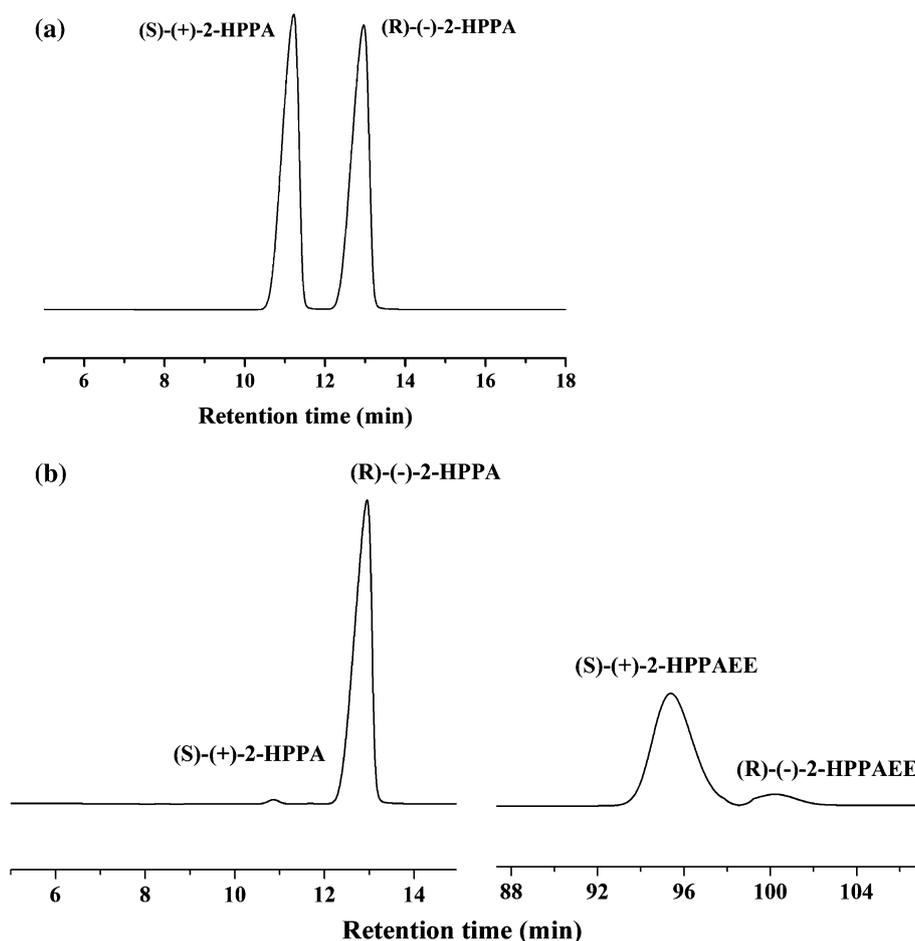
### Application

The optimal conditions were determined by the above experiment's results, involving temperature of 45 °C, pH of 5.5, 10 mg lipase AK dosage, 0.04 mmol substrate dosage and 40 h of reaction time. Enantioselective hydrolysis of HPPAEE enantiomers were carried out by lipase catalysis under these optimal conditions. The purity of racemic 2-HPPA and obtained products were analyzed through HPLC. Figure 6a shows the chromatograms of racemic 2-HPPA. Figure 6b shows the chromatograms of the products of hydrolysis of ( $\pm$ )-2-HPPAEE, indicating that high purity of 98% is obtained.

### Conclusions

Stereoselective lipase-catalyzed hydrolysis of 2-HPPAEE enantiomers was investigated to obtain (*R*)-(-)-2-HPPA. Lipase AK was selected as the most efficient catalyst. The effects of some important process parameters, including temperature, pH, dosage of lipase AK, dosage of substrate and reaction time were studied. It could be concluded that the enantiomeric excess of product mainly depends on the reaction temperature. The conversion of substrate primarily depends on temperature, pH, dosage of lipase AK, reaction time and dosage of substrate. The optimal conditions were achieved, including temperature of 45 °C, pH of 5.5, 10 mg lipase AK dosage, 0.04 mmol substrate dosage and reaction time of 40 h, where the conversion could reach up to 49% and the enantiomeric excess of product could reach up to 98%. A simple and feasible method is provided to obtain optically pure (*R*)-(-)-2-HPPA by this work.

**Fig. 6** HPLC chromatograms.  
**a** Racemate of ( $\pm$ )-2-HPPA,  
**b** products of hydrolysis of  
 ( $\pm$ )-2-HPPAEE



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### Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

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