***Original Research Article***

# Analysis of Phenolic Compounds in *Nicotiana Tabacum* Based on Aqueous Two-Phase Extraction Coupled with Liquid Chromatography


## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Phenolic compounds in *Nicotiana tabacum* L. have anticancer, antibacterial, anti-inflammatory, anti-tumor and other effects. Therefore, either to optimize the utilization of plant resources or to reduce the physiological harm caused by cigarette, it is necessary to separate and analyze the phenolic compounds in *Nicotiana tabacum.*
**Aim:** To develop a protocol for extraction and analysis of phenolic compounds in *Nicotiana tabacum*. The method based on aqueous two-phase extraction (ATP) should provide a solid experimental basis for future large-scale medical industrial extraction.
**Results:** Five of phenolic compounds in *Nicotiana tabacum* including catechol, caffeic acid, coumarin, rutin, and quercetin were extracted with the developed ATP method and analyzed by the optimized liquid chromatography method simultaneously. In the concentration range of 10-200 µg/mL, the linear correlation coefficients of calibration curve for five compounds were all greater than 0.999. The developed ATP extraction method employed 70% acetonitrile water solution as the extractant. The ammonium sulphate was selected as the preferred phase separation salt. The extraction efficiencies of five phenolic compounds were all more than 90%. In concrete sample, the concentrations of five compounds were determined based on acetonitrile/salt ATPE system,
**Conclusion:** Analysis of phenolic compounds in *Nicotiana tabacum* was achieved based on acetonitrile/ammonium sulphate ATP extraction coupled with liquid chromatography. The developed ATP extraction protocol employed 70% acetonitrile water solution as the extractant. The ammonium sulphate was selected as the preferred phase separation salt. The accuracy and precision were satisfied. The protocol developed in this study is expected to be applied in medical industry.



*Keywords: phenolic compounds; Nicotiana tabacum; aqueous two-phase extraction; phase separation salt; ammonium sulphate; acetonitrile.*


## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Nicotiana tabacum* (tobacco) is a perennial herbaceous plant. It is widely used as a natural product [1] in addition to the principal source of nicotine. *Nicotiana tabacum* L. contains not only nicotine, which can treat muscle spasms and joint pain, but also phenolic compounds [2]. A variety of phenolic compounds were detected in *Nicotiana tabacum* L. and its smoke, such as chlorogenic acid, rutin, quercetin, coumarin, caffeic acid, etc. [3] In flue-cured tobacco, the content of chlorogenic acid and rutin accounted for 75-95 % of total phenols [4].

Studies have shown that chlorogenic acid and rutin have certain curative effects in anti-cancer and anti-HIV [5]. Other phenols such as quercetin [6], coumarin [7], caffeic acid [8]

have been reported to have anticancer, antibacterial, anti-inflammatory, anti-tumor and other effects. Therefore, either to optimize the utilization of plant resources and flue-cured tobacco, or to reduce the physiological harm caused by cigarette, it is necessary to separate and analyze the phenolic compounds in *Nicotiana tabacum*.

At present, many extraction methods of phenolic compounds in *Nicotiana tabacum* L. have been reported. Among them, the commonly used methods are microwave extraction technique and ultrasonic extraction technique [9,10]. However, these technologies are mainly used as pretreatment methods for the analysis of phenolic compounds, rather than for the industrial extraction of phenolic compounds. As for supercritical water or CO2 extraction technique for industrial extraction, although the extraction effect is good, it usually requires expensive special equipment [11]. The complex extraction process limits the large-scale application of supercritical fluid extraction.

In recent years, one of the industrial-scale extraction methods, aqueous two-phase (ATP) extraction is the increasing interest [12,13]. ATP system is an aqueous liquid–liquid system that results from the incompatibility between two aqueous solutions. Because of the different characteristics of the two phases, the concentration of the target substance in the upper and lower phases is also different. The different properties of different phase could be attributed to surface properties, charge effects and various forces such as hydrophobic bonds, hydrogen bonds and ionic bonds, etc. As the liquid-liquid two phases are separated, the target substance enriched in one phase. Thereby, the extraction is realized. ATP process shows great potential in the extraction or purification of biological compounds. [14].

Aqueous two-phase extraction (ATPE) technique has been applied to the efficient crude separation of various natural products. For example, it was reported that the nicotine recovery rate reached 96.1% when an aqueous two-phase system was applied [15]. ATPE technique was also employed to separate β-glucuronidase (rGUS), an acidic recombinant protein from transgenic tobacco [16]. An aqueous two-phase partitioning system was developed for therapeutic antibodies and enzymes from tobacco extracts [17]. The ATPE was used to purify antibodies directly from cell culture medium [18] as well as protein, virus-like particles and plasmid DNA [19,20]. Based on these applications, ATPE is not only simple and environmentally friendly, but also can effectively improve the extraction rate of target compounds.

The development of aqueous two-phase system to extract polyphenols from *Nicotiana tabacum* can provide a technical basis for the comprehensive development of *Nicotiana tabacum*. Hitherto, few applications of ATPE technique for the extraction of phenolic substances in *Nicotiana tabacum* were reported. Further, to the best of our knowledge, there is not aqueous two-phase system has been applied to the extraction and separation of *Nicotiana tabacum* polyphenols.

In this paper, five kinds of easily available, high content and stable phenols, including catechol [21,22], caffeic acid [23], coumarin [24], rutin [25] and quercetin [26] were selected as the target compounds. The extract efficient of them were studied. The results showed that the protocol developed in this study, based on acetonitrile/salt ATPE system, combined with high performance liquid chromatography, efficiently extracted and analyzed five target phenolic compounds in *Nicotiana tabacum* Leaves. In the aqueous two-phase system, factors such as salt type and acetonitrile concentration were systematically investigated. The analysis results of actual *Nicotiana tabacum* samples showed that the method developed in this study was accurate and reliable, which provided a solid experimental basis for future large-scale industrial extraction.

## 2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

### 2.1 Chemicals and reagents

Standards of caffeic acid (≥99.0%), rutin (≥99.5%), coumarin (≥99.6%), quercetin (≥95.0%), and catechol (≥97.5%) were purchased from China National Institutes for Food and Drug Control.

HPLC grade methanol and acetonitrile were purchased from Tianjin Kemiou Chemical Reagent Co., Ltd. (Tianjin, China). Water was purified using a Milli-Q system (Molsheim, France). HPLC grade acetic acid was purchased from Sinopharm Chemical Reagent Co., Ltd. (Shanghai, China). Analytical grade reagents including potassium chloride, sodium chloride, sodium dihydrogen phosphate, and ammonium sulfate were all purchased from Sinopharm Chemical Reagent Co., Ltd. (Shanghai, China). The *Nicotiana tabacum* leaves were collected from Qingyu, Guizhou province, China.

### 2.2 Sample preparation

The stock solutions of caffeic acid, rutin, coumarin, quercetin, and catechol were prepared with acetonitrile at a series of concentrations of 1200 μg/mL, 800 μg/mL, 800 μg/mL, 660 μg/mL, and 800 μg/mL. The working solutions were then diluted from the stock solution with acetonitrile serially according to the experiment procedure.

For the linear range investigation, each stock solution was diluted to a series of working solutions at the concentration of 10 μg/mL, 50 μg/mL, 100 μg/mL, 150 μg/mL, and 200 μg/mL.

For concrete sample, the *Nicotiana tabacum* leaves were dried and crushed. 1.2 g powder of leaves were carefully weighted and transferred to a 50 mL centrifuge tube. 10 mL extractant (acetonitrile/water solution) was added. Further, three drops of acetic acid were added to inhibit the dissociation of the phenolic compounds. After one-hour ultrasonic bath followed by centrifugation for 5 minutes, the supernatant was transferred to a 10 mL tube with plug. The supernatant was then extracted with aqueous two-phase procedure and introduced to the chromatographic system.

### 2.3 Instruments

The HPLC system model in Shimadzu LC-10AD (Japan) consisted of a vacuum degasser, a binary gradient pump, an autosampler, a column thermostat, and an UV detector. Analytical balance (SartoriusBSA224S, China) and ultrasonic cleaner (KQ5200B, China) were used for sample preparation.

### 2.4 HPLC condition

Separation occurred on a Nova-Pak C18 column (3.9×150 mm, 5 μm). The acetic acid/water solution (0.5%, v/v) was used as mobile phase A for separation condition optimization. The mobile phase B was acetonitrile. The total flow rate was set at 1.0 mL/min. The sampling volume was 5.0 μL without further note. The ratio of phase A to phase B was adjusted according to the optimization progress. The column temperature was 35 °C. The wavelength of detector was set at 280 nm.

### 2.5 Optimization of ATP extract

To investigate the effect of phase separation salt, 5 model compounds were prepared, extracted and analyzed. For each compound, it was prepared at the concentration of 400 μg/mL. The solvent utilized was the acetonitrile/water (7:3, v/v) solution containing 1%(v/v) acetic acid. The ATP extraction was then carried out. 5 mL model solution was transferred to

a tube with plug. Excess sodium chloride was then added to conduct the phases separation. After phase separation, the volumes of upper and lower phases were measured. The upper acetonitrile phase was delivered to HPLC to get analysis. Then the ATP extraction process was repeated with salts of ammonium sulfate, potassium chloride, and sodium dihydrogen phosphate respectively. All experiments were performed in triplicate.

To investigate the effect of acetonitrile, the extractant containing 40%, 50%, 60%, 70%, and 80% acetonitrile were employed to prepare the sample solution respectively. For each model compound, the concentration in sample solution was 400 μg/mL. During investigation, the ammonium sulfate was utilized as the salt. The ATP extraction and HPLC analysis were conducted with the same procedure.

### 2.6 Standard addition recovery

The standards of caffeic acid, rutin, coumarin, quercetin, and catechol were added into 1.0 g powder of *Nicotiana tabacum* leave simultaneously. The amount of each standard added was 3 mg. The sample was introduced to 10 mL extractant (70% acetonitrile, 1% acetic acid) and then processed with 1 h ultrasonic bath and 5 min centrifugation. Afterward, the ATP extraction was carried out with the salt of ammonium sulfate. The HPLC analysis were conducted with the optimized method.

### 2.7 Extraction efficiency

The extraction efficiency (*E%*) of ATP extraction was calculated as follows

$$E\% = \frac{V_t C_t}{V_o C_o} \times 100\% \quad (1)$$

Where, $V_t$ is the volume of upper phase (acetonitrile) in the proposed ATP system. $C_t$ is the concentration of target compound in the upper phase. $V_o$ is the volume of sample solution submitted to ATP extraction process. $C_o$ is the concentration of target compound in the sample solution.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Chromatography optimization

Phenolic compounds in *Nicotiana tabacum* were extracted simultaneously. Hence, their baseline separation on chromatography was necessary for quantification and qualification. The chromatography optimization of five model compounds was realized in two steps. The first step was the empirical method, and then the condition optimization was carried out according to the results. The second step was to verify the optimized method.

The empirical chromatography was carried out with a binary mobile phase at a flow rate of 1.0 mL/min. Eluent A was water containing 0.2% acetic acid (*v/v*). Eluent B was acetonitrile. The gradient program started at the eluent ratio of 30% B and maintained for 6 minutes. The ratio of elution B increased to 40% linearly within 6-10 min and then increased to 90% linearly during 10-14 min. Afterward, the ratio increased to 100% within 14-17 min and maintained until 20 min.

With this empirical method, the chromatographic spectrum of the mixed standard samples of five phenolic compounds was shown in Figure 1(A).

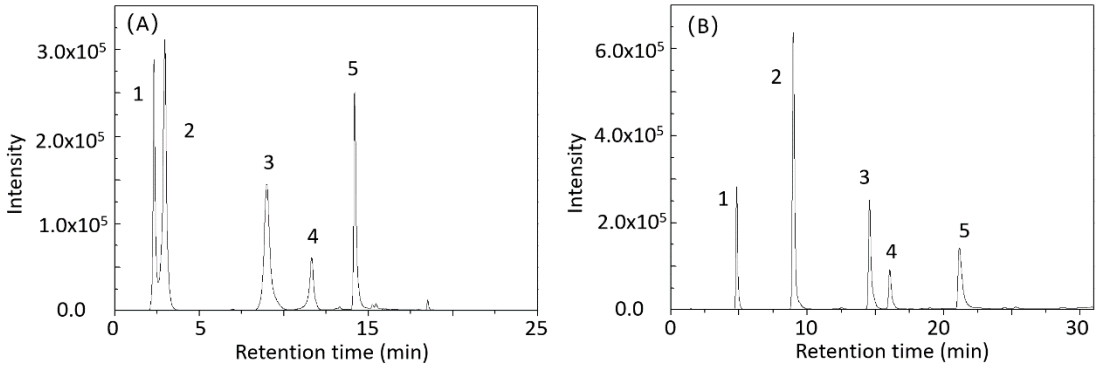


**Fig. 1. The chromatogram of five standards with empirical LC method (A) and optimized LC method (B)**

*Peak 1: Catechol; 2: caffeic acid; 3: coumarin; 4: rutin; 5: quercetin*

It can be found that two components of catechol (peak 1) and caffeic acid (peak 2) have not been separated completely. The peak of coumarin (peak 3) was broadened obviously. In order to solve the above problems, one means was to reduce the ratio of organic phase in the initial conditions of gradient program. The retention of caffeic acid could be enhanced with the lower organic mobile phase. Consequently, the separation of catechol and caffeic acid could be achieved.

The broaden of coumarin may attributed to non-specific interaction between coumarin molecule and silica gel of stationary phase in chromatography column. Base on this hypothesis, increasing the concentration of acetic acid in the mobile phase may reduce the peak broadening of coumarin. Acetic acid releases hydrogen ions to inhibit the dissociation of the phenolic compounds. Along with inhibition, the non-specific interaction of phenolic compounds and silica gel decreases.

Therefore, in the optimized method, the concentration of acetic acid in the eluent A was increased to 0.5%. The beginning ratio of eluent B was decreased to 15% and maintained for 2 minutes. Within 2-6 min, the ratio of B increased to 30% linearly. Afterward, the ratio increased linearly to 70% during 6-25 min and then to 90% during 25-28 min. Within 28-30 min, the ratio maintained.

With the optimized method, the mixed standard samples of five phenolic compounds were analyzed. The result chromatogram was shown in Figure 1(B). The five phenolic compounds were completely separated and each peak shape was symmetrical enough. The chromatographic analysis was completed within 30 min. The time consumption was relatively reasonable. All subsequent analyses were performed using the optimized mobile phase and gradient.

## 3.2 Method validation

The linear ranges of the method for five phenols were investigated. Each target compound was tested separately.

The relationship between the peak area and the sample concentration was calculated. The linear standard curves of the five substances were fitted. The respective linear regression equations are included in table 1. The results showed that under the optimized chromatographic conditions, the five substances all had good correlation in the proposed

concentration range10-200 μg/mL. The linear correlation coefficients ($R^2$) of each calibration curve were all greater than 0.999.

**Table 1. Linear range and correlation coefficient of five phenolic compounds**

| Compound | Regression equation | Linear range (μg/mL) | $R^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|
| catechol | *y* =5150.2 *x* - 21139 | 10-200 | 0.9998 |
| caffeic acid | *y* =136022 *x* - 285526 | 10-200 | 0.9991 |
| coumarin | *y* =5738.5 *x* - 22251 | 10-200 | 0.9997 |
| rutin | *y* =2506.5 *x* - 91321 | 10-200 | 0.9997 |
| quercetin | *y* =6545.5 *x* - 184587 | 10-200 | 0.9992 |

### 3.3 ATP system optimization

Phase separation salt is one of the important factors due to salting out effect of ATPE. Naturally, in this acetonitrile-water aqueous two-phase system, different salts have different phase separation ability. It will eventually lead to the different extraction efficiency

The extraction efficiency of five target phenolic compounds were investigated with 4 kinds of salt. Four salts were ammonium sulfate, sodium dihydrogen phosphate, sodium chloride and potassium chloride respectively. The extractions were performed with extractant that containing 70% acetonitrile. All extracts were analyzed with the same chromatographic program. The results were compared in Figure 2.

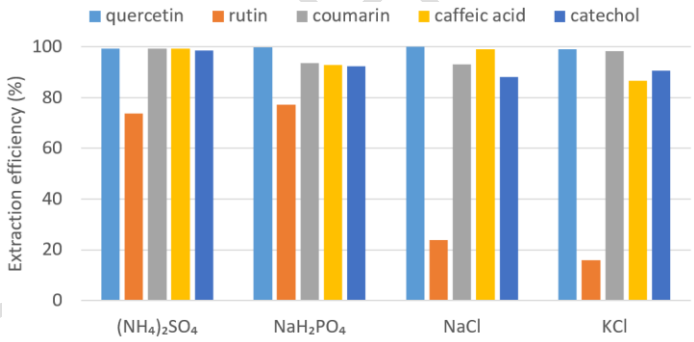


**Fig. 2. Extraction efficiency with different salts.**

The minimum extraction efficiency of rutin was observed when potassium chloride was applied. The maximum efficiency of rutin was achieved with the sodium dihydrogen phosphonate. The efficiency of caffeic acid was also the smallest when potassium chloride was applied. However, even with potassium chloride, the extraction efficiency of catechol, coumarin and quercetin were all more than 90%.

Among four salts, when ammonium sulfate or sodium dihydrogen phosphate was applied, the extraction efficiency of rutin were both greater than 70%. The extraction efficiency of other 4 target compounds were all greater than 90%. It inferred that the ammonium sulfate or sodium dihydrogen phosphate could be the preferred separation salt. The efficiency values of them were listed in table 2.

**Table 2. Extraction efficiency (%) of ammonium sulfate and sodium dihydrogen phosphate**

| salt | catechol | caffeic acid | coumarin | rutin | quercetin |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ammonium sulfate | 98.61 | 99.22 | 99.4 | 73.81 | 99.36 |
| sodium dihydrogen phosphate | 92.37 | 92.75 | 93.68 | 77.34 | 99.72 |

It can be found that the effect of ammonium sulfate is better than that of sodium dihydrogen phosphate. In ammonium sulfate, the extraction efficiency of catechol, caffeic acid, coumarin and quercetin were 98.61 %, 99.22 %, 99.40 % and 99.36 %, respectively. The rutin extraction efficiency with sodium dihydrogen phosphate was greater than with ammonium sulfate. It is probably that sodium dihydrogen phosphate has a greater hydration capacity, which reduces the dissolution of rutin in salt water (lower phase of ATP system) and pushes rutin molecule into the organic phase. Nevertheless, the extraction efficiency of 73.81% with ammonium sulfate was satisfied. The following experiments were carried out with ammonium sulfate.

The effect of acetonitrile concentration in the extractant was investigated. The concentrations of five phenolic compounds in the upper phase (acetonitrile phase) were determined and the extraction efficiency were calculated accordingly. All results were listed in table 3.

**Table 3. Extraction efficiency (*E%*) of five phenolic compounds from different acetonitrile concentration extractant**

| $C_{ACN}$ | catechol | caffeic acid | coumarin | rutin | quercetin |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 40% | 99.82 | 91.83 | 94.2 | 57.37 | 97.5 |
| 50% | 97.95 | 98.34 | 98.33 | 69.98 | 95.19 |
| 60% | 99.87 | 99.58 | 97.27 | 73.16 | 94.98 |
| 70% | 98.61 | 99.22 | 99.40 | 73.81 | 99.36 |
| 80% | 93.03 | 89.97 | 96.06 | 86.93 | 92.54 |

The concentration of acetonitrile showed little effect on catechol, caffeic acid, coumarin, and quercetin. The extraction efficiency of them kept at a high value and did not show an obvious trend. When the concentration of acetonitrile exceeds 70%, the extraction efficiency of them decreased obviously. The extraction efficiency of rutin was most affected by the variation of acetonitrile concentration. The value increased along with the increase of acetonitrile concentration continually.

Considering all five phenolic compounds, when the acetonitrile concentration is 70%, each substance can obtain an extraction efficiency more than 90% except rutin. Therefore, 70% acetonitrile was used as the optimized extraction condition for the following experiments.

### 3.4 Concrete sample and Recovery

The chromatogram of concrete sample that extracted with the developed aqueous two-phase method was shown in Figure 3(A).

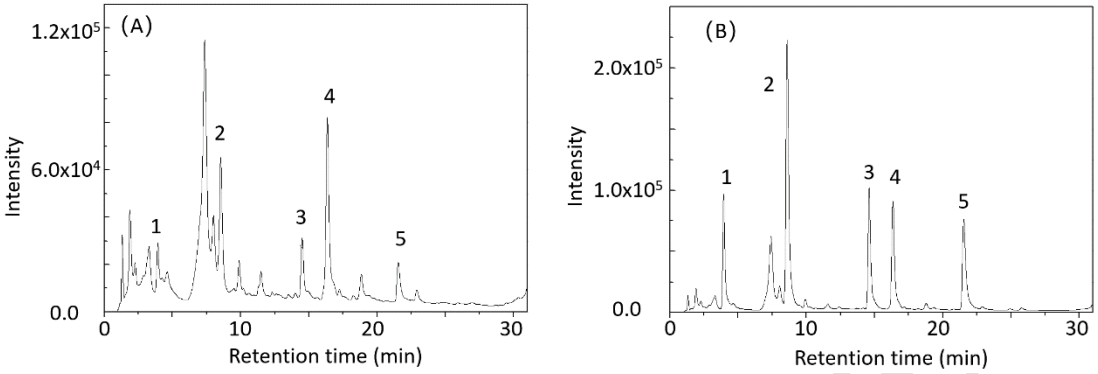


**Fig. 3. Chromatogram of concrete sample(A) and standards added sample (B)**
*Peak 1: Catechol; 2: caffeic acid; 3: coumarin; 4: rutin; 5: quercetin*

Five target compounds were detected and labeled as peaks 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 respectively. The concentrations of catechol, caffeic acid, coumarin, rutin, and quercetin in the provided *Nicotiana tabacum* leaves were determined to be 0.54 mg/g, 1.1060 mg/g, 1.5720 mg/g, 4.540 mg/g, and 1.1876 mg/g, respectively.

The accuracy of the developed method was tested by the recovery of standard addition. 3 mg of each of the five reference materials were added to the concrete sample. The standard added samples were extracted with ATPE and analyzed by the optimized chromatographic method. The typical spectrum was shown in Figure 3(B). By comparing Figure 3(A) and Figure 3(B), the specificities of the five target phenolic compounds in the concrete sample were all confirmed. The calculated recoveries were listed in table 4.

**Table 4. The recovery of the five substances with the ATP extraction**

| | catechol | caffeic acid | coumarin | rutin | quercetin |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| recovery | 97.6% | 98.8% | 101.6% | 97% | 100.9% |
| RSD (%) | 2.4 | 1.5 | 1.7 | 1.2 | 1.2 |

The good accuracy and precision were observed. The recovery of the five substances ranged from 97 to 102%. The relative standard deviation (RSD) was all less than 2.5% (n = 3).

## 4. CONCLUSION

The developed ATP extraction protocol employed 70% acetonitrile water solution as the extractant. The ammonium sulphate was selected as the preferred phase separation salt. Five phenolic compounds in Nicotiana tabacum leaves were extracted with the developed aqueous two-phase method and analyzed by the optimized LC method simultaneously. In LC process, the mobile phase modifier acetic acid was increased to 0.5% to inhibit the dissociation of the target phenolic compounds. Thereby, five phenolic compounds were

completely separated and each peak shape was symmetrical enough. The chromatographic analysis was completed within 30 min. The linear correlation coefficients ($R^2$) of calibration curve for five substances were all greater than 0.999 within the range of 10-200 μg/mL. In concrete sample of the provided *Nicotiana tabacum* leaves, the concentrations of catechol, caffeic acid, coumarin, rutin, and quercetin were determined to be 0.54 mg/g, 1.1060 mg/g, 1.5720 mg/g, 4.540 mg/g, and 1.1876 mg/g, respectively. The recovery of five substances ranged from 97 to 102%. The RSD of the developed method was less than 2.5% (n = 3). The accuracy and precision were satisfied.

## CONSENT AND ETHICAL APPROVAL

It is not applicable.

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