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# Efficient Method of Lignin Isolation Using Microwave-Assisted Acidolysis and Characterization of the Residual Lignin

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**S** Supporting Information

**ABSTRACT:** Microwave heating is characterized by high efficiency and selectivity in biomass treatment. Due to the high thermal stability and low polarity of lignin, isolation of lignin by high-temperature microwave treatment is a promising subject for investigation. In this paper, microwave treatment is applied to polysaccharide liquefaction and lignin isolation from softwood at 160–210 °C for 10 min with dilute sulfuric acid. Mass balance/element analysis/FTIR/TG/solid-state <sup>13</sup>C NMR/Py-GC/MS are applied to investigate the processed residues (residual lignin). At 190 °C processing temperature, the residual lignin is a material rich in aromatics. High lignin purity (93 wt %) and yield (82 wt %) could be achieved by a simple protocol, which usually takes days or even weeks using conventional milled wood lignin protocols. The Py-GC/MS is applied to check the structure of lignin by a newly developed approach. The liquid phase after isolation is analyzed by GC-MS and liquid carbon NMR. Most chemicals in processed liquid are from cellulose and hemicellulose, suggesting that lignin is preserved well in the residue. By comparison, we found that microwave isolation causes less lignin degradation than conventional acidolysis under equivalent conditions. It is concluded that microwave treatment is potentially a promising tool for isolation of polysaccharide-free lignin with high efficiency.

**KEYWORDS:** Lignin, Microwave, Acidolysis, Lignocellulosic biomass



## INTRODUCTION

Since 1838 when Anselme Payen first found “encrusting material” that was later named “lignin” embedded between cellulose and hemicellulose, numerous studies have been carried out to investigate the structure and characteristics of lignin. Lignin ranks second in quantity in the terrestrial regions of Earth’s surface, playing an important role in plants allowing water conduction and protecting them against pathogen attacks.<sup>1</sup> From the viewpoint of chemical structure, lignin can be a potential source of valuable phenolic compounds by degradation.<sup>2,3</sup> Compared with other sustainable carbon-based resources, these vast resources constitute a potential advantage for lignin utilization.

However, the extraction of polysaccharide-free lignin with high efficiency using conventional methods is still a challenge because in biomass lignin acts as “glue” adhering the plant polysaccharides layers together with strong covalent bonding to cellulose and hemicellulose.<sup>4</sup> Extraction of lignin is accompanied by structural damage and polysaccharide contamination.<sup>5</sup> The lack of high-quality lignin on the market coupled with difficulties in degrading it selectively and efficiently into useful low molecular weight products make it undervalued and underdeveloped compared with cellulose and hemicellulose.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, lignin is still widely used as an energy source in chemical pulp and paper mills and in some industrial biorefinery processes.<sup>7,8</sup> One advancement in pure lignin isolation was proposed by Klason. The two-step Klason

acidolysis protocol and its modified versions have been mostly used as standards of lignin content and purity determination, as in the TAPPI T222 method.<sup>9</sup> The drawback with the Klason protocol is that as concentrated sulfuric acid is applied the structure of Klason lignin (KL) is modified. In a KL procedure, lignin condenses to become water-insoluble. As a result, the repolymerization is serious. Another commonly used lignin in laboratory studies is milled wood lignin (MWL). This milder protocol uses neutral solvents for isolation affords a product that is widely regarded to offer the best material for the structural analysis of the “native lignin” originally present in the plant tissue.<sup>5,10</sup> The linkages in lignin–carbohydrate complexes (LCC) are broken by milling, and then lignin is extracted by dioxane–water solvent. The disadvantage is that the intensive and lengthy milling (taking between 1 h to 3 weeks depending on milling machine) is energy-consuming, which in turn increases the cost of the isolation. Low lignin yield,<sup>5</sup> polysaccharide contamination,<sup>11</sup> and the tendency for dioxane–water to dissolve only the lower molecular weight fractions of the lignin are also drawbacks of MWL protocol. MWL is generally representative of total lignin in wood except that phenolic content is higher than that in native lignin because MWL is extracted by dioxane–water solvent. On the

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74 basis of the MWL protocol, cellulolytic enzyme lignin (CEL)  
75 protocol was proposed to increase lignin yield, but it was still  
76 low at 27–29 wt %.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, CEL protocol requires a  
77 high dosage of enzymes, and the process is tedious. Therefore,  
78 both MWL and CEL methods are used mainly by lab-scale  
79 research but are not suitable for industrial production.<sup>5,11</sup>  
80 Although there are many improvements based on these  
81 methods, efficient lignin isolation with high yield and low  
82 contamination is always a difficult task and calls for new  
83 protocols.

84 With efficient and selective heating, microwave heating  
85 provides a promising approach in thermal treatment of  
86 biowaste, especially lignocellulose.<sup>12–14</sup> Until now, there have  
87 been only a few studies focusing on microwave-assisted lignin  
88 isolation. Zhou et al.<sup>15</sup> investigated microwave-assisted lignin  
89 extraction from birch in formic acid and compared it with  
90 conventional isolation methods. A higher delignification was  
91 achieved by microwave heating than oil bath heating. Li et al.<sup>16</sup>  
92 also performed microwave lignin extraction from bamboo at 90  
93 and 109 °C separately. It was found that increasing temperature  
94 would benefit lignin extraction. Zoia et al.<sup>17</sup> performed  
95 microwave-assisted lignin isolation in inorganic acid solution,  
96 and a high yield of 55 wt % (total amount of acid soluble and  
97 insoluble lignin) was achieved. All these studies prove the  
98 advantages of microwave-assisted lignin isolation, especially  
99 lignin purity and processing time. However, these studies only  
100 focus on low-temperature isolation. High-temperature isolation  
101 still needs investigation. With elevated temperature, better  
102 performance is expected to be achieved because acidolysis  
103 lignin is more stable to thermal degradation than cellulose and  
104 hemicellulose. This thermal stability can be expected to be  
105 further enhanced during microwave treatment because of the  
106 selectivity of microwave treatment. Microwave heating is based  
107 on the high-frequency rotation of polar molecules. Therefore,  
108 compounds with high polarity are more rapidly heated during  
109 microwave irradiation. Lignin, having higher aromaticity and  
110 lower polarity than polysaccharide,<sup>18,19</sup> is likely to degrade less  
111 severely in a microwave isolation than conventional acidolysis  
112 under equivalent conditions of total energy input.

113 Based on the discussion above, in this paper a new method  
114 for fast microwave-assisted lignin isolation is proposed. Dilute  
115 sulfuric acid is used for acidolysis, as previous studies have  
116 shown that lignin–carbohydrate complexes (LCC) are reduced  
117 to negligible levels when acidolysis is conducted in this  
118 medium.<sup>20</sup> High-temperature isolation (160–210 °C) is carried  
119 out to ensure LCC can be cleaved in a short time. Systematic  
120 analysis is performed to investigate lignin quality. A new  
121 analysis approach based on Py-GC/MS is applied to check the  
122 structure of lignin after isolation.

## 123 ■ MATERIALS AND METHODS

124 **Materials.** Mixed softwood pellets (MSP, UK Biochar Research  
125 Centre, School of Geosciences, University of Edinburgh) were used as  
126 feedstock for lignin isolation. The elemental and ICP analyses are  
127 shown in Tables S1 and S2. Compared with hardwood and herbaceous  
128 biomass, softwood has the least acid-soluble lignin, only about 0.2–0.5  
129 wt %, and thus is the most suitable for acidolysis lignin isolation.  
130 Sulfuric acid was purchased from Fischer Chemicals (>95 wt %).  
131 Creosol (99 wt %), vanillin (99 wt %), and phenol, 2-methoxy- (98  
132 wt %) were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich. *trans*-Isoeugenol (99 wt %)  
133 was purchased from Acros Organic.

134 **Experimental Methods.** All biomass was milled to 60 mesh  
135 powders using a cutting mill (Retsch SM300, Germany) in  
136 Biorenewables Development Center (BDC), University of York. The

microwave treatment was performed in a Discovery SP microwave  
137 reactor (CEM Corporation, USA) in capped vessels. Maximum power  
138 (300 W) of the microwave reactor was applied in all the experiments  
139 to make sure that the holding temperature could be achieved as  
140 quickly as possible. Diluted sulfuric acid (0.2 mol/L) was applied for  
141 isolation. The processing temperature of 160–210 °C at intervals of 10  
142 °C was used for isolation. The holding time was 5/10/20 min (in this  
143 paper, the abbreviation microwave residual lignin (MRL) only refers to  
144 the 10 min sample). During microwave treatment, 0.2 g of MSP and  
145 15 mL of acid solvent were heated in a capped vessel with stirring.  
146 After microwave treatment, the residue was recovered by filtration.  
147 Then, the residue was washed several times with deionized water until  
148 the rinsed water was neutral. In order to prepare the microwave  
149 residual lignin obtained in this way for further analysis, the residue was  
150 dried (105 °C, 24 h) and then weighed. All the experiments were  
151 repeated 3 times. 152

Lignin isolation by conventional heating (acidolysis lignin, AL) was  
153 performed using a benchtop autoclave (Anton Paar Monowave 50).  
154 MSP (0.08 g) and aqueous sulfuric acid (0.2 mol/L, 6 mL) were  
155 heated with stirring in a sealed vessel. The temperature was ramped up  
156 to 190 °C (within 5 min, similar to microwave experiments) and was  
157 held for 10 min. The residue (190 °C AL) after isolation was washed  
158 and dried as in the microwave residual lignin preparation. Most  
159 conditions of AL protocol are the same as those in the microwave  
160 experiment. By comparing AL and MRL, the characteristics and  
161 advantages of microwave treatment can be investigated. 162

The purity and yield were calculated by TAPPI T222 method.<sup>9</sup> The  
163 method is shown schematically in Figure S1. About 0.1 g of dewaxed  
164 sample was treated with 10 g of sulfuric acid (72 wt %) at 20 °C for 2  
165 h. The solution was then diluted with deionized water to 3 wt %  
166 sulfuric acid and refluxed for 4h. The insoluble residue (lignin) was  
167 isolated by filtration. After washed with hot water, the residue was  
168 dried at 105 °C for 24 h. This dried residue is Klason lignin (KL). The  
169 purity and yield were calculated according to the equation in Table 1.  
170 The purity result was adjusted by subtracting the ash content  
171 measured by TG analysis. 172

Table 1. Purity and Yield of MSP and 190 °C MRL/AL<sup>a</sup>

	purity (wt %)		yield (wt %)
	dry basis	extractive-free basis	
MSP	30.37 <sup>b</sup>	39.08 <sup>c</sup>	
190 °C MRL	80.64 <sup>d</sup>	92.85 <sup>e</sup>	82.31 <sup>f</sup>
190 °C AL	75.91 <sup>d</sup>	87.51 <sup>e</sup>	65.60 <sup>f</sup>

<sup>a</sup>For definitions of  $M_0$ ,  $M_d$ ,  $M_{a1}$ ,  $M_v$ ,  $M_{di}$ , and  $M_{a2}$ , see Figure S1. <sup>b</sup> $M_{a1}/M_0$ . <sup>c</sup> $M_{a1}/M_d$ . <sup>d</sup> $M_{a2}/M_i$ . <sup>e</sup> $M_{a2}/M_{di}$ . <sup>f</sup> $M_{a2}/M_{a1}$ .

Elemental analysis and ICP analysis data were obtained from the  
173 analytical service offered by Department of Chemistry, University of  
174 York. 175

Thermogravimetric (TG) analysis was performed using a Netzsch  
176 STA 409 analyzer (Germany). The following parameters were applied:  
177 temperature ramp rate 20 K/min, final temperature 600 °C, and carrier  
178 gas 50 mL/min pure nitrogen gas. To measure ash content, the  
179 following parameters were applied: temperature ramp rate 20 K/min,  
180 final temperature 625 °C holding for 1 h, and carrier gas 50 mL/min  
181 N<sub>2</sub> and 100 mL/min O<sub>2</sub>. The final mass % was used as the ash content.  
182

FTIR data was obtained using a PerkinElmer FTIR/FTNIR  
183 Spectrum 400 analyzer (USA). The spectra were acquired between  
184 700 and 4000 cm<sup>-1</sup> with resolution of 2 cm<sup>-1</sup> and scan time of 64 s.  
185

Solid-state <sup>13</sup>C NMR spectroscopy (SSNMR) results were obtained  
186 at the EPSRC UK National Solid-State NMR Service at University of  
187 Durham. The spectra were obtained at 100.562 MHz. The chemical  
188 shift range from 0 to 240 ppm was recorded. 189

Py-GC/MS results were obtained from BDC, University of York.  
190 The units used were CDS Analytical 5250-T Trapping Pyrolysis  
191 Autosampler (UK) as the pyrolysis unit, Agilent Technologies 7890B  
192 GC System (USA) as gas chromatography unit, and Agilent 193

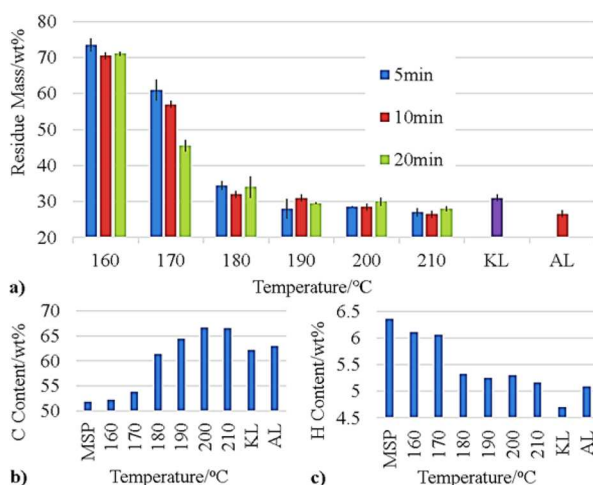
Technologies 5977A MSD (USA) as mass spectrum unit. The sample was loaded into the pyrolysis unit and pyrolyzed at 600 °C for 10 s. The volatile materials released were carried into the GC/MS unit by nitrogen for analysis. The following GC/MS parameters were applied: GC inlet temperature at 350 °C, initial temperature at 40 °C for 2 min, ramp rate at 10 K/min until 300 °C, holding at 300 °C for 30 min, and split ratio with 50:1. Volatile compounds were identified by comparing the mass spectra with NIST Lab database. A standard sample mixture of four compounds, creosol/vanillin/2-methoxyphenol (guaiacol)/*E*-isoeugenol, was also subjected to pyrolysis and GC/MS in order to verify the mass spectral identities.

After microwave isolation at 190 °C, the aqueous phase was neutralized and dried using freeze-dryer for 24 h, preparing for liquid-state <sup>13</sup>C NMR and GC/MS analysis. Liquid-state <sup>13</sup>C NMR spectroscopy results were obtained by JEOL ECS 400 NMR Spectrometer (Japan). D<sub>2</sub>O was used as the solvent for analysis. The number of scans was 8192.

GC/MS results were obtained using a PerkinElmer Clarus 500 GC/MS (USA). Ethanol was chosen as solvent for analysis. The GC program used was as follows: initial temperature at 50 °C holding for 4 min, ramp rate with 10 K/min until 290 °C and holding for 10 min, split ratio with 5:1, and injector temperature at 290 °C. The identities of the compounds were determined by comparing the mass spectra with NIST lab database.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Mass Balance and C/H Contents.** Figure 1 shows the influence of temperature and holding time on the yield of



**Figure 1.** Comparisons of KL, 190 °C AL, and microwave-isolated lignin under different conditions: (a) mass balance; (b and c) C/H content.

residue and C/H content. It was found that major changes of residue mass and C/H content took place from 160 to 190 °C. At 170 °C, the residue mass could be still affected by holding time; above 190 °C, the masses of the residues obtained did not vary significantly with holding time, showing the high efficiency of microwave heating. The residue mass of KL was 31 wt %, which was close to that of 190/200 °C residues. Adler<sup>21</sup> reported that the equivalent formula of the purest softwood lignin he could produce from spruce was C<sub>9</sub>H<sub>7.92</sub>O<sub>2.40</sub>(OCH<sub>3</sub>)<sub>0.92</sub>, which suggested the C/H content of pure softwood lignin should be close to 65.12/5.47 wt %. Lin et al.<sup>22</sup> also measured the C/H content of an industrial lignin which was 65.00/6.43 wt %. Compared with these values, the C/H content of 190 °C MRL was similar to those isolated lignins. The H content of KL was low because concentrated

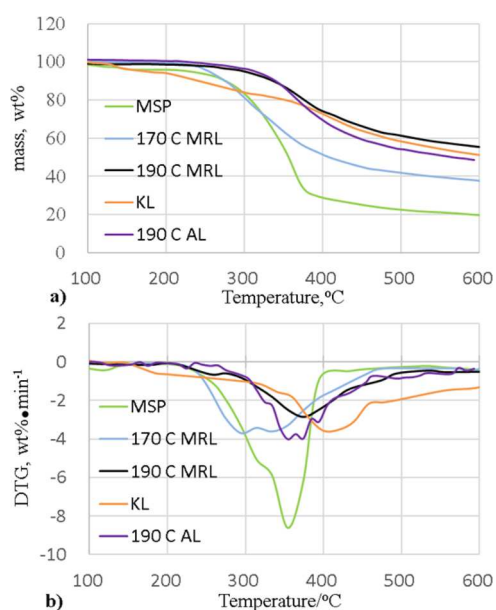
sulfuric acid was likely to dehydrate the lignin. The C/H of 190 °C AL was similar to that of 190 °C MRL; however, the residue mass was lower, showing conventional acidolysis at high temperature caused more mass loss than microwave treatment and indicating that lignin is in fact more thermally stable under microwave heating than when subjected to conventional heating as expected.

**Purities (Acid-Insoluble Lignin Content) and Yields.** The yields and purities of 190 °C MRL and 190 °C AL (10 min sample) shown in Table 1 were calculated according to TAPPI method T222 shown in Figure S1. After 10 min of microwave treatment at 190 °C, the isolation produced lignin with high purity (93 wt %) and yield (82 wt %), both of which were higher than those of lignins obtained using MWL methods. Wu and Argyropoulos<sup>11</sup> produced MWL with a 14 day milling process on the softwood (black spruce (*Picea mariana*)). The extractive-free basis purity and yields were 88.3 wt %/28.5 wt % respectively. Compared to MWL methods, the much shorter duration required by microwave heating is probably the main reason for the higher lignin yields obtained during this study. Within such a short processing time, lignin loss is reduced to a great extent. Sulfuric acid offers an environment where carbohydrate can be hydrolyzed and solubilized, while most lignin is insoluble.

Another reason for high purity and yield is possibly the selectivity of microwave treatment.<sup>12–14</sup> Different from conventional heating, microwave heating is achieved by the high-frequency rotation of polar molecules. Compared to nonpolar compounds, polar molecules and functional groups are treated more intensely and faster in microwave radiation. Compared with carbohydrate, lignin is generally regarded as having higher aromaticity and lower polarity.<sup>18,19</sup> Therefore, carbohydrate and lignin can be expected to behave in significantly different ways under microwave radiation, particularly in the presence of dilute aqueous sulfuric acid. Such a hypothesis explains why in Table 1 the yield of 190 °C AL was much lower than that of 190 °C MRL. These data provide further strong support for the mechanism by which microwave heating exerts its selectivity in mixtures containing materials of differing polarities.

**Liquid-Phase Analysis.** After isolation at 190 °C (10 min), the solution after microwave treatment was analyzed by GC/MS and liquid <sup>13</sup>C NMR. The GC/MS list of aqueous phase compounds are showed in Table S3. The GC/MS results showed that the majority of compounds in solution were chemicals derived from sugars characterized by the presence of ketone, aldehyde, and furan groups, while aromatic compounds occurred in much lower proportions. This result was consistent with liquid <sup>13</sup>C NMR results (Figure S2). The peaks in 20–40 ppm were ascribed as saturated carbon which were mainly from polysaccharide. The peaks of ketone were located in 205–220 ppm, suggesting that dehydrated sugars were probably the main products in liquid phase. Of greatest significance is the absence of intense peaks between 100 and 150 ppm, where carbons in benzenoid rings typically resonate, indicating that aromatic compounds remained predominantly in the insoluble solid residue. The absence of these peaks provides further evidence for lack of thermal depolymerization when lignin is heated by microwaves for 10 min at 190 °C.

**Thermogravimetric Analysis.** Figure 2 shows the TG curves of MSP, KL, 170/190 °C MRL, and 190 °C AL. For MSP, the DTG curve had a very strong peak at around 350 °C that corresponds to the decomposition of cellulose.<sup>23,24</sup> This peak was accompanied by a well-pronounced shoulder at 298



**Figure 2.** Pyrolysis curves of samples (MSP, KL 190 °C AL, and 170/190 °C MRL) at heating rate of 20 K/min. (a) TG curves; (b) DTG curves.

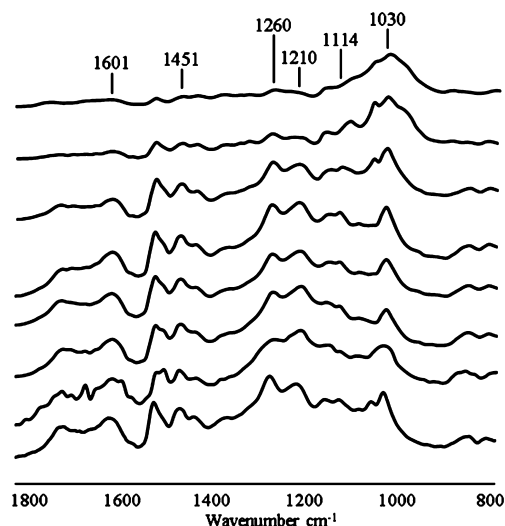
around 300 °C, attributable to hemicellulose decomposition.<sup>23,24</sup> For 170 °C MRL, the final mass loss was lower than that of MSP. These results illustrated that microwave isolation at 170 °C was already able to remove the carbohydrate to some extent. However, there were two strong DTG peaks (294 and 330 °C) in the range of 290–350 °C, showing that 170 °C MRL was still severely contaminated by cellulose and hemicellulose.

The mass and DTG curves of KL and 190 °C MRL had similar trends in general. Compared with linear structure of cellulose and hemicellulose (with some branches), the complex 3D structure of lignin and predominance of aryl–alkyl ether linkages make it recalcitrant to thermal degradation. These factors resulted in the 190 °C MRL and KL samples having high residual mass at 600 °C, a higher peak zone for degradation. The final residual masses were high at 52 and 55 wt % respectively, showing that fewer degradable compounds existed in these two samples than those in 170 °C MRL. Their DTG peaks were located between 370 and 410 °C, where pure lignin displays its DTG peak according to previous studies.<sup>23,24</sup> Unlike the DTG curves of MSP and 170 °C MRL, the DTG curves showed no peaks between 290 to 350 °C, confirming that polysaccharides were mostly removed in the 190 °C MRL and KL samples. A subtle difference between KL and 190 °C MRL was that the degrading peak of 190 °C MRL was slightly lower, which was either caused by structural changes brought about by the 190 °C treatment, or by dehydrations promoted by the 72 wt % sulfuric acid used in the Klason protocol.

Comparing 190 °C MRL and 190 °C AL, it was found there was more polysaccharide in 190 °C AL sample. The two DTG curves both had peaks at around 375 °C, showing lignin was a main component in both isolated residues. However, for the DTG curve of 190 °C AL, there was also a well-pronounced peak at 354 °C that was attributable to the degradation of polysaccharide.<sup>23,24</sup> Furthermore, the DTG peaks of 190 °C AL were stronger than those of 190 °C MRL, showing that 190 °C AL was less thermally stable. The data indicate that 190 °C

MRL is less contaminated by polysaccharides and more thermally stable than lignin produced by conventional acidolysis at 190 °C.

**FTIR.** Figure 3 shows the FTIR spectra of MSP and MRL. As the treatment temperatures were increased, the bands assigned

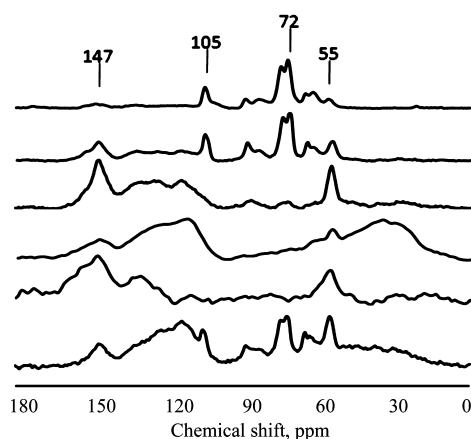


**Figure 3.** FTIR spectra of MSP and isolated lignin. From top to bottom: MSP, 170/180/190/200/210 °C MRL, KL, and 190 °C AL.

as aromatic skeleton (1601/1508/1451/1424 cm<sup>-1</sup>)<sup>25–28</sup> were strengthened significantly. These strong peaks suggested high aromaticity of the residues after treatment. The peak at 1030–1060 cm<sup>-1</sup> was assigned as C–O stretching of primary alcohol.<sup>25,27,28</sup> It weakened as temperature rose, indicating a better removal of polysaccharide at high temperature. The overall trend of the FTIR spectra demonstrated that temperature acts as an important factor in lignin isolation. At treatment temperatures higher than 190 °C, the spectra of MRL were very similar to that of KL. From 190 to 210 °C, the peaks at 1114 cm<sup>-1</sup> (secondary alcohol)<sup>29</sup> and 1030 cm<sup>-1</sup> were further weakened slightly. This may suggest that 210 °C MRL was purer than 190 °C MRL. However, as shown in Table 1, the 190 °C treatment rendered 18 wt % of the lignin acid soluble. Therefore, an isolation at 210 °C would solubilize more lignin, result in lower lignin yield, and perhaps trigger further structural changes away from native lignin. Furthermore, the tube pressure of the 210 °C experiment was 100 psi higher than that of 190 °C (Figure S3). Therefore, due to lignin yield and safety reasons, 190 °C seemed a suitable temperature for this current protocol.

The FTIR spectra of 190 °C MRL and 190 °C AL showed similar general trends. However, the peak at 1260 cm<sup>-1</sup> was stronger in 190 °C AL than that in 190 °C MRL. This peak could be ascribed to ether bonds, especially alkyl aryl ethers.<sup>25</sup>

**SSNMR.** Figure 4 shows the spectra of SSNMR spectra of MSP and various isolated lignin samples. The peak at 55 ppm was as being attributable to methoxyl carbons.<sup>29,30</sup> This peak was strengthened in isolated lignin samples, because the monomer of softwood lignin, the guaiacyl unit (G-unit), contains one methoxyl side chain. Comparing the spectra of MSP and 170/190 °C MRL, it was obvious that the peaks between 109 and 162 ppm were much stronger after microwave treatment. According to Mao et al.,<sup>29</sup> the peaks in the range between 108 and 60 ppm can be attributed to aliphatic carbons



**Figure 4.** SSNMR spectra of MSP and isolated lignin. From top to bottom: MSP, 170 °C MRL, 190 °C MRL, KL, KL (CPNQS), and 190 °C AL.

mainly from carbohydrates and side chains of lignin, such as the peaks at 72 and 105 ppm characteristic of C2, C3, C5, and C1 carbons of cellulose,<sup>31</sup> while peaks between 162 and 109 ppm were attributed to carbon atoms in benzenoid rings that provided strong evidence for the existence of lignin in their samples. The major peaks in this zone were located at 147 ppm (aromatic C–O),<sup>30,32</sup> 130 ppm (aromatic carbon bearing alkyl group),<sup>32</sup> 125 ppm (hydrogen-bearing aromatic carbon not adjacent to oxygen functionalities),<sup>32</sup> and 114 ppm (aromatic carbon ortho to phenolic C–OH moieties).<sup>32</sup>

The spectra of 190 °C MRL and KL showed significant differences. There were two wide bands at 30–50 ppm and 120–135 ppm for KL spectrum. Research<sup>29,33,34</sup> showed that these two bands can be attributed to CH<sub>2</sub> carbons and CH carbons, respectively. When processing the KL spectrum using the CPNQS methodology that suppresses the CH<sub>2</sub>/CH band, the spectrum became similar to that of 190 °C MRL. These data suggested that microwave isolation can keep the aromatic part of lignin intact; however, it appears to remove the aliphatic part to some extent. The monomers of lignin are phenylpropanoid in structure. They are based on a C<sub>6</sub>–C<sub>3</sub> structure that contains both aliphatic and aromatic carbons. Compared with the aromatic C<sub>6</sub> moieties, the C<sub>3</sub> aliphatic side chains of lignins are characterized by higher polarities, having higher O/C ratios than the aromatic parts of the structure. Microwaves are more efficient in heating polar compounds and functional groups,<sup>12</sup> so the side chain is more likely to be modified or cleaved during lignin isolation. As a result, lignin isolated using microwave heating has a higher proportion of intact aromatic rings and a lower proportion of intact side chains than does the

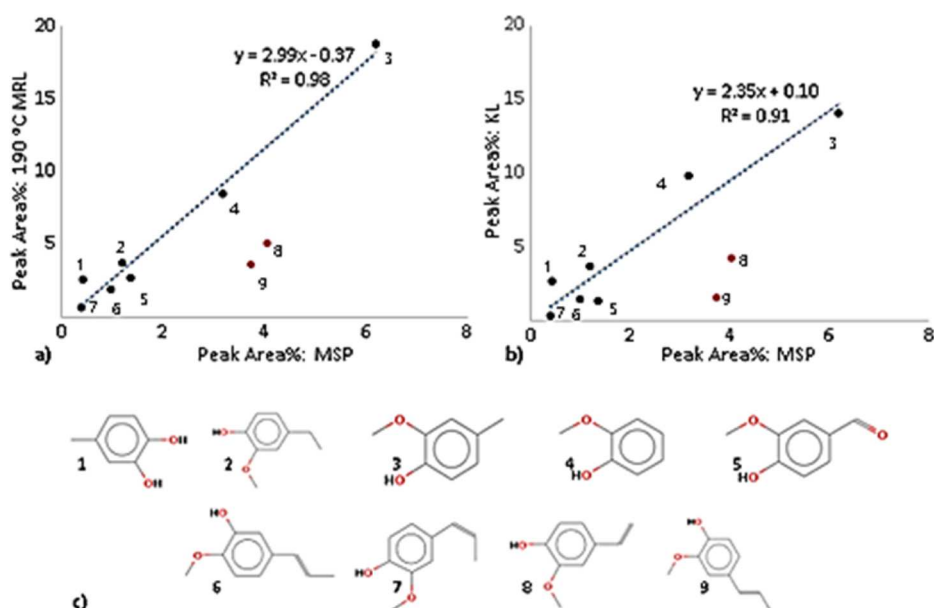
lignin isolated using conventional heating at the same 407 temperature. This fact will benefit the application of isolated 408 lignin as a potential source for production of low molecular 409 weight aromatic compounds. 410

The SSNMR spectrum of 190 °C AL showed a strong peak 411 at 72 ppm, suggesting severe sugar contamination. Similar to 412 the spectrum of KL (normal CP spectrum), there was a band at 413 120–135 ppm, suggesting a high content of CH<sub>2</sub> group in 414 lignin isolated by conventional acidolysis. These data add 415 further evidence to the hypothesis that MRL has a 416 proportionately higher aromatic carbon content and that 417 microwave heating at 190 °C results in significant cleavage of 418 the side chains of this type of lignin. 419

**Py-GC/MS.** MSP and the isolated lignin samples (190 °C 420 MRL, KL, and 190 °C AL) were analyzed by Py-GC/MS. From 421 the changes of peak area % of typical pyrolytic products, 422 especially phenolic compounds, the structure change and 423 degradation extent during lignin isolation can be investigated. 424 Because most polysaccharide had been removed, the phenolic 425 compounds were dominant in pyrolytic products of the three 426 lignin samples, while there were more pyrolytic products from 427 cellulose and hemicellulose in MSP, such as 2-propanone, 1- 428 hydroxy-/furfural/cyclopentane-1,2-dione. In Table 2, nine of 429 the compounds identified in highest proportions from the Py- 430 GC/MS are listed together with their measured ion current 431 peak areas. In Table 1 it was shown that the lignin content of 432 190 °C MRL (80.64 wt %, dry basis) was 2.67 times that of 433 MSP (30.37 wt %, dry basis). When the ratios between the ion 434 current peak areas for the 190 °C MRL and those for MSP are 435 compared as shown in Figure 5a, it is apparent that the trend 436 line has a slope of 2.99, which is in acceptable agreement with 437 the expected ratio of 2.67, suggesting that lignin was well- 438 preserved without significant degradation. Notably, two of the 439 nine compounds were significant outliers from the trend line, 2- 440 methoxy-4-vinylphenol and (*E*)-isoeugenol. There are two 441 possible reasons that can explain why these two compounds do 442 not conform to the expected trend: (1) The precursors for 443 these compounds are concentrated around the periphery of the 444 3D lignin structure and are bonded covalently to carbohydrates 445 as part of the LCC, resulting in chemical modification of the 446 alkene groups during acid hydrolysis. (2) The compounds are 447 more or less evenly distributed through the 3D structure of the 448 lignin and do not survive the acidic conditions at 190 °C for 449 reasons that cannot be explained at present. The fact that 450 compound numbers 6 and 7 in Table 2 also contain double 451 bonds in the side chain and do fit closer to the trend line may 452 be seen as evidence favoring the former explanation. The trend 453 line between KL and MSP (Figure 5b) was also somewhat 454 lower than that in Figure 5a, showing that there were 455

**Table 2.** Comparisons of Phenolic Compounds Peak Area (%) of MSP and Isolated Lignin

no.	compounds	MSP	190 °C MRL	KL
1	1,2-benzenediol, 4-methyl-	0.42	2.51	2.62
2	phenol, 4-ethyl-2-methoxy-	1.20	3.66	3.70
3	creosol	6.20	18.67	13.90
4	phenol, 2-methoxy-	3.17	8.45	9.73
5	vanillin	1.36	2.67	1.29
6	phenol, 2-methoxy-5-(1-propenyl)-, ( <i>E</i> )-	0.99	1.87	1.43
7	phenol, 2-methoxy-4-(1-propenyl)-, ( <i>Z</i> )-	0.39	0.65	0.31
8	2-methoxy-4-vinylphenol	4.04	4.92	3.58
9	<i>trans</i> -isoeugenol	3.78	3.20	1.37



**Figure 5.** Peak area % of phenolic compounds according py-GC/MS analysis. (a) MSP vs 190 °C MRL; (b) MSP vs KL. (c) Compound structures.

456 proportionately fewer aromatic compounds in pyrolytic  
 457 products of KL than that of 190 °C MRL. This was probably  
 458 because there were more aliphatic compounds in KL due to less  
 459 side chain modification than that in 190 °C MRL, which is  
 460 consistent with the results of SSNMR analysis presented above.  
 461 When the volatile products produced by Py-GC/MC of 190  
 462 °C AL were compared with those obtained from 190 °C MRL,  
 463 it was evident that pyrolysis products derived from carbohy-  
 464 drates, such as 5-hydroxymethyl furfural (0.60% in 190 °C AL,  
 465 0.22% in 190 °C MRL) and D-allose (2.06% in 190 °C AL,  
 466 undetectable in 190 °C MRL), were evident with higher peak  
 467 areas in the case of 190 °C AL. An interesting fact was that one  
 468 of main pyrolytic products, creosol, showed a higher peak area  
 469 % in 190 °C AL (25.0%) than that in 190 °C MRL (18.7%),  
 470 though the latter was purer lignin and less contaminated with  
 471 carbohydrates. Fleck<sup>35</sup> observed that some model lignin dimers,  
 472 such as conidendrin and di-isoeugenol in which the two  
 473 monomers are linked by a saturated ring, did not produce  
 474 creosol during pyrolysis. Fleck found that certain interlinkages,  
 475 such as an indane ring, could effectively prevent the formation  
 476 of creosol under pyrolytic conditions. Furthermore, Fleck<sup>35</sup>  
 477 pointed out that creosol was one of the main pyrolytic products  
 478 of coniferin which is a glucoside of coniferyl alcohol, so sugar  
 479 contamination actually could increase the yield of creosol to  
 480 some extent. It is arguable that these two factors explain why  
 481 190 °C AL with the higher carbohydrate content produced  
 482 more creosol. It is also possible that some of the structural  
 483 changes in the side chains of the lignin promoted by microwave  
 484 heating lead to formation of new cyclic aliphatic interlinkages  
 485 between monomeric units that are in close proximity within the  
 486 3D structure and that these changes also serve to reduce creosol  
 487 yields from Py-GC/MS of 190 °C MRL.

## 488 ■ CONCLUSIONS

489 It has been demonstrated that a pure form of lignin relatively  
 490 uncontaminated by residual carbohydrates can be produced  
 491 rapidly and efficiently by brief (10 min) microwave heating of  
 492 mixed softwood pellets (MSP) at 190 °C in dilute aqueous  
 493 sulfuric acid. The type of lignin produced by this new method,

designated as 190 °C MRL, has both higher yield and purity 494  
 than equivalent material produced by conventional heating to 495  
 190 °C in aqueous sulfuric acid at the same concentration in an 496  
 autoclave for the same time. The latter material has been 497  
 designated 190 °C AL (acidolysis lignin). It has been shown 498  
 that 190 °C MRL is of high aromaticity due to the modification 499  
 of lignin side chains. The Py-GC/MS results from the two 500  
 types of lignin indicate that some formation of cyclic aliphatic 501  
 linkage occurs between the side chains of monomeric units that 502  
 are in close proximity when microwave heating at 190 °C is 503  
 applied. The techniques applied using comparative Py-GC/MS 504  
 on lignin samples obtained by differing techniques have general 505  
 application in identifying structural changes occurring during 506  
 lignin isolation. 507

In general, the research results show that high-temperature 508  
 microwave treatment is a powerful tool for lignin isolation. 509  
 High efficiency, a simple protocol, and high lignin yield are its 510  
 most significant advantages. It is potentially a very promising 511  
 method for high-quality lignin preparation. 512

## ■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

### Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the 515  
 ACS Publications website at DOI: 10.1021/acssuschemeng.6b02545. 516  
 517

Element and ICP analysis of feedstock; TAPPI T222 518  
 method; GC/MS spectra and compounds lists; pressure 519  
 and temperature comparisons during experiment (PDF) 520

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