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Synthesis and optical properties of subphthalocyanines axially connected homo- and heterodimers via a hydroquinone linker

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Axially linked trifluoroethoxy (TFEO)-coated subphthalocyanine (SubPc) homo- and heterodimers were synthesized by two different axial ligand substitution methods. TFEO-SubPc homodimers were obtained directly from TFEO-SubPc boron chloride with α-, m-, and p-hydroquinones, while TFEO-SubPc heterodimers were synthesized via stepwise construction using a combination of the TFEO method and Torres’s triflate method. The optical properties of dimers obtained were investigated using UV-Vis and fluorescence spectrometry. Electron transfer was observed in the heterodimers, and TFEO-SubPc acted as an electron acceptor in the process. The electron transfer process differs depending on the α-, m-, and p-geometry of the hydroquinone linker, and is supported by computational calculations.

Subphthalocyanines (SubPcs), which are regarded as the lowest homologue of phthalocyanines (Pcs), consist of three diiminoisoindoline fragments attached around a boron center.1 While the Pcs are principally flat/plane 18-π-conjugated macrocycles,2 SubPcs have a unique cone-shaped geometry with a 14-π-conjugation. The curved π-conjugated system is often advantageous in the synthesis of functional materials than a flat π-conjugation due to its reduced tendency for molecular aggregation resulting in a better solubility profile. Moreover, the curved/convex geometry of SubPcs should be useful for molecular recognition of complementary convex π-conjugated molecules such as fullerenes.3 Their strong absorption and high emission quantum yields in the visible region make SubPcs promising chromophores with potential applications in optical data storage,4 nonlinear optics,5 and photosynthetic models for studying energy- and electron-transfer.6 Therefore, the modification and derivatization of SubPcs are of great importance to develop novel functional materials.

The substitution reaction of the axial ligands on the boron atom in SubPcs is one of the straightforward strategies for the derivatization of SubPcs to construct novel electron transfer systems.7 However, the axial substitution of SubPcs generally unreactive and yields are not that high. In this context, our research group reported in 2010 the considerable improvement of the axial ligand substitution of SubPcs by trifluoroethoxy (TFEO)-coating at the periphery of the SubPc macrocycle.7 In 2011, Torres et al. further improved the axial substitution of SubPcs by replacing the axial position of SubPcs once in triflate to activate the boron center.8 Subsequently, Bender et al. reported that aluminum chloride activates chlorine on the boron of SubPcs to induce the axial substitution reaction.9 As an extension of our high-yielding axial substitution methodology using peripheral TFEO-coating of SubPc with Torres’s triflate method, we herein disclose the synthesis of novel SubPc homodimers 1 and heterodimers 2 and 3 having hydroquinone as a linker and their spectral investigation. Frontier orbitals of the heterodimer calculated at the B3LYP/6-31G(d) computational level support their optical properties which confirm the donor-acceptor character between TFEO-SubPc and non-substituted SubPc (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Subphthalocyanine axial substituted dimers
Syntheses of SubPc hetero-dimers 2o,m,p and 3o,m,p were next investigated (Scheme 2). First, the substitution of TFEO-SubPc 4a with 1 equiv of o-, m-, and p-hydroquinones was carried out under reflux to provide hydroquinone-attached TFEO-SubPcs 6o,m,p. Then, the substitution of non-substituted SubPc 4b or perfluorinated SubPc 4c with 6 was achieved by the Torres’s stepwise-activation method with triflate to furnish hetero SubPc dimers 2o,m,p and 3o,m,p linked at the ortho-, meta-, or para-position on the central benzene unit in good yields. All SubPc dimers 1-3 showed good solubility in common organic solvents and were purified by column chromatography on silica gel. They were characterized by $^1$H and $^{19}$F NMR, MALDI-TOF mass and FTIR spectroscopy (see ESI). The $^1$H NMR spectra of dimers, which exhibit characteristic peaks of central benzene linkers around 5 ppm, are highly shielded by the diatropic magnetic currents of two SubPc rings. Other peaks corresponding to outlying trifluoroethoxy substituents of TFEO-SubPc appeared between 4.5 ppm and 5.3 ppm, and an outlying proton of H-SubPcs appeared around 7.8 ppm and 8.7 ppm. The $^{19}$F NMR spectrum of dimers showed peaks around -75 ppm for trifluoroethoxy substituents of TFEO-SubPc and -140 ppm for outlying fluorine substituents of F-SubPc. All MALDI-TOF MS spectra of dimers showed a peak split with a characteristic isotopic pattern corresponding to their molecular ion.

The optical features of dimers 1-3 were next investigated. The UV/Vis spectra of dimers recorded in a variety of solvents (dioxane, trifluorotoluene and dichloromethane) with a concentration range of $1 \times 10^{-6}$ M to $1 \times 10^{-4}$ M were examined (see Fig. 2 and Figs. S1-27 in ESI). TFEO-SubPc homo-dimers 1o,m,p are present mainly as monomers, irrespective of the solvent and concentration, and are characterized by sharp absorption bands in the B- (335 nm) and Q-band (600 nm) regions. The molar extinction coefficient of dimer $1p$ ($\varepsilon_{max} = 1.55 \times 10^4$) was double that of the TFEO-SubPc monomer $4a$ ($\varepsilon_{max} = 8.66 \times 10^3$), and most differences in a spectrum caused by the ortho-, meta- and para- positions were not observed. As hetero-dimers, two kinds of peaks, irrespective of the solvent and its concentration, were observed in Q bands corresponding to each SubPc unit. These results suggest that two SubPc units absorb light independently and do not disturb each other system.

Figure 2. UV-vis spectra of homodimer 1p (blue), heterodimers 2p (orange) and 3p (green), and monomer 4a (red) at $1 \times 10^{-5}$ M in dioxane.

The synthesis of SubPc dimers is shown in Scheme 1. TFEO-SubPc homo-dimers 1o, m, p were nicely synthesized by our direct chloro-substitution reaction of TFEO-SubPc 4a and o-, m- and p-hydroquinones (0.4 equiv) in the presence of triethylamine in toluene under reflux conditions for 12 h. TFEO-SubPc dimers linked with m- and p-hydroquinones 1m,p were obtained in 52 and 59% yield, respectively, and even sterically hindered ortho-substituted dimer 1o was isolated in 20% yield. It should be mentioned that the effect of the peripheral TFEO-substituent is significant for this substitution reaction, since non-substituted SubPc 4b did not react with p-hydroquinone under the same conditions resulting in no corresponding dimeric product 5p (Scheme 1).
Table 1. Fluorescence quantum yields (\(\Phi_f\)), emission maxima (\(\lambda_{em}\) [nm]) of dimers upon excitation at 530 nm.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1-3</th>
<th>Dioxane</th>
<th>Trifluorotoluene</th>
<th>Dichloromethane</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1m</td>
<td>0.32 (619)</td>
<td>0.12 (625)</td>
<td>0.22 (624)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1p</td>
<td>0.52 (617)</td>
<td>0.51 (615)</td>
<td>0.49 (616)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2p (R-H)</td>
<td>0.33 (616)</td>
<td>0.21 (613)</td>
<td>0.17 (614)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2m (R-H)</td>
<td>0.11 (574, 616)</td>
<td>0.031 (570, 614)</td>
<td>0.041 (575, 613)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3m (R-F)</td>
<td>0.026 (614)</td>
<td>0.022 (611)</td>
<td>0.018 (614)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3p (R-F)</td>
<td>0.098 (615)</td>
<td>0.069 (585, 612)</td>
<td>0.061 (587, 613)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(\Phi_f\) Determined by using zinc phthalocyanate in 1-chloronaphthalene as reference (\(\Phi_f = 0.30\)).

The steady-state fluorescence spectra of dimers 1-3 were measured in different organic solvents (see Table 1 and Figs. S28-36 in ESI). The TFEO-SubPc homodimers 1m and 1p showed a middle emission band around 617 nm with fluorescence quantum yields \(\Phi_f\) of 0.32 and 0.33, respectively in dioxane upon excitation at 530 nm (Table 1). On the other hand, 1m showed a higher fluorescence quantum yield (\(\Phi_f = 0.52\)) in dioxane. These results suggest that electronic communication between the SubPc moieties of dimers linked at ortho- and para- positions are stronger than the dimers linked at meta positions. In the case of heterodimers, the fluorescence of 2o,m,p decreased significantly in dioxane (\(\Phi_f = 0.017, 0.11\) and 0.026), which can be attributed to electron-transfer from the H-SubPc moiety to the TFEO-SubPc moiety.\(^6\) Especially, the values of ortho-linked SubPc dimer 2o displayed a striking decrease. On the other hand, the \(\Phi_f\) values of 3m,p were not so quenched (\(\Phi_f = 0.52\) and 0.23) with the exception of 3o (\(\Phi_f = 0.098\)).

Fig. 3. Fluorescence spectra of heterodimer 2o (blue), 2m (red), 2p (green), H-SubPc (purple) and TFEO-SubPc (light blue) in dioxane.

Energy transmission was next examined based on both the quantum yield and the steady-state fluorescence. Fig. 3 indicates the fluorescence spectra of heterodimers 2o, 2m, 2p, and monomers H-SubPc, TFEO-SubPc in dioxane. With the comparisons to the fluorescence spectra of the monomers H-SubPc and TFEO-SubPc, the fluorescence spectra of heterodimers 2o, 2m, and 2p are obviously quenched (Fig. 3a). It should be noted that very small peaks around 570 nm originated to the one half of H-SubPc unit, while the peaks around 616 nm are those of another half of dimers, TFEO-SubPc moiety (Fig. 3b). Although both the peaks are quenched, the values of quenching around 570 nm are more significant than those of around 616 nm, which imply the energy/electron transfer from the H-SubPc unit to the TFEO-SubPc moiety.

Fig. 4. Optimized geometry and distribution of molecular orbitals of 2o and 2p calculated at the B3LYP/6-31G(d) computational level by Spartan '14.\(^{12}\)

The optimized geometry and distribution of the highest-occupied molecular orbital (HOMO) and the lowest-unoccupied molecular orbital (LUMO) of heterodimers 2o and 2p were calculated by computational chemistry using Spartan '14 (Fig. 4). These results confirm the donor acceptor character between H-SubPc and TFEO-SubPc moieties. HOMO is localized on the H-SubPc moiety as a donor unit and LUMO is localized on the TFEO-SubPc moiety as an acceptor unit. This result indicates that the electron density of the SubPc macrocycle decreases in response to the electron affinity of 12 TFEO-substituents. These results indicate that fluorescence quenching in heterodimers 2 should be explained by an electron transfer process. More interestingly, the H-SubPc moiety is much closer to the TFEO-SubPc moiety of 2o than that of 2p. This result is found to give good agreement with the chemical shift shielding of the hydroquinone ring protons in the \(^1H\) NMR spectra. While 2p shows 4 protons at same 4.80 ppm (4H, more shielding),
2o has two peaks at 4.97 ppm (2H, more shielding) and 6.14 ppm (2H, less shielding), respectively (see ESI). These differences suggest that the hydroquinone ring of 2p lies parallel between the two SubPc moieties. On the other hand, the two SubPc units of 2o are somewhat twisted towards central hydroquinone moiety resulting two SubPc moieties closer. These facts may explain the difference in fluorescence quenching that depends on the α and π geometries. It has been reported that through-space electron transfer occurs efficiently when the distance between electron donors and acceptors is below 10 Å. Therefore, through-space electron transfer probably occurs in addition to through-bond electron transfer in 3o. A smaller distance between donor (H-SubPc) and acceptor (TFEO-SubPc) moieties allows for an easier direct overlap of frontier orbitals between the donor and acceptor. On the other hand, the H-SubPc and the TFEO-SubPc moieties in 3p are too distant to allow for through-space electron transfer. Hence, through-bond electron transfer is highly likely to be dominant in 3p. The observed reduced fluorescence quenching in meta-submitted heterodimer 2m is understandable since electron transfer through bonding is often not effective in the meta-position of aromatics. The observations of fluorescence quenching in heterodimers 3o,m,p can be similarly explained, although the significant donor-acceptor characters in 3o,m,p do not exist between TFEO-SubPc and F-SubPc moieties.

Conclusions
In conclusion, we have synthesized novel SubPc homo-and heterodimers bridged on the axial position via a hydroquinone linker by two types of axial ligand substitution reactions. The optical properties of those compounds were investigated by UV-Vis and fluorescence spectra and calculations. The observed fluorescence quantum yields of dimers suggest that significant energy transmission occurs in heterodimers 2o,m,p. For ortho-substituted heterodimer 2o, through-space electron transfer probably occurs by the propinquity of TFEO-SubPc and H-SubPc moieties, in addition to regular electron transfer through bonding.

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Notes and references


The electron transfer process between subphthalocyanines differs depending on the ortho-, meta-, and para-geometry of the hydroquinone linker.