



Iridium-catalyzed asymmetric reductive amination of C2-acylpyridines

Gang Wang,^a Zhiwen Nie,^{bc} Hengzhi You^{id}*^{ab} and Qin Yin^{id}*^{cd}

Cite this: *Chem. Commun.*, 2025, 61, 14386

Received 16th July 2025,
Accepted 12th August 2025

DOI: 10.1039/d5cc04017e

rsc.li/chemcomm

Chiral 1-pyridin-2-yl-ethylamines are significant building blocks for synthetic chemistry and pharmaceutical sciences, while their stereoselective and practical synthesis remains challenging and usually troublesome. Herein, we present a novel iridium-catalyzed direct asymmetric reductive amination of 2-acylpyridines with anilines, affording a series of chiral 1-pyridin-2-yl-ethylamines with up to 97% yield and 95% ee. A 5 mmol scale reaction is also performed to demonstrate the practicality of this method.

Given the unique electronic properties and chemical reactivity conferred by the nitrogen atom in the pyridine ring, chiral molecules containing a pyridine ring hold significant positions in pharmaceutical synthesis, materials, and catalysis.^{1–7} Among these, chiral 1-(pyridin-2-yl)ethan-1-amine derivatives are critical structural units as they frequently serve as pharmacophores of drug molecules or as ligands for metal catalysis (Fig. 1).⁸ For instance, chiral 1-[5-(2,2,2-trifluoroethoxy)pyridin-2-yl]ethan-1-amine is a key fragment in the T-type calcium channel modulator suvencaltamide⁹ and the [¹⁸F]-TTA-A4¹⁰ drug molecules. Similarly, 1-(5-fluoropyridin-2-yl)ethan-1-amine serves as the core structure of a novel orally bioavailable TRK inhibitor AZ-23.¹¹ Additionally, 1-(pyridin-2-yl)ethan-1-amine is also an essential component of potential adenosine receptor antagonists LDH-E-8-2.¹² Moreover, these structural motifs are also widely found in other drug structures.^{13–15} On the other hand, due to the coordination ability of the nitrogen atom in the pyridine ring with metals, these compounds are commonly used to synthesize chiral bidentate and tridentate ligands, which are applied in the field of asymmetric transition-metal catalysis.^{16–18} Therefore, the development of efficient synthetic methods for chiral 1-(pyridin-2-yl)ethan-1-amines is of great scientific and commercial significance.

So far, there are only a few reports on the catalytic asymmetric synthesis of chiral 1-pyridin-2-yl-ethylamines, while the majority rely on a chiral auxiliary strategy.^{19,20} The direct catalytic asymmetric addition of MeLi to pyridyl-2-imines was poor.²¹ Alternatively, organocatalytic asymmetric reduction of ketimines with silanes as a reductant was also reported, while the asymmetric control did not reach a useful level (Scheme 1a).^{22,23} On the other hand, transition-metal-catalyzed asymmetric reductive amination (ARA) of ketones has been proven as a reliable and direct method for the synthesis of chiral amines.^{24–35} Most reported ketone examples containing a pyridine ring are limited to 3- or 4-acylpyridines;^{36,37} instead, there are only very limited reports dealing with 2-acylpyridines, likely due to the strong coordinating ability of both the starting materials and the resulting products toward metal catalysts. For example, Yamada reported a Ru-catalyzed ARA of C2-acetylpyridine with ammonium salts; however, a substituent on the C6 position is required to ensure efficiency (Scheme 1b).³⁸ In addition, Zhou reported an intriguing iridium-catalyzed asymmetric stepwise amination of C2-benzoylpyridines of benzylamine using transfer hydrogenation, while the scope is limited to aryl ketones.³⁹ Based on the current method limitations and the



Fig. 1 Selected bioactive molecules and ligands bearing a 2-pyridine-substituted chiral amine unit.

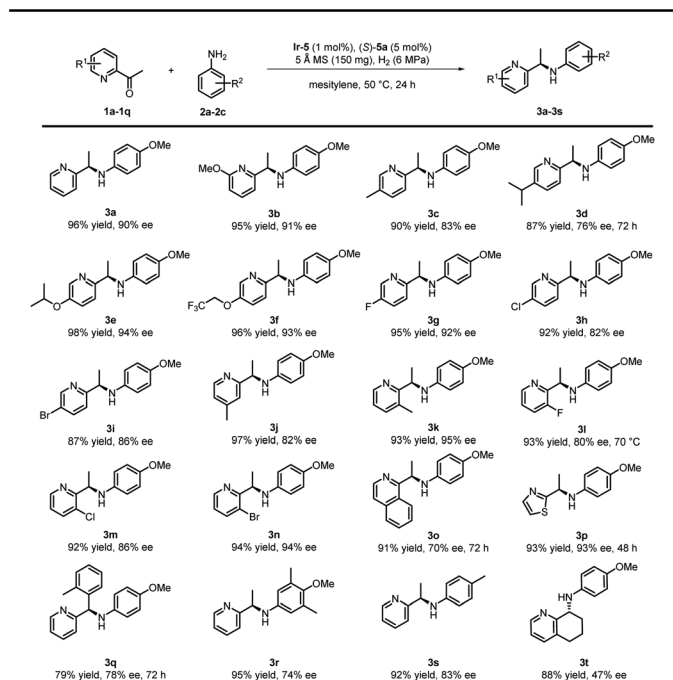
^a School of Science, Harbin Institute of Technology (Shenzhen), Shenzhen 518055, China. E-mail: youhengzhi@hit.edu.cn

^b Green Pharmaceutical Engineering Research Centre, Harbin Institute of Technology (Shenzhen), Shenzhen 518055, China

^c Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Shenzhen University of Advanced Technology, Shenzhen, Guangdong 518107, China. E-mail: yinqin@suat-sz.edu.cn

^d Shenzhen Institutes of Advanced Technology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Shenzhen, Guangdong 518055, China. E-mail: qin.yin@siat.ac.cn

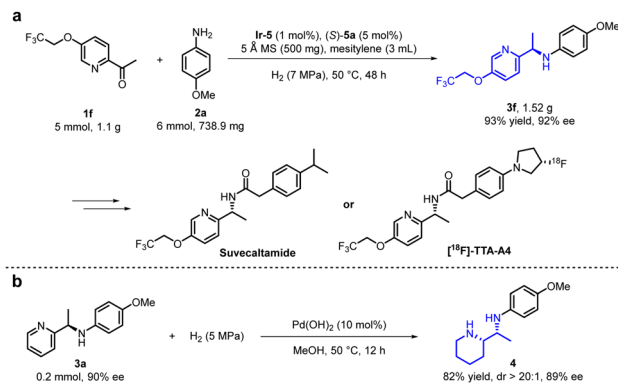


Table 2 Scope of substrates^a

^a Reaction conditions: ketone **1** (0.3 mmol), Ar-NH₂ (0.36 mmol), cat. (1 mol%), (S)-5a (5 mol%), mesitylene (1 mL), 5 Å MS (150 mg), H₂ (6 MPa), 50 or 70 °C, 24–72 h, isolated yield. Absolute configuration assigned by comparison with the literature (see the SI).

were observed, supplying the corresponding products with yields ranging from 87% to 98% and ee values between 76% and 94% (**3c–3f**). Substrates bearing a halide group also performed well, yielding **3g–3i** with yields of 87% to 95% and an ee between 82 to 92%. The compatibility of halides offers further chances for derivatizations. For C4-Me-substituted 2-acetylpyridine **1j**, the product **3j** was obtained with 82% ee but nearly quantitative yield. Interestingly, substituents (*e.g.*, Me or halide) on the C3 position have little effect on the outcome (**3k–3n**), producing the desired products with 80–95% ee. We also tested other N-hetero aromatics, such as 1-isoquinolin-1-yl-ethanone (**1o**) or 2-acetylthiazole (**1p**). While the enantiocontrol of **1o** was decreased (70% ee for **3o**), the products **3p** stemming from **1p** were achieved with a remarkable 93% yield and 93% ee after 48 hours. Notably, the sterically bulkier substrate pyridin-2-yl(*o*-tolyl)methanone **1q** yielded **3q** with 78% ee and 79% yield after 72 hours, highlighting the potential of this method on more challenging substrates. In addition, we also tested two other anilines (**3r**, **3s**); however, the asymmetric control seemed to be sensitive to the substituent on the phenyl ring, and inferior control was observed. Notably, cyclic ketone **1t** was also applicable while the corresponding product **3t** has only 47% ee.

To showcase the practicality, substrate **1f** was chosen for the scale-up reaction. At a 5 mmol scale, product **3f** was obtained with a 93% yield and 92% ee under 7 MPa hydrogen pressure for 48 hours, matching small-scale results (Scheme 2a). Product **3f** can be further converted into various drug molecules. In addition, the pyridine ring in compound **3a** can be



Scheme 2 Scale-up experimentation and synthetic applications.

hydrogenated in a highly diastereoselective manner using Pd(OH)₂/C as a catalyst, yielding the piperidine-derived vicinal diamine **4** with a dr of 20:1 and 89% ee (Scheme 2b).⁵¹

In conclusion, the ARA reaction of C2-acylpyridines and their analogues with *p*-anisidine was achieved *via* synergistic catalysis using Cp*Ir(III)-diamine catalysts and chiral phosphoric acid, affording a series of synthetically useful chiral 1-(2-pyridyl)ethanamine derivatives with generally high yields and good to excellent ee. In addition, this method is scalable, offering a rapid and practical strategy for the synthesis of drug molecules containing the chiral 1-(2-pyridyl)ethanamine scaffold.

Gang Wang: writing – original draft, methodology, data curation. Zhiwen Nie: methodology, data curation. Hengzhi You: review & editing, project administration. Qin Yin: writing – review & editing, project administration, conceptualization.

This work was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (No. 22522109; 22271307; 22302048), the Shenzhen Science and Technology Innovation Program (No. JCYJ20240813161112017; JCYJ20220818100804010; GXWD202 20811173736002; and KCXFZ20230731094904009), and the Shenzhen Key Laboratory of Advanced Functional Carbon Materials Research and Comprehensive Application. Q. Y. is indebted to Shenzhen University of Advanced Technology and Shenzhen Institutes of Advanced Technology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, for providing a starting grant.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

Data availability

Experimental procedures, characterization data, and NMR and HPLC spectra for all compounds can be found in the SI. See DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1039/d5cc04017e>

Notes and references

- H.-L. Kwong, H.-L. Yeung, C.-T. Yeung, W.-S. Lee, C.-S. Lee and W.-L. Wong, *Coord. Chem. Rev.*, 2007, **251**, 2188–2222.
- S. Sharma, M. Chauhan, A. Jamsheera, S. Tabassum and F. Arjmand, *Inorg. Chim. Acta*, 2017, **458**, 8–27.



- 3 M. Chen, J. Zhang, C. Liu, H. Li, H. Yang, Y. Feng and B. Zhang, *Org. Lett.*, 2021, **23**, 1748–1752.
- 4 T. Liu, Y. Hu and A. Shen, *Chin. J. Org. Chem.*, 2023, **43**, 622.
- 5 S. Zhang, Y. Ouyang, Y. Gao and P. Li, *Acc. Chem. Res.*, 2024, **57**, 957–970.
- 6 A. R. Dwivedi, S. Jaiswal, D. Kukkar, R. Kumar, T. G. Singh, M. P. Singh, A. M. Gaidhane, S. Lakhanpal, K. N. Prasad and B. Kumar, *RSC Med. Chem.*, 2025, **16**, 12–36.
- 7 H.-X. Cen, L.-P. Ding, L.-L. Liu, W.-D. Pan, X.-Q. Zhu, W.-W. Li, W.-J. Zhang, L.-J. Peng and X.-L. Liu, *Chin. J. Chem.*, 2025, **43**, 599–606.
- 8 J. Maury, W. Zawodny and J. Clayden, *Org. Lett.*, 2017, **19**, 472–475.
- 9 M. F. Egan, X. Zhao, A. Smith, M. D. Troyer, V. N. Uebele, V. Pidkorytov, K. Cox, M. Murphy, D. Snavelly, C. Lines and D. Michelson, *Hum. Psychopharmacol.*, 2013, **28**, 124–133.
- 10 R. L. Kraus, Y. Li, Y. Gregan, A. L. Gotter, V. N. Uebele, S. V. Fox, S. M. Doran, J. C. Barrow, Z.-Q. Yang, T. S. Reger, K. S. Koblan and J. J. Renger, *J. Pharmacol. Exp. Ther.*, 2010, **335**, 409–417.
- 11 K. Thress, T. MacIntyre, H. Wang, D. Whitston, Z.-Y. Liu, E. Hoffmann, T. Wang, J. L. Brown, K. Webster, C. Omer, P. E. Zage, L. Zeng and P. A. Zweidler-McKay, *Mol. Cancer Ther.*, 2009, **8**, 1818–1827.
- 12 A. Saini, R. Patel, S. Gaba, G. Singh, G. D. Gupta and V. Monga, *Eur. J. Med. Chem.*, 2022, **227**, 113907.
- 13 D. J. Hauss, S. E. Fogal, J. V. Ficorilli, C. A. Price, T. Roy, A. A. Jayaraj and J. J. Keirns, *J. Pharm. Sci.*, 1998, **87**, 164–169.
- 14 W. Lee, J. J. Crawford, I. Aliagas, L. J. Murray, S. Tay, W. Wang, C. E. Heise, K. P. Hoeflich, H. La, S. Mathieu, R. Mintzer, S. Ramaswamy, L. Rouge and J. Rudolph, *Bioorg. Med. Chem. Lett.*, 2016, **26**, 3518–3524.
- 15 M. Oliveira, D. Pominchuk, Z. Nowecki, E. Hamilton, Y. Kulyaba, T. Andabekov, Y. Hotko, T. Melkadze, G. Nemsadze, P. Neven, V. Vladimirov, C. Zamagni, H. Denys, F. Forget, Z. Horvath, A. Nesterova, M. Ajimi, B. Kirova, T. Klinowska, J. P. O. Lindemann, D. Lissa, A. Mathewson, C. J. Morrow, Z. Traugottova, R. Van Zyl and E. Arkania, *Lancet Oncol.*, 2024, **25**, 1424–1439.
- 16 C. Ni, T.-F. Ramspoth, M. C. Reis and S. R. Harutyunyan, *Angew. Chem., Int. Ed.*, 2025, **64**, e202415623.
- 17 A. Petrillo, K. F. Kirchgeßner-Prado, D. Hiller, K. A. Eisenlohr, G. Rubin, C. Würtele, R. Goldberg, D. Schatz, M. C. Holthausen, I. Garcia-Bosch and S. Schindler, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 2024, **146**, 25689–25700.
- 18 H. Wang, J. Wen and X. Zhang, *Chem. Rev.*, 2021, **121**, 7530–7567.
- 19 S. D. Kuduk, R. M. DiPardo, R. K. Chang, C. Ng and M. G. Bock, *Tetrahedron Lett.*, 2004, **45**, 6641–6643.
- 20 K. R. Prasad and O. Revu, *Tetrahedron*, 2013, **69**, 8422–8428.
- 21 Q. Perron and A. Alexakis, *Tetrahedron: Asymmetry*, 2007, **18**, 2503–2506.
- 22 A. V. Malkov, A. J. P. Stewart-Liddon, G. D. McGeoch, P. Ramírez-López and P. Kočovský, *Org. Biomol. Chem.*, 2012, **10**, 4864–4877.
- 23 V. Skrypai, S. E. Varjosaari, F. Azam, T. M. Gilbert and M. J. Adler, *J. Org. Chem.*, 2019, **84**, 5021–5026.
- 24 B. Song, C.-B. Yu, Y. Ji, M.-W. Chen and Y.-G. Zhou, *Chem. Commun.*, 2017, **53**, 1704–1707.
- 25 H. Zhou, Y. Liu, S. Yang, L. Zhou and M. Chang, *Angew. Chem., Int. Ed.*, 2017, **56**, 2725–2729.
- 26 Y. Chen, Y.-M. He, S. Zhang, T. Miao and Q.-H. Fan, *Angew. Chem., Int. Ed.*, 2019, **58**, 3809–3813.
- 27 N. U. D. Reshi, V. B. Saptal, M. Beller and J. K. Bera, *ACS Catal.*, 2021, **11**, 13809–13837.
- 28 Y. Tian, L. Hu, Y.-Z. Wang, X. Zhang and Q. Yin, *Org. Chem. Front.*, 2021, **8**, 2328–2342.
- 29 Z. Gao, J. Liu, H. Huang, H. Geng and M. Chang, *Angew. Chem., Int. Ed.*, 2021, **60**, 27307–27311.
- 30 Z. Wu, W. Wang, H. Guo, G. Gao, H. Huang and M. Chang, *Nat. Commun.*, 2022, **13**, 3344.
- 31 D. Sakamoto, I. Gay Sánchez, J. Rybáček, J. Vacek, L. Bednárová, M. Pazderková, R. Pohl, I. Cisařová, I. G. Stará and I. Starý, *ACS Catal.*, 2022, **12**, 10793–10800.
- 32 Y. Gao, Z. Wang, X. Zhang, M. Zhao, S. Zhang, C. Wang, L. Xu and P. Li, *Angew. Chem., Int. Ed.*, 2023, **62**, e202303709.
- 33 Z. Luo, T. Fan, J. Luo, Y. Liu and J. Zhang, *Org. Chem. Front.*, 2024, **11**, 6735–6741.
- 34 T. Chen, Y. Hu, X. Tang, Y. Zou, L. Wei, Z. Zhang and W. Zhang, *Org. Lett.*, 2024, **26**, 769–774.
- 35 X. Wang and J. S. Zhou, *Chin. Chem. Lett.*, 2025, 111148.
- 36 Y. Gao, Z. Wang, X. Zhang, M. Zhao, S. Zhang, C. Wang, L. Xu and P. Li, *Angew. Chem., Int. Ed.*, 2023, **62**, e202303709.
- 37 L. Xiang, C. You, X. Li and X. Zhang, *Org. Lett.*, 2025, **27**, 6726–6731.
- 38 M. Yamada, K. Azuma and M. Yamano, *Org. Lett.*, 2021, **23**, 3364–3367.
- 39 B. Yang, H. Fu, J. Yuan, S. Wen, C. Wang, Q. Liu and H. Zhou, *Asian J. Org. Chem.*, 2021, **10**, 2950–2953.
- 40 L. Hu, Y. Zhang, Q.-W. Zhang, Q. Yin and X. Zhang, *Angew. Chem., Int. Ed.*, 2020, **59**, 5321–5325.
- 41 Z. Dai, X. Zhang and Q. Yin, *Chin. J. Org. Chem.*, 2022, **42**, 2261–2274.
- 42 L. Hu, Y.-Z. Wang, L. Xu, Q. Yin and X. Zhang, *Angew. Chem., Int. Ed.*, 2022, **134**, e202202552.
- 43 N. Rong, A. Zhou, M. Liang, S.-G. Wang and Q. Yin, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 2024, **146**, 5081–5087.
- 44 M. Zhang, T. Niu, M. Liang, F. Xu, Y. Du, H. Zhuang, R.-J. Song, H. Yang and Q. Yin, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 2025, **147**, 18197–18207.
- 45 M.-R. Liang, X. Du, J. Lin, N. Rong, X. Zhan, X. Mao, H. Zhuang, T. Niu and Q. Yin, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 2025, **147**, 4239–4248.
- 46 D. Steinhuebel, Y. Sun, K. Matsumura, N. Sayo and T. Saito, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 2009, **131**, 11316–11317.
- 47 X. Wang and J. S. Zhou, *Sci. China: Chem.*, 2024, **67**, 2566–2570.
- 48 J. Liu, X. Wu, J. A. Iggo and J. Xiao, *Coord. Chem. Rev.*, 2008, **252**, 782–809.
- 49 C. Li, B. Villa-Marcos and J. Xiao, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 2009, **131**, 6967–6969.
- 50 B. Villa-Marcos, C. Li, K. R. Mulholland, P. J. Hogan and J. Xiao, *Molecules*, 2010, **15**, 2453–2472.
- 51 C. Liu, M. Wang, Y. Xu, Y. Li and Q. Liu, *Angew. Chem., Int. Ed.*, 2022, **61**, e202202814.

