microRNA-497 inhibits cell proliferation and induces apoptosis by targeting YAP1 in human hepatocellular carcinoma

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Keywords
apoptosis; hepatocellular carcinoma; microRNA-497; proliferation; Yes-associated protein 1

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(Received 11 October 2015, revised 7 January 2016, accepted 10 January 2016)

doi:10.1002/2211-5463.12032

Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is the most common form of liver cancer and the third-leading cause of cancer-induced death [1]. Although various therapeutic strategies have been developed and utilized in recent years, the prognosis of HCC patients remains unsatisfactory, with a 5-year survival rate in approximately 30% [2]. Delayed diagnosis of HCC and lack of effective therapy for advanced HCC are two major reasons for the poor prognosis of HCC patients [3,4]. Exploring the underlying molecular mechanisms of the development and progression of HCC, which will contribute to the identification of novel biomarkers and therapeutic targets, is of great significance to HCC patients.

microRNAs (miRNAs) function as oncogenes or tumor suppressors in human cancers by targeting mRNAs for degradation and/or translational repression. miR-497 has been proposed as a tumor suppressive miRNA and its deregulation is observed in human cancers. However, the prognostic value of miR-497 and its underlying molecular pathways involved in the initiation and development of hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) are poorly investigated. In the present study, we found that the mean level of miR-497 in HCC tissues was lower than that in adjacent nontumor tissues. Clinical data indicated that low expression of miR-497 was prominently associated with adverse prognostic features of HCC including high serum alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) level, large tumor size, high Edmondson–Steiner grading and advanced tumor–node–metastasis (TNM) stage. Furthermore, miR-497 was an independent prognostic factor for indicating both 5-year overall survival and disease-free survival of HCC patients. Gain- and loss-of-function studies showed that miR-497 reduced cell proliferation and induced apoptosis in HCC cells. Yes-associated protein 1 (YAP1) was identified as a direct target of miR-497 in HCC. An inverse correlation between YAP1 and miR-497 expression was observed in HCC tissues. Notably, YAP1 knockdown abrogated the effects of miR-497 deletion on HCC cells with decreased cell proliferation and increased apoptosis. In conclusion, we report that miR-497 is a potent prognostic indicator and may suppress tumor growth of HCC by targeting YAP1.

Abbreviations
AFP, alpha-fetoprotein; FACS, fluorescence-activated cell sorting; FBS, fetal bovine serum; HCC, hepatocellular carcinoma; HRP, horseradish peroxidase; TNM, tumor–node–metastasis; YAP1, Yes-associated protein 1.
miRNAs have been regarded as significant modulators of numerous cellular functions [5], including differentiation, proliferation, apoptosis, migration, and invasion. Emerging evidence has confirmed that miRNAs can play oncogenic or tumor suppressive roles in human cancers [6,7]. Deregulated expression and dysfunction of miRNAs have been found to play an important role in the pathogenesis of HCC [8], and miRNAs have been suggested as potential biomarkers and attractive therapeutics for HCC [9]. Among all cancer-associated miRNAs, miR-497 has been reported to be down-regulated in breast cancer [10], cervical cancer [11], colorectal cancer [12], and pancreatic cancer [13]. Functional experiments revealed the tumor suppressive role of miR-497 both in vitro and in vivo [12]. In HCC, miR-497 has been found to be down-regulated compared with corresponding nontumor liver tissues [14–16]. However, the clinical significance of miR-497 and its functional role in HCC remain largely uncovered.

In this study, we found that miR-497 was down-regulated in HCC tissues. Its decreased expression was associated with adverse clinicopathological features and poor prognosis of HCC patients. Functional assays demonstrated that miR-497 suppressed cell proliferation, and induced apoptosis in HCC cells. Furthermore, we revealed that Yes-associated protein 1 (YAP1), a well-known oncogenic protein in HCC [17,18], was a downstream target of miR-497. Additionally, miR-497 achieves its biological function in HCC, at least in part, by inhibiting YAP1 expression.

Materials and methods

Clinical samples and cell lines

Eighty-six samples of HCC and matched adjacent nontumor tissues were obtained from the Department of Geriatric Surgery at the First Affiliated Hospital of Xi’an Jiaotong University during January 2006 to December 2008, with a median follow-up time of 29.5 months. The demographic features and clinicopathologic data were shown in Table 1. All samples were used after obtaining informed consent from patients. Patients receiving preoperative chemotherapy or embolization were excluded. The Xi’an Jiaotong University Ethics Committee approved all protocols according to the Declaration of Helsinki (as revised in Tokyo 2004).

The human HCC cell lines, HepG2 and Huh7 (the Institute of Biochemistry and Cell Biology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Shanghai, China), were routinely cultured in complete Dulbecco’s modified Eagle medium (DMEM; Gibco, Grand Island, NY, USA) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS; Gibco) with 100 units/mL penicillin and 100 μg/mL streptomycin (Sigma, St. Louis, MO, USA) at 37 °C in a humidified containing of 5% CO2 incubator.

Real-time quantitative reverse transcription-PCR (qRT-PCR)

qPCR primer against mature miRNA hsa-miR-497-5p (HmiRQP0540) and Homo sapiens snRNA U6 qPCR Primer (HmiRQP9001) were purchased from Genecopoeia (Guangzhou, China). Complementary DNA synthesis was performed using TaqMan MicroRNA Reverse Transcription kit (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA, USA) according to the manufacturer’s instructions. Amplification and detection of miR-497 and U6 were performed using a TaqMan Human MiRNA Assay Kit (Applied Biosystems). The relative expression of miR-497 was shown as fold difference relative to U6.

| Clinicopathologic features | n = 86 | miR-497 expression |
|----------------------------|--------|-------------------|
| Age (year)                 |        |                   |
| <50                        | 25     | 14                |
| ≥50                        | 61     | 29                |
| P                          | 0.476  | 0.596  |
| Sex                        |        |                   |
| Male                       | 68     | 35                |
| Female                     | 18     | 8                 |
| HBV                        |        |                   |
| Absent                     | 24     | 10                |
| Present                    | 62     | 33                |
| Serum AFP level (ng·mL⁻¹)  |        |                   |
| <20                        | 20     | 6                 |
| ≥20                        | 66     | 37                |
| P                          | 0.002* | 0.011* |
| Tumor size (cm)            |        |                   |
| <5                         | 27     | 8                 |
| ≥5                         | 59     | 35                |
| No. of tumor nodules       |        |                   |
| 1                          | 60     | 29                |
| ≥2                         | 26     | 14                |
| P                          | 0.639  | 0.261  |
| Cirrhosis                  |        |                   |
| Absent                     | 31     | 13                |
| Present                    | 55     | 30                |
| Venous infiltration        |        |                   |
| Absent                     | 46     | 19                |
| Present                    | 40     | 24                |
| P                          | 0.084  |                   |
| Edmondson–Steiner grading  |        |                   |
| I + II                     | 51     | 20                |
| III + IV                   | 35     | 23                |
| P                          | 0.016* |                   |
| TNM tumor stage            |        |                   |
| I + II                     | 67     | 28                |
| III + IV                   | 19     | 15                |
| P                          | 0.004* |                   |

HCC, hepatocellular carcinoma; HBV, hepatitis B virus; AFP, alpha-fetoprotein; TNM, tumor–node–metastasis. *Statistically significant.
The following primers were used: YAP1 sense primer 5'-CCT GCG TAG CCA GTT ACC AA-3' and antisense primer 5'-CCA TCT CAT CCA CAC TGT TC -3' and GAPDH sense primer 5'-CAA GCT CAT TTC CTG GTA TGA C-3' and antisense primer 5'-CAG TGA GGG TCT CTC TCT TCC T-3'. The PCR amplification for the quantification of the YAP1 and GAPDH mRNAs was performed using an ABI PRISM 7300 Sequence Detection System (Applied Biosystems) and a One Step SYBR® Prime-Script™ RT-PCR Kit II (Takara Bio, Shiga, Japan) according to the manufacturer’s protocols.

**Cell transfection**

All miRNA vectors were purchased from Genecopoeia including miR-497 expression vector (HmiR0271-MR04), the control vector for miR-497 (CmiR0001-MR04), miR-497 inhibitor (HmiR-AN0540-AM04), and the negative control for the miR-497 inhibitor (CmiR-AN0001-AM04). The targeted sequences for YAP1 siRNA duplex (5'-AAA UAA AGC CAU UUC UGG UUU GCU CCU-3') or a nonspecific duplex oligonucleotide as a negative control were synthesized by Sangon Biotech (Shanghai) Co., Ltd. (Shanghai, China). Cells were transfected with the vectors mentioned above using Lipofectamine 2000 (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA) according to the manufacturer’s instructions.

**Cell proliferation and apoptosis detection**

For the proliferation assay, HCC cells were seeded into 96-well plates at 5000 cells per well for 24 hours and assessed using a Cell Proliferation ELISA, BrdU (5-bromodeoxyuridine) (chemiluminescent) (Roche, Indianapolis, IN, USA). Flow cytometric analysis was made with fluorescence-activated cell sorting (FACS) CALIBUR (Becton Dickinson, San Jose, CA, USA) and CELL QUEST software (Becton Dickinson). An Annexin-V-FLUOS Staining Kit (Roche) was used to analyze the level of apoptosis following the manufacturer’s instruction. The percentage of apoptotic cells were calculated by the software in the flow cytometry.

**Western blot**

Total proteins were extracted with RIPA lysis buffer and separated by SDS-PAGE and then transferred onto the polyvinylidene fluoride membrane (Roche). The membrane was blocked with 5% skimmed milk and incubated with the appropriate antibody. The following primary antibodies were used: YAP1 (#12395; Cell Signaling, Danvers, MA, USA) and GAPDH (1 : 5000, sc-25778; Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Santa Cruz, CA, USA). Goat-anti-mouse/rabbit IgG conjugated to horseradish peroxidase (HRP) was used as the secondary antibody (1 : 5000, CW0102/103; Cwbio-tech, Shanghai, China). Blots were detected using enhanced chemiluminescence regents (Thermo Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA). Western blot results were analyzed by IMAGEJ software (National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD, USA).

**Luciferase reporter assay**

The 3'-untranslated region (UTR) sequence of YAP1 predicted to interact with miR-497 or a mutated sequence within the predicted target sites was synthesized and inserted into the XbaI and FseI sites of the pGL3 control vector (Promega, Madison, WI, USA). These constructs were named as wild-type (wt) YAP1-3'UTR or mutant (mt) YAP1-3'UTR, respectively. For the luciferase reporter assay, Huh7 cells were respectively transfected with wt YAP1-3'UTR and mt YAP1-3'UTR and subsequently transduced with corresponding miRNA vectors. The cells were collected after 48 hours. The dual-luciferase reporter assay system (Promega) was used to measure Renilla luciferase activity according to the manufacturer’s protocols.

**Immunohistochemical staining**

The formalin-fixed and paraffin-embedded tissues from postoperative patients were cut into 5-μm sections. Sections were deparaffinized in xylene and rehydrated using a series of graded alcohols. Then slides were subjected to antigen retrieval with 0.01 M sodium citrate (pH 6.0) and blocking with 10% goat serum. The samples were incubated at 4 °C overnight with YAP1 (#12395; Cell Signaling) antibody. Immunostaining was performed using a SPlink Detection Kits (SP-9002; ZSGB-Bio, Beijing, China) according to the manufacturer’s instructions. The percentage of positive cells was graded as per the following criteria: 0, < 10%; 1, 10–30%; 2, 31–50%; 3, more than 50%.

**Statistical analysis**

Quantitative data are presented as mean ± SEM. Comparison between two groups using a two-tailed Student’s t-test. A Pearson chi-squared test was applied to determine clinicopathological correlations. The Kaplan–Meier method was used to calculate the survival curves. Significance was determined by the log-rank test. The association between miR-497 and YAP1 expression in HCC tissues was confirmed by Spearman’s correlation. Multivariate Cox regression analyses were performed to evaluate the effect of miR-497 expression on overall survival and recurrence-free survival. Difference were considered significant when P < 0.05.

**Results**

**Clinical significance of miR-497 in HCC cases**

Initially, we tested the expression of miR-497 in a retrospective cohort of 86 HCC tissues and matched...
adjacent nontumor tissues using qRT-PCR. The expression level of miR-497 in HCC tissues was significantly lower than that in matched adjacent nontumor liver tissues ($P < 0.05$, Fig. 1A). The expression of miR-497 was considered as either low ($n = 43$) or high ($n = 43$) according to the cutoff value, which was defined as the median of the cohort. As shown in Table 1, miR-497 was expressed at prominently lower levels in HCC patients with high alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) level ($P = 0.002$), large tumor size ($P = 0.011$), high Edmondson–Steiner grading ($P = 0.016$), and advanced TNM tumor stage ($P = 0.004$). Next, 86 HCC patients with survival information were analyzed by Kaplan–Meier estimation. Tumors with low expression of miR-497 indeed associated with shorter overall survival and disease-free survival of HCC patients ($P < 0.05$, respectively, Fig. 1B,C). Furthermore, multivariate Cox regression analysis indicated that miR-497 expression was an independent factor for predicting both 5-year overall and disease-free survival in HCC patients ($P = 0.004$ and $0.002$, respectively, Table 2). These data indicate that miR-497 is a potent biomarker for predicting prognosis of HCC patients.

miR-497 inhibits HCC cell proliferation and induces apoptosis

We transduced HCC cell line, HepG2, with miR-497 expression vector and the control vector for miR-497. As measured by qRT-PCR, the expression of miR-497 was...
significantly up-regulated by miR-497 expression vector in HepG2 cells ($P < 0.05$, Fig. 2A). BrdU incorporation assays were performed to test the effect of altering miR-497 levels on HCC cell proliferation. We found that up-regulation of miR-497 led to a significant reduction in cell proliferation in HepG2 cells ($P < 0.05$, Fig. 2B). Further-
more, as determined by flow cytometry assays, the percentage of apoptotic HepG2 cells was significantly elevated after up-regulation of miR-497 ($P < 0.05$, Fig. 2C). Next, miR-497 down-regulating Huh7 cells was established and confirmed by qRT-PCR ($P < 0.05$, Fig. 2D). As expected, down-regulation of miR-497 obviously promoted HCC cell proliferation and inhibited apoptosis ($P < 0.05$, respectively, Fig. 2E,F). Thus, miR-497 inhibits cell proliferation and induces apoptosis in HCC cells.

**YAP1 is identified as a functional target of miR-497**

To disclose the molecular mechanisms by which miR-497 inhibits HCC cell growth, predicted target genes of miR-497 were retrieved and analyzed using publicly available databases (TargetScan 6.2 and MiRanDa). YAP1, which is known to be an important transcription factor in liver development and cancer progression [19], was predicted as one of the targets of miR-497. As measured by qRT-PCR and western blot, both YAP1 mRNA and protein levels were significantly reduced by up-regulation of miR-497 in HepG2 cells ($P < 0.05$, respectively, Fig. 3A,B). Next, we investigated whether the miR-497 directly interacted with the 3'-UTR of YAP1 mRNA using a dual-luciferase reporter assay. As expected, miR-497 significantly inhibited the luciferase activity of YAP1 containing a wild-type (wt) 3'-UTR but did not suppress activity of YAP1 with a mutant (mt) 3'-UTR ($P < 0.05$, Fig. 3C, D). When anti-miR-497 was transfected, an increase in luciferase activity of wt YAP1 3'-UTR was observed. However, with the mt YAP1 3'-UTR constructs, there was no relative increase in activity ($P < 0.05$, Fig. 3C, D). Thus, our data strongly suggest that YAP1 is a target of miR-497 in HCC.

**miR-497 inhibits cell growth by targeting YAP1 in HCC cells**

Expression of YAP1 was further detected by immunohistochemistry in the previous cohort of 86 pairs of HCC and normal tumor-adjacent tissues. YAP1 was demonstrated to be significantly higher in HCC tissues as compared with that in noncancerous tissues ($P < 0.05$, Fig. 4A). YAP1 immunoreactivity was considered as either negative (score 0) or positive (scores 1–3). In these cases, YAP1 expression was detected in 69.8% (30/43) of the HCC samples with low expression of miR-497, whereas only 34.9% (15/43) of the HCC specimens with high expression of miR-497.
miR-497 showed a positive YAP1 signal \( (P < 0.05, \text{Fig. 4B}) \). Furthermore, Spearman correlation analysis indicated that miR-497 was inversely correlated with YAP1 expression in HCC tissues \( (r = -0.562, P < 0.001) \).

miR-497 down-regulating Huh7 cells that were transfected with scrambled siRNA or YAP1 siRNA were subjected to western blot for YAP1. As assessed by immunoblotting, YAP1 was knocked down by a specific siRNA \( (P < 0.05, \text{Fig. 5A}) \). Furthermore, YAP1 knockdown inhibited cell proliferation and induces apoptosis in miR-497 down-regulating Huh7 cells \( (P < 0.05, \text{respectively, Fig. 5B,C}) \), suggesting that YAP1 knockdown abrogated the effects of down-regulation of miR-497 on HCC cells. Taken together, these data indicate that miR-497 suppresses HCC cell growth by inhibiting YAP1.

**Discussion**

Several studies have demonstrated that miRNAs regulate the expression of oncogene or tumor suppressor, suggesting a new mechanism involved in the initiation and development of HCC [20,21]. miR-497 has been considered as a potent biomarker of human cancers with high prognostic value [13,22,23]. We initially detected the expression level of miR-497 in 86 paired of HCC tissues and adjacent nontumor tissues. Quantification of the data indicated that miR-497 expression in tumor tissues was significantly down-regulated as compared with that in adjacent nontumor tissues. Furthermore, our results showed that reduced miR-497 expression was associated with poor prognostic features in HCC. Importantly, miR-497 was identified as an independent prognostic marker for predicting 5-year overall survival and disease-free survival of HCC patients. Altogether, our results indicate that the status of miR-497 may be critical for prognosis determination in HCC patients.

Our gain- and loss-of-function experiments demonstrated that up-regulation of miR-497 inhibited cell proliferation and induced apoptosis in HepG2 cells. And down-regulation of miR-497 promoted cell proliferation and inhibited apoptosis in Huh7 cells. These data suggest that miR-497 indeed inhibits HCC cell growth in vitro. Deregulation of miRNAs has been considered as critical factor in the initiation and progression of HCC [24]. miRNAs function as a negative regulator of target gene through targeting mRNA for degradation and inhibiting protein translation [25]. The predicted targets of miR-497 were analyzed using publicly available databases (TargetScan 6.2 and MiRanda). YAP1 is a terminal effector of Hippo/YAP signaling and contributes to cell proliferation of liver
Furthermore, YAP1 is highly up-regulated in liver cancer specimens and cells [26], indicating the importance of YAP1 in liver tumorigenesis. Thus, we determined the expression of YAP1 in HCC cells with altering expression of miR-497. As expected, up-regulation of miR-497 significantly reduced the levels of both YAP1 mRNA and protein in HepG2 cells. Herein, we validated YAP1 as a direct functional target of miR-497 in HCC. Furthermore, the expression of YAP1 in HCC tissues was obviously higher compared with that in matched normal nontumor tissues. Otherwise, a significant inverse correlation between miR-497 and YAP1 expression was observed in HCC tissues. Importantly, YAP1 knockdown abolished the regulatory effect of down-regulation of miR-497 on Huh7 cells with decreased cell proliferation and increased apoptosis. Accordingly, we suggest that miR-497 may suppress cell growth by targeting YAP1 in HCC.

In conclusion, we find that miR-497 is down-regulated in HCC tissues compared to matched adjacent noncancerous tissues. Clinical data indicate that low expression of miR-497 is evidently associated with poor prognostic features of HCC. Notably, miR-497 expression is an independent prognostic marker for predicting 5-year overall survival and recurrence-free survival of HCC patients. We demonstrate that miR-497 may reduce cell growth by suppressing YAP1 expression in HCC cells. Taken together, we consider that miR-497 may potentially act as a clinical biomarker, and may also be a therapeutic target, in HCC.

Conclusions

In summary, this study shows that the expression of miR-497 is down-regulated in HCC tissues compared to matched adjacent noncancerous tissues. Clinical data indicate that low expression of miR-497 is evidently associated with poor prognostic features of HCC. Notably, miR-497 expression is an independent prognostic marker for predicting 5-year overall survival and recurrence-free survival of HCC patients. Gain-of-function studies demonstrate that miR-497 overexpression inhibits proliferation and induces apoptosis of HepG2 cells. On the contrary, miR-497 silencing facilitates Huh7 cell proliferation and inhibits apoptosis. Our data indicate that miR-497 inversely regulates the abundance of YAP1 in HCC cells.
Herein, YAP1 is identified as a direct downstream target of miR-497. Furthermore, YAP1 expression is up-regulated in HCC tissues and it is inversely correlated with the levels of miR-497. Importantly, YAP1 knockdown rescues the effects of miR-497 silencing on Huh7 cells with reduced proliferation and increased apoptosis. This study reveals that miR-497 may play a critical role in the tumor growth of HCC and may be a potential prognostic biomarker and therapeutic target for HCC.

Acknowledgements
The present study was supported by a grant from the Research Projects of Affiliated Hospital of Xi’an Medical College (no. XYFY-09-27).

Author contribution statement
Lei Zhang, Zhaoxiang Yu, and Yao Xian carried out the cell biology and molecular biology experiments, participated in the sequence alignment, and drafted the manuscript. Lei Zhang, Zhaoxiang Yu, and Xiaoobo Lin participated in the design of the study and performed the statistical analysis. Xiaoobo Lin conceived the study, and helped to draft the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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