The APOE ε4 exerts differential effects on familial and other subtypes of Alzheimer’s disease

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Funding Information
National Natural Science Foundation of China, Grant/Award Number: 81530036; National Key Scientific Instrument and Equipment Development Project, Grant/Award Number: 31627803; Mission Program of Beijing Municipal Administration of Hospitals, Grant/Award Number: SML20150901; Beijing Scholars Program; Beijing Brain Initiative from Beijing Municipal Science & Technology Commission, Grant/Award Number: Z16110000216137; Project for Outstanding Doctor with Combined Ability of Western and Chinese Medicine; and Beijing Municipal Commission of Health and Family Planning, Grant/Award Number: PXM2019_026283_000003

Abstract
Introduction: The genetic risk effects of apolipoprotein E (APOE) on familial Alzheimer’s disease (FAD) with or without gene mutations, sporadic AD (SAD), and normal controls (NC) remain unclear in the Chinese population.

Methods: In total, 15 119 subjects, including 311 FAD patients without PSEN1, PSEN2, APP, TREM2, and SORL1 pathogenic mutations (FAD [unknown]); 126 FAD patients with PSENs/APP mutations (FAD [PSENs/APP]); 7234 SAD patients; and 7448 NC were enrolled. The risk effects of APOE ε4 were analyzed across groups.

Results: The prevalence of the APOE ε4 genotype in FAD (unknown), FAD (PSENs/APP), SAD, and NC groups was 56.27%, 26.19%, 36.23%, and 19.54%, respectively. Further, the APOE ε4 positive genotype had predictive power for FAD (unknown) risk (odds ratio: 4.51, 95% confidence interval: 3.57–5.45, P < .001).

Discussion: APOE ε4 positive genotype may cause familial aggregation, and the investigation of multiple interventions targeting APOE pathological function to reduce the risk for this disease warrants attention.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The aging population in China has reached an unprecedented level. Dementia, especially Alzheimer’s disease (AD), has become a serious social and family burden. AD is classified into familial Alzheimer’s disease (FAD) and sporadic Alzheimer’s disease (SAD). FAD is almost entirely genetically determined, with heritability ranging from 92% to 100%. It is characterized by an early age of onset and pedigree clustering. FAD has been widely researched over the years since its first identification. The pathogenic mutations in the amyloid precursor protein (APP), presenilin 1 (PSEN1), and presenilin 2 (PSEN2) genes involved in the amyloid beta (Aβ) peptide processing, leads to development of FAD. However, these mutations underlie FAD in only a small proportion of cases, leaving a large group of familial subtypes genetically unexplained. Advances in sequencing techniques have enabled the identification of rare mutations and variants with moderate-to-strong risk effects on this complex disease. Recently, next-generation sequencing studies have identified new loci such as sortilin-related receptor 1 (SORL1) and triggering receptor expressed on myeloid cells 2 (TREM2), suggesting the role of functional pathways other than Aβ processing in AD pathogenesis. These new genes and mechanistic pathways could inspire new diagnostic concepts or therapeutic targets for AD.

Apolipoprotein E (APOE) is regarded as the greatest risk gene for AD; among the three isoform alleles (ε2, ε3, and ε4), APOE ε4 is considered the primary genetic risk factor. Homozygous APOE ε4 carriers usually exhibit earlier onset of the disease than heterozygous carriers, highlighting the dose-effect of the ε4 allele on AD. One copy of the ε4 allele increases the risk of AD by ≈2 to 6 times, and the presence of two copies increases the risk by 7.2 to 21.8 times (African Americans 7.2, Hispanics 8.6, white 11.8, Japanese 21.8). The general frequency of the APOE ε4 allele ranges from 9% to 23% in diverse ethnic populations (Asian 9%, Hispanic 12%, white 14%, African descent 19%, other/mixed 23%), but dramatically increases in AD patients (Hispanic 24%, Asian 28%, African descent 35%, white 38%, other/mixed 45%). The frequency of the APOE ε4 allele also varies among these subtypes. A recent study in a cohort of 404 Chinese subjects with FAD showed that among patients without PSENs/APP mutations, 44.31% carried one APOE ε4 allele, while 14.85% carried two APOE ε4 alleles. This suggests that APOE ε4 plays a major role in cases of FAD without PSENs/APP mutations. These results challenge the role of APOE as a risk factor mainly for SAD development. Therefore, a large-scale, multicenter study is necessary to investigate the effects of APOE in FAD, especially in those without PSENs/APP mutations.

Our aim was to explore the distribution and genetic effects of the APOE ε4 genotype in FAD without APP, PSEN1, PSEN2, TREM2, and SORL1 mutations. In addition, we compared the frequency of APOE in the Chinese population with data available from other countries. The outcomes of this study provide more clarity regarding the regulation of AD by the APOE ε4 positive genotype.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Participants

In total, 15,119 individuals, comprising 437 FAD, 7234 SAD patients, and 7448 normal controls (NC), were included in this study between January 2013 and May 2019.

FAD patients were enrolled from the Chinese Familial Alzheimer’s Disease Network (CFAN), which is a multicenter nationwide longitudinal study (www.chinacfan.org). All individuals from families with AD underwent APOE genotyping and testing for PSEN1, PSEN2, APP, TREM2, and SOR1L mutations. Depending on whether an individual carried a pathogenic mutation in an AD-associated gene, the cohort was divided into the following two subgroups: FAD without PSEN1, PSEN2, APP, TREM2, and SOR1L mutations. In total, 311 patients with FAD (unknown) and 126 patients with FAD (PSENs/APP) were included in this study. The samples of SAD were derived from the China Cognition and Aging Study (COAST), which is a multicenter cohort study comprising clinical diagnosis, disease progression, genetic regulation, and drug trials across 30/31 provinces in China. To investigate the prevalence of the APOE ε4 genotypes and allele frequencies in AD among the Chinese population, we excluded individuals for whom APOE genotype data were not available. The protocol of this study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Xuanwu Hospital, Capital Medical University. Written informed consent was obtained from the participants or their legal guardians prior to any study procedures.

2.2 | Procedures

The participants from the CFAN or COAST studies were initially assessed using the Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE). Participants with the MMSE score < 26 points underwent an additional structured clinical visit, during which their demographic information, family history, and medical history were collected, and neurological physical examination and neuropsychological assessments were performed. Four cognitive domains, namely memory, executive function, language, and visuo-constructive skills, were assessed with a battery of neuropsychological scales, including the Montreal Cognitive Assessment, the Chinese Version of the World Health Organization University of California-Los Angeles, Auditory Verbal Learning Test (WHO-UCLA AVLT), Trail Making Test, Digit Span Test, and Boston Naming Test. Any neuropsychiatric symptoms were detected using...
the Neuropsychiatric Inventory. Functional ability was assessed by the Activities of Daily Living. Overall cognitive function was evaluated using a clinical dementia rating (CDR); CDR global scores (range 0-3) and CDR sum of boxes (SOB) scores (range 0-18) were recorded.

The following four groups were included in this study: FAD (unknown), FAD (PSENs/APP), SAD, and NC. The FAD (unknown) group comprised individuals with at least two first-degree relatives affected by AD across two successive generations and without missense mutations in PSEN1, PSEN2, TREM2, and SORL1. The FAD (PSENs/APP) group comprised individuals with at least two first-degree relatives affected by AD across two successive generations and with missense mutations in the PSEN1, PSEN2, or APP genes. The NC group comprised individuals with normal cognition with an MMSE score ≥26 points from the China COAST. For FAD (unknown), FAD (PSENs/APP), and SAD groups, dementia status was diagnosed according to the criteria described by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision. The diagnosis of AD was made using the National Institute of Neurological and Communicative Disorders and Stroke and the Alzheimer’s Disease and Related Disorders Association or the National Institute on Aging-Alzheimer’s Association criteria. The detailed inclusion and exclusion criteria are provided in Table S1 in supporting information.

Blood samples were drawn by venipuncture at baseline and DNA was extracted by salting-out procedures, as previously described. The Sanger sequencing method was used to determine the APOE genotypes. Exon 4 of the APOE gene was amplified by PCR using the following primers: APOE sense, 5’-AGACGCGGCGACGCTGCTCAGAGGA-3’; and APOE antisense, 5’-CCCTCGGCGCCGGCCGTGTACAC-3’. PSENs/APP mutation genotyping was performed by screening exons 3-12 of PSEN1, exons 3-12 of PSEN2, and exons 16-17 of APP genes with the flanking intron sequences being amplified by PCR, using specific primers. The PCR products were sequenced using an ABI3730xl DNA Analyzer (Sangon Biotech Co., Ltd., Shanghai, China). The DNA sequences were analyzed using Chromas (Chromas version 2.33, Techneleyisum Pty Ltd, USA). The pathogenicity of the detected mutations in PSEN1, PSEN2, APP, TREM2, or SORL1 was assessed using the AD Mutation Database (http://www.molgen.ua.ac.be/ADMutations/), AlzForum (http://www.alzforum.org), PubMed (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/), PolyPhen-2 (http://genetics.bwh.harvard.edu/pph2/), and Mutation Taster (http://www.mutationtaster.org).

2.3 Statistical analyses

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the participant characteristics, including the variables of age, age at onset, sex, years of education, MMSE scores, and CDR scores. The means ± standard deviation were used to describe the quantitative variables. The prevalence of the APOE allele and genotype in each group was analyzed by Pearson’s χ² and Fisher’s exact test (as necessary), with post hoc Bonferroni corrections. Binary logistic regression models were conducted to evaluate the predictive effect of the APOE genotypes and ε4- or ε2- positive genotype status on the cases (FAD [unknown], FAD [PSENs/APP], and SAD) compared to the NC after adjusting for age, sex, education, and region of subjects. We further calculated the risk of APOE genotype for AD across different ages in the FAD (unknown) group and SAD group using a binary logistic regression model after adjusting for sex and education. According to the Framingham risk scoring method described by Sullivan et al., we established a FAD (unknown) prediction model. The FAD (unknown) risk prediction model is based on a binary logistic regression model, and APOE genotype, age, sex, and education were included as risk factors. The disease risk score was estimated according to the regression coefficient of the significant risk factors, and the risk heat map was drawn according to the risk prediction probability. The prediction accuracy of FAD (unknown) risk prediction model was estimated by the area under curve (AUC) using a logistic regression model. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 22.0 (SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL, USA). P < .05 was considered to indicate significant results.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Demographics

The demographics and clinical characteristics of each diagnostic group are presented based on the results obtained from the three regions across the China (Figure 1A). On average, the participants included in the analyses (n = 15 119) were older than 65 years, except for
FIGURE 1 Distribution of 15,119 participants in China, prevalence of apolipoprotein E (APOE) ε4 positive genotypes among Alzheimer’s disease (AD) patients, and the prevalence of AD among normal populations in China and other countries. A, Proportion of study participants from various geographical areas in China (45.10% from northern, 30.20% from southern, and 24.70% from western China.) B, The prevalence of APOE ε4 positive genotype shows a rising trend in the order of China (36.23%), South Korea (46.25%), Japan (48.92%), Brazil (49%), Colombia (49.37%), Spain (51.15%), Germany (53.04%), America (55.84%), United Kingdom (56.16%), France (56.36%), Australia (62.44%), and Canada (64.20%). China is positioned at the lowest prevalence level. C, The prevalence of AD in the population in France is presented the highest (12%), followed by the United States (9.7%), Spain (8.5%), Japan (7.2%), Australia (6.7%), UK (6.5%), South Korea (5.2%), Germany (3.06%), Canada (3%), China (3%), Brazil (2.7%), and Colombia (1.8%).

3.2 APOE allele frequencies across the diagnostic groups

The ε3 allele was the most frequent allele identified across all the groups (58.68% FAD [unknown], 80.56% FAD [PSENs/APP], 73.44% SAD, and 81.38% NC), followed by the ε4 allele (36.50% FAD [unknown], 13.89% FAD [PSENs/APP], 20.98% SAD, and 10.38% NC) and the ε2 allele (4.82% FAD [unknown], 5.56% FAD [PSENs/APP], 5.58% SAD, and 8.24% NC; Table 2).

3.3 APOE ε4 positive genotype carriers across the diagnosed groups

The prevalence of the APOE ε4 in SAD patients in China was the lowest among 12 countries (Figure 1B); however, the prevalence of SAD in China was not the lowest (Figure 1C). Further, we found that the prevalence of the APOE ε4 positive genotype was higher (56.27% FAD [unknown], 26.19% FAD [PSENs/APP], 36.23% SAD, and 19.54% NC, all \( P < .001 \)) than in the NC group (Table 2, and Table S2 in supporting information). In addition, the prevalence of the different APOE genotypes across the diagnostic groups is shown in Figure 2A. Interestingly, the prevalence of the APOE ε4 positive genotype in the FAD (unknown) group was higher than that in the SAD or FAD (PSENs/APP) groups (\( P < .001 \)), while the prevalence of the APOE ε4 positive genotype in the SAD group was higher than that in the FAD (PSENs/APP) group.
### Table 1: Participant characteristics

| Characteristics          | FAD (unknown) | FAD (PSENs/APP) | SAD          | NC           |
|--------------------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|
|                          | n = 311       | n = 126         | n = 7234     | n = 7448     |
| Age, mean ± SD           | 65.20 ± 11.30 | 49.97 ± 14.45   | 71.58 ± 10.46| 65.04 ± 11.45|
| AAO, mean ± SD           | 64.35 ± 9.24  | 48.52 ± 8.93    | 68.27 ± 10.38| 70.04 ± 11.45|
| Female, N (%)            | 148 (44.44)   | 69 (54.76)      | 356 (54.31)  | 4104 (55.10) |
| Education, mean ± SD     | 8.92 ± 4.52   | 10.96 ± 5.30    | 8.03 ± 6.19  | 8.8 ± 4.52   |
| MMSE, mean ± SD          | 18.95 ± 7.43  | 20.42 ± 8.82    | 17.27 ± 7.11 | 27.05 ± 2.59 |
| CDR global, mean ± SD    | 1.11 ± 0.78   | 0.98 ± 0.96     | 1.63 ± 1.76  |              |
| CDR SOB, Mean ± SD       | 5.28 ± 4.69   | 5.39 ± 5.59     | 5.54 ± 4.71  |              |

| Abbreviations: AAO, age at onset; APP, amyloid precursor protein; CDR, Clinical Dementia Rating; FAD (PSENs/APP), familial Alzheimer’s disease with PSEN1, PSEN2, or APP mutations; FAD (unknown), familial Alzheimer’s disease without PSEN1, PSEN2, APP, TREM2, and SORL1 mutations; FAD, familial Alzheimer’s disease; MMSE, Mini-Mental State Examination; NC, normal control; PSEN, presenilin; SAD, sporadic Alzheimer’s disease; SOB, sum of boxes.

*NOTE.* Data not available.

### Table 2: Prevalence of the APOE alleles and genotypes in each diagnostic group

| Group (N) | FAD (unknown) | FAD (PSENs/APP) | SAD          | NC           |
|-----------|---------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|
| Allele    | n = 311       | n = 126         | n = 7234     | n = 7448     |
| ε2        | 30 (4.82)     | 14 (5.56)       | 808 (5.58)   | 1228 (8.24)  |
| ε3        | 365 (58.68)   | 203 (80.56)     | 10625 (73.44)| 12122 (81.38)|
| ε4        | 227 (36.50)   | 35 (13.89)      | 3035 (20.98) | 1546 (10.38) |

| Genotype  | APOE ε3/ε3   | APOE ε3/ε4     | APOE ε4/ε4   | APOE ε4+     | APOE ε2+    | APOE ε2-     |
|-----------|--------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| APOE ε4/ε4 copies (homozygous) | 111 (35.69) | 82 (65.08) | 3966 (54.82) | 4933 (66.26) | 1229 (16.50) | 1455 (19.54) |
| APOE ε2/ε2 copies (heterozygous) | 0 (0.00) | 0 (0.00) | 39 (0.54) | 35 (0.47) | 1023 (13.74) | 135 (1.81) |
| APOE ε2/ε3 copies (heterozygous) | 25 (8.04) | 11 (8.73) | 608 (8.4) | 122 (1.69) | 3035 (20.98) | 1546 (10.38) |
| APOE ε3/ε4 copies (heterozygous) | 118 (37.94) | 28 (22.22) | 2085 (28.82) | 1229 (16.50) | 1455 (19.54) | 135 (1.81) |
| APOE ε4/ε4 copies (heterozygous) | 52 (16.72) | 2 (1.59) | 414 (5.72) | 91 (1.22) | 1455 (19.54) | 1455 (19.54) |
| APOE ε4+ copies (heterozygous) | 175 (56.27) | 33 (26.19) | 2621 (36.23) | 5993 (80.46) | 2621 (36.23) | 1455 (19.54) |
| APOE ε2+ copies (heterozygous) | 136 (43.73) | 93 (73.81) | 4613 (63.77) | 5993 (80.46) | 4613 (63.77) | 1455 (19.54) |
| APOE ε2- copies (heterozygous) | 30 (9.65) | 14 (11.11) | 769 (10.63) | 1193 (16.02) | 1193 (16.02) | 1193 (16.02) |

| Abbreviations: APOE, apolipoprotein E; APP, amyloid precursor protein; FAD (PSENs/APP), familial Alzheimer’s disease with PSEN1, PSEN2, or APP mutations; FAD (unknown), familial Alzheimer’s disease without PSEN1, PSEN2, APP, TREM2, and SORL1 mutations; FAD, familial Alzheimer’s disease; MMSE, Mini-Mental State Examination; NC, normal control; PSEN, presenilin; SAD, sporadic Alzheimer’s disease.

*NOTE.* Data are presented as N (percentage).

(P = .02). The APOE genotypes were classified as APOE ε4 heterozygous or homozygous, and their distribution in each group is shown in Figure 2C,D.

### 3.4 Predictive effect of APOE ε4 in AD

To explore the predictive effect of APOE in the different AD subtypes, we used binary logistic regression models adjusted for age, sex, education, and region of subjects (Table 3). We found that the APOE ε4 positive genotype had predictive power for the risk of FAD (unknown) (odds ratio [OR]: 4.51, 95% confidence interval [CI]: 3.57-5.45, P < .001), and SAD (OR: 2.26, 95% CI: 2.17-2.35, P < .001; Figure 2B). We also examined the effect of APOE ε4 gene dosage on disease risk, and found that the OR values for two APOE ε4 copies (homozygous) were higher than those for a single copy (heterozygous) in the FAD (unknown) and SAD groups; this was especially evident in the FAD (unknown) group (APOE ε4 heterozygous: OR: 3.26, 95% CI: 2.61-3.91, P < .001; APOE ε4 homozygous: OR: 22.13, 95% CI: 15.79-28.47, P < .001; Figure 2C,D).
The prevalence and predictive effect of apolipoprotein E (APOE) genotypes. The radar charts show the prevalence of APOE genotypes in Alzheimer’s disease (AD) subtypes and in normal population (A) and the odds ratio (OR) of APOE genotypes in AD subtypes (B). The prevalence and OR value of the APOE ε4/ε4 genotype was higher in the FAD (unknown) group compared to that in other groups. The bar graphs with the trendline indicates the rising frequencies and OR value in APOE ε4 heterozygous groups (C). The rising frequencies and OR in APOE ε4 homozygous genotypes in the FAD (unknown) group were also significantly higher than that in other groups (the OR value was presented with 95% confidence interval) (D). FAD (unknown), familial Alzheimer’s disease without PSEN1, PSEN2, APP, TREM2, and SORL1 mutations; FAD, familial Alzheimer’s disease; NC, normal control.

**FIGURE 2** The prevalence and predictive effect of apolipoprotein E (APOE) genotypes. The radar charts show the prevalence of APOE genotypes in Alzheimer’s disease (AD) subtypes and in normal population (A) and the odds ratio (OR) of APOE genotypes in AD subtypes (B). The prevalence and OR value of the APOE ε4/ε4 genotype was higher in the FAD (unknown) group compared to that in other groups. The bar graphs with the trendline indicates the rising frequencies and OR value in APOE ε4 heterozygous groups (C). The rising frequencies and OR in APOE ε4 homozygous genotypes in the FAD (unknown) group were also significantly higher than that in other groups (the OR value was presented with 95% confidence interval) (D). FAD (unknown), familial Alzheimer’s disease without PSEN1, PSEN2, APP, TREM2, and SORL1 mutations; FAD, familial Alzheimer’s disease; NC, normal control.

Risk effect of APOE genotype for AD across different ages in the FAD (unknown) and SAD groups

We estimated the OR values of the APOE ε4 positive genotype in comparison with that for the APOE ε4 negative genotype across different ages in the FAD (unknown) groups and SAD group by binary logistic regression models adjusted for sex and education (Figure 3A,B). We found that, in the same age range, the OR value increased with the number of APOE ε4 alleles in both groups. Moreover, we found that the risk due to the ε4 allele in both groups was age-dependent. In the FAD (unknown) group, the risk due to the ε4 allele gradually increased with age, and decreased gradually after 70 to 79 years of age. Similarly, in the SAD group, the risk for AD due to the ε4 allele gradually increased with age, and decreased after 65 to 74 years of age.

3.5 Risk prediction probability model of FAD (unknown)

Our results using the logistic regression model showed that APOE genotype and age were significant risk factors for FAD (unknown). We calculated the risk scores based on different age ranges and the number of APOE ε4 copies. The total risk score range was 0 to 15 points, and each score corresponded to a risk prediction probability score; these...
Table 3: Logistic regression analysis for predictive effect of APOE on AD subtypes

| Genotype | FAD (unknown) N = 311 | FAD (PSENs/APP) N = 126 | SAD N = 7234 |
|----------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| ε2/ε2   | 1                     | 1                       | 1           |
| ε2/ε3   | 1                     | 1                       | 1           |
| ε3/ε3   | 1                     | 1                       | 1           |
| ε4/ε4   | 1                     | 1                       | 1           |
| ε4/ε4   | 1                     | 1                       | 1           |
| ε4/ε4   | 1                     | 1                       | 1           |
| ε4/ε4   | 1                     | 1                       | 1           |
| ε4/ε4   | 1                     | 1                       | 1           |

NOTE. Data are presented as OR (95% CI) and P value. Abbreviations: APP, amyloid precursor protein; CI, confidence interval; FAD (PSENs/APP), familial Alzheimer’s disease with PSEN1, PSEN2, or APP mutations; FAD (unknown), familial Alzheimer’s disease without PSEN1, PSEN2, APP, TREM2, and SORL1 mutations; FAD, familial Alzheimer’s disease; NC, normal control APOE, apolipoprotein E; OR, odds ratio; PSEN, presenilin; SAD, sporadic Alzheimer’s disease.

4 | DISCUSSION

To our knowledge, this is the first multicenter study to examine APOE in the Chinese population and involved 15,119 individuals. We described the prevalence of the APOE alleles and genotypes in FAD (unknown), FAD (PSENs/APP), SAD, and NC groups and compared the genetic effects of APOE ε4 among these groups. We found that the APOE ε4 positive genotype increased the risk of AD, enhanced the familial aggregation, and showed a peak risk effect between 70 and 79 years of age in FAD (unknown) patients. Additionally, we found that the prevalence of the APOE ε4 positive genotype was clearly lower among the SAD patients in China than among those in Europe and the United States, indicating that ethnic background is an important factor in the risk of AD development.26,27

The prevalence of the APOE ε4 positive genotype displayed the following trend: FAD (unknown) (56.27%) > SAD (36.23%) > FAD (PSENs/APP) (26.19%) > NC (19.54%). The results revealed an uneven modulation across the groups. The results indicated that the APOE ε4 carriers in the FAD (unknown) group represented the largest proportion and had the highest OR values among all AD subgroups. However, the frequency of the APOE ε4 allele in the FAD (PSENs/APP) group was the lowest among AD groups, indicating that mutations in PSEN1, PSEN2, and APP genes promote disease development. This observation is consistent with those from previous studies.26,37 The high frequency of APOE ε4 is mainly attributed to the FAD (unknown) group rather than the FAD (PSENs/APP) group, suggesting that APOE ε4 plays an important role in the prevalence of FAD (unknown). We speculated that APOE may act as a major gene with incomplete penetrance, rather than a risk gene, in unknown mutant FAD. Furthermore, we found that the APOE ε4/ε4 positive genotype was prevalent in one third of the FAD (unknown) patients (APOE ε4/ε4 16.72% vs APOE ε4 positive genotype 56.27%) and in approximately one sixth of the SAD patients (APOE ε4/ε4 5.72% vs APOE ε4 positive genotype 36.23%). Moreover, the OR values for the two APOE ε4 copies (increase in risk by 22.13-fold) were higher than those for a single copy (by 3.26-fold) in the FAD (unknown) group. These values were 2-fold higher than those reported in previous studies.9-11 Thus, based on our study, we propose that patients...
FIGURE 3  The odds ratio (OR) and risk probability for Alzheimer’s disease (AD) development among different apolipoprotein E (APOE) ε4 genotypes with different age ranges. In the FAD (unknown) group (A), and SAD group (B), the odds ratio (OR) value for developing AD was higher in the APOE ε4 +/− group than in the APOE ε4 +/− group, irrespective of the age range. In the FAD (unknown) group, the OR value increased with age, and decreased gradually after 70 to 79 years of age. In the SAD group, similar to FAD (unknown), the risk effect of the ε4 allele for AD gradually increased till 65 to 74 years of age and decreased thereafter (the OR value was presented with 95% confidence interval). C, The heat maps show the risk probability of FAD (unknown). The increasing dosage of the APOE ε4 allele and increasing age significantly impact the risk probability of FAD (unknown), FAD (unknown), familial Alzheimer’s disease without PSEN1, PSEN2, APP, TREM2, and SORL1 mutations; FAD, familial Alzheimer’s disease; NC, normal control; SAD, sporadic Alzheimer’s disease

with two APOE ε4 alleles are more likely to develop FAD (unknown) than those with a single ε4 allele and other subtypes of AD. This phenomenon called the APOE ε4 diploid enhancement of familial aggregation has been suggested in previous studies, indicating that an increased APOE ε4 gene dosage may promote the development of the familial form of the disease. In addition, the prevalence of APOE ε4 homozygous was not significantly different between early-onset and late-onset patients with FAD (unknown) (data not shown), suggesting that this APOE ε4 diploid enhancement effect may play a similar role in both, which awaits further exploration. Our results have expanded the understanding of the gene dosage effect on FAD (unknown) and the harmful effects of APOE ε4 on all subtypes of AD, strongly indicating a relationship between APOE and AD.

In both SAD and FAD (unknown), we observed that risk effect of APOE ε4 positive genotype for AD was age dependent. The maximum risk was at the age of 65 to 74 years for SAD, and at the age of 70 to 79 years for FAD (unknown). It is indicated that risk factors other than APOE ε4 positive genotype may play an important role in disease onset
at a younger or older age. At the younger age range, these unidentified genetic variants may interact with each other or act independently, leading to AD. In the older age group, the increased mortality rates of APOE ε4 carriers with AD might contribute to the lower risk.40 Furthermore, several studies have demonstrated that the effects of the APOE ε4 allele diminish at a very old age.41-42 To date, the biological mechanisms underlying these effects have not been elucidated. Additionally, the risk prediction model shows that the risk of FAD (unknown) increased with the gene dosage of APOE ε4 and age, respectively. In APOE ε4 homozygotes, the risk of FAD (unknown) was significantly higher after 45 years of age. This observation may be clinically important. For instance, the administration of therapeutic interventions, such as APOE-targeted AD therapeutic strategies or comprehensive treatment modalities, before an at-risk individual reaches the highest-risk age range might reduce the risk of development of AD. Because the risk associated with the APOE ε4 allele varies by age, clinical trials investigating the prevention of AD in APOE ε4 carriers should be designed considering the effects of APOE ε4 at different ages.

Our study had some inherent limitations. First, the number of patients with FAD was relatively small owing to its low incidence compared to SAD. Another reason is that the life span for FAD patients is usually shorter, and as such, we managed to enroll few patients over 70 years, which affects our result regarding the effects of age. We plan to expand this sample size in our future research. Second, although we believe that APOE ε4 may be a pathogenic gene with an incomplete penetrance in FAD (unknown), we did not perform functional in vitro or in vivo studies to verify this hypothesis in the FAD subtype. Third, we found that APOE ε4 had different genetic effects in different AD subtypes; however, this finding should be validated in longitudinal cohorts in the future. Fourth, although our model has capacity to predict the risk of FAD (unknown), there would be other factors such as family history that contribute to the development of FAD (unknown). Therefore, we should include more factors to improve the prediction efficiency in the future. Fifth, previous studies have identified some risk genes for AD, such as APOE, BIN1, CD33, EPHA1, SORL1, TOMM40 and so on.43-45 We only tested APP, PSEN1, PSEN2, TREM2, and SORL1 mutations in our study and did not test the deletion/duplication, which may lead to the loss of genetic information. We will include this content in future research.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

This is the largest multicenter study investigating the association between APOE and AD in the Chinese population. This study revealed that the APOE ε4 positive genotype was associated with different AD subtypes and showed an increasing trend in NC, FAD (PSENs/APP), SAD, and FAD (unknown) groups, in that order. The high frequency of APOE ε4 in FAD (unknown) suggests that it plays an important role in familial aggregation. Future studies to identify therapeutic strategies for FAD (unknown) subtype should consider the age and APOE ε4 genotype. This might lead to identification of potential viable therapeutic options for patients in the FAD (unknown) family.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank all participants in this study and all neurologists at relevant academic centers for their help in the recruitment of subjects. In particular, we thank the participating hospitals including The First Affiliated Hospital of Xi’an JiaoTong University; Xiangya Hospital, Central South University; Huashan Hospital, Fudan University; The Second Affiliated Hospital of Zhejiang University School of Medicine; The First Affiliated Hospital of Chongqing Medical University; The Affiliated Hospital of Qingdao University; Guang Zhou Huai Hospital; Henan Provincial People’s Hospital; Tianjin Medical University General Hospital; No. 88 Hospital of PLA; The First Affiliated Hospital of Wenzhou Medical University; The First Bethune Hospital of Jilin University; University Hospital of Hubei University for Nationalities; The Second Hospital of Shandong University; The First Affiliated Hospital of Anhui Medical University; Beijing Chaoyang Hospital, Capital Medical University.

This study was supported by the Key Project of the National Natural Science Foundation of China (81530036); the National Key Scientific Instrument and Equipment Development Project (31627803); Mission Program of Beijing Municipal Administration of Hospitals (SML20150801); Beijing Scholars Program; Beijing Brain Initiative from Beijing Municipal Science & Technology Commission (Z161100000216137); Project for Outstanding Doctor with Combined Ability of Western and Chinese Medicine; and Beijing Municipal Commission of Health and Family Planning (PXM2019_026283_000003).

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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