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Nanokit coupled electrospray ionization mass spectrometry for analysis of angiotensin converting enzyme 2 activity in single living cell

Xinqi Chang\textsuperscript{a}, Nina Wang\textsuperscript{a}, Depeng Jiang\textsuperscript{b,∗}, Hong-Yuan Chen\textsuperscript{a}, Dechen Jiang\textsuperscript{a,∗}

\textsuperscript{a} State Key Laboratory of Analytical Chemistry for Life Science, School of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering, Nanjing University, Nanjing 210093, China
\textsuperscript{b} Department of Respiratory Medicine, The Second Affiliated Hospital, Chongqing Medical University, Chongqing 400030, China

\begin{abstract}
Angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 (ACE2) is not only an enzyme but also a functional receptor on cell membrane for severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). Here, the activity of ACE2 in single living cell is firstly determined using a nanokit coupled electrospray ionization mass spectrometry (nanokit-ESI-MS). Upon the insertion of a micro-capillary into the living hACE2-CHO cell and the electrochemical sorting of the cytosol, the target ACE2 enzyme hydrolyses angiotensin II inside the capillary to generate angiotensin 1–7. After the electrospray of the mixture at the tip of the capillary, the product is differentiated from the substrate in molecular weight to achieve the detection of ACE2 activity in single cells. The further measurement illustrates that the inflammatory state of cells does not lead to the significant change of ACE2 catalytic activity, which elucidates the relationship between intracellular ACE2 activity and inflammation at single cell level. The established strategy will provide a specific analytical method for further studying the role of ACE2 in the process of virus infection, and extend the application of nanokit based single cell analysis.

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Angiotensin-converting enzyme-2 (ACE2) is a type I integral membrane protein that functions as a carboxypeptidase to hydrolyse angiotensin II into angiotensin. It is known that ACE2 plays an important role in hypertension, cardiac function, heart function and diabetes. More specially, the epidemic of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) became a global pandemic in the past two years, which is caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). Current studies have shown that ACE2 is a specific receptor of SARS-CoV-2, mediating the entry of virus into host cells [1,2]. Accordingly, the complete investigation of ACE2, including its catalytic activity, is important for the fully understanding of its physiological role. Many methods have been developed for the determination of ACE2 activity from a population of cells [3,4], however, the measurement at single cell level is still challenging. Considering the importance of the cellular heterogeneity in the knowledge of ACE2 role [5–9], the establishment of a robust strategy to measure its activity in single living cell is needed.

Currently, probe based optical method is popular for the analysis of the enzymatic activity in single living cell [10–17]. Although this strategy is robust, the design and synthesis of the specific probe to recognize the enzyme is complex and time-consuming. Previously, our group reported nanokit based strategy for the measurement of the enzymatic activity in single living cells [18,19]. In this strategy, a nanopipette carrying the kit components was inserted into a living cell. The components was electrochemically pumped into the cell, which reacted with the target enzyme to generate the product and byproduct of hydrogen peroxide. By the electrochemical detection of hydrogen peroxide using the ring electrode at the orifice of the nanopipette, the activity of the target enzyme in one cell was determined. This method can be adapted for the measurement of many enzymes by choosing the proper kits, however, the byproduct of hydrogen peroxide is needed that restricts the application of this nanokit based analysis.

Single-cell mass spectroscopic analysis is the emerging technology with its advantages of non-label measurement, high sensitivity and selectivity [20]. Many ionization modes, including electrospray ionization (ESI), secondary ion ionization, matrix-assisted laser desorption ionization and inductively coupled plasma ionization, have been developed to record the molecular profiles at single cells [21–25]. Among them, ESI is a soft ionization method that utilizes a microcapillary to sort the cytosol from the living cell. This mode permits the detection of various intracellular compo-
the atomizer pressure of 0 Psig. The voltage applied at the voltage is 4000 V. The micro-manipulation is performed using a TransferMan®4r micromanipulator (Eppendorf, Germany) using a microscope model Olympus X73 (Olympus, Japan). Single-cell electrochemical tests are recorded using a MultiClamp700B patch clamp amplifier and an Axon Digidata 1550 data acquisition system (Molecular Devices, USA) with an Ag/AgCl electrode as a quasi-reference electrode.

All the glass micro-capillary used in the experiment are drawn from a borosilicate glass tube (BF100–58–10; o.d. 1.00 mm, i.d. 0.58 mm) using with P-2000 laser puller (Sutter Instrument, CA, USA). The opening of the micro-capillary is characterized to be 2-3 μm. To get good reproducibility, the dimension (including the opening size and inclination degree of the glass wall) of the capillary should be very close. Since the shape of the capillary controls the ionic current through its opening, only the capillaries with the similar ionic current are selected for the following experiments.

For the reaction of Ang II with the standard ACE2 enzyme, 100μg/mL Ang II is mixed with 600 ng/mL ACE2 in presence of 100μmol/L ZnCl₂, and reacted at 37 °C for a certain time. The aliquots are taken and filled into the micro-capillary for nanospray. To react with the enzyme from the cytosol, 10⁵ hACE2-CHO cells are lysed in pure water to get the cellular lysate. Then, 100μg/mL Ang II is reacted with the lysate in presence of 100μmol/L ZnCl₂ for 1 h before the nanospray.

In single cell analysis, a mixture of 100μg/mL Ang II and 100μmol/L ZnCl₂ is loaded into the capillary. Then, with the help of micromanipulation system, the tip of the capillary is positioned into a living hACE2-CHO cell. A voltage of −1 V is applied at Ag/AgCl wire inside the capillary to electrochemically sort the cytosol for 3 min. Afterward, the capillary is placed at 37 °C for 3 h to permit the reaction between Ang II and ACE2 enzyme. Finally, the capillary is positioned in front of the inlet of the mass spectrometer to initial the nanospray.

The mass spectrum of the standard Ang II and Ang 1–7 are measured by the filling of the chemicals into the microcapillary (i.d. 2-3 μm) following ESI-MS. The peaks at the mass to charge ratio of 1046.54 and 523.77 are associated with Ang II (Fig. 2A), and 899.47, 450.24 and 300.50 are associated with Ang 1–7 (Fig. 2B). The peak intensities of Ang II and Ang 1–7 with varied concentrations are listed in Fig. S1 (Supporting information), which exhibits a slightly stronger ionization efficiency of Ang 1–7 than that of Ang II. To verify the analysis of enzymatic activity, Ang II is reacted with the pure ACE2 enzyme in the buffer at 37 °C. Then, the mixtures at different reaction time are filled into the capillary for MS analysis, respectively. At the time of 0.5 min, only the peaks corresponding to Ang II are observed exhibiting the substrate in the mixture only. After the reaction for 10 min, the peaks associated with Ang II (1046.54 and 523.77) and Ang 1–7 (450.24 and 300.50) appear illustrating the partial conversion of Ang II into Ang 1–7 (Fig. 3A). With the extended reaction time, the peaks associated with Ang II decrease gradually, while the peaks associated with Ang 1–7 increase. The removal of ACE2 enzyme from the solution results in the observation of the peaks of Ang II only after the incubation for 2 h (Fig. S2 in Supporting information). These results exhibit the continuous conversion of Ang II by ACE2 enzyme.

To quantify the conversion rate, the peak intensities from Ang II and Ang 1–7 at the varied reaction time are measured. The conversion rate is quantified using the peak intensities from Ang II and Ang 1–7 (Fig. 3B). The near-linear increase in the conversion ratio is observed, which exhibits the continuous reaction between ACE2 and Ang II. After the reaction for 3 h, approx. 40% of Ang II is converted into Ang 1–7. Since the initial concentration of Ang II is 100μg/mL and the volume of the mixture inside the capillary is 10 μL, the catalytic activity of ACE2 is calculated to be 1.765 μU.
For the investigation of ACE2 activity in living cells, hACE2-CHO cells with a high expression of ACE2 enzyme is used as the model [26]. The cell lysate is obtained, and then, mixed with Ang II. Fig. 3C illustrates the typical mass spectrum after 15 min of reaction, exhibiting the peaks associated with Ang II and Ang 1–7. The peak intensity of Ang II is as high as 10^6 so that the peaks from many other intracellular molecules are invisible. The observation of Ang 1–7 from the mixture with the cell lysates confirms that ACE2 in these cells could convert Ang II effectively. The relationship between the conversion ratio and the reaction time (Fig. 3D) displays that over 80% Ang II is converted by the enzyme in 1 h. The enzymatic activity from the cellular lysate is calculated to be 1.06 mU, which is much higher than that from the commercial ACE2 enzymes. As comparison, A549 cells that do not express ACE2 enzymes are used for the control experiment (Fig. S3 in Supporting information). Only 3.14% Ang II is converted into Ang 1–7 after 3 h, which exhibits an obviously low enzymatic activity in A549 cells. Both of the experimental results supports the detection of the enzymatic activity from ACE2 expressed cells.

After validating the existence of ACE2 in the cells, the nanokit coupled ESI-MS is applied for the analysis of ACE2 activity in single living cells. With the help of the micro-manipulation system, the tip of the capillary is inserted into one cell (Fig. 4A). The cytosol in the cell is sorted into the capillary using the electrochemical pump following our previously reported protocol [18,19]. It is noted that ACE2 basically is produced inside the cells and then goes to the plasma membrane, however, part of it is still present inside the cell [27]. Therefore, this process can sort some ACE2 inside the capillary. Moreover, during the penetration of the capillary into the cell, a small piece of cell membrane containing ACE2 is loaded into the capillary, as well. Both of these parts will hydrolyse angiotensin II inside the capillary to generate angiotensin 1–7. Considering that the sorted amount of ACE2 from single cell is less than that from the cell lysate, the reaction time is extended to 3 h to maximize the conversion of Ang II. In this period, no obvious liquid loss is observed from the capillary exhibiting the same reaction volume. The slow volatilization of buffer from the orifice of capillary guarantees the reaction between the sorted enzyme from single cell and the substrate inside the capillary. Then, the mass spectrum is collected (Fig. 4B) that exhibits the peak of (450.24 and 899.47) from Ang 1–7. Since Ang 1–7 is not the cellular content, the observation of Ang 1–7 from the mixture inside the capillary provides the direct evidence about the reaction between ACE2 and Ang II. The result exhibits that the loaded enzyme from single cell can react the pre-filled substrate to complete the nanokit reaction. The same procedure is applied at single living A549 cells and no peak associated with Ang 1–7 is observed (Fig. S4 in Supporting information). This result illustrates the absence of the enzymatic reaction inside the cells without highly expressed ACE2.

Different from the partial conversion of Ang II by the enzyme in cell lysate, the loaded enzyme from single cell is insufficient and could covert a small amount of substrate. As a result, the peak in-
tensity of Ang II is almost the same, which is not shown in the spectrum. To calculate the enzymatic activity in single cell, the generated amount of Ang 1–7 is determined based on the calibration curve of the peak intensity from the standard (Fig. S1 in Supporting information). Fig. 4C lists the ACE2 activities in 8 cells. The average enzymatic activity from single cell is determined to be 4.2 ± 1.4 nU. The relative standard deviation is calculated to be 33.3%, which is obviously larger than that from the reaction with the enzyme in cellular lysate (2.5% from Fig. 3D). The observation of a large deviation from single cell analysis provides a clear evidence about the cellular heterogeneity in the ACE2 activity. As compared with our previous electrochemical strategy [18,19], this nanokit coupled ESI-MS method does not require any electrochemical byproduct, and can be applied on almost all the enzymatic reaction to determine its activity.

Coronavirus can specifically recognize and bind ACE2 at the cellular membrane, and then, enter the interior of cells to trigger inflammatory response [28]. In order to investigate the alteration of ACE2 activity under the inflammatory, hACE2-CHO cells are treated with inflammatory factors (tgfb3 and IL1B) for 24 h [29]. After that, the nanokit coupled ESI-MS method is carried out to measure the ACE2 catalytic activity at single cells. The activities from 10 cells are listed in Fig. 4C, as well. The statistical analysis of the activities with and without inflammatory (Fig. 4D) does not exhibit significant difference. This result provides a clue that the inflammatory state might not affect the intracellular ACE2 catalytic activity. The previous proteome study has revealed that ACE2 expression in the COVID-19 patients does not change [30]. Therefore, it might only function as the carrier for the SARS-CoV-2. In our study, the information about the independence between its activity and the cellular inflammatory will provide more information for the understanding of this disease.

In conclusion, the nanokit coupled ESI-MS method is firstly developed to determine the enzymatic activity in single cell. The loading of the cytosol, the reaction of the target enzymes and the following ESI-MS are integrated into one capillary, which is suitable for single cell analysis. Since this strategy relies on the mass difference between the substrate and the product, it can be applied on the analysis of various enzymes without any restriction.

More importantly, this method could be easily developed for the measurement of multiple enzyme activity in one cell by the incorporation of all these kits into one capillary. More detail characterization of this method is being conducted in the laboratory so that the quantitative measurement is feasible at single cells.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi: 10.1016/j.ccl.2022.05.036.

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