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DOCTORAL THESIS

Roles of stanniocalcin-1 on tumorigenicity of hepatocellular carcinoma and regulation of macrophage functions

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Abstract

The glycoprotein stanniocalcin-1 (STC1) is a paracrine factor in mammals which plays roles in various (patho)physiological functions, such as inflammation and carcinogenesis. Considerable numbers of studies showed dysregulation of STC1 expression in different types of human cancers. A previous study from our group, using clinicopathological data of 216 hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) patients revealed greater STC1 gene expression in tumors than the paired normal samples. However, patient samples with greater STC1 level exhibited smaller tumor size. In fact, multiple cell types, growth factors and matrix components in tumor microenvironment (TME) control cancer progression. Emerging evidence support the important role of infiltrating immune cells on tumor progression. Among those, tumor associated macrophages (TAM) in TME is known to be an essential driver of tumor inflammation and progression, exerting a yin-yang influence to determine if the tumor is suppressed or paving the way to metastasize. Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is mainly caused by chronic inflammation. With hindsight, the roles of STC1 in inflammation and carcinogenesis were documented. However, the observation on the negative correlation of STC1 expression with tumor size in HCC patients and the roles of STC1 on the interactions between tumor cells and macrophages are not clear.

In Chapter 2, the inverse correlation of STC1 expression with tumor size was addressed. Human metastatic HCC cell line, MHCC97L which was stably transfected with empty vector (P) and STC1 (S1) were used. Nude mice xenograft model showed that tumor size and volume formed from S1 cells were significantly smaller than that from P cells. The observation agreed with the clinical data aforementioned. *In vitro* studies demonstrated S1 cells had lower plating efficiency, migratory and proliferative potential, illustrating a lower tumorigenicity. Biochemical analyses on the rate of glycolysis, extracellular O_2 consumption, ATP production and Western blot studies on mTOR/p70S6K/rpS6 pathway showed the S1 cells adopted a lower energy metabolism. The data may explain the negative correlation between STC expression level and tumor size.

In cancer microenvironment, infiltration of host immune cells, especially macrophages, contributes to inflammation and tumor progression. In Chapter 3, it was hypothesized that cancer cell-derived STC1 alter macrophage functions. Therefore, the effects of STC1-overexpressing MHCC97L on macrophages were

studied. To mimic their interactions, Boyden chamber insert model was adopted to co-culture MHCC97L (97L/P and 97L/S1) and THP-1. Our data illustrated 97L/S1 suppressed migratory response of THP-1, with or without the addition of monocyte chemoattractant protein-1 (MCP-1) as the chemoattractant. Quantitative PCR showed downregulation of cytokine/chemokine receptors (CCR2, CCR4, CSF-1R) in THP-1 when co-cultured with 97L/S1. This prompted us to study the alterations of pathways related to cell motility in THP-1 by 97L/S1. Transcriptomic analysis detected 1784 differentially expressed genes (DEGs) between THP-1 cells co-cultured with 97L/P and 97L/S1. Ingenuity Pathway Analysis (IPA) prioritized an inhibition of RhoA signaling, which is known to stimulate cell motility. Western blotting analysis supported the IPA prediction and the cell migration data to show a significant reduction of MLC2 phosphorylation, leading to impaired formation of stress fibers, cell contraction and cell motility.

The preceding chapters focused on cancer cell-derived STC1 on HCC cells or THP-1 derived macrophages. In Chapter 4, it was hypothesized that macrophage-derived STC1 may also play a role in macrophage differentiation and inflammation, which modulate tumorigenicity of HCC during macrophage-cancer cell interactions. Thus, the roles of endogenous STC1 in macrophage differentiation and functions were investigated. Using human leukemia monocytic cell line THP-1, a pilot study showed a treatment with phorbol 12-myristate 13-acetate (PMA) significantly upregulated STC1 expression and pro-inflammatory cytokines. In follow-up studies, THP-1 was pharmacologically stimulated to differentiate into (i) classically activated macrophages (CAM)/ M1 state, and (ii) alternatively activated macrophages (AAM)/ M2 state. Greater STC1 expression was found to be associated with CAM. To examine the role of STC1 in CAM, $siRNA_{STC1}$ was used for gene knockdown. Conditioned medium collected from $siRNA_{STC1}$-treated CAM inhibited migration of HCC cell line Hep3B. Transcriptomic analysis of $siRNA_{STC1}$-treated CAM revealed an upregulation on TBC1D3G gene, which is involved in the release of extracellular vesicles (EVs) in macrophage to mediate inflammation. This study demonstrated the association between STC1 and macrophage-mediated inflammation.

Collectively, the above studies elucidated the influence of STC1 on cancer cell metabolism, macrophage differentiation and function. It warrants further investigations to unravel the therapeutic potential of STC1 in inflammation and carcinogenesis.

Table of Contents

Declaration i

Abstract ii

Acknowledgements iv

Table of Contents v

List of Figures ix

List of Tables and Excel Files xi

List of Abbreviations xii

Chapter 1 Literature Review 1

1.1. Stanniocalcins 1

1.1.1. Fish Stanniocalcins 1

1.1.2. Mammalian Stanniocalcins 5

1.2. Hepatocellular carcinoma 17

1.2.1. Transmission, diagnosis, and treatments 17

1.2.2. Pathology 18

1.3. Macrophages 20

1.3.1. Macrophage differentiation and polarization 20

1.3.2. Homeostasis between M1 and M2 macrophages in immunity 22

1.3.3. Other functions of macrophages 22

1.3.4. Tumor associated macrophages 24

Research Objectives and Hypothesis 29

Chapter 2 Effects of Stanniocalcin-1 Overexpression on Tumorigenicity and Metabolism of Hepatocellular Carcinoma 30

2.1. Introduction 30

2.2. Materials and Methods 33

2.2.1. Cell Culture 33

2.2.2. Lentiviral Overexpression of STC1 in MHCC97L Cells 33

2.2.3. Xenograft Animal Model 34

2.2.4. Total RNA Extraction and Real-time PCR 34

2.2.5. Western Blot Analysis 35

2.2.6. Colony Formation Assay 35

2.2.7. Boyden Chamber-based Cell Migration Assay 35

2.2.8. MTT Assay 36

2.2.9. Flow cytometry Annexin V/PI 36

2.2.10. Coulter Counter Cell-sizing 37

2.2.11. ATP Determination Assay 37

2.2.12. Glycolysis Assay 37

2.2.13. Extracellular Oxygen Consumption Assay. 38

2.2.14. GSH/GSSG-Glo Assay 38

2.2.15. Statistical Analysis 38

2.3. Results 39

2.3.1. STC1-overexpressing MHCC97L cells formed smaller tumor size 39

2.3.2. Effects of STC1 on MHCC97L migratory and proliferative abilities 39

2.3.3. STC1 reduced MHCC97L cell size 40

2.3.4. STC1 reduced cellular metabolism 41

2.4. Figures 42

2.5. Figure Legends 47

2.6. Discussion 49

Chapter 3 Effects of Stanniocalcin-1 overexpressing HCC on Macrophages in a Co-culture Model 52

3.1. Introduction 52

3.2. Materials and Methods 54

3.2.1. Cell Culture and Treatment 54
3.2.2. Total RNA Extraction and Real-time PCR 54
3.2.3. Western Blot Analysis 54
3.2.4. Boyden Chamber-based Co-culture 55
3.2.5. Boyden Chamber-based Co-culture Cell Migration Assay 55
3.2.6. Transcriptomic Analysis 56
3.2.7. Statistical Analysis 56

3.3. Results 57
3.3.1. Effects of MHCC97L/S1 co-culture on migratory activities and chemokine signaling of THP-1 cells 57
3.3.2. Effects of MHCC97L/S1 co-culture on global gene expressions of THP-1 cells 58
3.3.3. Effects of MHCC97L/S1 co-culture on RhoA-mediated pathways in THP-1 cells 59

3.4. Figures 60

3.5. Figure Legends 71

3.6. Discussion 73

Chapter 4 The Role of Stanniocalcin-1 on Macrophage Differentiation and Function 79

4.1. Introduction 79

4.2. Materials and Methods 82
4.2.1. Cell Culture and Stimulation 82
4.2.2. Total RNA Extraction and Real-time PCR 82
4.2.3. Western Blot Analysis 83
4.2.4. STC1 Knock-down by siRNA 83
4.2.5. Boyden Chamber-based Co-culture Cell Migration Assay 84
4.2.6. Transcriptomic Analysis 84
4.2.7. Statistical Analysis 85

4.3. Results 86

4.3.1. Dose- and time-dependent effects of PMA on M0 differentiation and STC1 expression 86
4.3.2. Effects of STC1-knockdown on the expression of macrophage markers in M0 differentiation 87
4.3.3. STC1 expression in pharmacologically-induced M1 (CAM) and M2 (AAM) endotypes 88
4.3.4. Effects of conditioned media from $siRNA_{STC1}$-transfected THP-1 on Hep3B migration 88
4.3.5. Effects of STC1 knockdown on global gene expression in CAM 89

4.4. Figures 90

4.5. Figure Legends 97

4.6. Discussion 99

Conclusion 102

References 104

Publications 130

Curriculum Vitae 131