

## DOCTORAL THESIS

# Exploration of the anticancer mechanisms of novel chemotherapeutic adjuvants involving autophagy and immune system reprogramming in the treatment of pancreatic cancer

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## Abstract

Pancreatic cancer is known to be one of the most life-threatening cancers characterized by aggressive local invasion and distant metastasis. The high basal level of autophagy in pancreatic cancer may be responsible for the low chemotherapeutic drug response rate and poor disease prognosis. However, the clinical application of autophagy inhibitors was unsatisfactory due to their toxicity and minimal single-agent anticancer efficacy. Hence, oncologists begin to consider the tumor microenvironment when exploring new drug targets. In the present study, the anti-tumorigenic mechanisms of two major phytochemicals derived from Chinese medicinal herbs had been investigated against pancreatic cancer development.

Calycosin is a bioactive isoflavonoid of the medicinal plant *Astragalus membranaceus*. Our results have shown that calycosin inhibited the growth of various pancreatic cancer cells both *in vitro* and *in vivo* by inducing cell cycle arrest and apoptosis. Alternatively, calycosin also facilitated MIA PaCa-2 pancreatic cancer cell migration *in vitro* and increased the expression of epithelial-mesenchymal transition (EMT) biomarkers *in vivo*. Further mechanistic study suggests that induction of the Raf/MEK/ERK pathway and facilitated polarization of M2 tumor-associated macrophage in the tumor microenvironment both contribute to the pro-metastatic potential of calycosin in pancreatic cancer. These events appear to be associated with calycosin-evoked activation of TGF- $\beta$  signaling, which may explain the paradoxical drug actions due to the dual roles of TGF- $\beta$  as both tumor suppressor and tumor promoter in pancreatic cancer development under different conditions.

Isoliquiritigenin (ISL) is a chalcone obtained from the medicinal plant *Glycyrrhiza glabra*, which can be a precursor for chemical conversion to form calycosin. Results

have shown that ISL decreased the growth and EMT of pancreatic cancer cells *in vitro*, probably due to modulation of autophagy. ISL-induced inhibition of autophagy subsequently promoted reactive oxygen species (ROS) production, leading to induction of apoptosis in pancreatic cancer cells. Such phenomenon also contributed to the synergistic growth-inhibitory effect in combined treatment with the orthodox chemotherapeutic drug 5-fluorouracil. In addition, ISL-induced tumor growth inhibition *in vivo* was further demonstrated in a tumor xenograft mice model of pancreatic cancer. ISL promoted apoptosis and inhibited autophagy in the tumor tissues. Study on immune cells indicates that ISL could reduce the number of myeloid-derived suppressor cells (MDSCs) both in tumor tissue and in peripheral blood, while CD4<sup>+</sup> and CD8<sup>+</sup> T cells were increased correspondingly. *In vitro* test has revealed that ISL inhibited the polarization of M2 macrophage along with its inhibition of autophagy in M2 macrophage. These immunomodulating effects of ISL had reversed the pro-invasive role of M2 macrophage in pancreatic cancer.

In conclusion, calycosin acts as a “double-edged sword” on the growth and metastasis of pancreatic cancer, which may be related to the dual roles of TGF- $\beta$  and its influence on the tumor microenvironment. Alternatively, ISL consistently inhibited the growth and metastatic drive of pancreatic cancer through regulation of autophagy and reprogramming of the immune system. The differential modes of action of these compounds have provided new insights in the development of effective pancreatic cancer treatment adjuvants.

**Keywords:** pancreatic cancer, calycosin, Isoliquiritigenin, TGF- $\beta$ , autophagy, anticancer immunity

## Table of Contents

<b>DECLARATION</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b> .....	<b>ix</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b> .....	<b>x</b>
<b>LIST OF SYMBOLS</b> .....	<b>xi</b>
<b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</b> .....	<b>xii</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.1 Overview of pancreatic cancer .....	1
1.1.1 Epidemiology .....	1
1.1.1.1 Incidence .....	1
1.1.1.2 Mortality .....	2
1.1.1.3 Trends .....	3
1.1.1.4 Survival .....	4
1.1.2 Etiology and risk factors .....	4
1.1.3 Pathologic classification of pancreatic cancer .....	5
1.1.3.1 Histopathological classification of pancreatic cancer .....	6
1.1.3.2 Molecular subtyping of pancreatic cancer .....	9
1.1.4 Progression of pancreatic cancer .....	11
1.1.4.1 Tumor plasticity and heterogeneity .....	11
1.1.4.2 Formation of metastases .....	12
1.1.5 Diagnosis and screening .....	13
1.1.6 Current treatment .....	14
1.1.6.1 Surgical management .....	15
1.1.6.2 Radiation therapy .....	15
1.1.6.3 Drug treatment .....	16
1.1.6.4 Palliative care .....	21
1.2 Immune cells in the tumor microenvironment of pancreatic cancer .....	21

1.2.1	Innate immune cells in PC .....	27
1.2.1.1	Dendritic cells .....	27
1.2.1.2	Natural killer (NK) cells .....	27
1.2.1.3	Macrophages .....	28
1.2.1.4	Myeloid-derived suppressor cells .....	29
1.2.2	Adaptive immune cells in PC .....	29
1.2.2.1	T cells.....	29
1.2.2.2	B cells.....	32
1.3	Autophagy .....	32
1.3.1	Process of autophagy .....	33
1.3.2	The bipolarity of autophagy in cancer .....	36
1.3.2.1	Tumor-suppressive role of autophagy .....	37
1.3.2.2	Tumor-promoting role of autophagy .....	39
1.3.3	A critical role for autophagy in pancreatic cancer .....	49
1.4	Overview of Calycosin.....	53
1.5	Overview of Isoliquiritigenin (ISL) .....	61
1.6	Hypothesis and objectives .....	67
<b>CHAPTER 2 MATERIALS AND METHODS .....</b>		<b>69</b>
2.1	Materials.....	69
2.2	Cell lines and cell culture .....	71
2.3	Assessment of cell viability by MTT assay.....	72
2.4	Assessment of apoptosis.....	72
2.5	Cell cycle analysis .....	73
2.6	Immunofluorescence assay for autophagy .....	73
2.7	Transmission Electron Microscopy .....	73
2.8	Measurement of intracellular ROS.....	74
2.9	Wound healing cell migration assay .....	74
2.10	Transwell matrigel invasion assay .....	74

2.11	Real-time polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) analysis .....	75
2.12	Western immunoblotting .....	76
2.13	Orthotopic tumor xenograft of pancreatic cancer cells.....	77
2.14	Subcutaneous tumor xenograft model of pancreatic cancer cells.....	78
2.15	Immunohistochemical (IHC) analysis of animal tissues .....	79
2.16	Immunofluorescence of animal tissues.....	80
2.17	Flow cytometric analysis of peripheral blood.....	80
2.18	Enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) .....	80
2.19	Statistical analysis.....	81

**CHAPTER 3 THE DUAL ROLES OF CALYCOSIN IN GROWTH INHIBITION AND METASTATIC PROGRESSION DURING PANCREATIC CANCER DEVELOPMENT: A “TGF-B PARADOX”..... 82**

3.1	Results .....	82
3.1.1	Calycosin inhibited pancreatic cancer cell growth .....	82
3.1.2	Calycosin induced apoptosis in MIA PaCa-2 cells.....	84
3.1.3	Calycosin induced S-phase cell cycle arrest in MIA PaCa-2 cells .....	86
3.1.4	Calycosin promoted the migration of MIA PaCa-2 cells .....	88
3.1.5	Calycosin increased tissue expression of pro-metastatic biomarkers in tumor sections from mice orthotopically-xenografted with pancreatic cancer cells 90	
3.1.6	Calycosin activated the TGF-β1-induced Raf/MEK/ERK pathway during EMT promotion .....	93
3.1.7	Calycosin promoted polarization of M2 macrophages in the tumor microenvironment .....	95
3.2	Discussion and summary .....	97

**CHAPTER 4 ISOLIQUIRITIGENIN INHIBITED THE PROGRESSION OF PANCREATIC CANCER THROUGH THE BLOCK OF AUTOPHAGY AND ENHANCING OF ANTICANCER IMMUNITY ..... 102**

4.1	Results .....	102
4.1.1	ISL inhibited the growth of pancreatic cancer cells .....	102
4.1.2	ISL increased the formation of autophagosomes.....	104

4.1.3	ISL blocked autophagy flux in pancreatic cancer cells .....	107
4.1.4	ISL promoted intracellular ROS production due by blockade of autophagy .....	109
4.1.5	ISL promoted apoptosis in pancreatic cancer cells due to increased ROS production.....	111
4.1.6	ISL synergistically enhanced cell growth inhibition by 5-FU.....	113
4.1.7	ISL inhibited the migration and invasion of pancreatic cancer cells	116
4.1.8	ISL inhibited the expression of EMT biomarkers .....	118
4.1.9	ISL inhibited the expression of EMT-associated transcription factor Snail through blockade of autophagy.....	120
4.1.10	ISL inhibited the growth of pancreatic tumor <i>in vivo</i> .....	122
4.1.11	ISL increased apoptosis and LC3II expression in tumor tissues .....	124
4.1.12	ISL decreased MDSCs <i>in vivo</i> .....	126
4.1.13	ISL increased CD4 <sup>+</sup> and CD8 <sup>+</sup> T cells <i>in vivo</i> .....	129
4.1.14	ISL impaired the polarization and autophagy of M2 macrophage ...	133
4.1.15	ISL-inhibitory polarization of M2 macrophage reduced invasion of PANC1 cells.....	135
4.2	Discussion and summary.....	137
<b>CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE PROSPECT.....</b>		<b>143</b>
5.1	Conclusion.....	143
5.2	Future plans and preliminary findings.....	147
5.2.1	Explore molecular STAT1 signaling pathways involved in the anticancer effects of ISL on pancreatic cancer.....	147
5.2.2	Determine if ISL inhibits pancreatic cancer metastasis in the orthotopic xenograft model .....	150
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>		<b>151</b>
<b>PUBLICATIONS .....</b>		<b>198</b>
<b>CURRICULUM VITAE.....</b>		<b>200</b>