Efficient Extraction of RNA and Analysis of Gene Expression in a Long-Term Taxus Cell Culture Using Real-Time RT-PCR

Li-Qin Li§, Chun-Hua Fu§, Chun-Fang Zhao, Juan Xia, Wen-Juan Wu, and Long-Jiang Yu*

Department of Biology Science and Technology, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Wuhan, 430074, Hubei, China. Fax: +86-27-87792265.
E-mail: yulj@mail.hust.edu.cn

* Author for correspondence and reprint requests

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A simple, quick and efficient method for isolating total RNA from heavy browning cells was developed by adding polyvinylpyrrolidone, mercaptoethanol and 3 mM NaAc during the process of the Trizol (a kind of a widely used RNA extraction buffer) method. High-quality total RNA was isolated and synthesized to cDNA. Transcript levels of four paclitaxel biosynthetic pathway genes: dxr, hmgr, ggpps and dbat were assayed by real-time RT-PCR. The results demonstrated that the transcript levels of these genes experienced a coincident descent in the past three years as well as a decreasing paclitaxel productivity. According to these results, the possible reason for the descending paclitaxel productivity during long-term Taxus media cv. Hicksii cell culture maybe due to a decreasing transcripts level of mass genes in close with a gross secondary metabolite level. Gene manipulation emphasized only on key enzyme genes in the paclitaxel biosynthesis pathway may not hamper the somaclonal variation trend of Taxus media cv. Hicksii cell culture.

Key words: RNA Extraction, Taxus, Real-Time RT-PCR

Introduction

Many secondary metabolites derived from plants are used as pharmaceuticals, among which paclitaxel, the most successful anticancer drug, was initially approved for the treatment of breast and ovary cancers. However, the use of this drug is restricted due to limited production.

Huge efforts have been made to develop a more sustainable source of paclitaxel. However, the complex structure of paclitaxel has impeded the development of a method to enhance its synthesis (Chau et al., 2004). At present, the commercial production is semi-synthesis by using precursors (e.g. baccatin III) extracted from natural sources. However, with the increasing usage of paclitaxel for the treatment of additional cancer types and other human diseases, environmental problems of the semi-synthesis still exist (Pyo et al., 2004). Another alternative is a plant cell suspension culture, which has several advantages: This method is similar to well established procedures that have been used successfully in bacterial fermentation. It facilitates basic studies on the paclitaxel biosynthesis; it appears to accumulate compounds not found in natural abundance in the bark and needles of plants. This process can provide an environmentally friendly methodology to receive a highly pure product.

However, a major obstacle for developing large-scale production systems based on plant cells was the instability of metabolite accumulation. Several reports showed a gradual loss of the secondary metabolite production ability, inconsistent production patterns or high variation in yield (Smykal et al., 2007; Trejo-Tapia et al., 2008). Somaclonal variation has also been observed during long-term Taxus cell culture. Previous research in our lab showed that a young cell line newly derived from Taxus media cv. Hicksii explants emerged the phenomena of acclimatization during a 4-year conventional subculture. The rate of biomass accumulation becomes faster; cell colour changes from deeply brown to white, and at the same time, paclitaxel production gradually becomes lower. The same phenomenon was reported by Kim et al. (2004). Many efforts have been made to research the somaclonal variation mechanism of long-term plant cell culture (Rubluoa et al., 2002; Martin and Pradeep, 2003; Whitmer et al., 2003). Supposed reasons may include point mutations, rearrange-

§ These authors contributed equally to this work.
ments in nuclear or organellar DNA, the activation of mobile elements, ploidy or epigenetic changes. Few reports have assessed the mRNA transcription level stability in long-term plant cell culture.

The paclitaxel biosynthesis pathway is complicated. Two distinct routes (the classical mevalonate pathway and a novel mevalonate-independent pathway) are utilized by plants for the biosynthesis of isopentenyl diphosphate, the universal precursor of isoprenoids. 3-Hydroxy-3-methylglutaryl coenzyme A reductase (HMGR) is the first key enzyme in the classical mevalonate pathway. 1-Deoxy-d-xylulose-5-phosphate reductoisomerase (DXR) is the second enzyme in the non-mevalonate pathway, which was also considered as a key enzyme (Nims et al., 2006). Therefore, the abundance of dxr and hmgr may reflect the isopentenyl diphosphate accumulation in Taxus cell lines.

Derived from the isoprenoid precursors isoprenyl diphosphate (IPP) and dimethylallyl diphosphate (DMAPP), geranylgeranyl pyrophosphate (GGPP) is synthesized by geranylgeranyl pyrophosphate synthase (GGPPS). After several steps, highly modified taxane occurs to produce 10-deacetylbaicatin III (10-DAB) which is then converted to baccatin III by 10-deacetylbaicatin III-10-O-acetyltransferase (DBAT) (Walker and Croteau, 2000). After at least three other catalysis reactions, paclitaxel is obtained. Therefore, GGPP is involved in the early paclitaxel biosynthesis pathway, and DBAT, as a rate-limiting enzyme, is involved in the late paclitaxel biosynthesis pathway.

Expression level variation of key enzyme genes in the paclitaxel biosynthesis accompanied with a gradual loss in the paclitaxel production has not been shown during long-term Taxus cell culture. To investigate the expression level of key enzyme genes, the quantitative real-time RT-PCR method was established. High-quality total RNA of a Taxus media cv. Hicksii cell line with short-term in vitro culture (TS) and a Taxus media cv. Hicksii cell line with long-term in vitro culture (TL) should be isolated as prerequisite. An efficient method of extracting total RNA from the heavy browning TS cell line was also established in this study.

Materials and Methods

RNA extraction

A TS cell sample was derived from explants in May 2003, collected in February 2004 and stored in liquid nitrogen, experiencing a 10-time subculture. During the period of subcultures, the calli grew slowly and developed heavy browning. A TL cell sample was collected in July 2007, after 50 times of continuous subculture derived from explants in May 2003. At that time, cells have been well acclimated without browning. A normal RNA extracting method by Trizol (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, USA) was used in this study. In our preliminary experiments, TL samples easily got high-quality RNA, while TS samples with high levels of phenolic compounds and/or polysaccharides yielded poor-quality RNA or no RNA at all. However, extraction of high-quality RNA was necessary for isolating genes by RT-PCR or investigating gene expression profiles. Four kinds of strategies were used in this study to establish an efficient extraction method which is suitable for heavy browning plant materials with high levels of phenolic compounds and/or polysaccharides.

Modified guanidinium isothiocyanate (MGI) method

(1) Grind 0.1 g plant cells in liquid nitrogen with a mortar and a pestle. Then, transfer the powders into an Eppendorf tube. Add 0.3 ml extraction buffer (4 mol/l guanidinium isothiocyanate, 25 mmol/l sodium citrate, pH 7.0, 0.5% sodium lauryl sarcosinate, 0.1 mol/l mercaptoethanol).

(2) Shake the sample violently for 2 min. Add 30 μl 2 mol/l NaAc (pH 4.2), 60 μl chloroform/isoamyl alcohol (24:1) and 300 μl water-saturated phenol, mix completely, and incubate in a ice bath for 15 min. Centrifuge for 30 min at 20000 × g at 4 °C.

(3) Transfer supernatants into new sterile tubes. Add 1 volume of alcohol, gently vortex, and incubate for 1 h at −20 °C. Centrifuge for 25 min at 15400 × g at 4 °C.

(4) Resuspend the precipitated pellet with 0.1 ml extraction buffer, add 0.1 ml water-saturated phenol and 40 μl chloroform/isoamyl alcohol, and incubate in an ice bath for 10 min. Centrifuge for 30 min at 15400 × g at 4 °C.

(5) Transfer the supernatants into new sterile tubes. Add 1 volume of alcohol and 12 μl 2 mol/l NaAc, gently mix, and incubate for 30 min at −20 °C. Centrifuge for 20 min at 15400 × g at 4 °C.

(6) Wash the pellet with 75% ethanol, air-dry and resuspend it in 20 μl of DEPC-treated water.
Cetyltrimethyl ammonium bromide (CTAB) method

1. Add 2% mercaptoethanol and 2% polyvinylpyrrolidone (PVP) to CTAB extraction buffer (2% CTAB, 100 mmol/l Tris-HCl, pH 8.0, 1.4 mol/l NaCl, 20 mmol/l EDTA, pH 8.0), and preheat at 65 °C. Add the cell powder after grinding in liquid nitrogen to the extraction buffer, shake the sample violently, and incubate for 30 min at 65 °C.

2. Cool down to room temperature, add 0.6 ml chloroform/isoamyl alcohol (24:1) and extract repeatedly. Centrifuge for 20 min at 15400 ¥ g.

3. Add 1/10 volume 3 mol/l NaAc (pH 5.2) and 2.5 volumes concentrated alcohol to the supernatants. Incubate for 2 h at -20 °C. Centrifuge for 30 min at 15400 ¥ g at 4 °C.

4. Wash the resultant pellet with 75% ethanol, air-dry and resuspend it in 20 μl of DEPC-treated water.

Trizol method

The extraction was carried out according to the methods of Trizol (a widely used RNA extraction buffer).

Modified Trizol (MT) method

1. Grind 0.1 g plant cells in liquid nitrogen with PVP and transfer them into an Eppendorf tube. Add 1 ml Trizol reagent and 10 μl mercaptoethanol. Mix and incubate for 5–10 min at room temperature. Centrifuge for 10 min at 13200 ¥ g at 4 °C.

2. Add 0.2 ml chloroform/isoamyl alcohol (24:1) to the supernatant. Shake the sample violently and incubate for 5–10 min at room temperature. Centrifuge for 15 min at 13200 ¥ g at 4 °C. Then repeat this step.

3. Add 6 μl 2 mol/l NaAc (pH 5.2) and 1 volume isopropyl alcohol to the supernatant. Incubate for 10 min at room temperature. Centrifuge for 10 min at 13200 ¥ g at 4 °C.

4. Wash the pellet with 75% ethanol, air-dry and resuspend it in 20 μl of DEPC-treated water.

RNA quality examination by electrophoresis and spectrophotometric analysis

To check the integrity of RNA, 3–5 μg isolated total RNA was analyzed on 1.2% formaldehyde-agarose denaturing gels to determine the integrity of rRNA bands. A230, A260 and A280 of the samples were determined by a spectrophotometer.

Quantitative real-time RT-PCR

The cDNA of samples was synthesized by the SuperScript™ Reverse Transcriptase (Invitrogen). DyNAmo SYBR Green qPCR kit (Finzymes, Espoo, Finland) and Rotor-Gene 3000 (Corbett, Sydney, Australia) were used for quantitative real-time PCR. Primer sequences are listed in Table I. 18SrDNA was the house-keeping gene used as endogenous reference; dxr, hmgr, ggpps and dbat were objective genes. PCR conditions: 18SrDNA, hmgr: 94 °C for 25 s, 48 °C for 25 s, 72 °C for 25 s; ggpps: 94 °C for 25 s, 50 °C for 25 s, 72 °C for 25 s; dxr, dbat: 94 °C for 25 s, 46 °C for 25 s, 72 °C for 25 s. A melting curve was determined at the end of the 45 cycles starting at 65 °C. Primer specificity was monitored using gel electrophoresis and melting curve data. The amount of DXRmRNA, HMGRmRNA, GGPPSmRNA and DBATmRNA normalized to the endogenous reference (18SrDNA) was calculated applying the comparative threshold cycle (Ct) method, according to which the amount of target is given by the following expression: target relative quantity = 2–ΔΔCt, where ΔΔCt = (Ct,target − Ct,18SrDNA)TS − (Ct,target − Ct,18SrDNA)TL (Amoroso et al., 2004).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gene</th>
<th>Primer sequence (5’-3’)</th>
<th>Product [bp]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18SrDNA</td>
<td>Sense: TGG AGA AAC TGA AGG AGG TA</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Antisense: CTT ATT GAA CAG GGT GCC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ggpps</td>
<td>Sense: GCC CAC AAA TCA CAA GGT</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Antisense: TTC AGG TCC ACA TTA GCA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dbat</td>
<td>Sense: GGG AGG GTG TCT TGT TTG</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Antisense: GTT ACC TGA ACC ACC AGA GG</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hmgr</td>
<td>Sense: AGA CCT CAG CCT GCT AAC T</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Antisense: CTA AGG GCA TCA CAG ACC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dxr</td>
<td>Sense: TGG AGA AAC TGA AGG AGG TA</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Antisense: CTT ATT GAA CAG GGT GCC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Primer sequences applied in this study.
For each sample, the mean threshold cycle of three replications was used for calculations.

**HPLC quantification of paclitaxel**

TS and TL samples were collected 20 d after subculture. The analysis of paclitaxel was performed by HPLC as described previously with slight modification (Zhang and Fevereiro, 2006). In brief, dry samples (0.1 g) were extracted with methanol/methylenechloride (1:1, v/v) with sonication. The methylenechloride phase was separated from the aqueous phase and then evaporated in a rotary evaporator equipped with a condenser for solvent recovery. The residue was resuspended in 1 ml methanol. HPLC (Waters 2695) was carried out using a reverse-phase C18 column at 227 nm at 25 °C. The mobile phase was methanol/water (65:35, v/v). The elution rate was kept at 0.8 ml/min.

**Results**

**Comparison of different RNA extracting methods**

RNA of TL samples was successfully extracted by all of the methods mentioned above. Except for the MT method, all of the other methods were not suitable for the TS samples. RNA extracted by the MT and CTAB method can be identified by the presence of 28S, 18S and 5S bands. The MGI and Trizol method failed to get RNA. RNA extracted via the CTAB method exhibited degradation as shown by weak intensity of 18S in comparison with 28S bands (Fig. 1). By spectrophotometric analysis, the $A_{260}/A_{230}$ ratios of RNA extracted by the CTAB method were lower than 1.8 indicating contamination of polysaccharides or polyphenols. RNA extracted by the MT method showed $A_{260}/A_{230}$ ratios above 1.8, and $A_{260}/A_{280}$ ratios ranged between 1.8 and 2 implying little or no contamination of polysaccharides, polyphenol proteins or DNA (Table II). Therefore, relatively satisfactory results are obtained by the MT method, which could be used to obtain high-quality RNA from heavy browning plant tissue or cells.

**Transcription levels of dxr, hmgr, ggpps and dbat**

Amplification of the dxr, hmgr, ggpps and dbat genes gave specific products of the expected size (Fig. 2). The products were sequenced and confirmed to be the target genes. The transcription level of each key enzyme gene experienced a world of variation from February 2004 to July 2007 (Fig. 3). By real-time RT-PCR it was concluded that the MT method could be used to obtain high-quality RNA from heavy browning plant tissue or cells.

![Ethidium bromide-stained agarose gel showing RT-PCR products](image)

**Table II. Spectrophotometric readings used to evaluate the RNA quantity and quality.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>$A_{260}/A_{230}$</th>
<th>$A_{260}/A_{280}$</th>
<th>Total RNA [μg/g FW]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CTAB method</td>
<td>1.47 (0.11)</td>
<td>1.56 (0.18)</td>
<td>181 (58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MT method</td>
<td>1.81 (0.15)</td>
<td>1.92 (0.24)</td>
<td>245 (71)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results are expressed as the mean of 3 samples (standard deviation).
that the expression levels of the genes in TS samples were apparently higher that those in TL samples (Table III).

Table III. Relative transcript levels of four genes from TS and TL samples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gene</th>
<th>△△CT</th>
<th>Relative transcript level (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TL</td>
<td>TS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ggpps</td>
<td>−9.2 (±0.3)</td>
<td>100 9.2 (±0.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dxr</td>
<td>−9.3 (±0.2)</td>
<td>100 9.3 (±0.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hmgr</td>
<td>−13.2 (±0.3)</td>
<td>100 13.2 (±0.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dbat</td>
<td>−16.1 (±0.4)</td>
<td>100 16.1 (±0.4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Quantification of paclitaxel by HPLC

The paclitaxel production of Taxus media cv. Hicksii cell culture notably decreased from February 2004 to July 2007. In addition, it can be noted that the amount of other taxanes and unknown secondary metabolites also decreased during the course.

Discussion

Phenolic compounds are readily oxidized and covalently linked with quinones, and bind nucleic acids (Malnoy et al., 2001). Polysaccharides can co-precipitate with RNA in low ionic strength buffers (Liu et al., 1998), leading to poor-quality RNA or no RNA at all. PVP has a strong ability to bind with phenolics, inhibiting oxidation and preventing quinone binding with RNA. Mercaptoethanol can interrupt the disulfide bridge of polyphenol oxidase and prevent polyphenol from oxidation. Addition of NaAc during precipitation can efficiently eliminate the intervention of polysaccharides. Our data suggested that RNA extracted with the MT method provide robust template for the reverse transcription reaction.

DBAT and GGPP are key enzymes determining the downstream and upstream regulation level, respectively (Walker and Croteau, 2000; Liao et al., 2005). Transcript levels of dbat and ggpps in TL cells were much lower than those in TS cells, which may account for the decrease of the paclitaxel content of Taxus cell. HMGR is the first key enzyme in the classical mevalonate pathway and DXR the second in the non-mevalonate pathway. Their expression levels in TL cells were much lower than those in TS cells. The result suggested that the decreasing tendency of the expression profiles does not happen only on the key enzyme genes which are closely related with paclitaxel biosynthesis, but also on the early metabolic pathway before the biosynthesis of IPP. HPLC analysis showed that the amounts of all other secondary metabolites besides paclitaxel decreased.

Many strategies are now focusing on the transcriptional regulation of key enzyme genes involved in the paclitaxel biosynthesis, such as inducing Taxus cells by various elicitors and precursor feeding (Ketchum et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2007). However, these strategies can not solve the problem of gradual paclitaxel loss during long-term subculture. Once a newly established paclitaxel cell line loses its high productivity characteristic after continuous subcultures, it is difficult to recover it by simple ma-
nplementation on the metabolic regulation. For this reason, more emphasis should be put on the conservation of high-yield cell lines and on elucidating the mechanism underlying the somaclonal variation that is responsible for the gradual loss of secondary metabolites after continuous subcultures.


