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Bifunctional chimera for ligand-directed photo-degradation of oncogenic microRNA†

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Targeted inhibition of oncogenic microRNAs provides a promising anti-cancer approach. Here, we report a bifunctional chimera for ligand-directed regulation of target oncogenic precursor microRNA through photo-degradation. Chimeric TGP-210-Ppa with photosensitizer pyropheophorbide a (Ppa) linked with the ligand of the oncogenic precursor miR-210 was able to bind specifically to oncogenic pre-miRNA and produce $^1O_2$ under red light irradiation to degrade the target pre-miRNA. This bifunctional chimera-based modification of precursor microRNA serves as a unique method for target gene regulation since photo-irradiation was able to provide temporal–spatial resolution. We demonstrated that TGP-210-Ppa prevented the generation of functional miR-210 in breast cancer cells in a photocontrollable manner. This also successfully reversed the downstream oncogenic signaling pathway mediated by miR-210 to promote cancer cell death.

As a class of endogenous gene regulators, microRNAs (miRNAs) have been found to extensively participate in cancer progression.[1] Suppression of oncogenic miRNAs thus represents a promising anti-cancer strategy.[2,3] In addition to antisense oligonucleotides capable of blocking miRNA function through Watson–Crick base pairing-based hybridization,[4] small molecules that directly bind to the secondary structures of miRNAs are emerging as a novel type of miRNA inhibitor.[5] For example, xanthone derivatives,[6] aminoglycosides,[7,8] and ether-amide derivatives[9] have been reported to selectively bind and inhibit target miRNAs in living cells. To further enhance the potency of small-molecule inhibitors, the Disney group developed bifunctional chimeras containing small-molecule ligands of precursor miRNAs for targeted miRNA degradation.[10,11] Ribonuclease-targeting chimera (RIBOTAC) comprising a small-molecule miRNA ligand linked with an RNase recruiter is validated to induce miRNA degradation by bringing RNase in close proximity to the target miRNA.[12,13] This approach has been demonstrated to degrade oncogenic miRNAs such as miR-96,[14] miR-210,[15] miR-17-92,[16] and miR-21.[12] These achievements highlight the promise of small-molecule chimeras for miRNA inhibition.

Singlet oxygen ($^1O_2$) is a reactive oxygen species (ROS) that is highly detrimental toward biomolecules, including nucleic acids, proteins and lipids.[17,18] Exposure to $^1O_2$ is known to cause oxidative damage to adjacent biomolecules and lead to malfunction of the oxidized biomolecules.[19,20] Photosensitizers with strong absorption at long wavelengths have been widely adopted for biomedical applications to generate $^1O_2$ in spatio-temporal- and dose-controllable manners.[21,22] The integration of photosensitizers with photoirradiation to produce excessive $^1O_2$ has led to the discovery of photodynamic therapy (PDT) as a powerful anti-cancer modality.[23,24] A more deliberate approach, named chromophore-assisted light inactivation (CALI), has been developed to selectively inactivate proteins in living cells by pre-installation of photosensitizers onto the target followed by meticulous light illumination to generate $^1O_2$.[25,26] However, the possibility of using $^1O_2$ to precisely inactivate miRNAs in living cells has been little reported.

Here we report a novel small-molecule chimera, **TGP-210-Ppa**, for targeted inhibition of miR-210 in living cancer cells (Scheme 1). **TGP-210-Ppa** consists of the small-molecule ligand, **TGP-210**, against precursor miR-210 (pre-miR-210) and the organic photosensitizer, pyropheophorbide a (Ppa). Upon ligand-directed binding of **TGP-210-Ppa** to pre-miR-210, red light irradiation is implemented to excite Ppa to produce $^1O_2$ to oxidize riboguanosine (rG) into 8-oxo-rG, causing the mutation and dysfunction of pre-miR-210.

The chemical structure of **TGP-210-Ppa** is shown in Fig. 1a. The two functional units, **TGP-210** and Ppa were readily conjugated together using an amide condensation strategy with ethylenediamine as the linker (Fig. S1, ESI†). The structure of the purified **TGP-210-Ppa** was confirmed by electrospray ionization-mass spectrometry (ESI-MS) (Fig. S2, ESI†). The

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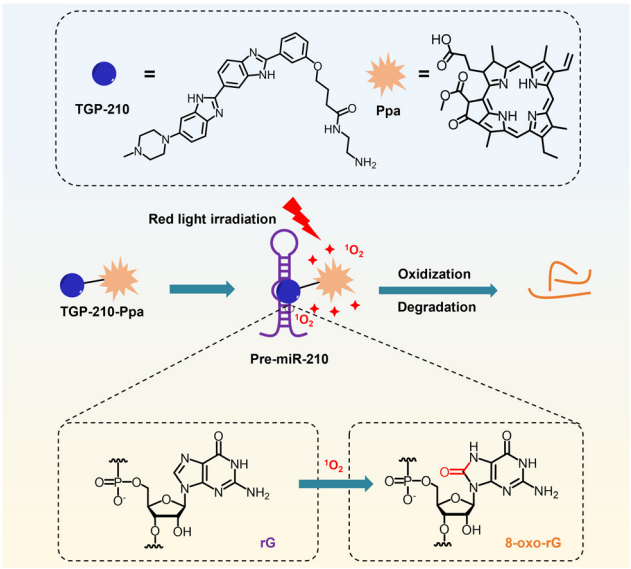

Scheme 1 Schematic illustration on the working mechanism of the ligand-directed red-light regulation of oncogenic microRNA.

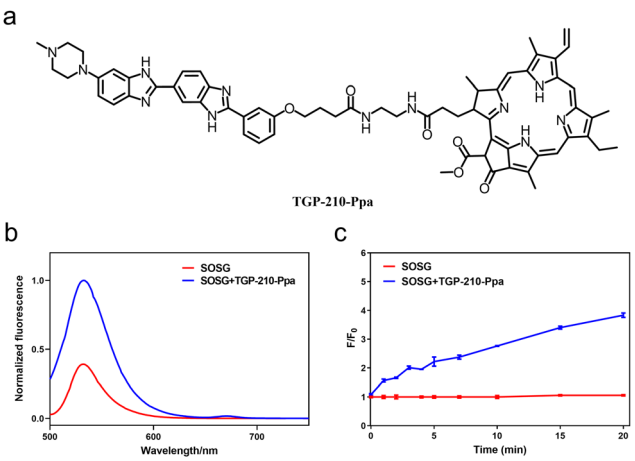

Fig. 1 (a) Chemical structure of **TGP-210-Ppa**. (b) Fluorescence spectra of **TGP-210-Ppa** after irradiation with 670 nm light (70 mW cm^{-2}) for 5 min. (c) The increase of SOSG fluorescence at 530 nm after incubation with **TGP-210-Ppa** and irradiation by 670 nm light (70 mW cm^{-2}) for 0–20 min. λ_{ex} = 488 nm. Data are shown as mean ± SEM (n = 3).

ultraviolet-visible (UV-Vis) spectroscopy of **TGP-210-Ppa** shows the characteristic absorption of **TGP-210** at ~350 nm and two characteristic absorption peaks of Ppa at ~400 nm and ~660 nm (Fig. S3, ESI†). The fluorescence spectrum shows that **TGP-210-Ppa** has similar fluorescence emission to that of Ppa (Fig. S4, ESI†). These results suggest that the conjugation of **TGP-210** to Ppa does not change the photophysical properties of the photo-sensitizer significantly.

We next examined whether **TGP-210-Ppa** was able to generate $^1O_2$ upon red-light irradiation and induce photo damage to its target pre-miR-210. Using the $^1O_2$ sensor green (SOSG) as the fluorescent indicator, we confirmed the capability of **TGP-210-Ppa** to generate $^1O_2$ in Phosphate Buffered Saline (PBS) buffer upon red light irradiation. As shown in Fig. 1b, irradiation of **TGP-210-Ppa** in PBS buffer containing SOSG using light of wavelength around 670 nm increased the fluorescence signal around 530 nm, which is characteristic of the fluorescence signal enhanced by $^1O_2$ on SOSG. Time dependence curve of the fluorescence enhancement *versus* irradiation time is shown in Fig. 1c. Subsequently, 9,10-anthracendipropionic acid (ADPA) was used as a capture probe to evaluate the efficiency of the $^1O_2$ generation. As shown in Fig. S5 (ESI†), the absorption intensity of ADPA at 378 nm gradually decreased as the irradiation time increased in the presence of the **TGP-210-Ppa** and MB, suggesting ADPA decomposition. According to the decay curves of the ADPA absorption, the $^1O_2$ quantum yield of the **TGP-210-Ppa** was about 0.327.[27] We then chose red light irradiation for 5 min as the standard condition to induce $^1O_2$-based oxidation.

Since nucleobases are known to be susceptible to $^1O_2$,[28] we evaluated the generation of oxidized nucleobases in pre-miR-210. Whether pre-miR-210 treated with **TGP-210-Ppa** upon red light irradiation results in the oxidation of nucleobases in pre-miR-210 was examined. We used LC-ESI-MS/MS to analyze the hydrolysis products of pre-miR-210 with or without **TGP-210-Ppa** under light irradiation (Fig. S6, ESI†). It is noteworthy that only 8-oxo-rG was detected as the oxidized nucleobase form in the hydrolyzed products of pre-miR-210 treated with **TGP-210-Ppa** and light irradiation. This is consistent with previous evidence that, among the four nucleobases in RNA, guanine is a major substrate of $^1O_2$.[29] Gel-shift assay revealed that excessive $^1O_2$ generated in the system by the presence of 200 equivalent of **TGP-210-Ppa** to pre-miR-210, together with 15 min light irradiation induced strand breakage (Fig. S7, ESI†), which is in agreement with previously reported results.[30,31] Overall, these results demonstrate that **TGP-210-Ppa** is able to cause oxidative damage to pre-miR-210 under photoirradiation.

The intracellular applications of **TGP-210-Ppa** were then explored. An MTT assay showed that **TGP-210-Ppa** had no obvious cytotoxicity in the dark at the concentration up to 25 μM (Fig. 2a). Confocal fluorescence imaging and flow cytometry showed that **TGP-210-Ppa** was able to be taken up

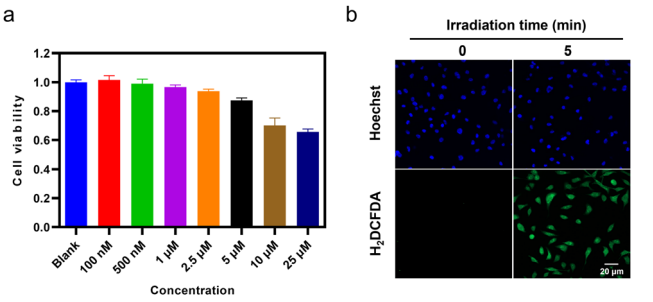

Fig. 2 (a) Relative viabilities of MDA-MB-231 cells incubated with different concentrations of **TGP-210-Ppa** for 48 h before light exposure. (b) Confocal microscopic images of MDA-MB-231 cells treated with **TGP-210-Ppa** for 4 h followed by exposure to 670 nm light for 5 min. Scale bar: 20 μm.

by cancer cell lines such as breast cancer MDA-MB-231 cells (Fig. S8, ESI†). Intracellular generation of $^1O_2$ by **TGP-210-Ppa** upon exposure to red light irradiation was monitored using the $^1O_2$-sensitive fluorescent probe 2′,7′-dichlorodihydrofluorescein diacetate (H_2DCFDA). As shown in Fig. 2b, the irradiation of MDA-MB-231 cells incubated with **TGP-210-Ppa** using light of 670 nm for 5 min significantly enhanced the fluorescence signal from the $^1O_2$ indicator inside the cells. We next investigated whether the *in-situ* generation of $^1O_2$ was able to regulate the intracellular pre-miR-210 since it was the target of **TGP-210-Ppa** for proximity-based regulation. Furthermore, to study the binding consequences of adding the Ppa moiety to **TGP-210**, binding affinities were measured by microscale thermophoresis (MST) to the targets with **TGP-210** or **TGP-210-Ppa**.[15,32] The results indicate that **TGP-210-Ppa** maintained selective binding to RNA with a K_d of 392 nM to pre-miR-210, which is modestly weaker compared with **TGP-210** with a K_d of 265 nM (Fig. S9, ESI†).

The protocol to evaluate the efficacy of the ligand-directed red-light regulation of intracellular pre-miR-210 is illustrated in Fig. 3a. Quantitative reverse transcription polymer chain reaction (qRT-PCR) results indicated the relative abundance of various RNAs in MDA-MB-231 cells treated with **TGP-210-Ppa** with or without red light irradiation. Cells treated by **TGP-210** or Ppa were used as a control to exclude the effect caused by the ligand or photo-sensitizer alone (Fig. 3b). Without exposure to light irradiation, both **TGP-210** and **TGP-210-Ppa** raised the intracellular level of pre-miR-210 dose-dependently, which could be attributed to the ligand-mediated blockade of pre-miR-210 processing due to the occupancy of enzymatic sites by **TGP-210-Ppa**.[33] Cells treated by Ppa alone did not show obvious changes in the intracellular pre-miR-210 level even after red light irradiation.

For cells treated by **TGP-210-Ppa** with a concentration as low as 10 nM, red light irradiation induced a significant decrease of intracellular pre-miR-210 level (Fig. 3c). Higher concentrations of **TGP-210-Ppa** elevated the pre-miR-210 level before light irradiation. However, after the cells pre-treated with **TGP-210-Ppa** were exposed to red light irradiation to trigger the formation of $^1O_2$, the ligand-directed modification or degradation of pre-miR-210 became predominant. These results suggest that the enhanced suppression of miR-210 by **TGP-210-Ppa** depends on both its chimeric effects. Also, **TGP-210-Ppa** further reduced the intracellular level of miR-210 in a dose-dependent manner under light irradiation, with similar effects observed for pre-miR-210 (Fig. S10, ESI†). Consequently, **TGP-210-Ppa** led to a more potent inhibition of miR-210 biogenesis after photo-irradiation. Moreover, non-target miRNAs, including miR-21, miR-24 and miR-192, were not modulated by **TGP-210-Ppa** even after light irradiation (Fig. 3d), confirming a ligand-directed selective inhibition of miR-210.

Finally, we investigated whether the ligand-directed photo-regulation of pre-miR-210 was able to further regulate relevant genes down-stream of miR-210. It has been well established that the overexpression of miR-210 promotes cancer cell growth by inhibiting the glycerol-3-phosphate dehydrogenase 1-like (GPD1L)-hypoxia inducible factor 1-alpha (HIF-1α) pathway (Fig. 4a).[34] Therefore we examined the potential of **TGP-210-Ppa** for photo-regulating the expression level of GPD1L and HIF-1α. The results shown in Fig. 4b and c confirmed our assumption that **TGP-210-Ppa** in MDA-MB-231 cells upon

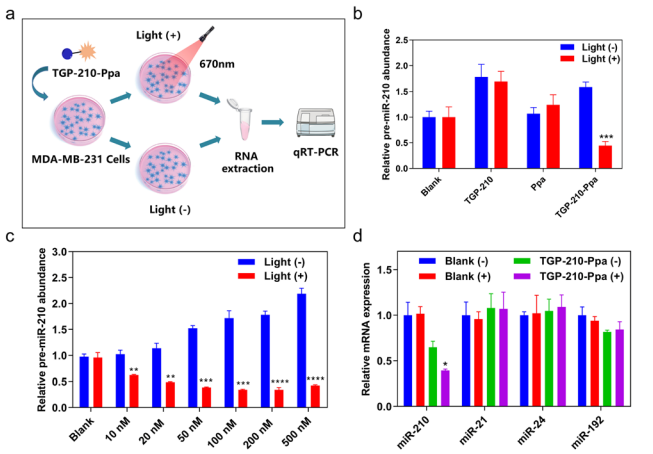

Fig. 3 (a) Schematic illustration of the protocol to evaluate the efficacy of the ligand-directed red-light regulation of intracellular pre-miR-210. (b) qRT-PCR analysis of pre-miR-210 in MDA-MB-231 cells pre-treated with **TGP-210** (500 nM), Ppa (500 nM) or **TGP-210-Ppa** (500 nM) before and after red light irradiation. Cells were incubated with different compounds for 4 hours, the red light applied was 670 nm light with intensity set at 70 mW cm^{-2} and the irradiation time was 5 minutes. (c) Relative expression levels of pre-miR-210 in the different concentrations of **TGP-210-Ppa** treated groups with or without light. (d) Treatment of MDA-MB-231 cells with **TGP-210-Ppa** (500 nM) for 4 h and 670 nm irradiation for 5 min and 24 h later, qRT-PCR analysis of miR-210, miR-21, miR-24 and miR-192. Data are shown as mean ± SEM (n = 3). *P < 0.05, **P < 0.01, ***P < 0.001 and ****P < 0.0001.

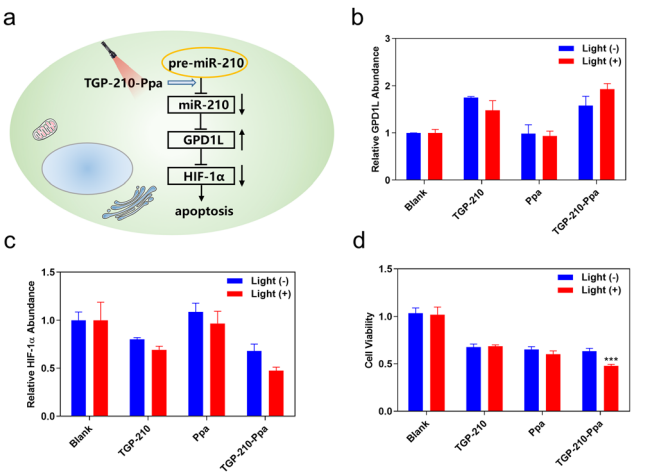

Fig. 4 (a) Schematic illustration of the miR-210-GPD1L-HIF1α regulatory pathway that might be photo-regulated in MDA-MB-231 cells treated by **TGP-210-Ppa**. (b) Quantitative analysis for GPD1L and (c) HIF-1α is measured by qRT-PCR with or without light. (d) Relative viabilities of MDA-MB-231 cells incubated with **TGP-210**, Ppa or **TGP-210-Ppa** for 4 h and 670 nm irradiation for 5 min at 24 h post incubation. Data are shown as mean ± SEM (n = 6). ***P < 0.001.

photo-irradiation caused elevated expression of GPD1L and suppression of the HIF1α gene. MTT assay showed that **TGP-210-Ppa** with light irradiation elicited 52% cell apoptosis (Fig. 4d). Therefore, the ligand-directed photo-degradation of pre-miR-210 by **TGP-210-Ppa** could partially reverse the miR-210-involved signaling pathway to induce cancer apoptosis.

In summary, we reported a novel bifunctional chimera for photo-oxidation and degradation of target pre-miRNA that is related to cancer. **TGP-210-Ppa** that integrated the small-molecule ligand to the oncogenic pre-miR-210 with the photosensitizer Ppa was prepared, which demonstrated high efficacy for ligand-directed red-light degradation of intracellular pre-miR-210. **TGP-210-Ppa** could efficiently produce $^1O_2$ upon red-light irradiation, which induced the oxidization of rG into 8-oxo-rG in pre-miR-210 and further degradation of intracellular pre-miR-210. Using **TGP-210-Ppa** and red-light irradiation, we demonstrated the possibility of reversing oncogenic signalling pathways downstream of miR-210 to promote cancer cell apoptosis. As more small-molecule ligands are being reported to bind with specific RNA targets, this proof-of-concept work holds promise to develop various photo-regulatable bifunctional chimeras for spatial and temporal degradation of disease-related precursor microRNAs. Further efforts to address the limit of this system for *in vivo* applications due to the penetration ability of red light into deep tissue are now underway in our group.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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