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Design and synthesis of a novel "turn-on" fluorescent probe based on benzofuran-3(2H)-one for detection of hydrazine in water samples and biological systems

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ABSTRACT

Hydrazine is a very important industrial chemical with high toxicity to the human body. In this work, a fluorescent probe **HZ**, based on the substitution-cyclization-elimination cascade which initiated by hydrazine, was designed and synthesized. **HZ** had various characteristics such as high selectivity, high sensitivity, fast detection speed, wide application range, and so on. After treating with hydrazine, the fluorescence signal of **HZ** at 520 nm in aqueous solution was significantly enhanced. Furthermore, **HZ** had the linear range of 1–10 equivalent for monitoring hydrazine, and the solution showed a colorless to yellow color change. In practical application, the detection limit of **HZ** for the detection of hydrazine was only 0.75 µM, which could be utilized for trace detection of hydrazine in different water samples. These indicated that **HZ** had a broad application prospect in the fields of environmental protection and water treatment. This work not only provided a useful instrument for the detection of the ecological environment but also supplied important information for the system optimization of other ecological environment detectors. In addition, **HZ** could monitor endogenous and exogenous hydrazine in MCF-7 cells successfully, which demonstrated its potential for practical application in complex biological systems.

1. Introduction

As a significant industrial chemical, hydrazine is widely used in pharmaceutical, chemical, catalytic, agricultural, and other fields [1–4]. Nevertheless, due to the wide application of hydrazine, it is easy to cause environmental pollution in the whole industrial process, such as production, disposal, and so on [5]. In addition, due to its highly explosive, hydrazine plays a more crucial role in the high-energy fuel of rocket and fuel cell propulsion systems [6,7]. Hydrazine is also a highly toxic substance, which may lead to acute damage to many organs of the human body, such as the kidney, lung, and liver [8–10].

As we know, US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has used hydrazine as a potential carcinogen, and the threshold limit value (TLV) is 10 ppb [11]. Consequently, the trace detection of extremely harmful

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hydrazine has aroused great interest, and it is particularly important to control the concentration of hydrazine in industrial areas as well as to monitor the concentration of hydrazine in biological systems and drinking water [12].

At present, a variety of hydrazine detection methods have been developed, such as titrimetry [13], spectrophotometry [14], electrochemistry [15], chromatography-mass spectrometry [16,17], Raman spectroscopy [18] and so on. Unfortunately, these methods have some shortcomings, such as high cost, tedious operation, or long analysis time, which hinder the roles of these methods in practical application. In recent years, fluorescent probes have been widely developed in the detection of small molecular targets because of their sensitivity, selectivity, and good biocompatibility [19,20]. Up to now, based on the strong nucleophilic property of hydrazine, several fluorescent probes of



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Fig. 1. The selective detection of HZ for hydrazine.

hydrazine have been exploited [21–23]. These fluorescent probes connected the fluorophores with the recognition groups, which was commonly the nucleophilic reaction site. The reported recognition groups of hydrazine mainly included acetyl [24–28], levulinate [29,30], 4-bromo butyrate [31–33], phthalimide [34–36], aldehyde [37], cyano group [38,39], and so on. Nevertheless, most of the hydrazine fluorescent probes had some disadvantages, such as strong background signal, negative selectivity, high cytotoxicity, and complex synthesis process. These disadvantages limited the scope of applications of the probes greatly, thus much attention has been paid to design fluorescence probes with better selectivity and higher sensitivity for the detection of hydrazine. It is believed that with the continuous improvement of selectivity and sensitivity in future research, the applications of hydrazine probes in various fields will face new opportunities and challenges.

As far as we know, benzofuranone and its derivatives have attracted much attention because of their excellent photo-physical properties, high fluorescence quantum yield, and photo bleaching resistance among many organic fluorophores. These favorable properties make benzofuranone become a powerful platform for the development of fluorescent probes for a variety of targets. Herein, we designed and synthesized a novel fluorescent probe HZ based on benzofuranone for monitoring of hydrazine (Fig. 1). Compared with other species, HZ had higher selectivity for hydrazine, and it could be used for detecting hydrazine in a variety of samples. With the addition of hydrazine, the 4-bromo butyrate group of HZ was replaced by hydrazine nucleophilic substitution into the corresponding hydrazone. Then the electron of the N atom attacked the C positive ion in the C=O double bond, which affected the distribution of intramolecular electron density. Finally, the fluorophore of benzofuranone derivative was formed by cyclization and elimination reaction. As a result, there were significant changes in the absorption and fluorescence spectra of HZ. In Table S1, we listed the previously reported probes for hydrazine and compared the properties including response time, excitation/emission wavelength, detection limit, and biological imaging capabilities [3,5,12,19,22–25,33,36,39–52]. Compared with some other hydrazine probes [49], the response time of HZ was short (<7 min), which was conducive to the rapid detection. In addition, because of the specificity of the recognition group 4-bromo butyrate group, HZ had high selectivity for hydrazine among various species than the ones with other reaction mechanisms [50]. Furthermore, HZ had smaller steric hindrance than other probes [33], so it was easier to adjust the excitation and emission wavelength due to its flexible structure.

In this work, the developed probe, **HZ**, had a large Stokes Shift (>110 nm) and a wide linear range (10–100 μ M). Besides, **HZ** had a low proportion of DMSO (1% DMSO), which was more suitable for biological applications. Meanwhile, the limit of detection (LOD) was determined to be 0.75 μ M. Given the above characteristics, we applied the probe to the rapid measurement of hydrazine in environmental water samples. In addition, **HZ** could penetrate living cells, which enabled us to use the probe for confocal imaging of hydrazine in MCF-7 cells successfully.

2. Experimental section

2.1. Materials and instruments

The chemicals reagents were commercially acquired from Aladdin Reagents. Chromatographic purification was performed using 300–400 mesh chromatography silica gel (Haiyang, Qingdao, P.R. China). All amino acids were obtained from Sigma-Aldrich. The fluorescence spectra were carried out on Hitachi F-7000 spectrophotometer. UV–vis spectra recording was conducted on Shimadzu UV-2550 spectrometer. The NMR spectra were acquired in Bruker DRX-600 and Advance III HD spectrometer. The Mass spectra were obtained from AB SCIEX Triple-TOF 4600. The pH detection was carried out with PHS-25 pH-meter (Shanghai Geotechnical International Trading Co. Ltd., Shanghai, P.R. China).

2.2. Synthesis of compound 1

To a solution of 6-hydroxybenzofuran-3(2H)-one (5 mmol, 0.74 g) in dry ethanol (10 mL) was added benzaldehyde (5 mmol, 0.53 g) and sodium hydroxide (10 mmol, 0.4 g). The mixture was refluxed for 5 h until the starting compound was consumed, as determined by TLC [53, 54]. After completing the reaction, the solution was cooled to room temperature and acidified to pH = 6.0 with acetic acid. To gain the precipitate, the ice water was added slowly. Finally, the residue was filtered, and the crude product was purified by silica gel column chromatography to acquire compound 1 (Yield: 0.83 g, 70%). ¹H NMR (600 MHz, DMSO-d₆) δ 11.26 (s, 1H), 7.96 (d, *J* = 7.4 Hz, 2H), 7.65 (d, *J* = 8.4 Hz, 1H), 7.51 (t, *J* = 7.5 Hz, 2H), 7.44 (t, *J* = 7.3 Hz, 1H), 6.82 (d, *J* = 1.9 Hz, 1H), 6.81 (s, 1H), 6.74 (dd, *J* = 8.4, 1.9 Hz, 1H). ¹³C NMR (151 MHz, DMSO) δ 181.94, 168.46, 167.09, 147.85, 132.55, 131.53, 130.12, 129.45, 126.49, 113.57, 113.20, 110.80, 99.12. HRMS (ESI-TOF) *m/z*: [M+H]⁺ Calcd. for C₁₅H₁₀O₃ 239.0663, Found 239.0699.

2.3. Synthesis of probe HZ

4-dimethylaminopyridine (DMAP) (40 mg, 0.32 mmol), 1-ethyl-3-(3-dimethylaminopropyl) carbodiimide hydrochloride (EDC·HCl) (202 mg, 1.04 mmol) and 4-bromobutyric acid (120 mg, 0.72 mmol) were dissolved into 40 mL anhydrous DCM with compound **1** [33,49]. At room temperature, the mixture was stirred for 16 h. After the reaction completed, the solvent was removed, and the residue was purified by eluting with (PE/EA = 50/1, v/v) to afford probe **HZ** (Yield: 181 mg, 65%). ¹H NMR (600 MHz, DMSO- d_6) δ 8.00 (d, J = 7.3 Hz, 2H), 7.87 (d, J = 8.3 Hz, 1H), 7.55–7.50 (m, 3H), 7.48 (t, J = 7.3 Hz, 1H), 7.14 (dd, J = 8.3, 1.9 Hz, 1H), 6.97 (s, 1H), 3.66 (t, J = 6.6 Hz, 2H), 2.82 (t, J = 7.3 Hz, 2H), 2.25–2.17 (m, 2H). ¹³C NMR (151 MHz, DMSO) δ 182.90, 170.86, 166.58, 157.82, 147.21, 131.90, 130.67, 129.53, 125.86, 119.11, 118.82, 112.87, 107.83, 34.31, 32.71, 27.91. HRMS (ESI-TOF) m/z: [M+H]⁺ Calcd. for C₁₉H₁₅BrO₄ 387.0217, Found 387.0217.



Scheme 1. The synthetic route of probe HZ.

2.4. Fluorescent spectral measurement

The stock solution of HZ (1.0 mM) was dissolved in DMSO, and other concentrations were obtained by dilution. The stock solution of hydrazine, amino acids, cations, and anions was prepared in ultrapure water. The mixture reaction solution was implemented at 37 °C for 7 min, and the fluorescence intensity was recorded. The wavelength of excitation was set as 410 nm. Both excitation and emission slit widths were 5 nm. The photomultiplier voltage was 600 V. The error bars were the standard deviation based on three independent experiments.

2.5. Determination of the fluorescence quantum yield

The fluorescence quantum yield Φ_u was detected by the relative contrast, with rhodamine B of the ethanol solution as the standard substance. Participation ratio method was recruited with the formula: $\Phi_u = [(A_sF_un^2)/(A_uF_sn_0^2)]\Phi_s$. Herein, rhodamine B was used as control. Φ_u and Φ_s were the fluorescence quantum yields of HZ and reference, respectively. A_u and A_s were the absorbance values of HZ and reference, while F_u and F_s were their integrations of emission band areas. n and n_0 were the solvent refractive indexes of HZ solution and reference, respectively.

Control: $\Phi_s = 0.69$, $A_s = 0.024$, $F_s = 71.29$, $n_0 = 1.361$; For 1: Au1 = 0.038, Fu1 = 84.11, n1 = 1.477; Φ u1 = 0.61; For **HZ**: A_{u2} = 0.043, F_{u2} = 14.75, n₂ = 1.477; Φ _{u2} = 0.09;

2.6. Preparation for water samples

The stock solution of hydrazine (10 mM) was dissolved in rice water, tap water, and distilled water. A calculated amount of hydrazine, HZ, and PBS was added to a vial and the complex solution was diluted to 200 μ L with rice water, tap water, and distilled water. The final HZ and hydrazine concentrations were 1.0 \times 10⁻⁵ M, 0–10.0 \times 10⁻⁵ M, respectively. All measurements were performed in triplicate.

2.7. MTT assay

Cell viability was performed using MCF-7 cells and HeLa cells. MCF-7 cells and HeLa cells were seeded in the medium, which was incubated with different concentrations of HZ at 37 $^\circ$ C. After 24 h, each well was

added with 5 μL MTT (5 mg/mL) and placed for 4 h in the incubator at 37 °C, and then cell supernatant was removed. Finally, to each well was added 150 μL DMSO and cell viability assay was detected on Tecan Microplate Reader. The error bars were the standard deviation based on three independent experiments.

2.8. Cell culture and imaging

MCF-7 cells were cultivated with Dulbecco's Modified Eagle Medium (DMEM) (Gibco Company, USA) containing 1% Penicillin-Streptomycin and 10% FBS (Fetal Bovine Serum) in the incubator for 24 h. For the control group, MCF-7 cells were directly incubated with **HZ** (10 μ M) at 37 °C for 60 min. For the experimental group, MCF-7 cells were initially treated with isoniazid (100 μ M) or hydrazine (100 μ M or 200 μ M) at 37 °C for 30 min. Then, MCF-7 cells were incubated with **HZ** (10 μ M) at 37 °C for 60 min. All confocal imaging results were completed using a single-photon confocal fluorescence microscope (Olympus FV3000). Excited at 410 nm, green fluorescence was collected from 460 to 550 nm.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Characterization of compound 1 and probe HZ

The synthetic route of compound **1** and probe HZ was displayed in Scheme 1. To ensure the accuracy of the synthesis, the structures of compound **1** and probe HZ were confirmed by ¹H NMR, ¹³C NMR, and HRMS (Figs. S6–S11).

3.2. The absorption spectrum and fluorescence spectrum response

To determine the response activity of HZ to hydrazine, the absorption spectrum and fluorescence spectrum were investigated at 37 °C in PBS buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4). Consequently, we monitored the UV–Vis absorption of HZ without and with hydrazine in PBS buffer for the first time. As seen in Fig. 2a, the UV–Vis absorption of HZ showed a weak absorption peak at 390 nm, while the absorbance shifted to an obvious absorption peak at 400 nm after HZ reacted with 500 μ M hydrazine. This result implicated that HZ had an optical response to hydrazine. In addition, free probe HZ showed a very weak fluorescence emission signal due to the effective quenching effect in the absence of hydrazine. On the contrary, after being treated with hydrazine in PBS buffer, a



Fig. 2. a) The absorption spectra of HZ (10 μ M) without (black) and with (red) hydrazine (500 μ M). Inset (a): The images of absorption were HZ (10 μ M) without (white) or with (yellow) hydrazine (500 μ M) in visible light. b) The fluorescence spectra of HZ (10 μ M) without and with hydrazine (500 μ M) for 7 min at 37 °C. Insert (b): The different colors without (left) and with hydrazine (right) under UV 365 nm. Excitation: 410 nm; Slit widths: 5 nm*5 nm; Photomultiplier voltage: 600 V.



Fig. 3. a) The fluorescence spectra of HZ (10 μ M) with different concentrations of hydrazine (1–100 eq) in PBS buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4, 1% DMSO) for 7 min. b) The curve of the fluorescence intensity with the different concentrations of hydrazine (1–100 eq) at 520 nm. Insert (b): The linear relationship of the fluorescence signal with the concentration of hydrazine (1–10 eq) in PBS buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4, 1% DMSO) for 7 min at 520 nm. Excitation: 410 nm; Slit widths: 5 nm*5 nm; Photomultiplier voltage: 600 V.

Fig. 4. a) and b) Time-dependent fluorescence intensity of **HZ** incubated with hydrazine (500 μM) in PBS buffer (10 mM, 1% DMSO, pH 7.4) at 37 °C for different time (1–15 min). Excitation: 410 nm; Slit widths: 5 nm*5 nm; Photomultiplier voltage: 600 V.

remarkable fluorescence signal emerged at 520 nm (Fig. 2b). These results showed that hydrazine could expose the fluorophore and release bright green fluorescence intensity (Fig. 2b insert), which significantly increased through nucleophilic substitution, cyclization, and elimination reaction. Furthermore, HZ was seemly an ideal detector for monitoring hydrazine *in vitro*.

According to the practical properties of HZ towards hydrazine, we carried out the following fluorescent determination experiment. The fluorescence quantum yield of HZ was calculated as 0.09, which showed that HZ had a certain real value as a turn-on probe. As seen in Fig. 3a, the fluorescence signal of HZ (10 μ M) enhanced gradually at 520 nm when incubated with different concentrations of hydrazine (1–100 eq). When the concentration of hydrazine was added to 50.0 equivalent (500 μ M), the fluorescence intensity reached the plateau (Fig. 3b). To better quantify the content of hydrazine in various samples, we explored the quantitative linear range of hydrazine by HZ. We found that when the

concentration of hydrazine was in the range of 1–10.0 equivalent, the fluorescence intensity of HZ raised linearly at 520 nm. Finally, with the continuous dilution of hydrazine concentration, we found that the detection limit of hydrazine was 0.75 μM (Fig. 3b insert).

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3.3. pH-Titration and time-dependent curve

We first investigated the fluorescence intensity changes of HZ with different pH in the absence and presence of hydrazine. It could be seen that when hydrazine was not added, the fluorescence intensity of HZ was almost unchanged within the pH range of 3–9. With the addition of hydrazine, the fluorescence intensity of HZ was significantly enhanced within the pH range of 6–9 (Fig. S1). The above results showed that HZ could monitor the level of hydrazine in physiological conditions.

To investigate the response time of HZ, we measured the timedependent fluorescence intensity changes of HZ in PBS buffer. As



Fig. 5. a) The fluorescence signal of the HZ (10 µM) with different species (1 mM) in PBS buffer (10 mM, 1% DMSO, pH 7.4) for 7 min at 520 nm. b) The fluorescence signal of the HZ (10 µM) with different amino acids (1 mM) in PBS buffer (10 mM, 1% DMSO, pH 7.4) for 7 min at 520 nm. Excitation: 410 nm; Slit widths: 5 nm*5 nm; Photomultiplier voltage: 600 V.



Fig. 6. a) The plausible mechanism b) the NMR spectra for hydrazine of HZ.

shown in Fig. 4a and b, when hydrazine was added, the fluorescence signal increased significantly and reached a plateau within 7 min. The shorter reaction time was more beneficial for the rapid determination of hydrazine. Herein, 7 min was selected as the reaction time.

3.4. Selectivity analysis

The selectivity of HZ was significant in the determination of

hydrazine, so we evaluated the selectivity of **HZ** with the addition of various analytes (Fig. 5a and b). The analytes mainly included compounds ethylenediamine, methylamine, urea, ammonia, isoniazid, metal ions K⁺, Fe²⁺, Al³⁺, Cd²⁺, Fe³⁺, Zn²⁺, Co²⁺, Ni²⁺, Cr³⁺, Mn²⁺, Ca²⁺, anions S²⁻, NO²⁻, S₂O₃²⁻, C₂O₄²⁻, and amino acids Ala, Arg, Asn, Asp, Cys, Gln, Glu, Gly, His, Ile, Leu, Lys, Met, Phe, Pro, Ser, Thr, Trp, Tyr, Val. In Fig. 5, we found that there was no obvious fluorescence enhancement in all groups except for hydrazine, and the color of the



Fig. 7. a) The fluorescence intensity of **HZ** $(1.0 \times 10^{-5} \text{ M})$ with the concentration of hydrazine in rice water, tap water, and distilled water. b) The linear relationship of the fluorescence intensity with the concentration of hydrazine $(0-10.0 \times 10^{-5} \text{ M})$ in rice water, tap water, and distilled water. Excitation: 410 nm; Slit widths: 5 nm*5 nm; Photomultiplier voltage: 600 V.



Fig. 8. Cell viability of a) MCF-7 and b) HeLa with different concentrations of HZ for 24 h.

solution did not change with the addition of different analytes. These results indicated that the selectivity of **HZ** was good. The excellent selectivity of **HZ** made it more suitable for the detection of hydrazine in complex biological systems.

benzofuranone derivatives was formed by cyclization and elimination reaction (Fig. 6a). The NMR spectra and MS spectra analyses have verified the mechanism (Figs. 6b and S2). In addition, to better explain the reaction mechanism, the ¹H NMR, ¹³C NMR, and HRMS of the reaction product after purification were provided (Figs. S3–S5).

3.5. Reaction mechanism study of HZ

The deprotection method of 4-bromo butyrate quenching fluorophore was used here. In **HZ**, 4-bromo butyric acid was the reaction site of hydrazine. When hydrazine was added, the 4-bromo butyric acid group of **HZ** was replaced by hydrazine nucleophilic substitution into the corresponding hydrazone. Then the electron of the N atom attacked the C positive ion in the C=O double bond, which affected the distribution of intramolecular electron density. Finally, the fluorophore of

3.6. Detection of hydrazine in water samples

Hydrazine is an important detection index in the process of environmental protection and water treatment, so the detection of hydrazine in water samples has attracted wide attention. The hydrazine in rice water, tap water, and distilled water were monitored by HZ. There was no obvious fluorescence enhancement in the detected water samples without hydrazine after incubating with HZ. However, the water



Fig. 9. The fluorescent images of MCF-7 cells with HZ under different treatments. (a–c) Control: the cells were treated with HZ (10 μ M) for 60 min at 37 °C; (d–l) Others: the cells were firstly treated with isoniazid (100 μ M), hydrazine (100 μ M or 200 μ M) for 30 min at 37 °C, then incubated with HZ (10 μ M) for 60 min at 37 °C. Scale bar: 25 μ m.

samples were treated with different hydrazine concentrations (0–10.0 × 10^{-5} M) and appeared sharp fluorescence signals after incubating with HZ. As shown in Fig. 7a, the recoveries gained by HZ intensity were compared, which indicated that HZ had practical value for monitoring hydrazine in different water samples. In addition, to better research the content of hydrazine in different water samples, we explored the quantitative linear range of hydrazine by HZ with the fluorescence intensity (Fig. 7b). The results showed that HZ could quantify hydrazine in various water samples.

3.7. Detection of hydrazine in live cells

Before imaging cells, we firstly used MTT assay to determine the cytotoxicity of HZ on MCF-7 cells and HeLa cells. The results showed that even if the concentration of HZ increased to more than 50 μ M, the survival rate of MCF-7 cells was still above 80% (Fig. 8a). The cytotoxicity of HZ in HeLa cells was also relatively low (Fig. 8b). We demonstrated that the toxicity of HZ was low, which provided a good basis for subsequent cell experiments.

Encouraged by the above results of good cytotoxicity of **HZ**, we investigated the biological practical value of **HZ** in living cells by Olympus FV3000 confocal microscope. The confocal experiment was used to evaluate the cell permeability and imaging ability of **HZ** in MCF-7 cells. In the control group, **HZ** was incubated with MCF-7 cells at 37 °C for 60 min directly and then photographed. As shown in Fig. 9a–c, it was no obvious fluorescence in the green channel excited by 410 nm. In the experimental group, MCF-7 cells were initially incubated with 100 μ M isoniazid for 30 min and then treated with **HZ** for 60 min, which did show a bright fluorescence emission signal (Fig. 9d–f). The above results showed that isoniazid could induce the production of endogenous hydrazine in living cells.

In the other groups, MCF-7 cells were initially incubated with 100 μ M or 200 μ M hydrazine for 30 min and then treated with HZ for 60 min, which displayed a bright fluorescence emission signal (Fig. 9g–l). The results showed that the fluorescence intensity of the 200 μ M group was significantly higher than that of the 100 μ M group in the green channel. Thus, there was a dose-dependent fluorescence enhancement. The good cell morphology further proved the strong cell membrane permeability of HZ. The results showed that HZ was compatible with the measurement of hydrazine in living cells, and its advantages were mainly reflected in low cytotoxicity and good biocompatibility. The above results showed that HZ could monitor endogenous and exogenous hydrazine in living cells.

4. Conclusion

In summary, a novel benzofuranone-derivated fluorescent probe HZ for detecting hydrazine was exploited. The results indicated that HZ reacted with hydrazine (<7 min) rapidly. Furthermore, HZ had a significant enhancement of fluorescence signal at 520 nm in the presence of hydrazine. The linear correlation was applicable for quantifying hydrazine (1.0–10.0 equiv. to cover 10–100 μM), and the limit of detection was 0.75 μ M. In addition to the above advantages, HZ also had higher selectivity for hydrazine, which could be used for the monitoring of hydrazine in complex biological systems. Additionally, HZ could meet the requirements for the detection of hydrazine in natural water sources because it could work within the range of pH 6-9. HZ could be successfully applied to the fluorescence imaging of endogenous and exogenous hydrazine in living cells, which was attributed to the good cell membrane permeability and low cytotoxicity of HZ. We have reason to believe that HZ will become a potential tool for the detection of hydrazine in biology and the environment in the near future.

Declaration of competing interest

interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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