Glial cell development in the vertebrate central nervous system

Thesis by

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Biology

California Institute of Technology
Pasadena, CA

2003

(Submitted March 4th, 2003)
To my parents and Sally Suen
First of all, I would like to thank David, for he opened my eyes to the real scientific world. I learned much from him, but especially how to be critical, rigorous, and creative. I admire his energy, his enthusiasm for science, and excellent memory.

Special thanks to Vincent Dionne, Heather Eisthen, Gregory Hinkle, Rona Delay and friends at Woods Hole. Without them, I would never be here at Caltech, and because of them, three years of life at Wood Hole became more bearable. I thank Vince, who is never selfish. I thank Heather for her understanding and encouragement. Life at Woods Hole taught me that hard working and independence is simply not enough, to do good science, a rich scientific environment is absolutely necessary. For that, I am grateful to Caltech for accepting me, and I am grateful to many people at Caltech, especially past and present members of the Anderson lab for providing a superb environment.

Qiu-fu Ma first taught me how to do sectioning and in situ. I respect Qiu-fu because he beat many odds and achieved much and yet remains a very decent person and true to his roots. Jae Kim is my longtime bay mate. Together, we had many stimulating discussions about science and life in large. His great sense of humor is always appreciated. Many lab members have helped me in many ways throughout the years, Hai Wang, Zhoufeng Chen, Sherry Perez, Sean Morrison, Liching Lo, Pat White, Walter Lerchner, Mark Zylka, Xinzhong Dong, Limor Gaby, Sally Lowell, and Yosuke Mukoyama. I thank my collaborators Gloria and Christian. It is a lot of fun to work with them. Gaby Mosconi will always be fondly remembered. She treats us like her own kids and makes life in the lab so much more enjoyable.

I would like to thank many members of the professional staff at Caltech, especially Shelly Diamond of the FACS facility, Shirley Pease and Bruce Kennedy of the animal facility. I thank my committee members, Kai Zinn, Marianne Bronner-Fraser, and
Jose Alberola-IIa. I should have sought advice more often from them. Thanks to Kai for introducing me to rock climbing.

Lastly, I thank my parents and my wife Sally, none of this would be possible without their unconditional support, love and faith in me.
ABSTRACT

Neurons and glial cells are the two most fundamental cell types of the vertebrate central nervous system (CNS). While neurons are directly responsible for information processing via their electrical activities, glial cells play essential supportive roles. For example, oligodendroglia insulates axons, microglia performs immune functions, and astroglia maintains homeostasis of the entire CNS. Malfunction of glial cells causes numerous debilitating diseases directly (such as glial tumors), or indirectly by disrupting the normal functions of neurons that they support (as in multiple sclerosis).

Despite their functional importance, relatively little is known about the development of vertebrate CNS glial cells. Focusing on the possibility that members of the basic helix-loop-helix (bHLH) transcription factors may play important roles in the development of vertebrate glial cells, similar to their functions in neurons, I searched for novel bHLH factors expressed in glial cells. A new family of bHLH factors was found and named Olig. Intriguingly, one member of this family, Olig2, is sequentially expressed first in motoneuron progenitors and later in the oligodendroglia. The sequence and expression pattern of Olig2 is highly conserved among different vertebrate species including fish, birds and mammals.

To understand the role of Olig2 in oligodendroglia development, I ectopically expressed Olig2 singly or in combination with other factors in chick embryos. My result suggests that Olig2 can promote oligodendrocyte formation in the absence of neurogenic bHLH factors, which are negative regulators of glial fate. Other groups of researchers reported that in the presence of neurogenic factors, Olig2 promotes motoneuron development instead. Olig2 gene is therefore sufficient to specify the fate of either a neuronal subtype or a glial subtype, together with neurogenic factors.

To further assess whether Olig genes are required for motoneuron and oligodendroglia development, I knocked out both Olig2 and Olig1 genes in mouse. In double null mutants, spinal motoneurons and oligodendroglia precursors from the entire CNS fail to develop, demonstrating that Olig genes are absolutely necessary for the
generation of these cell types. Unexpectedly, in the absence of both \textit{Olig1} and \textit{Olig2}, spinal motoneurons are transformed into V2 interneurons whereas oligodendroglial cells are respecified as astroglial cells. These results suggest that \textit{Olig} genes are not involved in neuron-glia decision, but rather in specifying subtype identities of neuron and glia. Given that motoneurons and oligodendrocytes likely derive from common precursors, the expression of Olig may serve to couple the subtype identities of both neurons and glial cells sequentially generated from the same stem cells.

The series of studies on \textit{Olig} genes contributed on two areas of neural development. First, they shed important light on the specification of oligodendrocyte and astrocyte, the two major glial types in the vertebrate CNS. Second, they revealed that cell fate determinations of neuron and glia are not two unrelated events as often believed, on the contrary, they are deeply intertwined.
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