

Fluorescent metallacycle-cored polymers via covalent linkage and their use as contrast agents for cell imaging

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The covalent linkage of supramolecular monomers provides a powerful strategy for constructing dynamic polymeric materials whose properties can be readily tuned either by the selection of monomers or the choice of functional linkers. In this strategy, the stabilities of the supramolecular monomers and the reactions used to link the monomers are crucial because such monomers are normally dynamic and can disassemble during the linking process, leading to mixture of products. Therefore, although noncovalent interactions have been widely introduced into metallacycle structures to prepare metallosupramolecular polymers, metallacycle-cored polymers linked by covalent bonds have been rarely reported. Herein, we used the mild, highly efficient amidation reaction between alkylamine and *N*-hydroxysuccinimide-activated carboxylic acid to link the pendent amino functional groups of a rhomboidal metallacycle 10 to give metallacycle-cored polymers P1 and P2, which further yielded nanoparticles at low concentration and transformed into network structures as the concentration increased. Moreover, these polymers exhibited enhanced emission and showed better quantum yields than metallacycle 10 in methanol and methanol/water (1/9, vol/vol) due to the aggregation-induced emission properties of a tetraphenylethene-based pyridyl donor, which serves as a precursor for metallacycle 10. The fluorescence properties of these polymers were further used in cell imaging, and they showed a significant enrichment in lung cells after i.v. injection. Considering the anticancer activity of rhomboidal Pt(II) metallacycles, this type of fluorescent metallacycle-cored polymers can have potential applications toward lung cancer treatment.

fluorescent polymers | supramolecular coordination complex | covalent linkage | aggregation-induced emission | cell imaging

Fluorescent polymers have received much attention in the chemical and life sciences due to their promising applications in biological labeling, tracking, monitoring, imaging, and diagnostics (1–3). Compared with other fluorophores such as small molecules and quantum dots, they are advantageous as biomaterials because of their good biocompatibility, ease of preparation, and biomimetic character (4–6). Conventional fluorophores show good emission in dilute solution but experience varying degrees of aggregation-caused quenching due to the intense intermolecular interactions, which will decay or relax the excited state back to the ground state via nonradiative channels (7). Such fluorophores are not ideal candidates for the preparation of fluorescent polymers, because they need to be aggregated by the polymerization process, which will more or less decrease the fluorescence emissions and the quantum yields of the derived fluorescent polymers.

In 2001, Tang and coworkers (8) reported an opposite fluorescence effect named as aggregation-induced emission (AIE). In such cases, fluorophores are nearly nonemissive as discrete molecules, but they exhibit strong fluorescence in concentrated solution or in the solid state due to the restriction of molecular rotations, which will decrease the nonradiative decay (7–11). If

fluorophores with such AIE properties were used as luminescent sources, the aggregation induced by the polymerization should promote the emission of such polymers.

Coordination-driven self-assembly is an efficient approach to construct supramolecular coordination complexes (SCCs) (12–24). Due to the directionality of metal–ligand bonds and their moderate bond energies, the structures of SCCs can be finely tuned. So far, various SCCs with different geometries, such as 2D metallacycles (25–28) and 3D metallacages (29–32), were successfully prepared by the self-assembly of carefully selected metal acceptors and organic donors. Moreover, metal–ligand interactions show good tolerance of other noncovalent interactions such as hydrogen bonding and host–guest interactions, which were used to construct highly advanced functional supramolecular entities, such as mechanically interlocked molecules (33–35) and supramolecular polymers (36–38), via orthogonal self-assembly.

Although some progress has been made on the functionalization of metallacycles to construct stimuli-responsive supramolecular complexes and polymers (33–38), the covalent linkage (39–41) of metallacycles to synthesize functional polymers has rarely been reported. The main difficulty of this strategy lies in how to maintain the dynamic metallacycle structures during the linking process. To accomplish covalently linked metallacycle-cored polymers, there are several issues to be addressed: (i) The metallacycles should be both simple and stable to reduce the possibility of deconstruction;

Significance

Fluorescent polymers play an important role in bioimaging due to their improved brightness, inertness to microenvironment, and good biocompatibility. In this article, we used tetraphenylene (TPE) derivatives that give strong fluorescence emission in an aggregated state as fluorophores and synthesized fluorescent polymers via the covalent linkage of TPE-based rhomboidal Pt(II) metallacycles. Due to the integration of covalent linkage-induced aggregation of the monomers, the aggregation-induced emission character of TPE derivatives together with Pt(II)-based metal–ligand interactions, these polymers exhibit enhanced emission compared with their corresponding precursors, making them applicable as excellent cell imaging agents. Considering the potential anticancer activity of rhomboidal Pt(II) metallacycles, these polymers may serve as theranostic agents for both bioimaging and cancer therapy.

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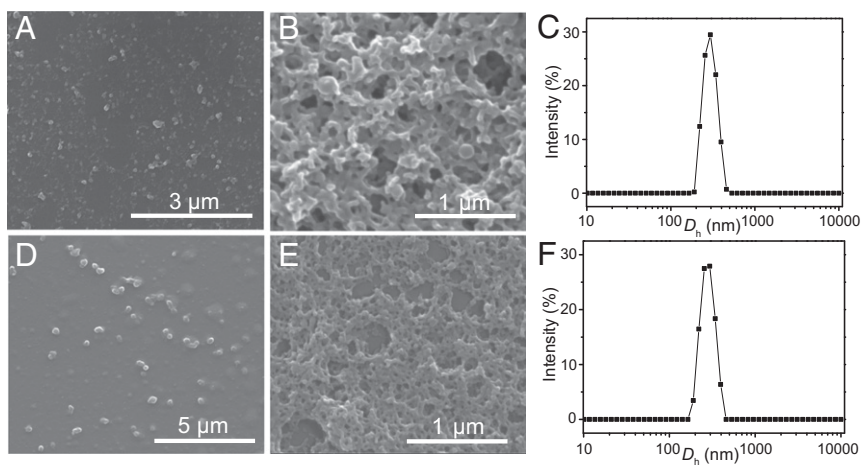


Fig. 3. Morphology and size analyses of **P1** and **P2**. (A) The formation of nanoparticles at the concentration of 0.1 mg/mL for **P1**. (B) The formation of network structures at the concentration of 1.0 mg/mL for **P1**. (C) Size distributions of **P1** in methanol at the concentration of 0.1 mg/mL. (D) The formation of nanoparticles at the concentration of 0.1 mg/mL for **P2**. (E) The formation of network structures at the concentration of 1.0 mg/mL for **P2**. (F) Size distributions of **P2** in methanol at the concentration of 0.1 mg/mL.

and **P2** serve as contrast agents for cell imaging in the concentration range of 40 $\mu\text{g/mL}$ to 200 $\mu\text{g/mL}$.

In vivo experiments were performed to evaluate the efficiency and distribution of **P2** as contrast agent. Aqueous suspensions of **P2** at various concentrations (~ 7.8 to 500 $\mu\text{g/mL}$) were imaged using an in vitro phantom study. A linear dependence of the fluorescence intensity on concentration was observed in the tested range (Fig. 6A), revealing the potential of using **P2** for real-time imaging and quantitative analysis. To verify this, 20 μL of **P2** (10 mg/mL) was intratumorally injected into a mouse bearing an MDA-MB-231 (a human breast adenocarcinoma cell line) tumor. A significant fluorescence of the tumor was observed even 24 h after injection (Fig. 6B), indicating that **P2** is both chemostable and photostable in vivo, which is an essential criterion for bioimaging agents. The same mouse was killed 24 h after injection, and the tumor, major organs, and lymph nodes were imaged (Fig. 6C). A significant transfer of **P2** from the tumor to the liver and lung was observed. In addition, there was an accumulation of **P2** in lymph nodes, which is associated with tumor metastasis and early diagnostics. We next explored the in vivo distribution of **P2** in tumor-bearing mouse following systematic administration. By the investigation of the images and fluorescence counts of different organs 6 h after i.v. injection, we found that **P2** showed a significant

enrichment in the lung over the other organs (Fig. 6D and E). Hence, given the known anticancer activity of rhomboidal Pt(II) metallacycles (42), the possible use of these polymers toward lung cancer therapy could be explored.

Conclusion

In summary, by linking the rhomboidal metallacycles **10** via amidation reaction between *N*-hydroxysuccinimide-activated carboxylic acid and alkylamine, two polymers, **P1** and **P2**, were successfully prepared and characterized by multinuclear NMR (^1H and ^{31}P) and SEM. The structure of the metallacycles was maintained in the polymers due to the mild, highly efficient and catalysis-free amidation reaction, providing a method to polymerize metallacycles to give functional polymers and an alternative approach for postfunctionalization of metallacycles. The metal coordination limits the free rotation of the aromatic rings of TPE, and the formation and further aggregation of polymers match well with the AIE properties of TPE derivatives, thereby providing these polymers with enhanced fluorescence emission properties useful as bioimaging agents. Moreover, this covalent linking approach to aggregate AIE-type compounds also provides a good method to further enhance the AIE effects. The use of these fluorescent polymers as bioimaging agents was

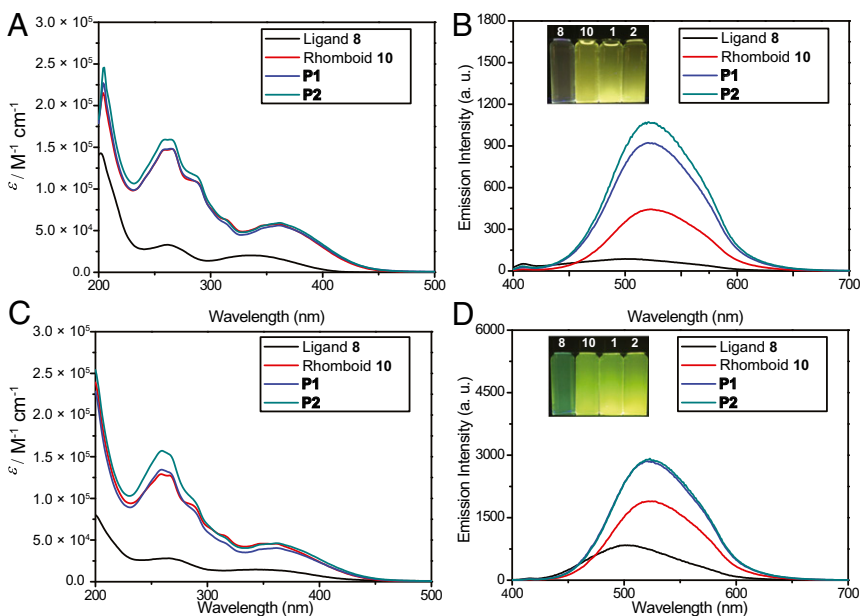


Fig. 4. Spectral characterization of ligand **8**, rhomboid **10**, **P1**, and **P2**. (A) UV-Vis absorption spectra of ligand **8**, rhomboid **10**, **P1**, and **P2** in methanol. (B) Fluorescence emission spectra of ligand **8**, rhomboid **10**, **P1**, and **P2** in methanol ($\lambda_{\text{ex}} = 362$ nm); (Inset) photograph of **8**, **10**, **P1**, and **P2** in methanol upon excitation at 365 nm using a UV lamp at 298 K. (C) UV-Vis absorption spectra of ligand **8**, rhomboid **10**, **P1**, and **P2** in 10%/90% methanol/water. (D) Fluorescence emission spectra of ligand **8**, rhomboid **10**, **P1**, and **P2** in 10%/90% methanol/water ($\lambda_{\text{ex}} = 362$ nm); (Inset) photograph of **8**, **10**, **P1**, and **P2** in 10%/90% methanol/water upon excitation at 365 nm using a UV lamp at 298 K. All of the concentrations are 10.0 μM ; monomer concentration was used for **P1** and **P2**.

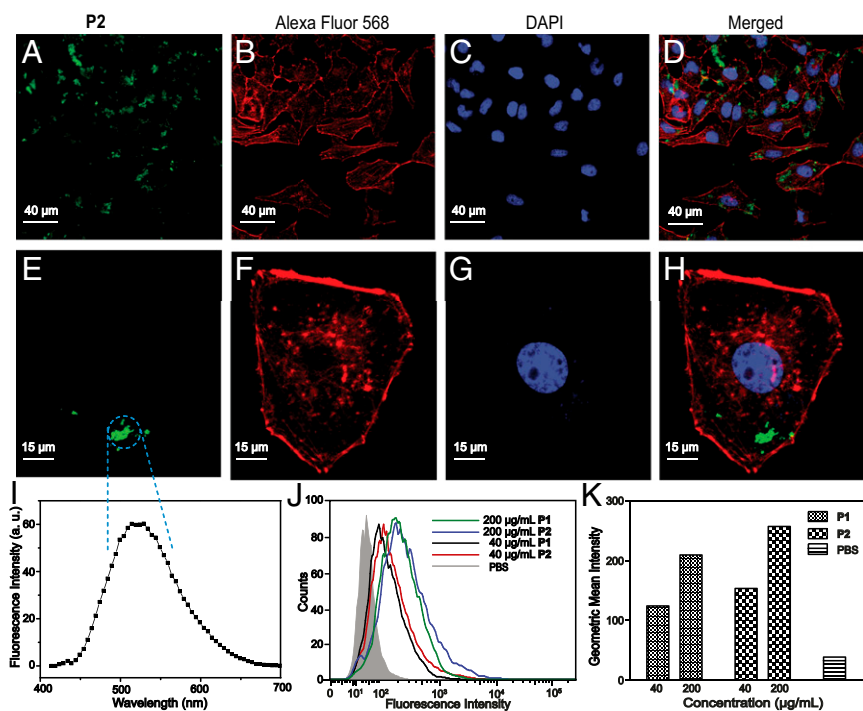


Fig. 5. CLSM images and flow cytometric analysis of A549R cells after incubation with P1 and P2. (A and E) Images of cells treated with P2. (B and F) Images of cells stained with Alexa Fluor 568. (C and G) Images of cells stained with DAPI. (D) Merged image of A549R cells from A, B, and C. (H) Merged image of A549R cells from E, F, and G. (I) Fluorescence spectrum of P2 in A549R cells taken by CLSM. (J and K) Flow cytometric analysis of P1 and P2 in A549R cells after 6 h of incubation.

explored, and their biodistribution after intratumoral and i.v. injection was also studied. A significant enrichment of the polymers in the lung was observed after i.v. injection. Other studies could explore further tuning the emission of the polymers by changing the linkers and the metallacycles, as well as their applications in bioimaging, drug delivery, and cancer therapy (42, 44–47).

Materials and Methods

All reagents were commercially available and used as supplied without further purification. Deuterated solvents were purchased from Cambridge Isotope Laboratory. Compounds 5 (48), 9 (49), 11 (39), and 12 (39) were prepared according to the literature procedures. NMR spectra were recorded on a Varian Unity 300-MHz or 400-MHz spectrometer. ¹H and ¹³C NMR chemical shifts are reported relative to residual solvent signals, and ³¹P[¹H],

NMR chemical shifts are referenced to an external unlocked sample of 85% H₃PO₄ (δ 0.0). Mass spectra were recorded on a Micromass Quattro II triple-quadrupole mass spectrometer using electrospray ionization with a MassLynx operating system. The melting points were collected on an SHSIC WRS-2 automatic melting point apparatus. The UV-Vis experiments were conducted on a Hitachi U-4100 absorption spectrophotometer. The fluorescent experiments were conducted on a Hitachi F-7000 fluorescence spectrophotometer. Quantum yields were determined using quinine sulfate at 365 nm (Φ_F = 56%). SEM was performed on an FEI Quanta 600 FEG (field emission gun). CLSM was performed with a Zeiss LSM 710 Confocal Microscope using a 63x objective. Flow cytometry was performed with a Fluorescence Activated Cell Sorter Calibur Flow Cytometer (BD Biosciences). The size of polymers was measured using a Malvern ZS90 DLS instrument with an He–Ne laser (633 nm) and 90° collecting optics. The data were analyzed using Malvern Dispersion Technology Software 5.10. The mice were obtained from Beijing HFK Bioscience Co., Ltd.

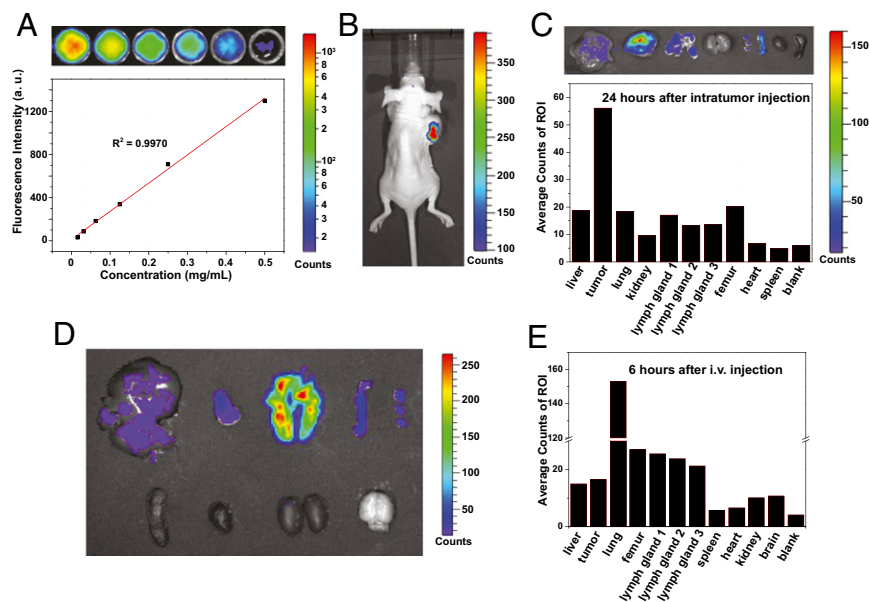


Fig. 6. Biodistribution and fluorescence images of P2 in mice after intratumoral injection and i.v. injection. (A) Optical images of aqueous suspensions of different concentrations of P2 in a 96-well plate, showing plot and fitting of the fluorescence intensity of P2 versus their concentration. (B) Optical and fluorescence image of a mouse after intratumoral injection of 200 μg P2. The image was taken 24 h post injection. (C) Biodistribution of P2 24 h after intratumoral injection. The sequence of the images of the organs is the same as that of the fluorescence counts. (D and E) Optical and fluorescence images of a mouse after i.v. injection of 600 μg P2. (D) Images of different organs and (E) the fluorescence counts of different organs 6 h after i.v. injection. The sequence of the images of the organs is the same as that of the fluorescence counts. ROI, region of interest.

All animals received care in compliance with the guidelines outlined in the *Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals* (50). The procedures were approved by the University of Science and Technology of China Animal Care and Use Committee.

Rhomboid **10** was synthesized by heating **8** with **9** in a 1:1 molar ratio in a 2-dram vial. After cooling, the solvent was removed to give rhomboid **10** as a yellow solid. The formation of polymers **P1** and **P2** was achieved by stirring rhomboid **10** and linker **11** or **12** (1:2 molar ratio) in methanol (0.25 mmol/L for **10**) for 24 h. After that, the solvent was removed to give a crude product, which was dialyzed with methanol for another 24 h to give polymers that were then collected and dried under reduced pressure for future use.

Rhomboid **10**: ^1H NMR (400 MHz, CD_3OD , 295 K): 8.87 (m, 8H), 8.46–8.75 (m, 4H), 7.99 (m, 8H), 7.45–7.85 (m, 20H), 7.28 (d, $J = 8.2$ Hz, 8H), 7.02 (d, $J = 8.8$ Hz, 8H), 6.74 (d, $J = 8.8$ Hz, 8H), 3.95 (t, $J = 5.6$ Hz, 8H), 2.75 (t, $J = 7.0$ Hz, 4H), 0.90–1.90 (m, 152H). $^{31}\text{P}\{^1\text{H}\}$ NMR (121.4 MHz, CD_3OD , 295 K) δ (ppm): 13.92 ppm (s, ^{195}Pt satellites, $^1J_{\text{Pt-P}} = 2,661.8$ Hz). ESI-TOF-MS: m/z 877.3635 ($[\text{10} - 4\text{OTf}]^{4+}$), m/z 1,220.1737 ($[\text{10} - 3\text{OTf}]^{3+}$), m/z 1,904.7172 ($[\text{10} - 2\text{OTf}]^{2+}$).

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- P2: ^1H NMR (400 MHz, CD_3OD , 295 K): ^1H NMR (400 MHz, CD_3OD , 295 K): 8.87 (m, 8H), 8.46–8.75 (m, 4H), 7.99 (m, 8H), 7.45–7.85 (m, 20H), 7.28 (d, $J = 8.2$ Hz, 8H), 7.02 (d, $J = 8.8$ Hz, 8H), 6.74 (d, $J = 8.8$ Hz, 8H), 4.01 (t, $J = 5.6$ Hz, 8H), 3.21 (t, $J = 7.0$ Hz, 8H), 2.91 (t, $J = 7.2$ Hz, 8H), 2.55 (t, $J = 7.2$ Hz, 8H), 1.78 (t, $J = 6.6$ Hz, 8H), 0.90–1.60 (m, 152H). $^{31}\text{P}\{^1\text{H}\}$ NMR (121.4 MHz, CD_3OD , 295 K) δ (ppm): 13.33 ppm (s, ^{195}Pt satellites, $^1J_{\text{Pt-P}} = 2,698.1$ Hz).

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