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# Subcellular localization and function study of a secreted phospholipase C from *Nocardia seriolae*

Liqun Xia <sup>1,2‡</sup>, Haiying Liang <sup>1‡</sup>, Liang Xu <sup>1</sup>, Jianlin Chen <sup>1</sup>, Michaël Bekaert <sup>4</sup>,

Honglian Zhang <sup>1</sup>, Yishan Lu <sup>1,2,3\*</sup>

(1. College of Fisheries, Guangdong Ocean University, Zhanjiang 524088, PR China; 2. Shenzhen Research Institute of Guangdong Ocean University, Shenzhen 518108, PR China; 3. Guangdong Provincial Key Laboratory of Pathogenic Biology and Epidemiology for Aquatic Economic Animals, Zhanjiang 524088, PR China; 4. Institute of Aquaculture, University of Stirling, Stirling, FK9 4LA, UK)

\* Corresponding author. College of Fisheries, Guangdong Ocean University, 1 Haida Road, Mazhang District, Zhanjiang 524088, PR China. Tel: +86-755-23250536; Fax: +86-755-28380068; E-mail address: fishdis@163.com.

‡ These authors contributed to the work equally and should be regarded as co-first authors.

One sentence summary: The NsPLC is a secreted protein which exhibits a punctate distribution near the nucleus in FHM cells and may participate in the cell apoptosis regulation.

## ABSTRACT

Fish nocardiosis is a chronic systemic granulomatous disease, and *Nocardia seriolae* is the main pathogen that causes this disease. But the pathogenesis and virulence factors of *N. seriolae* are not fully understood. A phospholipase C (PLC), which was likely to be a secreted protein targeting host cell mitochondria, was found by the bioinformatics analysis on the whole genome sequence of *N. seriolae*. In order to determine the subcellular localization and study the preliminary function of PLC from *N. seriolae* (NsPLC), the gene cloning, secreted protein identification, subcellular localization in host cells and apoptosis detection of NsPLC were carried out in this study. The results showed that NsPLC was a secreted protein by mass spectrometry analysis of extracellular products from *N. seriolae*. Subcellular localization of NsPLC-GFP fusion protein in FHM cells revealed that the green fluorescence exhibited a punctate distribution near the nucleus and did not co-localize with mitochondria. In addition, apoptosis assay suggested that apoptosis was induced in FHM cells by the overexpression of NsPLC. This study may lay the foundation for further study on the function of NsPLC and promote the understanding of the virulence factors and pathogenic mechanism of *N. seriolae*.

**Keyword:** *Nocardia seriolae*; phospholipase C; subcellular localization; secreted protein; cell apoptosis; overexpression

## INTRODUCTION

Fish nocardiosis is a chronic systemic granulomatous disease, which has influenced the Asian aquaculture systems seriously (Ho, et al. 2016, Vu-Khac, et al. 2016). Three species of *Nocardia* have been identified as the pathogen of fish nocardiosis. They are *Nocardia seriolae*, *N. salmonicida* and *N. asteroides* (Xia, et al. 2015b). Notably, *N. seriolae* was shown to be the main pathogen of fish nocardiosis in recent years. It is reported that *N. seriolae* can infect over 20 kinds of freshwater fish and sea fish, such as largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*), snakehead (*Channa maculata*), amberjack (*Seriola dumerili*), yellowtail (*S. quinquerediata*), golden pompano (*Trachinotus ovatus*), snubnose pompano (*T. blochii*) and large yellow croaker (*Larimichthys crocea*) (Shimahara, et al. 2008, Wang, et al. 2009, Xia, et al. 2015a).

*N. seriolae* is a Gram-positive facultatively intracellular pathogen (Nayak, et al. 2014), which can evade intracellular killing after being engulfed by the macrophages. Then macrophages may help *N. seriolae* to disseminate in the host and cause infection. But the mechanisms involved in *N. seriolae*-host interaction are not fully understood and the virulence factors of *N. seriolae* are not well studied. *Nocardia* have effective strategies to survive and colonize in the host, such as resisting oxidative killing by phagocytes, inhibiting phagosome-lysosome fusion, blocking phagosomal acidification, modulating phagosomal function and lysosomal content (Beaman and Beaman 1994). It was shown that the secreted proteins of *N. asteroides* strain GUH-2 can induce the apoptotic death of host cells (Barry and Beaman 2007, Camp, et al. 2003, Loeffler, et al. 2004). The secretome researches of pathogenic actinomycetes have revealed that secreted proteins are closely related to their pathogenicity, especially some mitochondria-targeted proteins may play an important role in modulation of cell death and bacterial pathogenesis (Lartigue and Faustin 2013,

Rudel, et al. 2010, Saint-Georges-Chaumet and Edeas 2016, West, et al. 2011).

According to the bioinformatics analysis of *N. seriolae* ZJ0503 genome (Xia, et al. 2015a), ORF5028 encodes a phospholipase C (PLC) homolog which is likely to be a secreted protein targeting host cell mitochondria. Phospholipases C (PLCs) have been defined to be important virulence factors of many bacterial pathogens including *M. tuberculosis*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, *Clostridium perfringens*, *Bacillus cereus*, *Legionella pneumophila*, *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Listeria monocytogen* (Flores-Diaz, et al. 2016, Goldfine, et al. 1998, Raynaud, et al. 2002). The toxic PLC can interact with eukaryotic cell membranes and hydrolyze phosphatidylcholine and sphingomyelin, leading to cell lysis (Moigne, et al. 2015). The gene cloning, secreted protein identification, subcellular localization and apoptosis detection of *N. seriolae* PLC (NsPLC) were carried out in this study. It may lay the foundation for further study on the function of this gene and promote the understanding of molecular pathogenic mechanism of *N. seriolae*.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Bacterial strains, cell and plasmids**

*N. seriolae* ZJ0503, isolated from diseased *T. ovatus* in China, was cultured at 28°C in an optimized medium (Xia, et al. 2015b). *Escherichia coli* DH5 $\alpha$  was grown in Luria-Bertani (LB) broth at 37 °C with vigorous shaking. Fathead minnow (FHM) epithelial cells (ATCC CCL-42, Manassas, VA)(Gravell and Malsberger 1965) were cultured in Leibovitz's L15 medium containing 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS, Invitrogen, USA) at 25 °C. Plasmid pEGFP-N1 (Clontech, Mountain View, CA) was used for subcellular localization. Plasmid pcDNA3.1/His A (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA) was used for overexpression.

## **Cloning of *NsPLC* and plasmid construction**

Genomic DNA extraction from *N. seriolae* was performed as described previously (Xia, et al. 2015b). The PCR primers pEGFP-F/R and pcDNA-F/R (Table 1) were used to amplify the *NsPLC* gene. The PCR was performed with KOD-plus-Neo DNA polymerase (Toyobo, Osaka, Japan) using the following PCR procedure: pre-denaturation at 98 °C for 2 min, 30 cycles at 98 °C for 10 sec, 55 °C for 15 sec, and 68 °C for 15 sec, a final extension at 68°C for 5 min. Respectively, the amplified fragments were digested by corresponding restriction enzymes and cloned into eukaryotic vectors pEGFP-N1 and pcDNA3.1/His A. These different constructs were confirmed by restriction enzyme digestion and DNA sequencing, then named as pEGFP-PLC and pcDNA-PLC.

## **Bioinformatics analysis, sequence alignments and phylogenetic analysis**

Based on the whole genome sequence data of *N. seriolae* ZJ0503 (Xia, et al. 2015a), the potentially excreted proteins were predicted using LocTree3 and ExPASy-PROSITE. Subcellular localization was predicted by using SignalP 4.1 and LocTree3. The amino acid sequence of *NsPLC* was analyzed with the online Protein BLAST program and DNASTAR software. 14 PLC sequences from different bacteria were selected for multiple sequence alignments using ClustalX 2.0 and GeneDoc, and different bacterial PLC sequences were also used for phylogenetic tree analysis with MEGA5.0 by the neighbor-joining method (Tamura, et al. 2011).

## **Identification of sereted proteins**

The extracellular products of *N. seriolae* were obtained by a cellophane overlay method with modification (Sudheesh, et al. 2007). Briefly, *N. seriolae* was cultured on optimized medium agar plates and bacterial cell suspension was prepared with single colonies. 200 µL of the bacterial cell

suspension was spread on optimized medium plates covered with sterile cellophane sheet and incubated at 28 °C for 3-5 d. Cells of *N. seriolae* grown on the cellophane sheet were washed with PBS (0.01M, pH 7.2) and centrifuged at 8000 g for 20 min. Then the supernatant containing extracellular products was filter sterilized with a 0.2 µm membrane filter. Following filtering, the sterilized supernatant was transferred into dialysis tubing (3.5k MW) and dialysed in ultra pure water at 4 °C for 16-24 h (water was changed for three times). The supernatant was transferred into a centrifuge tube after dialysis, freezed under -80 °C, and lyophilized using a vacuum freeze dryer to get the protein dry powder. The powder of extracellular products was identified using shotgun mass spectrometry (MS).

### **Cell culture, transfection and staining**

Plasmids were prepared using an endotoxin-free plasmid purification kit (Qiagen Inc., Chatsworth, CA). FHM cells were cultured in 24-well plates and grown to 70% confluency (for subcellular localization) or 90% confluency (for overexpression). Different plasmids were transfected into FHM cells with Lipofectamine 2000 (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA). The mitochondria of FHM cells were stained with 300 nM MitoTracker Red CMXRos dye (Molecular Probes, Carlsbad, CA) at 28 °C for 45min, and then the FHM cells were fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde for 30 min. Finally, the nucleuses of FHM cells were labeled with 1 µg/mL diamidino-2-phenylindole (DAPI) at room temperature for 10 min. The fluorescence exhibited in FHM cells were observed using fluorescence microscope (Leica DM IRB).

### **Subcellular localization in host cells**

To determine the subcellular localization of NsPLC in host cells, FHM cells were transiently transfected with pEGFP-PLC and the control plasmid pEGFP-N1, respectively. Being stained with

both MitoTracker Red and DAPI at 48 h posttransfection, the FHM cells were microscopically observed.

### **Detection of cell apoptosis**

To test whether the overexpression of NsPLC induces apoptosis in fish cells, FHM cells were transiently transfected with pcDNA-PLC or the control plasmid pcDNA3.1 His A. Then the FHM cells were stained with DAPI at 48 h posttransfection and microscopically observed. Moreover, the mitochondrial membrane potential ( $\Delta\Psi_m$ ) was measured with a JC-1 assay kit (Beyotime, Shanghai, China) and the caspase-3 activity was assessed with a caspase-3 colorimetric assay kit (BioVision, Milpitas, CA). At 24 h, 48 h and 72 h posttransfection, the FHM cells were collected and the  $\Delta\Psi_m$  was determined by the method described previously with minor modification (Sun, et al. 2014). As a positive control for low  $\Delta\Psi_m$ , FHM cells were treated with carbonyl cyanide 3-chlorophenylhydrazone (CCCP, 10  $\mu$ M) at 25 °C for 20 min.  $\Delta\Psi_m$  was measured by the changes in the 590/530 (nm) JC-1 emitted fluorescence with an Enspire 2300 Multilabel Reader (Perkin Elmer, MA, USA). The caspase-3 activity detection was performed as described previously (Zhao, et al. 2010) at 24 h and 48 h posttransfection. Statistical analysis was carried out with SPSS Statistics 15.0 and differences were considered significant when the *p* values were less than 0.05. To confirm the NsPLC expression in pcDNA-PLC transfected FHM cells, RT-PCR and western blot analysis were performed as described previously (Xia, et al. 2010). Briefly, total RNA and protein were isolated from the pcDNA-PLC or pcDNA 3.1 His A transfected FHM cells at 48 h posttransfection. RT-PCR was then performed using primers pcDNA-F/pcDNA-R (Table 1) following the synthesis of cDNA. Western blot analysis was carried out by using mouse anti-His monoclonal antibody (Sigma, St. Louis, MO) as the primary antibody at a dilution of



1:1000 and horseradish peroxidase (HRP)-conjugated goat anti-mouse IgG (Sigma, St. Louis, MO) as the secondary antibody at a dilution of 1:5000.

### **Sequence analysis and characterization of NsPLC**

The *NsPLC* gene was obtained from the genome DNA of *N. seriolae* strain ZJ0503 by PCR. Sequence analysis revealed that the NsPLC was 1524 bp, which encoded 507 amino acids. The calculated molecular weight of NsPLC was 53.7 kDa and the theoretical isoelectric point (pI) was 4.95. The NsPLC was predicted to be a secreted protein by using SignalP 4.1 and LocTree3 and it may co-localize with mitochondria. Functional motifs search for NsPLC with ExPASy-PROSITE revealed that amino acid 1-38 (MGVFAGINRRDFLAKAMAAGGAASLASLAGPIIERAYA) in the N-terminus of this protein is a twin arginine translocation (Tat) signal (Fig. 1).

Protein BLAST showed that the deduced amino acid sequence of NsPLC displayed high homology with other PLC sequences from actinomycetes, ranging from 92% identity with PLC from *N. concava* to 59% identity with membrane-associated PLC from *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* H37Rv. Alignment among NsPLC and other PLC sequences from actinomycetes was shown in Fig. 1, and 5 amino acids (ETHDE) marked with asterisks in Fig. 1 were putative active sites on conserved domain in PLCs. A phylogenetic tree was constructed with amino acid sequences of 14 bacterial PLCs. As shown in Fig. 2, the NsPLC and other PLCs in actinomycetes were clustered within a monophyletic clade with a 100% bootstrap.

### **Identification of NsPLC as a secreted protein**

The extracellular products of *N. seriolae* were obtained and the secreted proteins were identified using shotgun MS. Results showed that three peptide sequences of NsPLC (QAADPNSELAR, FEGITGPIGLGYR, GGLVASETFDHTSQLR) were detected with

confidence greater than or equal to 99%, which proved that NsPLC was a secreted protein.

### **Subcellular localization of NsPLC in FHM cells**

Subcellular localization of NsPLC in fish cells was determined by NsPLC-GFP fusion protein expression. The NsPLC-GFP fusion protein was detected with a strong green fluorescence signal and exhibited a punctate distribution at 48 h posttransfection. The nucleus were shown with blue fluorescence and the mitochondria were displayed with red fluorescence. Comparing with the location of nucleus and mitochondrion in the pEGFP-PLC transfected cells, the NsPLC-GFP fusion protein was found mainly aggregate near the nucleus in the cytoplasm and did not co-localize with the mitochondria (Fig. 3 left). The results demonstrated that NsPLC did not target to mitochondria in FHM cells. Whereas the signal of GFP was distributed in both cytoplasm and nucleus in control cells transfected with pEGFP-N1, and no specific fluorescence co-localized with the mitochondria (Fig. 3 right).

### **Apoptosis induced in FHM cells by overexpression of NsPLC**

To show whether NsPLC involves in apoptosis of fish cells, the plasmid pcDNA-PLC was transfected in FHM cells, and then the  $\Delta\Psi_m$  and caspase-3 activity in transfected cells were assayed. At 48 h posttransfection, apoptotic bodies were observed in NsPLC overexpressed cells by DAPI staining (Fig. 4A down). While the nucleus remained intact in the control plasmid transfected cells at the same time (Fig. 4A up).  $\Delta\Psi_m$  detection revealed that  $\Delta\Psi_m$  showed with JC-1 polymer/monomer fluorescence ratio dropped obviously in NsPLC overexpressed cells (Fig. 4B). The  $\Delta\Psi_m$  level in NsPLC overexpressed cells was about 0.5 fold lower than that in the control plasmid transfected cells at 48 h and 72 h posttransfection (Fig. 4B). Furthermore, measurement of caspase-3 activity showed that caspase-3 was activated in NsPLC overexpressed

cells (Fig. 4C). The caspase-3 activity value in NsPLC overexpressed cells was approximately 1.5 fold higher than that in control cells at 48 h posttransfection. Both the  $\Delta\Psi_m$  and caspase-3 activity assay indicated that apoptosis can be induced by the overexpression of NsPLC in FHM cells. The NsPLC expression in pcDNA-PLC transfected FHM cells were confirmed by the presence of a specific band on RT-PCR and western blot analysis (Fig. 4D).

## DISUSSION

The NsPLC was successfully cloned in this study, and protein blast revealed it belonging to the PlcC superfamily. PLCs exist in prokaryotic and eukaryotic organisms widely. PLCs are found to be virulence factors in many pathogenic bacteria. Bacterial PLCs are known to generate a signaling lipid molecule sn-1,2-diacylglycerol (DAG), which can activate protein kinase C in macrophages and other cell types (Schmiel and Miller 1999). The *NsPLC* gene was predicted to encode a secreted protein with a Tat signal. By identifying the extracellular products of *N. seriolae* with MS, the NsPLC was proved to be a secreted protein in this research. It has been reported that *P. aeruginosa* and other bacterial pathogens express extracellular PLCs that are secreted through the inner membrane via the Tat pathway (Barker, et al. 2004, Smith, et al. 1995, Tuckwell, et al. 2006). Since PLCs were proved to play a critical role in the virulence of many bacterial pathogens, it was reasonable to presume that NsPLC was an extracellular enzyme and a pivotal virulence factor of *N. seriolae*.

Recent researches about the secreted microbial proteins revealed that most pathogenic bacteria deliver secreted proteins to the host cell cytoplasm, where they may target to mitochondria, golgi, lysosomes, peroxisomes and autophagosomes, affecting the physiology, signaling pathway and

innate immune response of the target cells (Bischofberger and van der Goot 2008, Lobet, et al. 2015, Moreno-Altamirano, et al. 2012). The NsPLC was predicted to co-localize with mitochondria by bioinformatics analysis. In this study, the subcellular localization of NsPLC in host cells exhibited a punctate distribution near the nucleus and did not co-localize with the mitochondria. Little is known about the distribution of secreted bacterial PLCs within host cell. But the subcellular localization of mammalian PLCs was studied quite a lot. Previous studies showed that the subcellular localization of mammalian PLCs mainly localized in the cytoplasm with diverse distribution, such as in cytoplasmic vesicles, in perinuclear halo, in a punctate distribution, in Golgi apparatus, in granules and in nanotubes extending among cells. In brief, the subcellular localization of mammalian PLCs differed in quiescent cells compared to the pathological counterpart, depending on the isoform and may vary under different conditions (Di Raimo, et al. 2016, Lo Vasco, et al. 2010).

For the function of PLCs from Gram-positive bacteria, studies mainly focus on *C. perfringens* alpha-toxin, *M. tuberculosis* PLCs, *B. cereus* PC-PLC and *L. monocytogenes* PlcA (Flores-Diaz, et al. 2016). Notably, the bacterial PLCs are revealed to be associated with cell death in these studies. Multiple data indicate that alpha-toxin activates cell death, stimulating the release of cytochrome C from mitochondria and the consequent activation of caspases-3 (Manni, et al. 2017, Monturiol-Gross, et al. 2012). In *M. tuberculosis*, PLCs exhibit cytotoxic effects on macrophages and involve in cell death (Assis, et al. 2014). Given that bacterial PLCs may participate in cell death, experiment to determine whether NsPLC is related to the cell apoptosis was performed in this study. Both the  $\Delta\Psi_m$  detection and the caspase-3 activity assay showed the cell apoptosis was induced in FHM cells by the overexpression of NsPLC. *N. asteroides* is one of the pathogens of

fish nocardiosis, and previous studies have shown that *N. asteroides* strain GUH-2 has the ability to induce apoptotic death in the murine brain, PC12 cells and HeLa cells and some secreted product of nocardiae is capable of causing apoptosis (Barry and Beaman 2007, Camp, et al. 2003, Loeffler, et al. 2004). As a secreted protein of *N. seriolae*, NsPLC may participate in the cell apoptosis regulation.

The subcellular localization and preliminary function study of NsPLC may lay the foundation for further study on the function of this gene and promote the understanding of the virulence factors and pathogenic mechanism of *N. seriolae*. Further studies are required to verify the mechanisms involved in NsPLC-induced cell death. It remains to be clarified whether the NsPLC is the major virulence factor of *N. seriolae* by constructing a  $\Delta$ PLC mutant attenuated *N. seriolae*. And the relationship among the interaction between NsPLC and macrophage also need to be highlighted in future studies.

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**Conflict of interest.** None declared.

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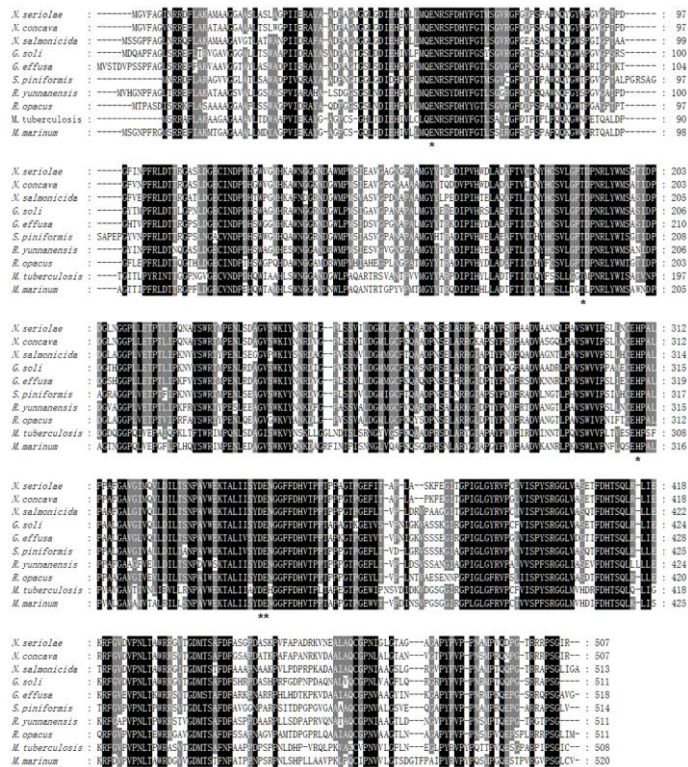
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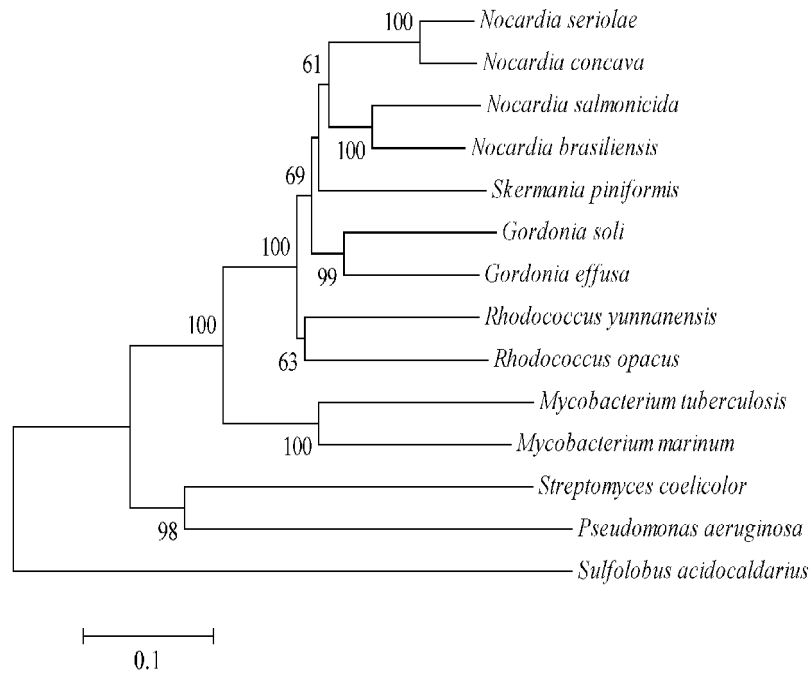
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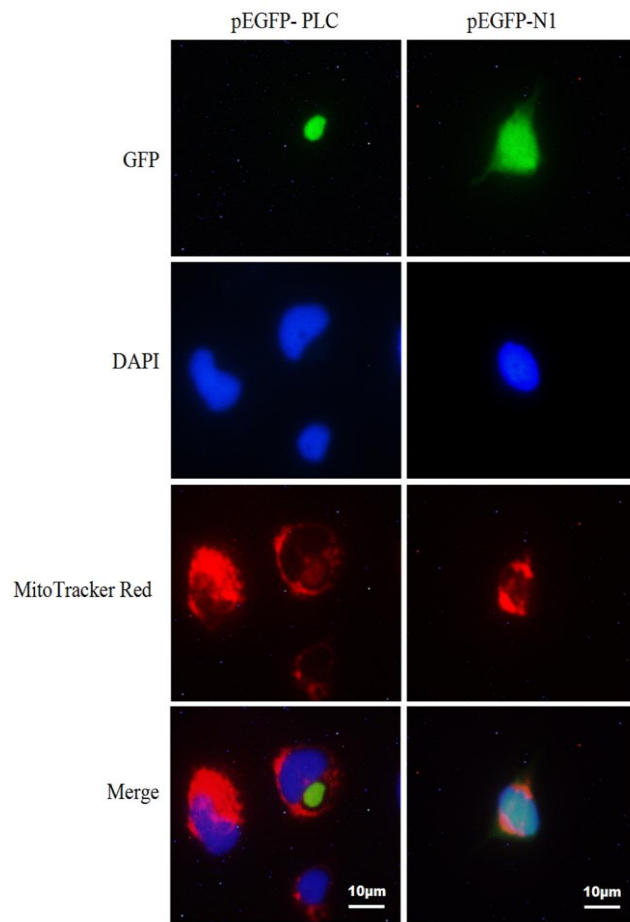
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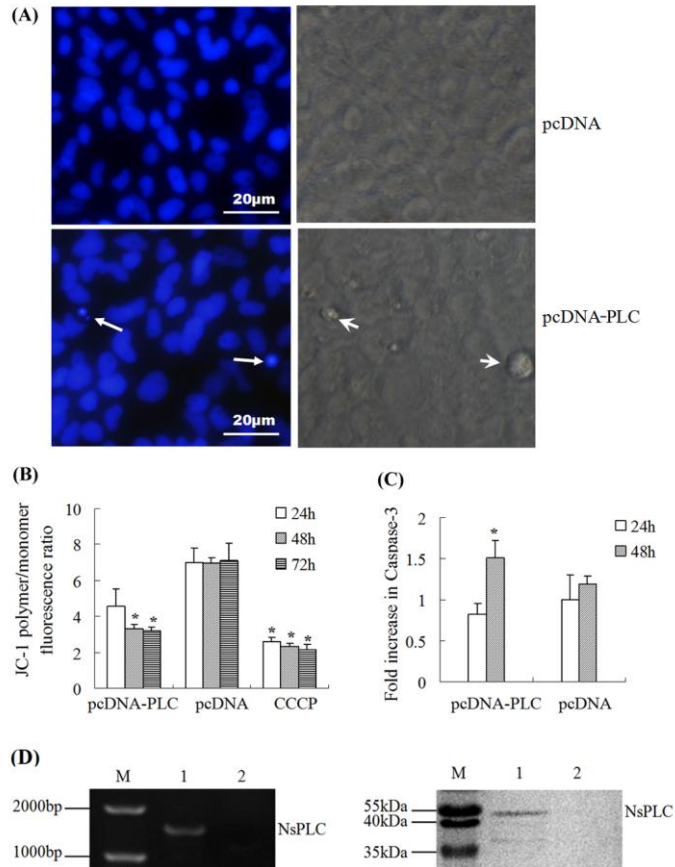
**Figure 1.** Multiple alignment of the deduced amino acid sequences of PLC among different species. GenBank accession numbers are shown in Figure 2. Black shading shows identical amino acids, whereas gray shading is used for regions with more than 75% identity. The asterisks indicate amino acids that are putative active sites in conserved domain in PLCs.



**Figure 2.** Phylogenetic tree of PLC based on the homologous amino acids. The numbers next to the branches indicate percentage values for 1000 bootstrap replicates. GenBank accession numbers are *Nocardia concava* (WP\_040807264.1), *Nocardia salmonicida* (WP\_062985526.1), *Nocardia brasiliensis* (WP\_042255962.1), *Skermania piniformis* (WP\_066470704.1), *Gordonia soli* (WP\_007624473.1), *Gordonia effusa* (GAB20429.1), *Rhodococcus yunnanensis* (WP\_072805611.1), *Rhodococcus opacus* (WP\_012689406.1), *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (NP\_216865.1), *Mycobacterium marinum* (ACC42073.1), *Streptomyces coelicolor* (NP\_733712.1), *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* (NP\_249535.1), *Sulfolobus acidocaldarius* (WP\_011278577.1).



**Figure 3.** Subcellular localization of NsPLC in FHM cells. FHM cells were transiently transfected with pEGFP-PLC and pEGFP-N1. At 48 h posttransfection, the cells were stained with MitoTracker Red CMXRos and DAPI, and then observed under fluorescence microscope. Green fluorescence showed the localization of PLC-GFP fusion protein or GFP, red fluorescence showed the location of mitochondrion, and blue fluorescence showed the nucleus.



**Figure 4.** Apoptosis assay in transfected FHM cells. (A) Observation of apoptotic body. The transfected cells were fixed at 48 h posttransfection staining by DAPI. Arrows indicated the apoptotic bodies (fragmented nucleus), arrow heads indicated the apoptotic cells. (B) Mitochondrial membrane potential assay. FHM cells transfected with pcDNA-PLC or pcDNA plasmid were collected at indicated time points after transfection and the mitochondrial membrane potential were assessed using the JC-1. Untransfected cells treated with CCCP was positive control. The data were expressed as the JC-1 polymer/monomer fluorescence ratio. Significant differences were indicated by \* ( $p < 0.05$ ). (C) Measurement of caspase-3 activity. FHM cells transfected with pcDNA-PLC and pcDNA plasmid were collected at indicated time points after transfection and the levels of cleaved caspase-3 were measured. The data were expressed as fold increase compared to the corresponding caspase-3 activity values in untransfected cells. Significant differences were indicated by \* ( $p < 0.05$ ). (D) Confirmation of the NsPLC expression in pcDNA-PLC transfected FHM cells by RT-PCR and Western blot. Lane M, DNA or protein markers; lane 1, FHM/pcDNA-PLC; lane 2, FHM/pcDNA. NsPLC was expressed in the FHM cells transfected with plasmid of pcDNA-PLC.

Table 1. Primers used in this study.

Primer Name	Sequence 5'-3'	Restriction Enzyme
pEGFP-F	CCCAAGCTTATGGGCGTGTTCGCCGGCATC	<i>Hind</i> III
pEGFP-R	CCGACGTCGACTGCCGGATACCGCTGGGCCGAC	<i>Sal</i> I
pcDNA-F	GGGGTACCATGGGCGTGTTCGCCGGCATC	<i>Kpn</i> I
pcDNA-R	GCTCTAGACCGGATACCGCTGGGCCGAC	<i>Xba</i> I