Improved spectrometer-microscope for quantitative fluorescence resonance energy transfer measurement based on simultaneous spectral unmixing of excitation and emission spectra

Fangrui Lin
Mengyan Du
Fangfang Yang
Lichun Wei
Tongsheng Chen

Improved spectrometer-microscope for quantitative fluorescence resonance energy transfer measurement based on simultaneous spectral unmixing of excitation and emission spectra

Fangrui Lin, Mengyan Du, Fangfang Yang, Lichun Wei, and Tongsheng Chen*
South China Normal University, MOE Key Laboratory of Laser Life Science and College of Life Science, Guangzhou, China

Abstract. Based on our recently developed quantitative fluorescence resonance energy transfer (FRET) measurement method using simultaneous spectral unmixing of excitation and emission spectra (ExEm-spFRET), we here set up an improved spectrometer-microscope (SM) for implementing modified ExEm-spFRET (mExEm-spFRET), in which a system correction factor ($f_{sc}$) is introduced. Our SM system is very stable for at least six months. Implementation of mExEm-spFRET with four or two excitation wavelengths on SM for single living cells expressing different FRET constructs obtained consistent FRET efficiency ($E$) and acceptor–donor concentration ratio ($R_c$) values. We also performed mExEm-spFRET measurement for single living cells co-expressing cyan fluorescent protein (CFP)-Bax and yellow fluorescent protein (YFP)-Bax and found that the $E$ values between CFP-Bax and YFP-Bax were very low (2.2%) and independent of $R_c$ for control cells, indicating that Bax did not exist as homooligomer in healthy cells, but positively proportional to $R_c$ in the case of $R_c < 1$ and kept constant value (25%) when $R_c > 1$ for staurosporine (STS)-treated cells, demonstrating that all Bax formed homooligomer after STS treatment for 6 h. © 2018 Society of Photo-Optical Instrumentation Engineers (SPIE) [DOI: 10.1117/1.JBO.23.1.016006]

Keywords: fluorescence resonance energy transfer; excitation–emission spectral unmixing; spectroscopy; fluorescence microscopy; single living cells.

Paper 170169R received Mar. 18, 2017; accepted for publication Dec. 7, 2017; published online Jan. 8, 2018.

1 Introduction

Fluorescence resonance energy transfer (FRET) is an indispensable tool for monitoring intracellular instantaneous and weak biological processes in real time, including protein–protein interaction,1 conformational changes of proteins,7 activation of proteins kinases,3,4 and dynamic concentration changes of ions.7,8 Quantitative FRET signals, including FRET efficiency ($E$) and the concentration ratio ($R_c$) between acceptor and donor molecules, are essential for scientific communication and exact interpretation.9–11 However, the prerequisite of larger overlap between donor emission spectra and acceptor excitation spectra for FRET occurrence inevitably results in a significant overlap between donor and acceptor emission spectra (named as donor emission cross talk).12 Moreover, acceptor can also be excited directly under the excitation wavelengths of donor fluorophores (named as acceptor excitation cross talk).13–16 The two spectral cross talks preclude separation of three spectral components: donor fluorescence, direct excitation acceptor fluorescence, and FRET-sensitized acceptor fluorescence.17

In 1992, Clegg18 described the concept of unmixing fluorescence spectra to gain FRET efficiency. Spectral linear unmixing of emission spectra (Em unmixing) has been widely used for quantitative FRET measurement.14,15,17,20 Contributions of donor and acceptor to the emission spectra of a given FRET pair can be easily resolved by Em unmixing due to their different emission spectra. However, the acceptor excitation cross talk must be corrected using an additional acceptor reference because of the same spectra of direct acceptor emission and FRET-sensitized acceptor emission.13–15,17,21 The concept used for Em unmixing can also be applied to spectral unmixing of excitation spectra (Ex unmixing).22 Moreover, spectral linear unmixing of the combined excitation and emission spectra (ExEm unmixing) has the inherent ability to resolve the donor fluorescence, direct excitation acceptor fluorescence, and FRET-sensitized acceptor fluorescence without additional reference.16,17,22

With the advances of fluorescence spectroscopy and microscopy, ExEm unmixing has been tried for quantitative FRET measurement (ExEm-spFRET method).17,23 In 2013, Mustafa et al.16 demonstrated that ExEm-spFRET measurement with as few as two excitation wavelengths could obtain accurate $E$ values and performed ExEm-spFRET measurement on a laser scanning confocal microscope with 405- and 488-nm excitation wavelengths for single living cells expressing a fluorescent Cerulean–Venus tandem construct. We recently set up a spectrometer-microscope (SM) by combining a fiber optic spectrometer and a wide-field fluorescence microscope for fast and high-sensitive quantitative FRET measurement using Em unmixing24 and also developed a wide-field microscope equipped with a liquid crystal tunable filter for quantitative ExEm-spFRET imaging in single living cells.25

In this report, we improved the SM system for implementing quantitative ExEm-spFRET measurement in single living...
cells. Moreover, a system correction factor ($f_{sc}$) that can be predetermined using a donor–acceptor tandem reference can be applicable to the system. The instrument used on quantitative FRET measurement. We implemented mExEm-spFRET measurement with four (405, 436, 470, and 480 nm) or two (405 and 470 nm, 405 and 480 nm, 436 and 470 nm, and 436 and 480 nm) excitation wavelengths on our SM platform for single living cells expressing different FRET constructs and obtained consistent $E$ and $R_c$ values. Quantitative mExEm-spFRET measurement for HeLa cells coexpressing CFP-Bax and YFP-Bax showed that the $E$ values between CFP-Bax and YFP-Bax were about 2.2% independent of $R_c$ for control cells, indicating that Bax did not exist as homooligomer in healthy cells, but positively proportional to $R_c$ in the case of $R_c $ < 1 and kept constant value (25%) when $R_c $ > 1 for staurosporine (STS)-treated cells, demonstrating that all Bax formed homooligomer after STS treatment for 6 h.

2 Materials and Methods

2.1 Improved Spectrometer-Microscope

The improved SM consists of a wide-field fluorescence microscope (IX73, Olympus, Japan) equipped with a metal halide lamp (HGLGPS, Olympus, Japan), a 40 x /1.3 NA oil objective (UPLFLN40XO, Olympus, Japan), a CCD (ORCA-Flash 4.0, Hamamatsu, Japan), a fiber optic spectrometer (QE65 Pro, Ocean Optics, Florida), and a customized excitation filters wheel. As shown in Fig. 1, five different bandpass excitation filters are installed in the excitation filters wheel. In our study, four different excitations of 405/20 nm (Ex405), 436/20 nm (Ex436), 470/20 nm (Ex470), and 480/20 nm (Ex480) (Chroma, United States) are used for ExEm-spFRET and mExEm-spFRET measurement. Excitation of 510/20 nm (Ex510) (Chroma, United States) is used for emp-PbFRET measurement. Excitations of both Ex405 and Ex436 share the same filter cube that contains a DM455 (455-nm dichroic mirror, D455) (Olympus, Japan) and an ET460lp (bandpass emission filter of 460 nm, LP460) (Chroma, United States). Similarly, excitations of both Ex470 and Ex480 share another filter cube that contains a DM490 (490-nm dichroic mirror, D490) (Olympus, Japan) and an ET495lp (bandpass emission filter of 495 nm, LP495) (Chroma, United States). The illumination intensity can be attenuated in seven discrete steps (0%, 3%, 6%, 12%, 25%, 50%, and 100%), and another neutral density filters controller with three discrete steps (1%, 3%, and empty) can be used for the same purpose. Donor excitation and donor detection (DD) cube containing a DM460 (460-nm dichroic mirror, D460) and an ET480/30m (bandpass emission filter of 480/30 nm, BP480/30) (Chroma, United States) and acceptor excitation and acceptor detection (AA) cube containing a DM550 (515-nm dichroic mirror, D515) and an ET550/40m (bandpass emission filter of 550/40 nm, BP550/40) (Chroma, United States) are used to estimate the coexpression of both donor and acceptor in single living cells.

SM has two independent detection modes: (a) microscopic imaging in CCD channel, offering a guidance for finding cells, and (b) spectral detection in spectrometer channel, recording emission spectra of the guided cells in the middle of CCD channel. Each count(λ) or $E(λ)$ at the emission wavelength is related to the photons in about a 0.761-nm wavelength range. Spectral detection range is from 460 to 620 nm in this report.
2.2 Modified ExEm-spFRET Method

ExEm-spFRET method we recently developed\textsuperscript{25} is modified using a system correction factor ($f_{sc}$) as follows (mExEm-spFRET):

$$E = \frac{W_S}{f_{sc}r_0W_D + W_S},$$  \hspace{1cm} (1)

$$R_c = \frac{W_A}{r_k(f_{sc}r_0W_D + W_S)},$$  \hspace{1cm} (2)

where $r_0$ is the quantum yield ratio of acceptor to donor, $r_k$ is defined as the ratio of total acceptor extinction coefficient to total donor extinction coefficient at all excitation wavelengths, and $W_D$, $W_A$, and $W_S$ are the weight factors of donor, acceptor, and donor–acceptor sensitization, respectively. Linearly unmixing the measured excitation–emission spectrum ($S_{DA}$) of an FRET sample into the unit-area-normalized excitation–emission spectral fingerprints of donor ($S_D$) and acceptor ($S_A$) as well as donor–acceptor sensitization ($S_S$) is as follows:\textsuperscript{26}

$$S_{DA} = W_D \cdot S_D + W_A \cdot S_A + W_S \cdot S_S. \hspace{1cm} (3)$$

A donor–acceptor tandem reference with known $E^{\text{ref}}$ and $R_c^{\text{ref}}$ can be used to predetermine $f_{sc}$ and $r_k$ as follows:

$$f_{sc} = \frac{W_S - W_dE^{\text{ref}}}{r_0W_D^{E^{\text{ref}}}}, \hspace{1cm} (4)$$

$$r_k = \frac{W_A}{R_c^{\text{ref}}(f_{sc}r_0W_D + W_S)}. \hspace{1cm} (5)$$

In reality, $E^{\text{ref}}$ can also be determined using some FRET methods, such as three-cube-based acceptor-sensitized emission method (E-FRET)\textsuperscript{19,27} or partial acceptor photobleaching method (emp-PbFRET).\textsuperscript{26}

2.3 Partial Acceptor Photobleaching Method

Quantitative emp-PbFRET measurement was performed on SM for predetermining the $E^{\text{ref}}$ of a 1D-nA tandem reference which contains one donor (D) and n acceptor (A). Ex436 excitation was used to excite donor (Cerulean/CFP), and Ex510 excitation was used to selectively collect donor emission, and acceptor detection channel (CH$_A$) from 530 to 550 nm was used to mainly collect acceptor emission. The $E^{\text{ref}}$ value of 1D-nA construct can be measured as follows:\textsuperscript{11,26}

$$E = \frac{1 - \frac{I_{\text{DD}}}{I_{\text{DD}}^{\text{ref}}}}{1 - \frac{I_{\text{DD}}}{I_{\text{DD}}^{\text{ref}}}(1 - x)}, \hspace{1cm} (6)$$

where $I_{\text{DD}}$ and $I_{\text{DD}}^{\text{post}}$ are the donor intensity (fluorescence count) in CH$_D$ channel with donor excitation before and after partial acceptor photobleaching, respectively. $I_{\text{AA}}$ and $I_{\text{AA}}^{\text{post}}$ are the acceptor intensity (fluorescence count) in CH$_A$ channel with selective acceptor excitation before and after partial acceptor photobleaching, respectively, and $x$ is the photobleaching degree of acceptor calculated as $x = (I_{\text{AA}} - I_{\text{AA}}^{\text{post}})/I_{\text{AA}}$.

2.4 Calibration of SM

Careful calibration of SM was carried out with a halogen tungsten lamp (ISP-REF-CAL, Ocean Optics, Dunedin, Florida) just as described previously.\textsuperscript{24} We first used a spectrometer (QE65 Pro, Ocean Optics, Florida) precalibrated by a standard light source (LS-1-CAL, Ocean Optics, Florida) to measure the spectrum $[E(\lambda)]$ of the halogen tungsten lamp. We next used the spectrometer to measure the spectrum $[\text{count}_{\text{lamp}}(\lambda)]$ at the export of our microscope when the halogen tungsten lamp was placed on the objective of the microscope. The emission spectral response was calculated using $K(\lambda) = E(\lambda)/\text{count}_{\text{lamp}}(\lambda)$.

2.5 Reagent and Plasmids

Plasmids DNA of Cerulean (C), Venus (V), CFP, and YFP were purchased from Addgene Company (Cambridge, Massachusetts). FRET tandem constructs, including C32V, CVC, and VCV, were kindly provided by the Vogel lab (National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland).$^{19,27}$ Plasmids DNA of CFP-Bax and YFP-Bax were kindly provided by Dr. Prehn.$^1$ Plasmid DNA of 18AA was kindly given by Professor Kaminski.$^{15}$ STS was purchased from Sigma-Aldrich Co. LLC (Santa Clara).

2.6 Cell Culture and Transfection

HeLa cells obtained from the Department of Medicine, Jinan University (Guangzhou, China) were cultured just as described previously.\textsuperscript{28} When the cells reached 70% to 90% confluence in a 35-mm glass dish, plasmids were transfected into cells by Turbofect™ (Fermentas Inc., Glen Burnie, Maryland) for 24 h.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Calibration of SM

We first measured the emission spectral responses $[K(\lambda)]$ of our SM system as shown in Fig. 7. We used the spectrometer to measure the spectrum $[E(\lambda)$, black solid line] of the halogen tungsten lamp and the spectrum $[\text{count}_{\text{lamp}}(\lambda)$, black dot line] at the export of our microscope with D455 cube (a) and D490 cube (b), respectively, when the halogen tungsten lamp was placed on the objective of our microscope. $K_1(\lambda)$ for D455 cube and $K_2(\lambda)$ for D490 cube are also shown in Fig. 7 (gray solid line). Throughout the paper, emission count spectra with Ex405 or Ex436 excitation were calibrated with $K_1(\lambda)$, and emission count spectra with Ex470 or Ex480 excitation were calibrated with $K_2(\lambda)$.

We found that the emission spectral responses measured during six months were constant, demonstrating the excellent stability of our SM system. Although this calibration step is not mandatory for a precalibrated SM during at least six months, we actually performed this calibration step for every mExEm-spFRET measurement, which can be used as a criterion to determine whether SM is stable. In fact, this calibration step is very simple and can be performed within a few minutes.
3.2 Excitation–Emission Spectral Fingerprints

Living HeLa cells exclusively expressed Cerulean (donor) or Venus (acceptor) were used to measure the excitation–emission spectral fingerprints of Cerulean and Venus as well as Cerulean–Venus sensitization. Figure 2 shows the raw emission count spectra of a representative HeLa cell expressing Cerulean-only (inset image) with Ex405, Ex436, Ex470, and Ex480 excitation, respectively, with respect to the value of the maximum peak at emission spectrum with Ex436 excitation. Scale bar: 10 μm. Figure 2 also shows the raw count spectra (left), normalized intensity spectra after calibration (middle), and the relative fluorescence intensity (right) in emission channel CH1 (from 510 to 530 nm) of a representative HeLa cell expressing Cerulean-only (inset image) with Ex405, Ex436, Ex470, and Ex480 excitation, respectively, with respect to the value of the maximum peak at emission spectrum with Ex436 excitation. Scale bar: 10 μm.

The emission spectra of Cerulean with Ex436 excitation and Venus with Ex470 excitation obtained from at least 20 living HeLa cells expressing different levels of Cerulean (SEX C) and Venus (SEX V) were normalized to unit area, respectively, as the emission spectra of Cerulean (SEM C) and Venus (SEM V). The unit-volume-normalized three-dimensional excitation–emission spectral fingerprints of Cerulean (S_C), Venus (S_V), and Cerulean–Venus sensitization (S_S) in Figure 2(e) were calculated by the outer product of SEX C and SEM C, SEX V and SEM V, respectively. In reality, S_C and S_V as well as S_S in Figure 2(e) were reconstructed by equally dividing the normalized intensity values into 25 grades (pseudocolor), and the equal grades were connected with contours.

The fact that the normalized emission spectra of fluorescent proteins (FPs) (Cerulean/CFP or Venus/YFP) measured from living HeLa or HepG2 cells expressing different levels of FPs are consistent further demonstrates the notion that the absorption and emission spectra of fluorescent proteins are generally very stable. Although fluorescence intensity is proportional to the intensity of excitation light, mExEm-spFRET method is independent of the intensity of excitation light.

Figure 2 (a) (left) shows the raw emission count spectra of a representative cell expressing Cerulean-only indicated by red circle (inset) with Ex405, Ex436, Ex470, and Ex480 excitation, respectively. After calibration with $K(\lambda)$, emission spectrum of Cerulean with four excitations, respectively, was divided by the maximum value of emission spectrum with Ex436 excitation to obtain the normalized emission spectra [Fig. 2(a), middle]. The relative fluorescence intensities in emission wavelength range of 510 to 530 nm (CH1) with Ex405, Ex436, Ex470, and Ex480 excitation, respectively, were shown in Fig. 2(a) (right). Similarly, Fig. 2(b) (left) shows the raw emission count spectra of a representative cell expressing Venus-only indicated by red circle (inset) with four excitations. Emission spectrum of Venus with four excitations, respectively, was divided by the maximum value of emission spectrum with Ex480 excitation to obtain the normalized emission spectra [Fig. 2(b), middle]. The relative fluorescence intensities in emission wavelength range of 520 to 540 nm (CH2) with Ex405, Ex436, Ex470, and Ex480 excitation, respectively, are shown in Fig. 2(b) (right). Fluorescence intensities in Fig. 2(a) (middle) with Ex436 excitation and in Fig. 2(b) (middle) with Ex470 excitation are normalized to unit area, respectively, as the emission spectra of Cerulean and Venus.

The emission spectra of Cerulean with Ex436 excitation and Venus with Ex470 excitation obtained from at least 20 living HeLa cells expressing Cerulean or Venus were normalized to unit area as the emission spectra of Cerulean (SEM C) and Venus (SEM V) [Fig. 2(c)]. Figure 2(d) shows the unit-area-normalized excitation spectra of Cerulean (SEX C) and Venus (SEX V). The unit-volume-normalized three-dimensional excitation–emission spectral fingerprints of Cerulean (S_C), Venus (S_V), and Cerulean–Venus sensitization (S_S) in Fig. 2(e) were calculated by the outer product of SEX C and SEM C, SEX V and SEM V, and SEX C and SEM V, respectively. In reality, S_C and S_V as well as S_S in Fig. 2(e) were reconstructed by equally dividing the normalized intensity values into 25 grades (pseudocolor), and the equal grades were connected with contours.

The fact that the normalized emission spectra of fluorescent proteins (FPs) (Cerulean/CFP or Venus/YFP) measured from living HeLa or HepG2 cells expressing different levels of FPs are consistent further demonstrates the notion that the absorption and emission spectra of fluorescent proteins are generally very stable. Although fluorescence intensity is proportional to the intensity of excitation light, mExEm-spFRET method is independent of the intensity of excitation light.
Because three excitation–emission spectral fingerprints (SD, SA, and SS) are normalized to unit volume, different excitation intensity only affects the weight factors (WD, WA, and WS) rather than the ratios of weight factors. In reality, we found that the normalized excitation–emission spectral fingerprints of FPs obtained from living HeLa or HepG2 cells were constant during at least six months, indicating that our SM system is very stable. Therefore, the predetermined SC, SV, and SS can be directly used for subsequent quantitative mExEm-spFRET measurement without additional measurement. To offset the random fluctuation of count recorded at different emission wavelength, we summated the fluorescence intensity values in an emission wavelength range (CH1 for Cerulean and CH2 for Venus) rather than at single emission wavelength for Cerulean or Venus to obtain their excitation spectra. In reality, the emission wavelength range of 500 to 530 nm should be a better choice for CH1.

### 3.3 Predetermination of the Correction Factors \( f_{sc} \) and \( r_k \)

To predetermine the correction factors \( f_{sc} \) and \( r_k \), living HeLa cells expressing C32V were excited with Ex405, Ex436, Ex470, and Ex480 excitation, respectively. Figure 3(a) shows the normalized emission spectra of a representative cell expressing C32V with Ex405, Ex436, Ex470, and Ex480 excitation, respectively, with respect to the value of the maximum peak at emission spectrum with Ex436 excitation. Scale bar: 10 μm; (b) excitation–emission spectrum corresponding to (a); (c) images of the cell with Ex436 (DD) or Ex510 (AA) excitation before (upper panels) and after (lower panels) partial Venus photobleaching. Scale bar: 10 μm; (d) normalized count spectra of C32V inside the cell indicated by red circles in (c). CHD: 470 to 490 nm and CHA: 530 to 550 nm. (e) Statistical \( E^{\text{rot}} \) value from at least 15 living cells using emp-PbFRET method. (f) Statistical \( f_{sc} \) and \( r_k \) values from at least 20 living cells.
normalized emission spectra of a representative cell expressing C32V with Ex405, Ex436, Ex470, and Ex480 excitation, respectively, with respect to the value of the maximum peak at emission spectrum with Ex436 excitation. Figure 3(b) shows the corresponding excitation–emission spectrum (right) of representative cells separately expressing C + V (a, with respect to the value of the maximum peak at emission spectrum with Ex480 excitation), CVC (b, with respect to the value of the maximum peak at emission spectrum with Ex436 excitation), and VCV (c, with respect to the value of the maximum peak at emission spectrum with Ex480 excitation), with Ex405, Ex436, Ex470, and Ex480 excitation, respectively. Scale bar: 10 μm. (d) Statistical E (left) and R_c (right) values of C + V, CVC, and VCV constructs in 20 living HeLa cells obtained by ExEm-spFRET and mExEm-spFRET method, respectively.

In many reports, the quantum yield values of donor (Q_D) and acceptor (Q_A) from literature were directly quoted for quantitative FRET measurement. However, real Q_D and Q_A values are related to not only the optical properties of donor/acceptor but also the emission transmission characteristics of the instrument used. Moreover, it is also inappropriate to consider the Q_D and Q_A values from literature as the real Q_D and Q_A within a bandpass emission wavelength range. We here used the f_sc to correct the ratio of Q_A to Q_D (Q_A/Q_D) in our SM system. In fact, the product of the Q_A/Q_D ratio quoted from literature and the f_sc is the real Q_A/Q_D value in our SM system. Therefore, mExEm-spFRET method can measure the real Q_A/Q_D value rather than the referenced Q_A/Q_D value from literature for quantitative FRET measurement.

Generally, r_k is only related to the excitation spectrum of our SM system and the absorption spectra of both donor and acceptor for a given cell line. Just as discussed above about the spectral fingerprints, the spectral characteristics of our SM system and donor/acceptor are very stable. Therefore, for a given specific system, the predetermined f_sc and r_k can be directly used for subsequent mExEm-spFRET measurement. In reality, we remeasured f_sc and r_k values for Cerulean–Venus pair inside HeLa cells on our SM system during six months and obtained consistent f_sc and r_k values, further demonstrating the stability of our instrument.

### 3.4 Implementation of mExEm-spFRET in Single Living HeLa Cells Expressing C + V, CVC, and VCV

We next performed ExEm-spFRET and mExEm-spFRET method, respectively, on SM to measure the E and R_c values of single living cells expressing unlinked Cerulean plus Venus (C + V), CVC, and VCV, respectively. We measured four emission spectra of the cells excited with Ex405, Ex436, Ex470, and Ex480, respectively. Figures 4(a)–4(c) show the normalized emission spectra of a representative cell expressing C32V with Ex405, Ex436, and Ex480 excitation, respectively.
emission spectra (left) of a representative cell expressing C + V (a, with respect to the value of the maximum peak at emission spectrum with Ex436 excitation), CVC (b, with respect to the value of the maximum peak at emission spectrum with Ex436 excitation), and VCV (c, with respect to the value of the maximum peak at emission spectrum with Ex480 excitation), respectively, with different excitations and the corresponding excitation–emission spectra (S<sub>DA</sub>) (right). The S<sub>DA</sub> were linearly unmix by according to Eq. (3) to obtain the weight values of donor, acceptor, and donor–acceptor sensitization (Table 1). Substituting these weight values and f<sub>r</sub> = 0.44 as well as f<sub>ia</sub> = 1.83 into mExEm-spFRET method [Eqs. (1) and (2)] to obtain the corresponding E and R<sub>c</sub>. 3.1% and 1.01 for C + V, 40.4% and 0.54 for CVC, and 69.2% and 2.59 for VCV. In addition, for the same cells, implementation of ExEm-spFRET method exhibited that the E and R<sub>c</sub> values were 5.5% and 1.21 for C + V, 55.3% and 0.56 for CVC, and 80.4% and 2.04 for VCV. Figure 4(d) shows the statistical E and R<sub>c</sub> values of C + V, CVC, and VCV from 20 living cells. The E values of CVC and VCV obtained by mExEm-spFRET are consistent with those measured by E-FRET method (40.0% ± 0.7% for CVC and 69.3% ± 1.0% for VCV).

We also used mExEm-spFRET method with two excitations to calculate the E and R<sub>c</sub> values of C + V, CVC, and VCV constructs, respectively, for the same cells (Table 2). mExEm-spFRET method with Ex405 and Ex470, Ex405 and Ex480, Ex 430 and Ex470, or Ex436 and Ex480 excitations showed consistent results, while mExEm-spFRET method with Ex405 and Ex436 excitations obtained an obviously larger R<sub>c</sub> value for CVC construct, which may owe to the similarity of fluorescence intensity spectra with Ex405 and Ex436 excitation, respectively.

Table 1 Weight values for different constructs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weight values</th>
<th>C + V</th>
<th>CVC</th>
<th>VCV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>W&lt;sub&gt;D&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W&lt;sub&gt;A&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W&lt;sub&gt;S&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We also used mExEm-spFRET method with four excitation wavelengths to measure the E and R<sub>c</sub> values of C32V construct in the presence of free Cerulean or free Venus. Figure 5 shows the E − R<sub>c</sub> plot on a cell-by-cell basis for C + V, C32V, C32V + C, and C32V + V, respectively. Unlinked Cerulean plus Venus (C + V) exhibits very low E values independent of R<sub>c</sub> (solid squares), whereas C32V exhibits a restricted distribution for E (about 30.9%) and R<sub>c</sub> (about 1.02) values (solid triangles). The E values of C32V + C are positively proportional to the corresponding R<sub>c</sub> (open triangles), whereas C32V + V has

**Table 2** E and R<sub>c</sub> values of constructs measured by mExEm-spFRET with different excitation wavelengths.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excitation wavelengths (nm)</th>
<th>C + V</th>
<th>C32V</th>
<th>CVC</th>
<th>VCV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E (%)</td>
<td>R&lt;sub&gt;c&lt;/sub&gt; %</td>
<td>E (%)</td>
<td>R&lt;sub&gt;c&lt;/sub&gt; %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>405, 436, 470, 480</td>
<td>3.1 ± 1.5</td>
<td>1.00 ± 0.33</td>
<td>30.9 ± 2.0</td>
<td>1.02 ± 0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>405, 436</td>
<td>2.4 ± 1.4</td>
<td>0.92 ± 0.58</td>
<td>29.6 ± 2.2</td>
<td>1.00 ± 0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>405, 470</td>
<td>3.6 ± 1.7</td>
<td>1.08 ± 0.72</td>
<td>31.6 ± 2.0</td>
<td>0.99 ± 0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>405, 480</td>
<td>2.8 ± 1.5</td>
<td>1.08 ± 0.71</td>
<td>30.6 ± 2.1</td>
<td>1.01 ± 0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>436, 470</td>
<td>3.1 ± 1.5</td>
<td>1.10 ± 0.71</td>
<td>31.0 ± 1.9</td>
<td>0.99 ± 0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>436, 480</td>
<td>2.9 ± 1.5</td>
<td>1.07 ± 0.69</td>
<td>30.7 ± 1.9</td>
<td>0.97 ± 0.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*P < 0.05, compared with the corresponding R<sub>c</sub> value with four excitation wavelengths (the first line).
the same \( E \) values as C32V (open circles), which is consistent with the previous reports.\(^{15,20,34} \)

In reality, high concentration of free Cerulean and free Venus may result in the possibility of spurious FRET efficiency by random collision.\(^{25} \) For some bright cells coexpressing Cerulean and Venus (C + V, solid squares in Fig. 5), donor and acceptor may be within the Förster distance and form “spurious donor–acceptor complex,” which leads to a small systematic increase of \( E \) as a function of \( R_c \).\(^{10,14} \) Therefore, we should not choose the cells with very high concentration of fluorescent proteins for quantitative measurements.

3.6 mExEm-spFRET Measurement of STS-Induced Bax Homeoligomerization

Bax is a proapoptotic protein required for the process of mitochondrial outer membrane permeabilization.\(^{1} \) Some publications, including our previous studies, have demonstrated that STS induces Bax translocation into mitochondria and subsequent homooligomerization.\(^{20,28,36} \) We here performed mExEm-spFRET method on SM for single living HeLa cells coexpressing CFP-Bax and YFP-Bax. A CFP–YFP tandem reference (18AA) was used to predetermine the \( f_{sc} \) (1.80) and \( r_{sc} \) (0.42) values for CFP–YFP pair on our SM system. As shown in Figs. 6(a) and 6(b), emission spectrum with Ex405, Ex436, Ex470, and Ex480 excitation, respectively, was divided by the maximum value of emission spectrum with Ex436 excitation to obtain the normalized emission spectra. Bax distributed evenly in cytosol in the control cell exhibiting 2.85% of \( R_c \) [Fig. 6(a)], and Bax showed significant clusters in the cell exhibiting 10.23% of \( R_c \) after 2-\( \mu \)M STS treatment for 6 h [Fig. 6(b)]. Statistical \( E \) values are 2.2% ± 0.4% for control cells (26 cells) and 14.4% ± 5.7% for STS-treated cells (105 cells), indicating that STS induced the formation of mitochondria-associated Bax clusters. Figure 6(c) shows the \( E - R_c \) plot on a cell-by-cell basis for control (solid squares) and STS-treated (open squares) cells, respectively. As shown in Fig. 6(c), the fact that the FRET efficiency \( \{ \text{apparent FRET efficiency} \} \) is very low and independent on the \( R_c \) for control cells indicates that Bax does not exist as homooligomer in healthy cells. However, for the STS-treated cells, apparent FRET efficiency \( \{ \text{apparent FRET efficiency} \} \) obviously increased in the case of \( R_c < 1 \) [(DA) increases with \( R_c \) or \( (A_{total}) \)] but kept constant in the case of \( R_c > 1 \) [(DA) = \( (D_{total}) \)] with \( R_c \) increasing, further demonstrating that all Bax formed homooligomer after STS treatment for 6 h.

4 Conclusions

We here set up an improved SM for fast quantitative ExEm-spFRET measurement in single living cells. Our SM system is very stable for at least six months. The modified ExEm-spFRET method (mExEm-spFRET) containing a system correction factor \( \{ f_{sc} \} \) can be easily performed on our SM platform for quantitative FRET measurement in single living cells. Especially, availability of mExEm-spFRET with two excitation wavelengths enables the SM system to implement real-time and dynamical mExEm-spFRET measurement in single living cells, which is very important for monitoring intracellular rapid biochemical events.

Appendix: Emission Spectral Responses of SM System

As shown in Fig. 7, we carefully measured the emission spectral responses \( [K(\lambda)] \) of SM system. \( E(\lambda) \) and \( \text{count}_{\text{lamp}}(\lambda) \) were normalized at emission wavelength 620 nm.
Disclosures
The authors have no competing interests.

Acknowledgments
We thank Professor S.S. Vogel (NIH/NIAAA) for providing C32V, CVC, and VCV plasmids, Dr. Prehn for providing CFP-Bax and YFP-Bax plasmids, and Professor Kaminski for providing 18AA plasmid. This project was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grant Nos. 81471699 and 61527825) and the Science and Technology Plan Project of Guangdong Province (No. 2014B090901060).

References


