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# Circular RNA circRNF20 promotes breast cancer tumorigenesis and Warburg effect through miR-487a/HIF-1 $\alpha$ /HK2

Lili Cao<sup>1</sup>, Min Wang<sup>1</sup>, Yujin Dong<sup>1</sup>, Bo Xu<sup>1</sup>, Ju Chen<sup>2</sup>, Yu Ding<sup>3</sup>, Shusheng Qiu<sup>3</sup>, Liang Li<sup>3</sup>, Elena Karamfilova Zaharieva<sup>4</sup>, Xinwen Zhou<sup>5</sup> and Yanbin Xu<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

Compelling evidence has demonstrated the potential functions of circular RNAs (circRNAs) in breast cancer (BC) tumorigenesis. Nevertheless, the underlying mechanism by which circRNAs regulate BC progression is still unclear. The purpose of present research was to investigate the novel circRNA circRNF20 (hsa\_circ\_0087784) and its role in BC. CircRNA microarray sequencing revealed that circRNF20 was one of the upregulated transcripts in BC samples. Increased circRNF20 level predicted the poor clinical outcome in BC specimens. Functionally, circRNF20 promoted the proliferation and Warburg effect (aerobic glycolysis) of BC cells. Mechanistically, circRNF20 harbor miR-487a, acting as miRNA sponge, and then miR-487a targeted the 3'-UTR of hypoxia-inducible factor-1 $\alpha$  (HIF-1 $\alpha$ ). Moreover, HIF-1 $\alpha$  could bind with the promoter of hexokinase II (HK2) and promoted its transcription. In conclusion, this finding illustrates the vital roles of circRNF20 via the circRNF20/ miR-487a/HIF-1 $\alpha$ /HK2 axis in breast cancer progress and Warburg effect, providing an interesting insight for the BC tumorigenesis.

## Introduction

Breast cancer (BC) is emerging as the leading cause of cancer-related deaths and the second highest mortality in women worldwide<sup>1–3</sup>. In the last few decades, outstanding advances have been achieved for breast cancer treatments, however, the morbidity and mortality are still high<sup>4,5</sup>. Existing research shows that the initiation factors inducing BC are complicated, including hormone disorders, heredity, environment. Besides factors above, epigenetic mutations are also important factors in the tumorigenesis of BC<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, it is critical to identify the molecular mechanisms involved in the proliferation and progression genesis in BC<sup>7–9</sup>. Moreover, more valuable coping

strategies and precise targeting therapies are pressing challenges with significant clinical implications.

Circular RNAs (circRNAs) are group of RNA transcripts and covalently-closed loops formed by back-splicing. Generally, circRNAs are derived from the exon or intron of gene precursor mRNA (pre-mRNA). The 5' and 3' end of exon or intron are jointed to construct the closed loop. The alternative splicing for pre-mRNA transcript could yield diverse circRNAs subtype<sup>10,11</sup>. In human cancer, circRNA could diffusely modify the tumor progression by post-transcriptional regulation<sup>12</sup>. For example, circRNA circ-ABCB10 is significantly upregulated in BC tissue and circ-ABCB10 knockdown suppresses the proliferation and increased apoptosis of breast cancer cells by sponging miR-1271<sup>13</sup>. CircRNA circ-Ccnb1 is decreased in BC, which inhibits the p53 mutations function through H2AX and represses BC tumor growth<sup>14</sup>. circRNA circYAP is overexpressed in BC and remarkably suppresses proliferation, migration and colony formation of cells. Besides, circYAP significantly decreases YAP protein,

Correspondence: Yanbin Xu ([xuyanbin.zibo.edu@aliyun.com](mailto:xuyanbin.zibo.edu@aliyun.com))

<sup>1</sup>Department of Oncology, Zibo Central Hospital, Zibo 255020, China

<sup>2</sup>Department of Ultrasound, Zibo Central Hospital, Zibo 255020, China

Full list of author information is available at the end of the article.

These Author contributed equally: Lili Cao, Min Wang

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**Table 1 The correlation of circRNF20 and the characteristics of BC patients.**

characteristics	n = 50	circRNF20		P value
		Low = 23	High = 27	
Age (years)	<50	23	10	0.580
	≥50	27	13	
Lymph node metastasis	Yes	35	16	0.031
	No	15	7	
Distant metastases	Yes	30	14	0.287
	No	20	9	
T stage	T1/T2	34	17	0.421
	T3/T4	16	6	
N stage	N0	20	9	0.269
	N1/N2	22	10	
	N3	8	4	
Histological differentiation	Well	11	7	0.109
	Moderate	27	10	
	Poor	12	6	
Tumor Size (cm)	<2	19	13	0.002
	≥2	31	10	
Ki-67	Low	18	8	0.498
	High	32	15	

however does not affect YAP mRNA level<sup>15</sup>. As a consequence, emerging evidences support the critical roles of circRNA for BC.

Warburg effect (aerobic glycolysis) is a distinctive cellular metabolic manner in cancer cells, exhibiting an increasing rate of glucose uptake and lactic acid fermentation in aerobic environment. Unlike normal cells which undergo both oxidative phosphorylation and glycolysis, cancer cells are inclined to glycolysis in anoxic or aerobic microenvironment. CircRNAs have been identified to modulate the Warburg effect of human cancers. In neuroblastoma, CUX1-generated circRNA (circ-CUX1) promotes expression of enolase 1, glucose-6-phosphate isomerase, and phosphoglycerate kinase 1, and binds to EWSR1 to facilitate its interaction with MAZ, contributing to the aerobic glycolysis and neuroblastoma progression<sup>16</sup>. In hepatocellular carcinoma, circRNA MAT2B circMAT2B upregulates the expression levels of PKM2 through sponging miR-338-3p, promoting the glycolysis and HCC progression<sup>17</sup>.

In our study, we performed the circRNA high-throughput sequencing and revealed the circRNA profile in BC tissue. Finally, we identified a novel circRNA circRNF20 (hsa\_circ\_0087784) and investigated its biological roles in the BC progress and Warburg effect. CircRNF20 is a 499 bp transcript originated from RNF20 gene exon-3, exon-4, and exon-5. circRNF20 could target the miR-487a/HIF-1 $\alpha$  in BC phenotype. Moreover, HIF-1 $\alpha$  could bind with the HK2 promoter, initiate HK2 expression and eventually promote BC progression. Overall, these findings indicate that circRNF20 might act

as novel biomarkers for BC prognosis and promising therapeutic targets.

## Materials and methods

### Clinical tissue samples

BC tissue specimens (fifty causes) and their corresponding adjacent normal tissue were collected during the surgery. None of chemotherapy or radiotherapy was administrated before surgical excision. Tissue samples were snap-frozen in liquid nitrogen for further analysis. All tissue specimens received a postoperative histopathological diagnosis by pathologist. The overall survival (OS) was identified as the time from tumor excision to either the last follow-up visit or death of BC patients. The relationship between circRNF20 level and clinical characteristic was listed in Table 1. The Written consent was obtained from each BC patient before surgery. The study had been approved by the ethnic committee of the Zibo Central Hospital.

### Cell lines

BC cell lines (MCF-7, MDA-MB-468, MDA-MB-231, MDA-MB-453) and normal human breast epithelial cell (MCF-10A) were provided from American Type Culture Collection (ATCC, USA). Cells were cultured in Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium (DMEM, Corning, USA) with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS, Gibco, USA), 2 mM glutamine, 100 units/mL penicillin/streptomycin at 5% CO<sub>2</sub> cell culture under 37 °C.

### Oligonucleotides transfections

Short hairpin oligonucleotides (shRNAs) and control oligonucleotides, overexpression vectors and control vectors targeting circRNF20 were synthesized by GeneSeed Biotechnology Co., Ltd (Guangzhou, China). miR-487a mimics and inhibitor were synthesized by RiboBio (Guangzhou, China). Transfections of expression plasmids in GC cells were performed using the Lipofectamine 2000 kit (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA) following the manufacturer's instructions. All sequences were presented in Table S1.

### RNA isolation and real-time PCR

Total RNA was extracted from the BC tissue samples using RNeasy Mini Kit (QIAGEN, Hilden, Germany) was used according to the manufacturer's protocol. Subsequently, isolated RNA was detected at the ratio of A260/A280 for quantitation, and then converted into cDNA using Promega reverse transcription kit. Quantitative real-time PCR was performed in the ABI7500 system using SYBR Green methods. The relative gene expression was measured and normalized to beta-actin by the 2<sup>- $\Delta\Delta$ ct</sup> method. The primers used in the study were displayed in Supplement Table S1.

### RNA Sanger sequencing

Total RNA was extracted using TRIZOL reagent according to the standard method. RNA Sanger sequencing was performed BGI Genomics Co., Ltd (Shenzhen, China).

### Cellular proliferation and apoptosis assay

Cell proliferation was measured using CCK-8 assays. In brief,  $1 \times 10^3$  cells were seeded in 96-well plates, and incubated with 10  $\mu$ L of CCK-8 assay solution (Dojindo, Tokyo, Japan) in each well. After the solution administration, the absorbance value was detected using enzyme immunoassay analyzer (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Inc., Waltham, MA, USA) at 450 nm. Cellular apoptosis assay was detected using flow cytometry. In brief, cells were resuspended in Annexin-binding buffer (5  $\mu$ L Annexin V-FITC, 1  $\mu$ L PI) at room temperature for 15 min in the dark using APC Annexin V Apoptosis Detection Kit (BioLegend, San Diego, CA, USA). FITC and PI fluorescence were analyzed by flow cytometry (FACScan, BD Biosciences).

### Lactate production, glucose uptake, and ATP levels

The glucose level was quantified by glucose assay kit (Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO, USA). The lactate level was detected using the Lactate Assay kit (BioVision, Mountain View, CA, USA). The ATP level was determined with CellTiter-Glo Luminescent Cell Viability Assay (Promega, Madison, MI, USA).

### Western blotting analysis

Total protein was extracted from using RIPA buffer added with proteinase and phosphatase inhibitor cocktail. Protein extraction (30 mg) was loaded to 10% SDS-PAGE and then transferred onto the polyvinylidene fluoride (PVDF) membranes. Primary antibodies were incubated with the membranes, including anti-HK2 (Abcam, ab209847, 1:1000), anti-HIF-1 $\alpha$  (Abcam, ab51608, 1:1000). beta-actin was used as normalized control.

### Luciferase assay

The sequences including miR-487a binding sites (wild-type, mutant) in the circRNF20 and HIF-1 $\alpha$  3'-UTR were subcloned into psiCHECK2 Dual-luciferase vector (Promega, Madison, WI, USA). The vectors were co-transfected with miR-487a mimics or control (NC) into 293T cells. After 48 h transfection, luciferase activities between the Firefly and Renilla (control) luciferase activities were measured using the Dual Light System following the instruction.

### RNA-fluorescence in situ hybridization (RNA-FISH)

circRNF20 probes were designed and synthesized by GenePharma (Shanghai, China). The hybridization was

performed overnight with probes using fluorescent in situ hybridization kit according to the manufacturer's protocol (GenePharma, Shanghai, China). Fluorescence images were captured using confocal laser-scanning microscope (LSM 780, Zeiss, Germany).

### Chromatin immunoprecipitation (ChIP) assay

ChIP Assay Kit (Millipore, Bedford, MA) was used according to manufacturer's instructions. In brief, the cross-linked chromatin was sonicated into fragments and then immunoprecipitated using HIF-1 $\alpha$  antibody. IgG was used as negative control. DNA fraction was analyzed by qRT-PCR. The primers sequences for ChIP-PCR were listed in Table S1.

### In vivo tumorigenesis assay

Male nude mice (4–5 weeks old) were provided by Slac Laboratory Animal Center (Shanghai, China) and maintained in microisolator cages. Mice were subcutaneously inoculated with  $1 \times 10^7$  MDA-MB-231 cells (0.1 mL) that stably transfected with shRNA for circRNF20. The animal assay was conducted according to the institutional guidelines and approved by the Animal Ethics Committee of Zibo Central Hospital. The mice tumor size was measured every three days for volume calculated using the formula: length  $\times$  width  $^2/2$ . The weight was measured after three weeks.

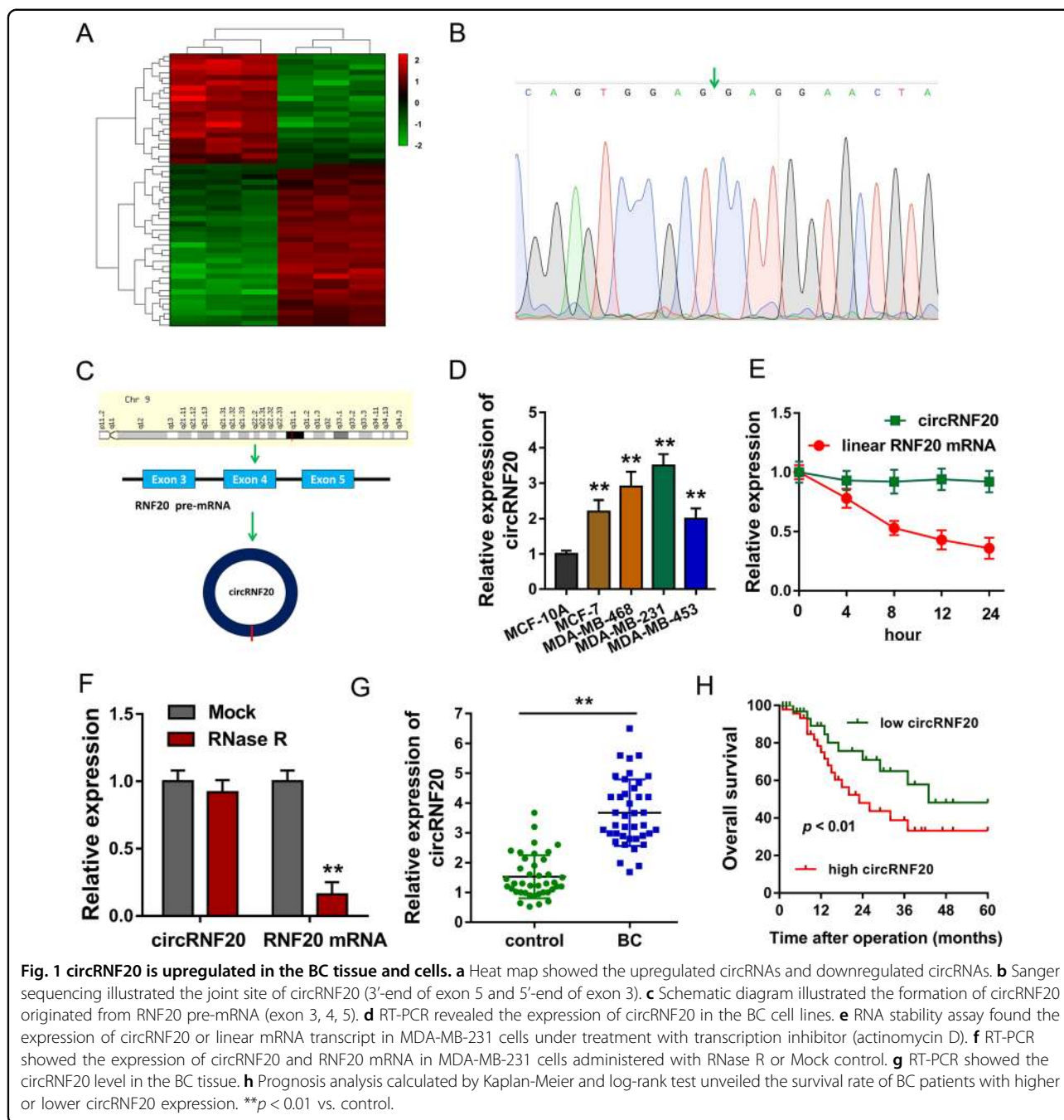
### Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS software (SPSS, Chicago, Illinois, USA). Survival curves for BC patients were generated using the Kaplan-Meier method, and the difference was analyzed by log-rank test. The optimal cut-off value of the relative expression of circRNF20 in BC was determined by ROC curve analysis in Cutoff Finder (<http://molpath.charite.de/cutoff/>)<sup>18</sup>. Comparison between groups was calculated by Student's *t*-test. Data were presented as mean  $\pm$  standard deviation (SD) from three independent experiments. *P*-value less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

## Results

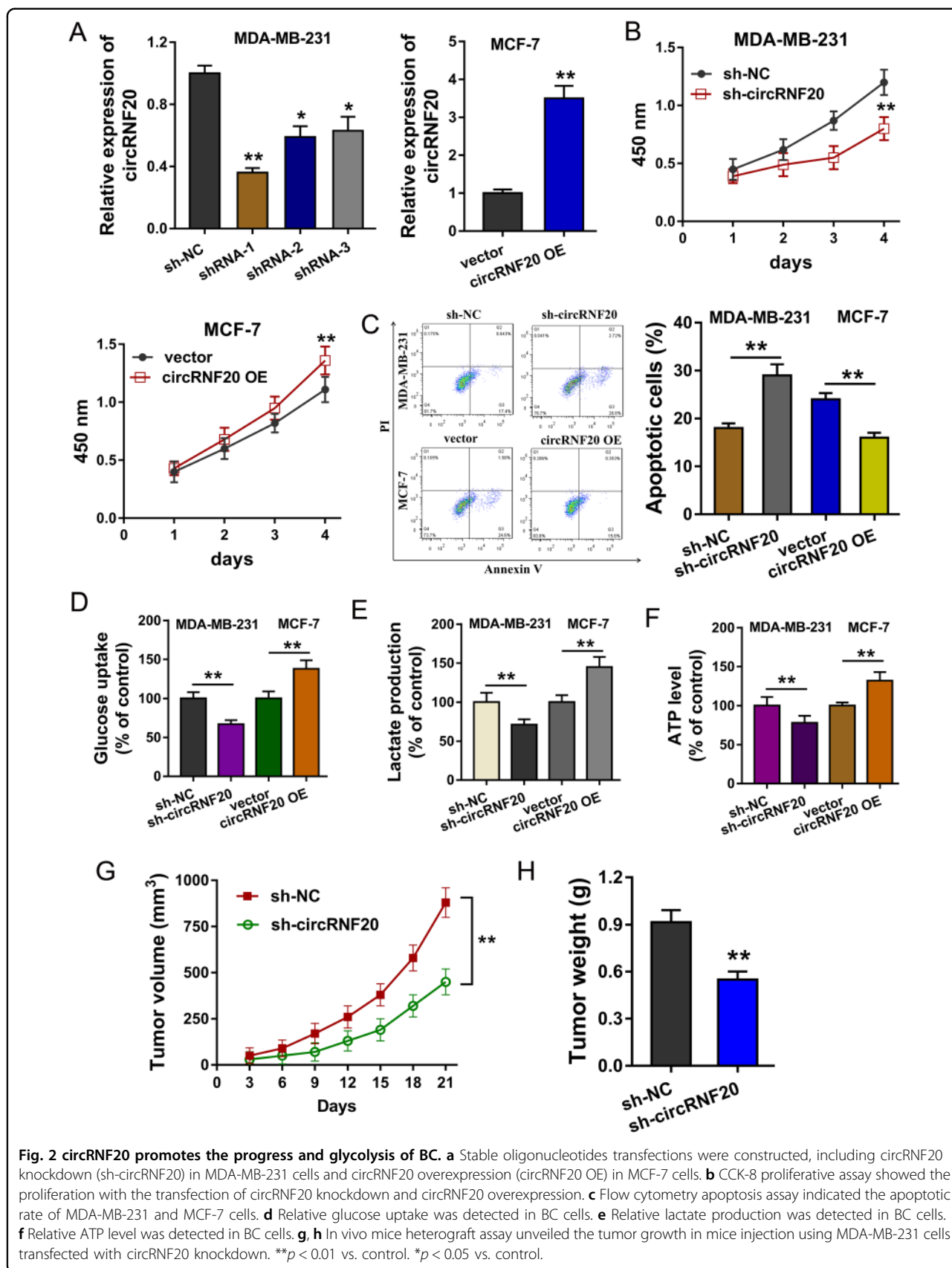
### circRNF20 is upregulated in the BC tissue and cells

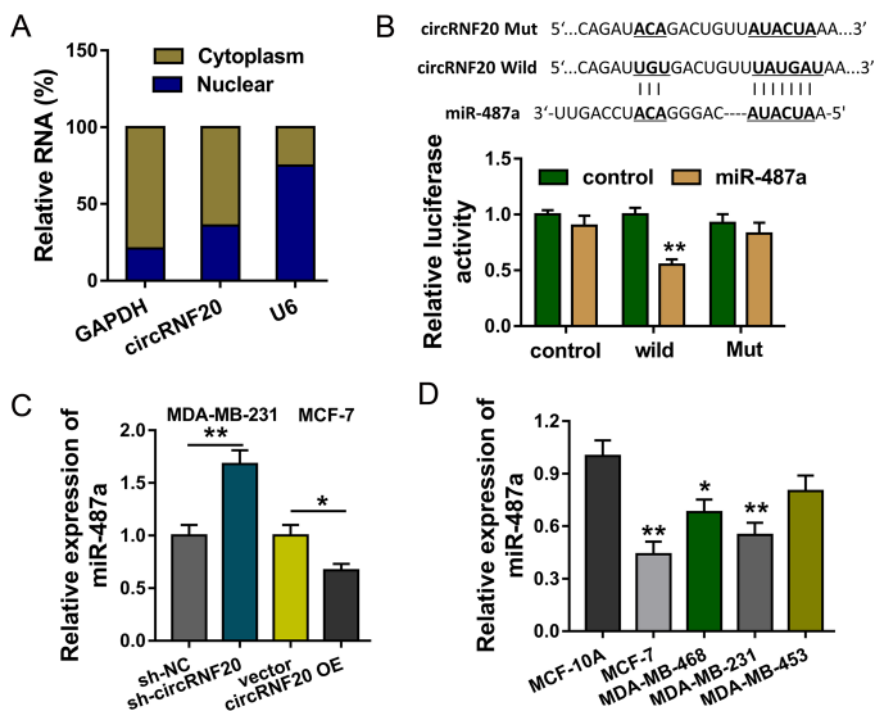
To identify the potential dysregulated circRNAs in the BC, we performed circRNA expression profile in BC tissue and adjacent normal tissue. Heat map showed that there were hundreds of upregulated circRNAs and downregulated circRNAs (Fig. 1a, Fig. S1). Sanger sequencing illustrated the joint site of circRNF20. The joint site was converged by the 3'-end of exon 5 and 5'-end of exon 3 (Fig. 1b). Schematic diagram illustrated the formation of circRNF20 originated from RNF20 pre-mRNA (exon 3, 4, 5) (Fig. 1c). RT-PCR revealed that the expression of circRNF20 was upregulated in the BC cell lines (Fig. 1d). RNA stability



assay found that circular transcript circRNF20 was much more stable than the linear mRNA transcript in BC cells under treatment with transcription inhibitor (actinomycin D) (Fig. 1e). In the administration of RNase R or control, RT-PCR showed the expression of circRNF20 and RNF20 mRNA in MDA-MB-231 cells. Linear form of RNF20 was significantly decreased under the RNase R treatment, however circRNF20 resist to RNase R digestion (Fig. 1f). In the BC tissue specimens clinical analysis, circRNF20

expression was closely correlated with lymph node metastasis and tumor size (Table 1). RT-PCR showed that circRNF20 was over-expressed as comparing to the normal tissue (Fig. 1g). Prognosis analysis calculated by Kaplan-Meier and log-rank test unveiled that the higher circRNF20 expression indicated the lower survival rate of BC patients (Fig. 1h). These results suggest that circRNF20 is upregulated in the BC tissue and cells, and indicated the prognosis marker.





**Fig. 3** circRNF20 acts as the sponge of miR-487a. **a** The subcellular location analysis indicated the distribution of circRNF20 in the cytoplasm and nucleus. **b** Complementary binding sites within circRNF20 and miR-487a were predicted using online bioinformatic prediction (CircInteractome, <https://circinteractome.nia.nih.gov>) and ENCORI (<http://starbase.sysu.edu.cn/>). Luciferase reporter assay indicated the combination of circRNF20 with miR-487a. **c** RT-PCR illustrated the miR-487a expression in BC cells (MDA-MB-231, MCF-7) with circRNF20 knockdown or circRNF20 overexpression. **d** RT-PCR showed the miR-487a level in the BC cell lines. \*\* $p < 0.01$  vs. control. \* $p < 0.05$  vs. control.

### circRNF20 promotes the progress and glycolysis of BC

In order to investigate the biological roles of circRNF20, we constructed the circRNF20 knockdown (sh-circRNF20) in MDA-MB-231 cells and circRNF20 overexpression (circRNF20 OE) in MCF-7 cells (Fig. 2a). CCK-8 proliferative assay showed that circRNF20 knockdown repressed the proliferation and circRNF20 overexpression promoted it (Fig. 2b). Flow cytometry apoptosis assay indicated that circRNF20 knockdown increased the apoptosis and circRNF20 overexpression reduced it (Fig. 2c). Subsequently, the Warburg effect correlated analysis indicated that circRNF20 knockdown reduced the glucose uptake, lactate production and ATP level as comparing to the blank control (Fig. 2d–f). In vivo mice heterograft assay unveiled that circRNF20 knockdown (MDA-MB-231 cells) inhibited the tumor growth (Fig. 2g, h). These data illustrated that circRNF20 promotes the progress and glycolysis of BC.

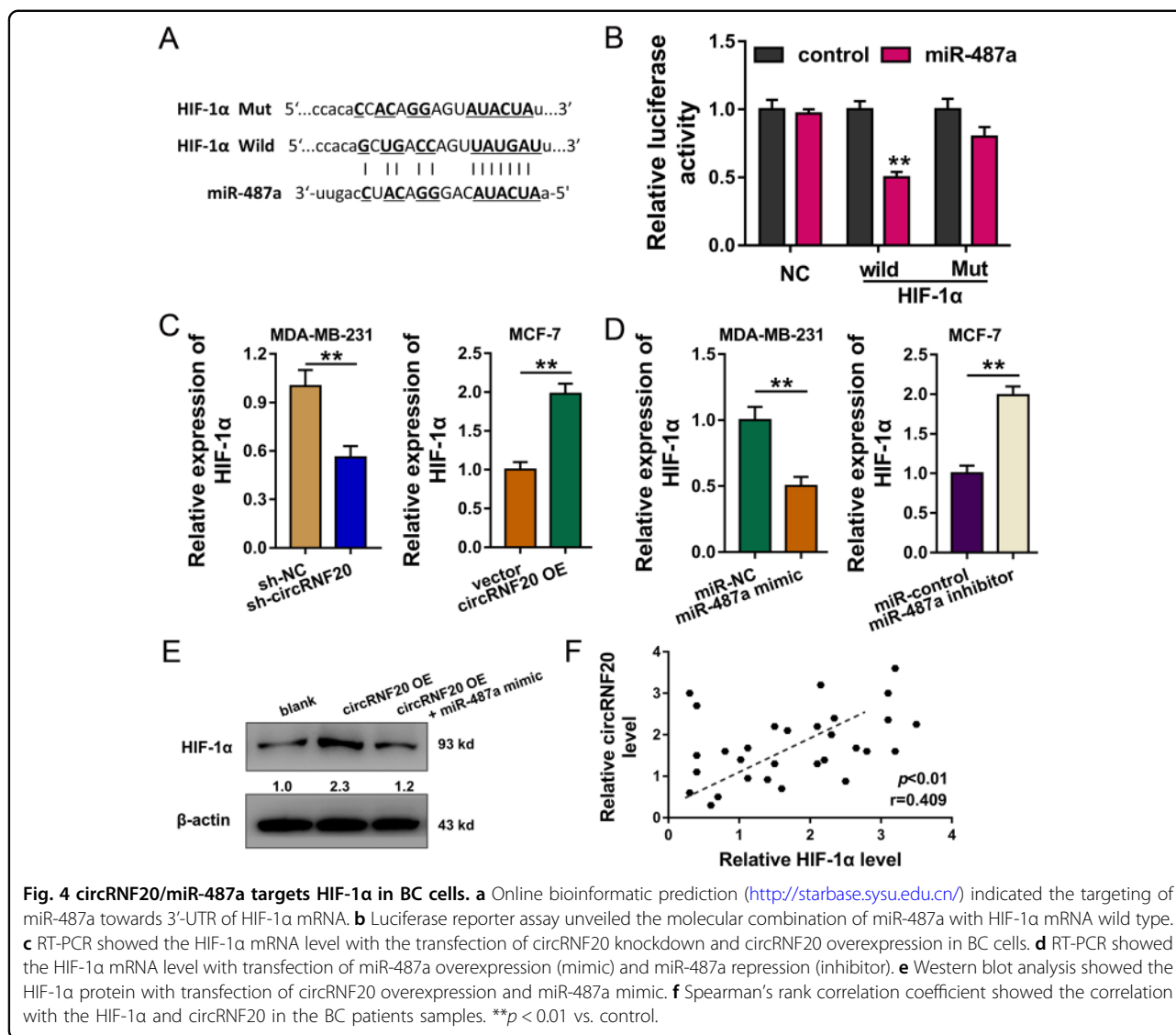
### circRNF20 acts as the sponge of miR-487a

The subcellular location of circRNF20 was found to be primarily distributed in the cytoplasm, more than nucleus (Fig. 3a). The cytoplasmic location of circRNF20 indicated the potential post-transcriptional regulation. Online bioinformatic prediction (CircInteractome, <https://>

[circinteractome.nia.nih.gov](https://circinteractome.nia.nih.gov)) and ENCORI (<http://starbase.sysu.edu.cn/>) indicated that miR-487a functioned as the target of circRNF20 with complementary binding sites. Luciferase reporter assay indicated that circRNF20 closely combined with miR-487a (Fig. 3b). RNA-Fluorescence In Situ Hybridization (RNA-FISH) unveiled that circRNF20 and miR-487a were both primarily located in the cytoplasm (Fig. S2). In BC cells (MDA-MB-231, MCF-7), RT-PCR illustrated that circRNF20 knockdown increased the miR-487a expression and circRNF20 overexpression reduced the miR-487a (Fig. 3c). Moreover, miR-487a level was found to be downregulated in the BC cell lines (Fig. 3d). In conclusion, these findings suggest that circRNF20 acts as the sponge of miR-487a.

### circRNF20/miR-487a targets HIF-1 $\alpha$ in BC cells

Online bioinformatic prediction (<http://starbase.sysu.edu.cn/>) inspired that miR-487a could also target the 3'-UTR of HIF-1 $\alpha$  mRNA (Fig. 4a). Luciferase reporter assay unveiled that miR-487a combined with HIF-1 $\alpha$  mRNA wild type at molecular level (Fig. 4b). In BC cells, RT-PCR showed that circRNF20 knockdown reduced the HIF-1 $\alpha$  mRNA level, and the circRNF20 overexpression could enhance the HIF-1 $\alpha$  mRNA (Fig. 4c). Moreover, miR-487a



overexpression decreased the HIF-1α level and miR-487a repression upregulated the HIF-1α level (Fig. 4d). Western blot analysis showed that circRNF20 overexpression upregulated the HIF-1α protein, and the miR-487a mimic rescued the protein generation (Fig. 4e). Correlation analysis by Spearman's rank correlation coefficient showed that circRNF20 was positively correlated with the HIF-1α in the BC patients samples (Fig. 4f). These findings suggest that circRNF20/miR-487a targets HIF-1α in BC cells.

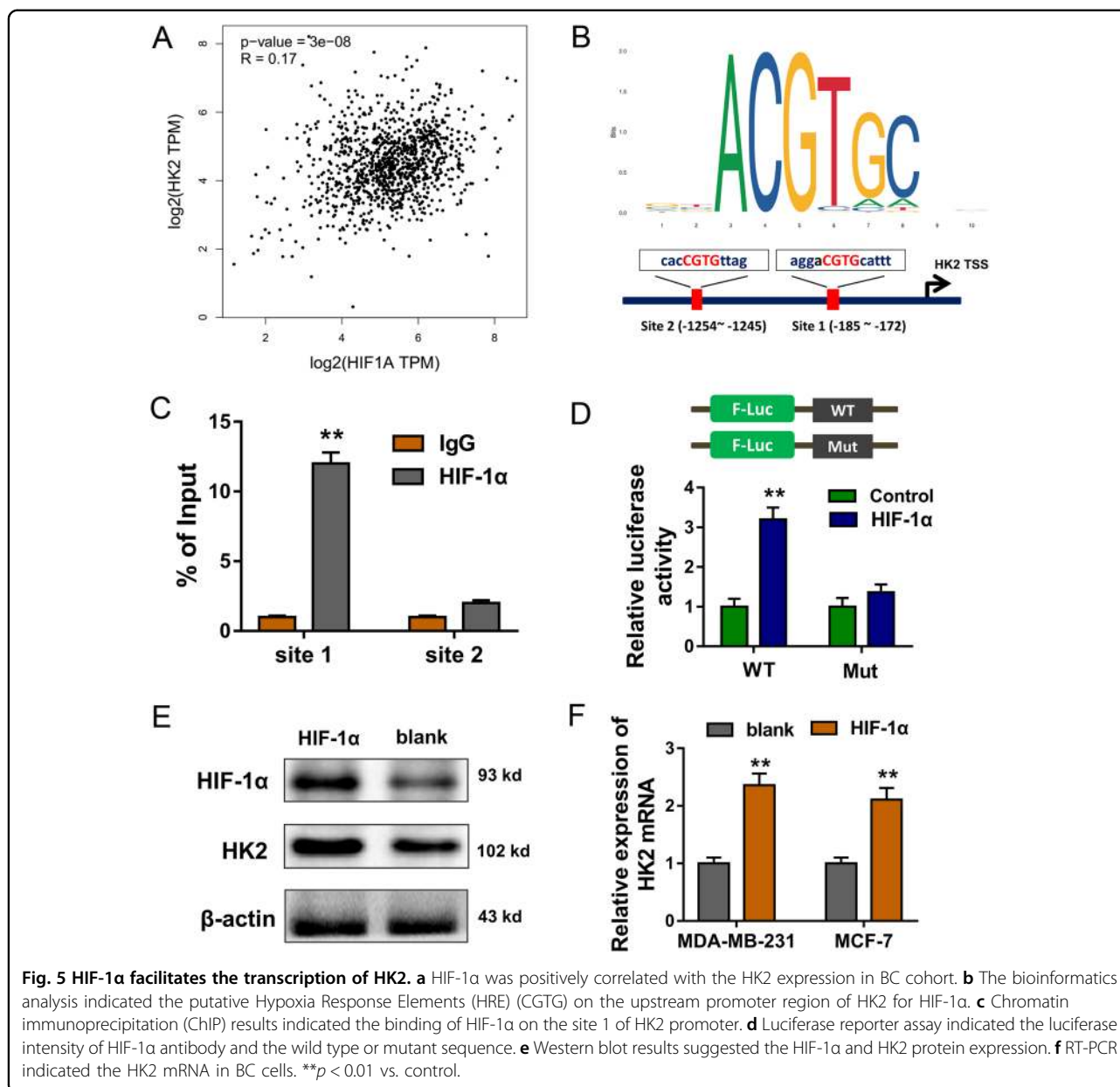
#### HIF-1α facilitates the transcription of HK2

Previous findings illustrated that circRNF20 regulated the Warburg effect, therefore, there could be a connection with the circRNF20/miR-487a/HIF-1α and glycolysis in BC. For the potential targets, we found that HIF-1α was positively correlated with the HK2 expression (Fig. 5a).

The bioinformatics analysis indicated that HIF-1α had the putative Hypoxia Response Elements (HRE) (CGTG) on the upstream promoter region of HK2 (Fig. 5b). Chromatin immunoprecipitation (ChIP) results indicated that HIF-1α could bind with the site 1 of HK2 promoter (Fig. 5c). Luciferase reporter assay indicated that HIF-1α targeted the wild type of site 1, instead of mutant sequence (Fig. 5d). Western blot results suggested that enhanced HIF-1α expression could upregulated the HK2 protein (Fig. 5e). RT-PCR indicated that enhanced HIF-1α expression might increase the HK2 mRNA in BC cells (Fig. 5f). Overall, these data suggest that HIF-1α facilitates the transcription of HK2.

#### Discussion

The roles of circular RNA (circRNA) have been identified in the human cancer, including breast cancer (BC)<sup>19</sup>.



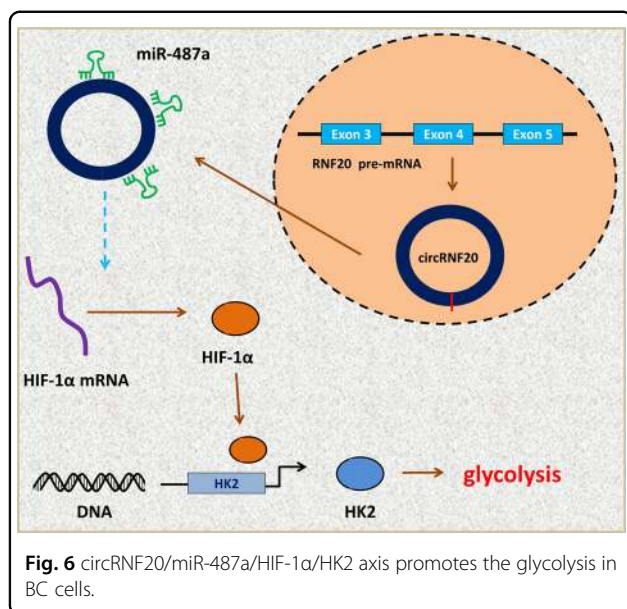
Multiple pathological factors participate in the tumor progression of BC, moreover, circRNA could regulate the series of tumor phenotype, including metastasis and Warburg effect<sup>20</sup>. Warburg effect, also known as the aerobic glycolysis, provides the major energy for the BC tumor microenvironment<sup>21,22</sup>. Warburg effect is characterized by a vital metabolic event involved in proliferation, invasion, and migration in BC<sup>23,24</sup>.

CircRNA is group of transcript generated by the back splicing without the 5'-end and 3'-end. In present study, we selected the novel circRNA using the circRNA microarray in the BC tissue samples. CircRNA circRNF20 is a novel circRNA circRNF20 (hsa\_circ\_0087784)

CircRNF20 is a 499 bp transcript originated from RNF20 gene exon-3, exon-4, and exon-5. In clinical investigation, circRNF20 is highly expressed in the BC samples, and its overexpression is correlated with the poor prognosis of BC patients. In the cellular experiments, results indicated that circRNF20 could promote the proliferation and reduce the apoptosis of BC cells. Moreover, circRNF20 promote the glucose uptake, lactate production and ATP level in BC cells. In other words, circRNF20 may function as a promoting factor in the BC Warburg effect (Fig. 6).

More and more researches have illustrated the critical roles of circRNAs in the BC. For example, circRNA circ-ABC10 is significantly upregulated in BC tissue and cells





and circ-ABC10 knockdown suppresses the proliferation and increased apoptosis of BC cells and circ-ABC10 sponged miR-1271 to regulate the BC tumorigenesis<sup>13</sup>. Circular RNA circ-Ccnb1 inhibits the three p53 mutations function, forming a complex with H2AX and Bclaf1 in p53 mutant cells<sup>14</sup>. CircIRAK3 is increased in metastatic BC cells and predictive recurrence, constructing the circIRAK3/miR-3607/FOXC1/IRAK3 positive-feedback loop<sup>25</sup>. The generated circRNAs are distributed both in cytoplasm and nucleus, and the subcellular distribution determines the functions of circRNAs<sup>26</sup>. The cytoplasmic circRNA could target the miRNA, acting as miRNA sponge, to indirectly regulate the functional proteins. For example, circRNA circ0005276 interacted with FUS binding protein (FUS) so as to activate the transcription of XIAP. Rescue assays were conducted to determine the crucial role of XIAP in circ0005276 and FUS-mediated PCa cellular processes<sup>27</sup>.

In this research, we found that circRNA circRNF20 could harbor the miR-487a, acting as the miRNA sponge. Moreover, miR-487a could target the HIF-1α 3'-UTR to reduce the HIF-1α protein level. HIF-1α is the critical element for the aerobic glycolysis, therefore, the circRNF20/miR-487a/HIF-1α axis exerts the critical role in the tumor energy metabolism<sup>28,29</sup>. Interestingly, transcription factor HIF-1α could target the promoter of HK2 to accelerate its transcription. Overall, the circRNF20/miR-487a/HIF-1α/HK2 axis promotes the glycolysis in BC cells.

In the BC carcinogenesis, hypoxia is a crucial feature of BC, which regulates the tumor progress, metabolism and metastasis. One of the major characteristic for cancer is the anoxic microenvironment, therefore, tumor cells could specifically utilize the glycolysis to provide energy

for BC cells. For example, circDENND4C is highly expressed in BC in response to hypoxia. Knockdown of circDENND4C reduced the glycolysis and migration of BC cells under hypoxia<sup>30</sup>.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study unveiled the critical role of circRNF20 in the BC progress and Warburg effect. Mechanistically, circRNF20 harbor miR-487a, acting as miRNA sponge, and then miR-487a targeted the 3'-UTR of hypoxia-inducible factor-1α (HIF-1α). Moreover, HIF-1α could bind with the promoter of HK2 and promoted its transcription. The finding illustrates the vital role of circRNF20/ miR-487a/HIF-1α/HK2 axis in BC tumorigenesis.

## Author details

<sup>1</sup>Department of Oncology, Zibo Central Hospital, Zibo 255020, China.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Ultrasound, Zibo Central Hospital, Zibo 255020, China.

<sup>3</sup>Department of Breast and Thyroid Surgery, Zibo Key laboratory of Breast cancer Individualized diagnosis, treatment and transformation, Zibo Central Hospital, Zibo 255020, China. <sup>4</sup>Department of Experimental Oncology, Research Institute for Radiation Biology and Medicine, Hiroshima University, Hiroshima 734-8553, Japan. <sup>5</sup>School of Radiation Medicine and Protection, Medical College of Soochow University, Suzhou 215123, China

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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