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# MiR-20a-5p represses multi-drug resistance in osteosarcoma by targeting the KIF26B gene

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## Abstract

**Background:** Chemoresistance hinders curative cancer chemotherapy in osteosarcoma (OS), resulting in only an approximately 20 % survival rate in patients with metastatic disease at diagnosis. Identifying the mechanisms responsible for regulating chemotherapy resistance is crucial for improving OS treatment.

**Methods:** This study was performed in two human OS cell lines (the multi-chemosensitive OS cell line G-292 and the multi-chemoresistant OS cell line SJSA-1). The levels of miR-20a-5p and KIF26B mRNA expression were determined by quantitative real-time PCR. KIF26B protein levels were determined by western blot analysis. Cell viability was assessed by MTT assay. Apoptosis was evaluated by flow cytometry.

**Results:** We found that miR-20a-5p was more highly expressed in G-292 cells than in SJSA-1 cells. Forced expression of miR-20a-5p counteracted OS cell chemoresistance in both cell culture and tumor xenografts in nude mice. One of miR-20a-5p's targets, kinesin family member 26B (KIF26B), was found to mediate the miR-20a-5p-induced reduction in OS chemoresistance by modulating the activities of the MAPK/ERK and cAMP/PKA signaling pathways.

**Conclusions:** In addition to providing mechanistic insights, our study revealed that miR-20a-5p and KIF26B contribute to OS chemoresistance and determined the roles of these genes in this process, which may be critical for characterizing drug responsiveness and overcoming chemoresistance in OS patients.

**Keywords:** Osteosarcoma, miR-20a-5p, KIF26B, Multi-drug resistance

## Background

Osteosarcoma (OS) is the most common primary bone malignancy in children and adolescents, up to 20–25 % of diagnosed patients present with metastasis, primarily to the lung [1]. Prior to the use of adjuvant and neo-adjuvant chemotherapy, the long-term survival rate for OS subsequent to surgical resection alone was less than 20 %. Fortunately, multi-drug chemotherapy regimens that were pioneered in the 1970s and early 80s have dramatically improved the survival rate, and the necessity

for chemotherapy treatment for OS patients has been demonstrated in randomized controlled trials [2]. Currently, the standard chemotherapy regimen for newly diagnosed OS patients mainly uses cisplatin, doxorubicin, ifosfamide and methotrexate. By combining these anti-OS drugs, the 5-year survival rate of patients with localized disease has risen to approximately 70 % in recent years. However, the outcome remains poor for most patients with metastatic or recurrent OS, who have less than a 20 % chance of long-term survival despite aggressive therapies [3]. To a certain extent, this result is likely due to chemoresistance to anti-OS drugs. Therefore, identifying the mechanisms responsible for regulating chemotherapy resistance is crucial for improving OS treatment. Chemoresistance in tumors occurs by numerous mechanisms, including decreased intracellular drug accumulation, drug inactivation, enhanced DNA repair,

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perturbations in signal transduction pathways, apoptosis and autophagy-related chemoresistance, and cancer stem cell-mediated drug resistance [4–6]. The regulation of post-transcriptional and translational events has been well documented to play a key role in tumor chemoresistance [7–12]. MicroRNAs (miRNAs or miRs) can regulate translation and play pivotal roles in modulating various biological processes, including multi-drug resistance in cancer cells. Over 30 % of human protein-encoding genes are predicted to be post-transcriptionally regulated by miRs [13–15]. Several studies have shown that miRNA misregulation can increase chemoresistance in cancer cells if specific proteins are affected [16–18]. For instance, miR-33a was found to be upregulated in chemoresistant OS and to promote resistance to cisplatin by downregulating TWIST [19]. Given the major roles of miRNAs in regulating protein expression in general, understanding how miRNAs contribute to OS chemoresistance is necessary.

In this study, we report that miR-20a-5p was downregulated in a multi-drug-resistant (MDR) human OS cell line (SJSA-1) and describe the mechanism of OS chemoresistance mediated by miR-20a-5p. We provide experimental evidence that miR-20a-5p repression of the direct target kinesin family member 26B (KIF26B), a member of the kinesin family that can attach to and move along microtubules to transport cellular cargoes, improved the chemosensitivity of OS cells to multiple drugs, including doxorubicin (Dox), etoposide (Etop), methotrexate (MTX), cisplatin (CDDP) and carboplatin (Carb). In contrast, knockdown of KIF26B increased cellular sensitivity to these drugs. More importantly, we found that miR-20a-5p/KIF26B promoted multi-drug resistance in OS cells by regulating MAPK/ERK and cAMP/PKA signaling pathway activities. To the best of our knowledge, this study provides the first evidence of the potential utility of miR-20a-5p as an important target for developing novel OS chemotherapeutics.

## Methods

### Cell lines and culture

The SJSA-1 (ATCC No. CRL-2098) and G-292 (ATCC No. CRL-1423) cell lines were purchased from ATCC. Both cell lines were cultured in Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA) supplemented with 10 % fetal bovine serum (Invitrogen) and 1 % glutamine at 37 °C in 5 % CO<sub>2</sub>.

### Bisulfite sequencing PCR (BSP) analysis

Genomic DNA was isolated by a standard phenol/chloroform purification method, verified by electrophoresis on an agarose gel, and treated by an ammonium bisulfite-based bisulfite conversion method. Then, the

PCR fragments from the converted DNA were sequenced and analyzed. Raw sequence data files were processed, and the area ratio (%) of C over C+T of the primary CpG dinucleotide was calculated as the % of methylation and plotted [20].

### RNA-seq analysis

RNA-seq analysis was performed by BGI-Tech of China, and RNA-seq library preparation and sequencing were performed by BGI (Shenzhen, China). Following purification, RNA was fragmented using divalent cations at an elevated temperature, and first-strand cDNA was synthesized using random hexamer primers and Superscript<sup>TM</sup> III (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA). Second-strand cDNA was synthesized using buffer, dNTPs, RNase H, and DNA polymerase I. Short fragments were purified with a QIAquick PCR extraction kit (Qiagen) and resolved with EB buffer for end reparation and poly (A) addition. The short fragments were subsequently connected using sequencing adapters. After agarose gel electrophoresis, suitable fragments were used as templates for PCR amplification. During the QC steps, an Agilent 2100 Bioanalyzer and an ABI StepOnePlus Real-Time PCR System were used in quantification and qualification of the sample library. Finally, the library (200 bp insert) was sequenced using Illumina HiSeq 2000 (Illumina Inc., San Diego, CA, USA). The single-end library was prepared following the protocol of the Illumina TruSeq RNA Sample Preparation Kit (Illumina) [21].

### Transient transfection assays and reagents

Mimic, agomir, antagomir, and scrambled (negative control, NC) siRNA sequences as well as a riboFECT CP transfection kit were supplied by Guangzhou RiboBio, China. A GFP-tagged KIF26B overexpression construct (pReciever-M98) was purchased from Genecopia, Guangzhou, China (Catalog No.: EX-E0804-M98-5). Transfections of the abovementioned ribonucleic acid reagents and reporter plasmids were performed according to the manufacturer's instructions. Chemically modified mimic oligonucleotides (agomir) were synthesized to upregulate miR-20a-5p expression in vivo. The 5' ends of the oligonucleotides were conjugated to cholesterol molecules, and all of the bases were 2'-OMe modified. The agomir oligonucleotides were deprotected, desalted and purified by high-performance liquid chromatography. The siRNA sequences used to produce KIF26B interference in this study were as follows:

si-KIF26B:

5'-CGGACAGCCUCUCCUAUUAdTdT-3'  
3'-dTdTGCCUGUCGGAGAGGAUAAU-5'

hsa-miR-20a-5p

antagomir: 5'-CUACCUGCACUAUAAGCACUUUA-3'

mimic:

sense 5'-UAAAGUGCUUAUAGUGCAGGUAG-3'

antisense 5'-CUACCUGCACUAUAAGCACUUUA-3'

#### Luciferase reporter assay

A full-length human KIF26B 3'-untranslated region (UTR, 520 bp) and wild-type (WT) and mutant (Mut) target sequences for miR-20a-5p were cloned on either side of the 3'-region of the luciferase coding sequence in the pmiR-RB-REPORT<sup>TM</sup> vector to construct the pmiR-RB-REPORT<sup>TM</sup>-KIF26B vector. The construct was confirmed by DNA sequencing. Cells were seeded into 96-well plates at approximately  $1 \times 10^4$  cells per well and transfected with a mixture of 50 ng of pmiR-RB-REPORT<sup>TM</sup> WT or Mut or of 5 pmol of mimic or NC nucleotides using a riboFECT CP transfection kit according to the manufacturer's instructions. Luciferase activity was measured 24 h after transfection using a Dual-Luciferase Reporter Assay System (Promega) in tandem with a Promega GloMax 20/20 luminometer. The relative firefly luciferase activities of the UTR construct and pathway reporter constructs were analyzed as previously reported [22].

#### Chemotherapeutics

All of the chemotherapeutic drugs used in this study were of clinical grade (NCI Dictionary of Cancer Terms, <http://www.cancer.gov/dictionary>). The following chemotherapeutics were used: Dox, doxorubicin (Haizheng, Zhejiang, China); Etop, etoposide (Hengrui, Jiangsu, China); MTX, methotrexate (Lingnan, Guangdong, China); CDDP, cisplatin (Haosen, Jiangsu, China); and Carb, carboplatin (Qilu, Shandong, China) [20, 23, 24].

#### Chemoresistance profiling (IC<sub>50</sub> determination)

To perform thiazolyl blue tetrazolium blue (MTT)-based cell proliferation assays, experimental groups of cells in the logarithmic phase of growth were seeded in triplicate in 96-well plates at a cell density of  $0.5 \times 10^4$ /well and treated with fourfold serially diluted drugs for 72 h, after which 10  $\mu$ l (5 mg/ml) of MTT salt (Sigma) was added to the corresponding wells. The cells were incubated at 37 °C for an additional 4 h, and the reaction was stopped by lysing the cells with 150  $\mu$ l of DMSO for 5 min. The optical density was measured at 570 nm. A group that received no drug treatment was used as a reference for calculating the relative cell survival rate.

#### Apoptosis analysis

Cells were harvested and rinsed twice with phosphate-buffered saline (PBS). The samples were diluted with

150  $\mu$ l of  $1 \times$  annexin-binding buffer, and then 5  $\mu$ l of FITC-labeled enhanced-annexin V and 5  $\mu$ l (20  $\mu$ g/ml) of propidium iodide were added into the cell suspension. The cells were incubated in the dark for 15 min at room temperature. Flow cytometry was conducted on a FACSCalibur instrument (FACSVerse). The results were analyzed according to the manufacturer's instructions. The experiments were performed independently three times, and the data from a representative experiment are shown.

#### Cell cycle assay

After transfection with either miR-20a-5p or miR-Ctrl for 48 h, the cells were collected and fixed in 70 % cold ethanol for 24 h at 4 °C. The cells were stained with 50  $\mu$ g/ml propidium iodide (BD Biosciences) at room temperature for 30 min in the dark. The cell cycle was evaluated using a FACSCalibur instrument (FACSVerse), and the results were analyzed according to the manufacturer's instructions. All of the experiments were performed independently three times, and the data from a representative experiment are shown.

#### RNA analysis

Total RNA was isolated from cells during the logarithmic phase using TRIzol (Tiangen Biotech Co., Ltd., Beijing, China). For mRNA analysis, a cDNA primed by an oligo-dT was constructed using a PrimeScript RT reagent kit (Tiangen Biotech Co., Ltd., Beijing, China). The KIF26B mRNA level was quantified using duplex-qRT-PCR analysis, wherein TaqMan probes with a different fluorescence profile were used to detect  $\beta$ -actin (provided by Shing Gene, Shanghai, China) in a FTC-3000P PCR instrument (Funglyn Biotech Inc., Canada). Using the  $2^{-\Delta\Delta C_t}$  method, target gene expression levels were normalized to the  $\beta$ -actin expression level before the relative levels of the target genes were compared. The sequences of primers and probes used for the qRT-PCR analysis were as follows:

hKIF26B F: 5'-GCTGCGTGTTCGTGTTTCGG-3'

hKIF26B R: 5'-TTCCTTGCGTTCGTTTATGAG-3'

hKIF26B probe:

5'-CY5-TCGGAAAGGATGATTCCATGCAGAAC-3'

hACTB F: 5'-GCCCATCTACGAGGGGTATG-3'

hACTB R: 5'-GAGGTAGTCAGTCAGGTCCCG-3'

hACTB probe:

5'-HEX-CCCCCATGCCATCCTGCGTC-3'

#### Bulge-Loop<sup>TM</sup> miRNA qRT-PCR

To detect and quantify the expression of miR-20-5p, RNA was reverse-transcribed using a Bulge-Loop<sup>TM</sup> miRNA qRT-PCR Primer Set (RiboBio) and quantified using SYBR Green-based real-time PCR analysis in a

FTC-3000P instrument (Funglynn Biotech Inc., Canada). The Ct values of miR-20-5p were normalized to the Ct values of U6 RNA before quantification using the  $2^{-\Delta\Delta C_t}$  method.

### Western blot protein analysis

Cells were lysed with lysis buffer (60 mM Tris-HCl [pH 6.8], 2 % SDS, 20 % glycerol, 0.25 % bromophenol blue, and 1.25 % 2-mercaptoethanol) and heated at 99 °C for 10 min before electrophoresis/Western blot analysis. The primary anti-KIF26B (17422-1-AP) antibodies and anti-GAPDH (60004-1-Ig) antibodies were purchased from Proteintech (San Ying Biotechnology, China) and were recognized with anti-rabbit IgG peroxidase-conjugated antibody (30000-0-AP) (San Ying Biotechnology, China), followed by an enhanced chemiluminescence reaction (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA). Relative levels of proteins were quantified using densitometry with a Gel-Pro Analyzer (Media Cybernetics, Rockville, MD, USA). The target bands over the GAPDH band were densitometrically quantified, as indicated under each band.

### In vivo studies

Animal experiments were performed in accordance with the National Institutes of Health Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals. Male BALB/c nude mice between 3 and 4 weeks old were used for this study [22]. SJSA-1 or G-292 cells were embedded in BD Matrigel Matrix (Becton, Dickinson, Franklin Lakes, NJ, USA) and subcutaneously injected into two sites on the back of each mouse as follows:  $1.0 \times 10^7$  cells/site for G-292 or  $4 \times 10^6$  cells/site for SJSA-1 into 2 sites/mouse, with 6 mice in each group. Ten days after cell injection, all of the SJSA-1-derived tumors were intratumorally injected with 2 nM miR-20a-5p agomir (Ago) every 2 days, whereas G-292-derived tumors were injected with 2 nM miR-20a-5p/Mock antagomir (Anta)/PBS. Twelve days later, after four cell injections, three mice from the G-292 group and three from the SJSA-1 group intraperitoneally received Dox (75 µg/mouse) once every other day. The remaining three mice in each group received PBS as a mock treatment control. The mice were euthanized on day 30 after four drug injections, and their tumors were weighed and imaged. Tumor weight was described as the mean  $\pm$  S.D. The expression levels of KIF26B and Ki67 proteins were measured using immunochemical analysis on 5 µm sections of formalin-fixed, paraffin-embedded tumor xenografts in nude mice. The antigens were retrieved by pre-treating the de-waxed sections in a microwave oven at 750 Watts for 5 min in citrate buffer (pH 6) processed with a Super Sensitive Link-Labeled Detection System (Biogenex, Menarini, Florence, Italy),

and the slides were developed using 3-amino-9-ethyl-carbazole (Dako, Milan, Italy) as a chromogenic substrate. After the slides were counterstained with Mayer's hematoxylin (Invitrogen), they were mounted in an aqueous mounting medium (Glycergel, Dako). Images were captured using a Leica DM 4000B microscope (Wetzlar, Germany), the relative level of each protein was calculated using Leica software (Wetzlar, Germany), and the percentage of the mock over the chemotherapeutically treated tumors was calculated and plotted.

### Statistical analysis

All of the results are represented as the mean  $\pm$  standard deviation (SD) of three independent experiments. Two-tailed Student's *t* test, one-way analysis of variance or Mann-Whitney U test was used to calculate statistical significance. All of the statistical analyses were performed with Microsoft Excel 2010 (Microsoft, Redmond, WA). A *p* value of less than 0.05 was designated statistically significant.

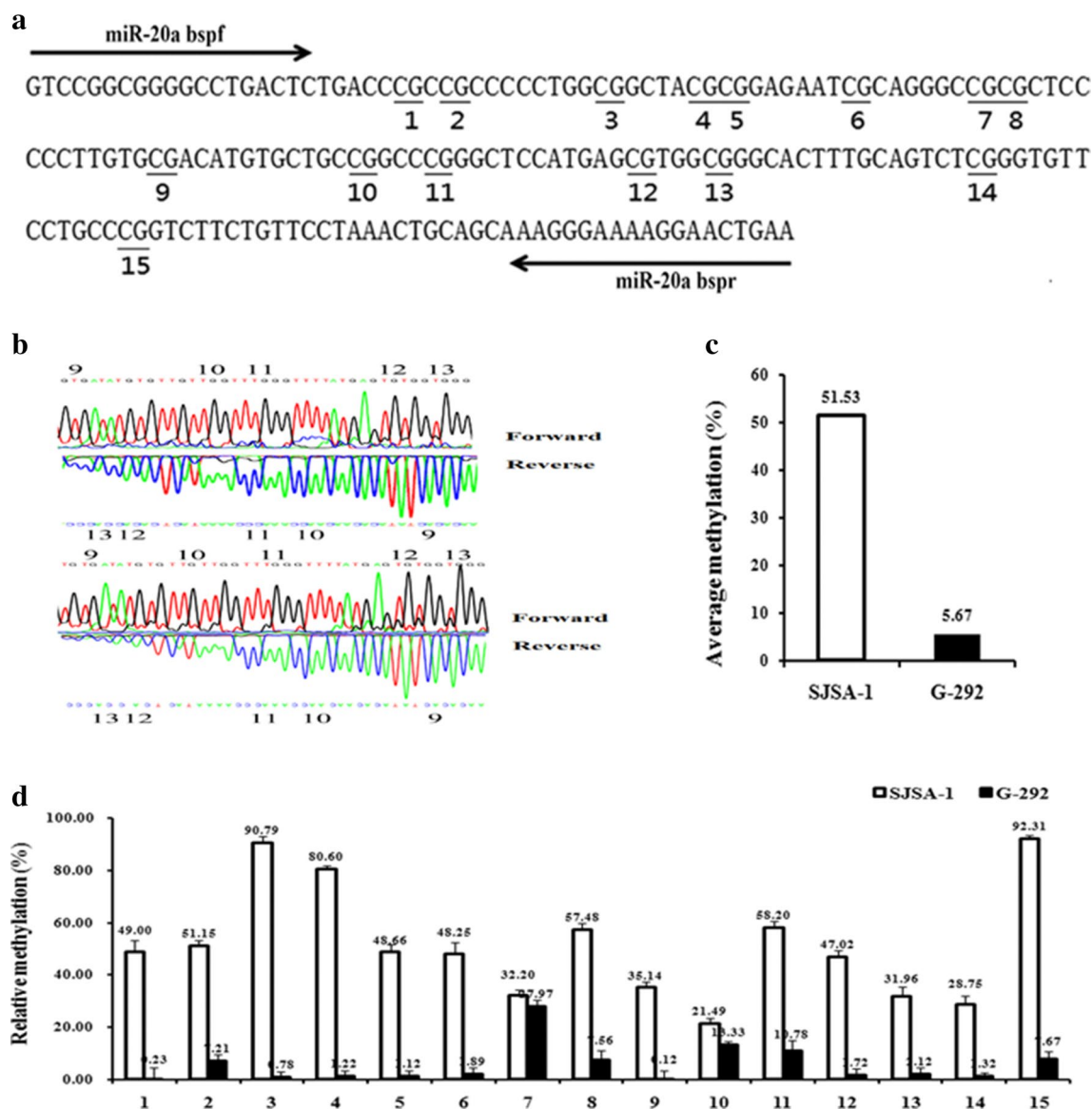
## Results

### Expression of the DNA methylation-regulated miR-20a gene positively correlates with the multi-chemoresistance of OS cells

The doses at which 50 % of cells were killed by the drugs Dox, Etop, MTX, CDDP and Carb following individual 72 h treatments were determined in the following seven OS cell lines: G-292, SJSA-1, MG63.2, MG63, Saos.2, U2OS, and MNNG/HOS. Evaluating the fold difference over the lowest IC<sub>50</sub> value, G-292 was the most multi-chemosensitive cell line, with the lowest IC<sub>50</sub> values for three of five drugs, whereas the SJSA-1 cell line was the most multi-chemoresistant cell line, with a relative IC<sub>50</sub> that was 27.11-fold higher than that of G-292 cells [25]. To profile miRNA expression in the G-292 and SJSA-1 OS cell lines, we performed RNA-seq-based miR-omic analysis and referred to the relevant literature, and miR-20a-5p was selected as one of the studied target genes. The RT-PCR validation also confirmed that miR-20a-5p was significantly more highly expressed in the G-292 than the SJSA-1 cell line (by more than eightfold), suggesting that this miR might be involved in regulating the multi-drug resistance of OS cells.

To investigate the epigenetic regulation of miR-20a-5p expression, the methylation status of the miR-20a promoter region was assessed in both the SJSA-1 and G-292 cell lines using the bisulfite sequencing PCR (BSP) assay. A total of 15 CpG sites in this region were methylated at varying ratios (Fig. 1a, b). The methylation ratio of the miR-20a gene in SJSA-1 cells in most CpG islands is much higher than the ratio in G-292 cells, as high as approximately 10-fold on average (51.53:5.67, Fig. 1c, d), indicating that





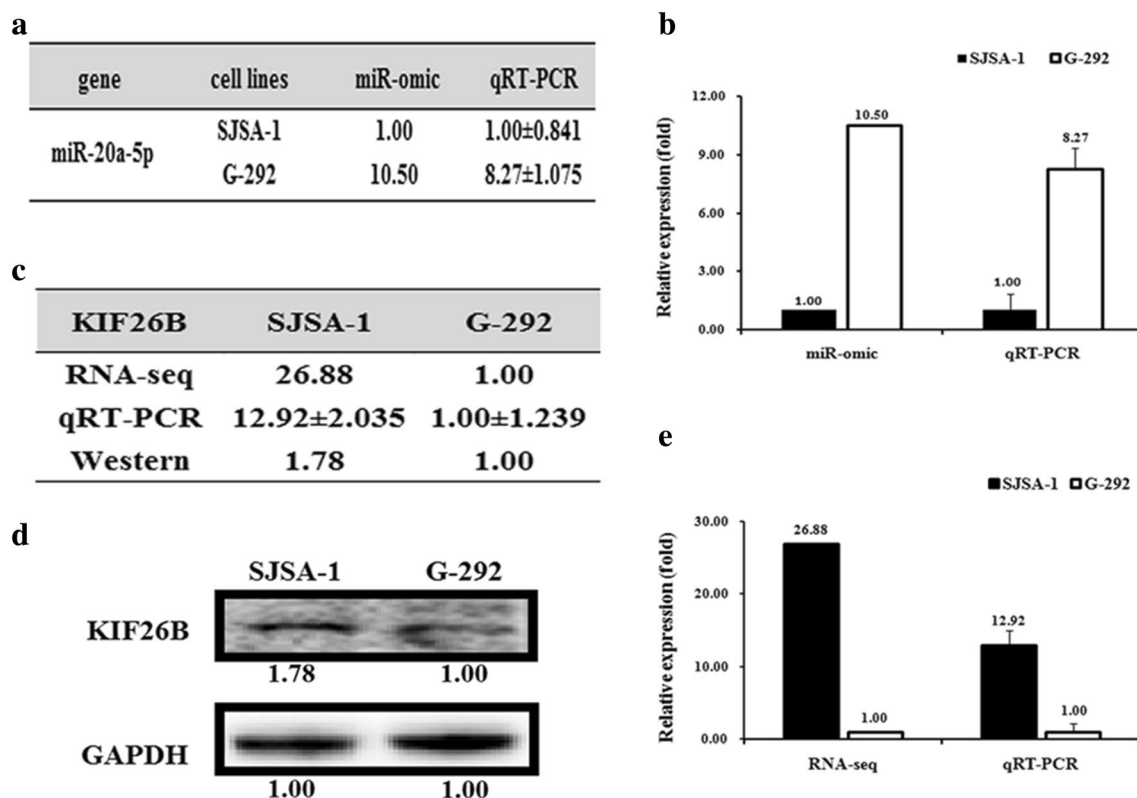
**Fig. 1** Differential methylation of the miR-20a gene in SJSA-1 cells compared with G-292 cells. **a** BSP primers and CpG dinucleotides of miR-20a are shown. **b** Original sequencing results of both strands of the PCR product from the bisulfite-converted DNA. **c** Relative methylation levels (fold) of miR-20a in SJSA-1 and G-292 cells. **d** Methylation percentage at each CpG site in the SJSA-1 and G-292 cells

miR-20a methylation is negatively correlated with miR-20a-5p expression (Fig. 2a, b). In conclusion, both the DNA methylation and gene expression levels of miR-20a-5p are tightly correlated with multi-drug resistance in OS cells.

#### MiR-20a-5p specifically suppresses KIF26B expression in OS cells

To examine the effects of miR-20a-5p on the expression of its targets in OS, we measured the RNA and protein levels of putative miR-20a-5p target genes, which were chosen by TargetScan (<http://www.targetscan.org/>). Among these genes, the expression of kinesin family member 26B

(KIF26B), which has a binding site for miR-20a-5p in the 3'-UTR of its mRNA, was opposite to that of miR-20a-5p at both the RNA (Fig. 2c, d) and protein levels (Fig. 2e) in G-292 and SJSA-1 cells. Furthermore, to assess whether miR-20a-5p directly alters the expression of KIF26B in the above OS cell lines, we measured KIF26B levels in OS cell lines that were transfected with either a miR-20a-5p mimic (SJSA-1) or an antagomir (G-292). Western blot results showed that KIF26B expression was suppressed by transfection of the miR-20a-5p mimic in SJSA-1 cells (~28 %) and enhanced in antagomir-transfected G-292 cells (~3.15-fold) (Fig. 3a–e) relative to the negative control.



**Fig. 2** Different expression patterns of miR-20a-5p/KIF26B in SJSA-1 and G-292 cells. The miR-20a-5p expression levels in SJSA-1 cells compared with G-292 cells (summarized in Table a) were analyzed by miR-seq and qRT-PCR analyses in plot b. The expression level of KIF26B is higher in SJSA-1 cells than in G-292 cells, as summarized in Table c. Western blot and qRT-PCR analyses are shown in plots d and e, respectively

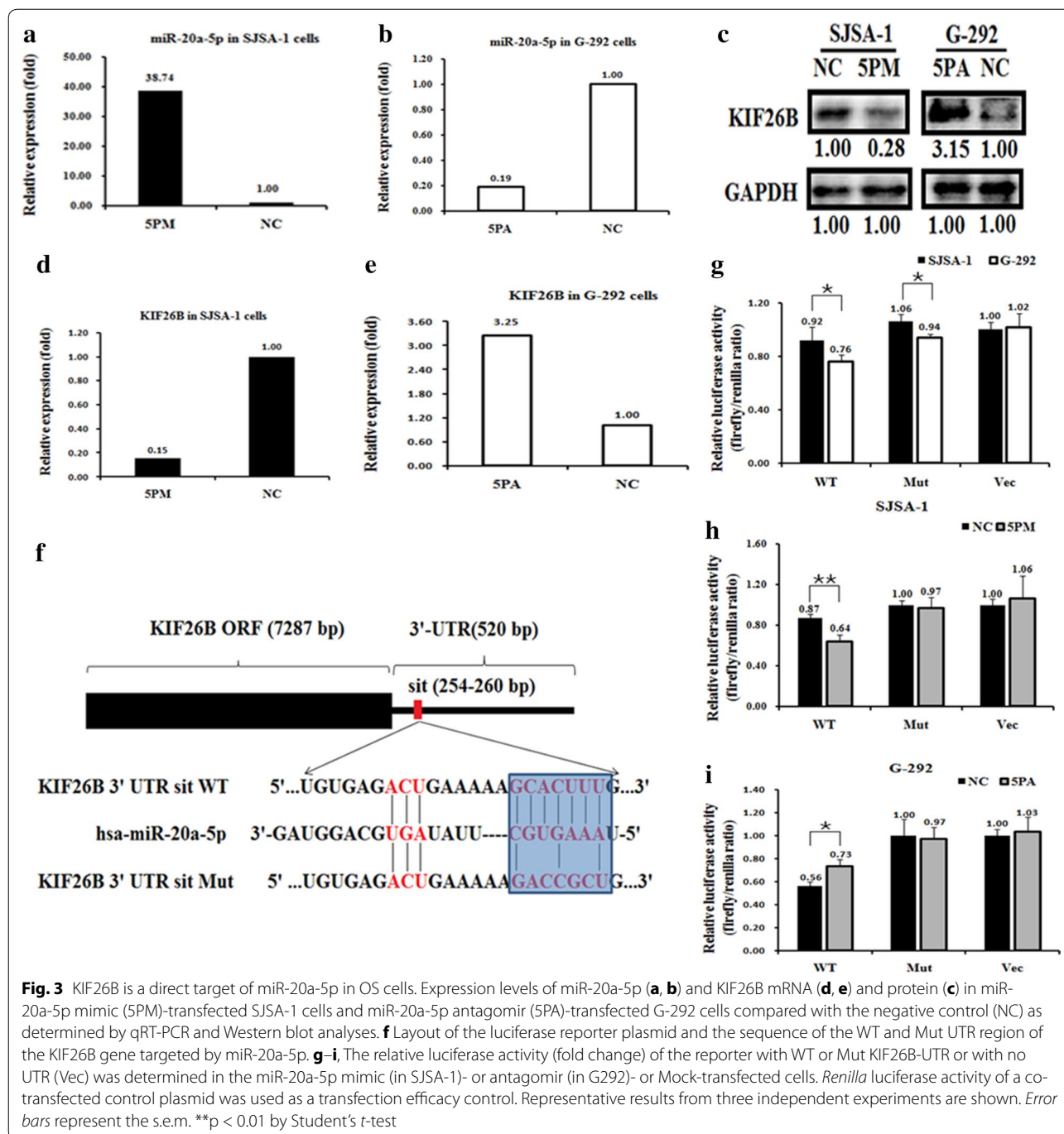
To confirm KIF26B as a real miR-20a-5p target, the WT or Mut 3'-UTR region (520 bp) of KIF26B was inserted downstream of the luciferase gene in the pmiR-RB-REPORT™ vector (Guangzhou RiboBio, China) to create the pmiR-RB-REPORT™-UTR WT and Mut, respectively (Fig. 3f), and assayed in SJSA-1 and G-292 cell lines to determine the functional status of miR-20a-5p in OS cells. Transfection of pmiR-RB-REPORT-UTR WT, but not of the other two reporter constructs, resulted in significantly higher luciferase activity in SJSA-1 cells than in G292 cells. Furthermore, the luciferase activity of pmiR-RB-REPORT-UTR WT, but not of the other two constructs, was decreased by the mimic in SJSA-1 cells and increased by the antagomiR in G292 cells (Fig. 3). In conclusion, the KIF26B gene was shown to be a novel direct target of miR-20a-5p in OS cells and might contribute to miR-20a-5p-mediated multi-drug resistance in OS cells.

#### Overexpression of KIF26B modulates multi-drug resistance effects similar to miR-20a-5p knockdown in OS cells

To further demonstrate that miR-20a-5p modulates multi-drug resistance by repressing KIF26B expression

in OS cells, we compared drug-triggered cell death in SJSA-1 cells transfected with miR-20a-5p mimic or KIF26B siRNA. The results showed that transfection with the miR-20a-5p mimic reduced the KIF26B level to 36 % of that found in the NC and that KIF26B siRNA inhibited KIF26B protein expression to approximately 40 % of the NC control (Fig. 4a). The transfection of mimic and KIF26B siRNA into SJSA-1 cells induced drug-triggered death, except for the transfection of the mimic to CDDP (Fig. 4b). In contrast, antagomir transfection and KIF26B overexpression repressed cell death in SJSA-1 cells stressed by Dox, Etop, CDDP and Carb, but not in cells stressed by MTX (Fig. 4c, d). This discrepancy suggested that KIF26B might not mediate OS chemoresistance in response to MTX.

Additionally, the miR-20a-5p mimic mediated KIF26B downregulation in SJSA-1 cells and increased the percentage of apoptotic cells from 1.29 to 5.01 %. Similarly, knockdown of KIF26B with siRNA also elevated the apoptotic ratio of SJSA-1 cells (Fig. 5a, b). This result indicated that low levels of miR-20a-5p promoted OS cell survival probably by increasing KIF26B expression.



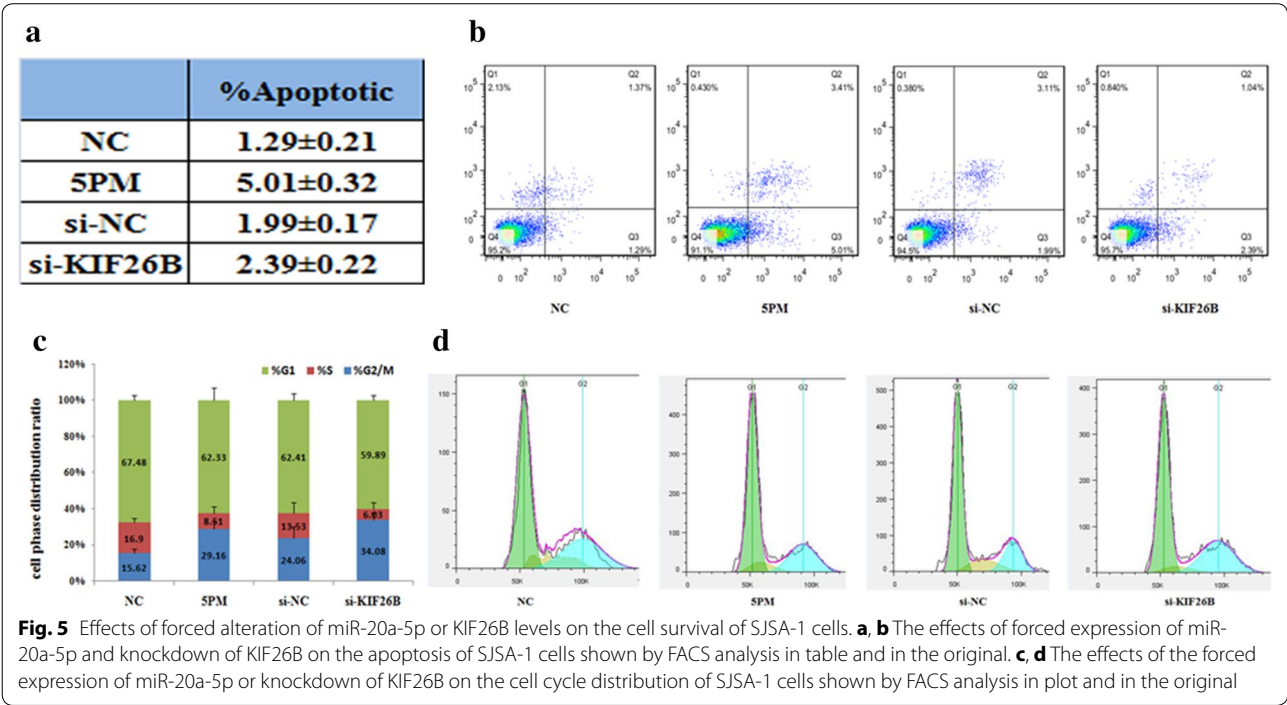
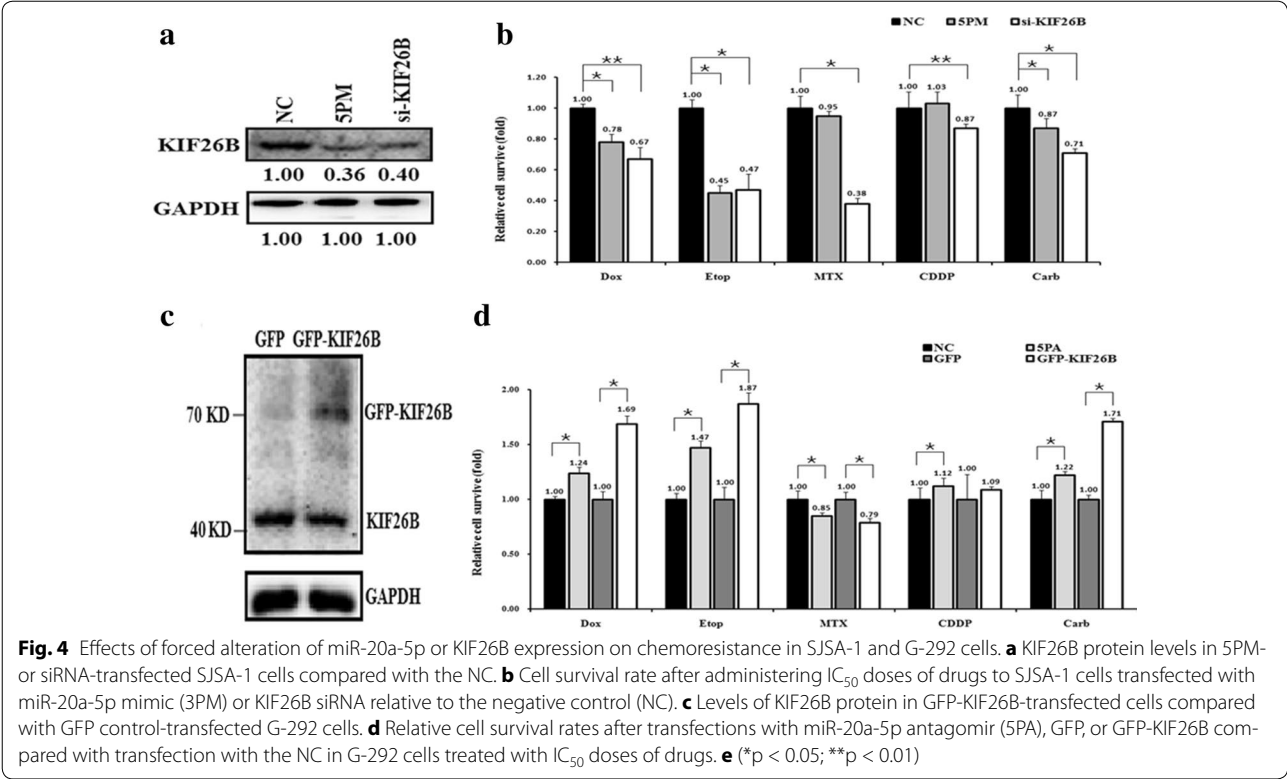
**Fig. 3** KIF26B is a direct target of miR-20a-5p in OS cells. Expression levels of miR-20a-5p (**a, b**) and KIF26B mRNA (**d, e**) and protein (**c**) in miR-20a-5p mimic (SPM)-transfected SJSA-1 cells and miR-20a-5p antagonist (SPA)-transfected G-292 cells compared with the negative control (NC) as determined by qRT-PCR and Western blot analyses. **f** Layout of the luciferase reporter plasmid and the sequence of the WT and Mut UTR region of the KIF26B gene targeted by miR-20a-5p. **g-i**, The relative luciferase activity (fold change) of the reporter with WT or Mut KIF26B-UTR or with no UTR (Vec) was determined in the miR-20a-5p mimic (in SJSA-1)- or antagonist (in G292)- or Mock-transfected cells. *Renilla* luciferase activity of a co-transfected control plasmid was used as a transfection efficacy control. Representative results from three independent experiments are shown. Error bars represent the s.e.m. \*\*p < 0.01 by Student's *t*-test

Furthermore, FACS analysis of the cell cycle in SJSA-1 cells showed that the percentage of S stage cells significantly decreased after miR-20a-5p mimic transfection or KIF26B knockdown (Fig. 5c, d). This result implies that KIF26B could play a role in arresting cells to facilitate the necessary repair of cellular damage induced by stress, such as by anti-cancer drugs. All of these observations suggest that KIF26B acts as a downstream target of

miR-20a-5p and mediates chemoresistance against Dox, Etop, MTX, CDDP and Carb in OS cells.

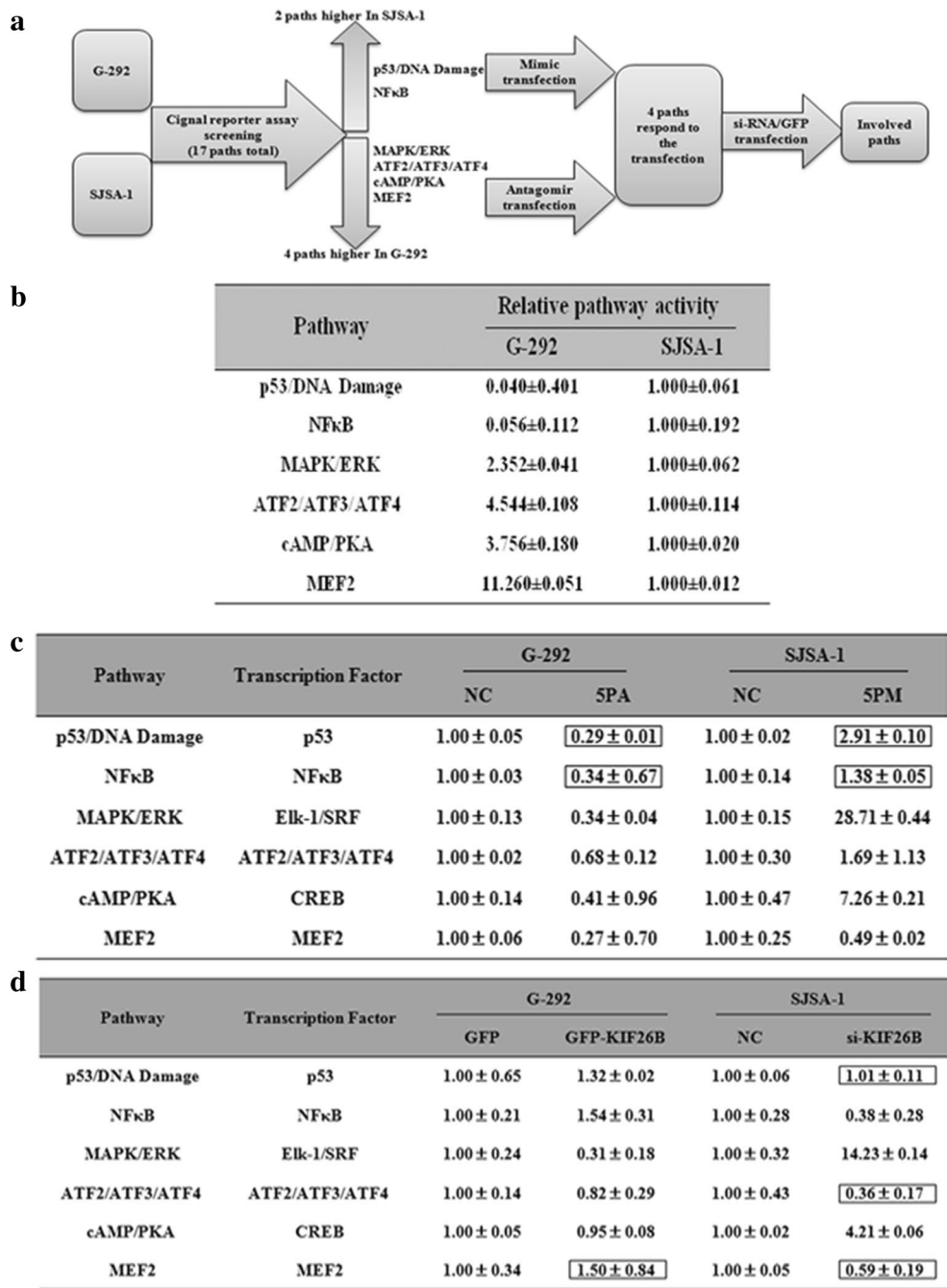
#### miR-20a-5p and KIF26B regulate the activities of chemoresistance-associated signaling pathways in multi-drug resistant OS cells

To further explore the mechanism underlying OS chemoresistance, we detected the activities of the following



seventeen signaling pathways using Qiagen pathway reporter systems in both SJSA-1 and G-292 cells: oxidative stress, DNA damage, NF- $\kappa$ B, hypoxia, ER stress, heavy metal stress, heat shock, glucocorticoid, JNK, xenobiotic, Wnt, Notch, TGF- $\beta$ , cell cycle/pRb-E2F, Myc/Max, and MAPK/ERK (Fig. 6a). The activities of six of the signaling





**Fig. 6** Signaling pathways regulated by miR-20a-5p and KIF26B. **a** Experimental scheme. **b** Relative activities (mean ± S.D) of the 6 pathways that differed by more than twofold between SJSA-1 and G-292 cells. **c** Relative activities of the 6 pathways regulated by miR-20a-5p in OS cells. **d** Relative activities of the 6 pathways regulated by KIF26B in G-292 and SJSA-1 cells. The boxes indicate the pathways that failed to respond in an expected manner

pathways, i.e., p53/DNA damage, NF-κB, MAPK/ERK, ATF2/ATF3/ATF4, cAMP/PKA and MEF2 pathways, differed by more than twofold between the two OS cell types, suggesting that these pathways might be involved in OS

chemoresistance. The pathways with higher activity in SJSA-1 cells compared with G-292 cells were the p53/DNA damage and NF-κB pathways, whereas the other four pathways showed lower activity in SJSA-1 cells compared with

G-292 cells. Furthermore, of these six pathways, MAPK/ERK, ATF2/ATF3/ATF4, and cAMP/PKA signaling pathway activity increased in miR-20a-5p mimic-transfected SJSA-1 cells and decreased in antagomir-transfected G-292 cells (Fig. 6b, c). We also knocked down KIF26B expression in SJSA-1 cells by siRNA transfection and over-expressed KIF26B in G-292 cells by GFP-KIF26B transfection to determine its effects on these pathways. We observed activity changes only in the NF- $\kappa$ B, MAPK/ERK and cAMP/PKA pathways, which was in accordance with the differences observed between SJSA-1 and G-292 cells (Fig. 6d). Combining the results from all of these assays, the MAPK/ERK and cAMP/PKA signaling pathways were most likely to contribute to OS chemoresistance mediated by the miR-20a-5p/KIF26B axis.

#### **KIF26B expression decreases in miR-20a-5p agomiR-injected SJSA-1 tumor xenografts and increases in antagomir-injected G-292 tumor xenografts in nude mice**

Intratumoral injection of miR-20a-5p agomir/antagomir or the scramble sequence control (Mock) or PBS into SJSA-1/G-292-derived tumors was initiated on the tenth day and repeated four times once every 2 days. Then, intraperitoneal injection of PBS or Dox was initiated in the G-292 and SJSA-1 groups and repeated four times, once every 2 days (Fig. 7a). In the SJSA-1 tumor mice that received intratumoral injection of miR-20a-5p agomir, the mock tumor xenograft was lighter than the Ago-5P tumor xenograft. The reverse effect was observed for the antagomir in G-292 tumor mice. Therefore, miR-20a-5p is capable of inhibiting *in vivo* tumor growth. Consistent with the observation that cultured SJSA-1 cells were more resistant to Dox than cultured G-292 cells, intraperitoneal injection of Dox resulted in larger G-292 tumors than SJSA-1 tumors (Fig. 7b–f). Furthermore, the tumor weight of the miR-20a-5p agomir/Dox injected SJSA-1 mice was smaller than that in the miR-20a-5p agomir/Mock counterparts, and the reverse observation was found in that of Dox-treated group of G-292 cells with and without miR-20a-5p agomir transfection (Fig. 7b–f). These results indicated that miR-20a-5p compromised the tumor-inhibition capability of Dox.

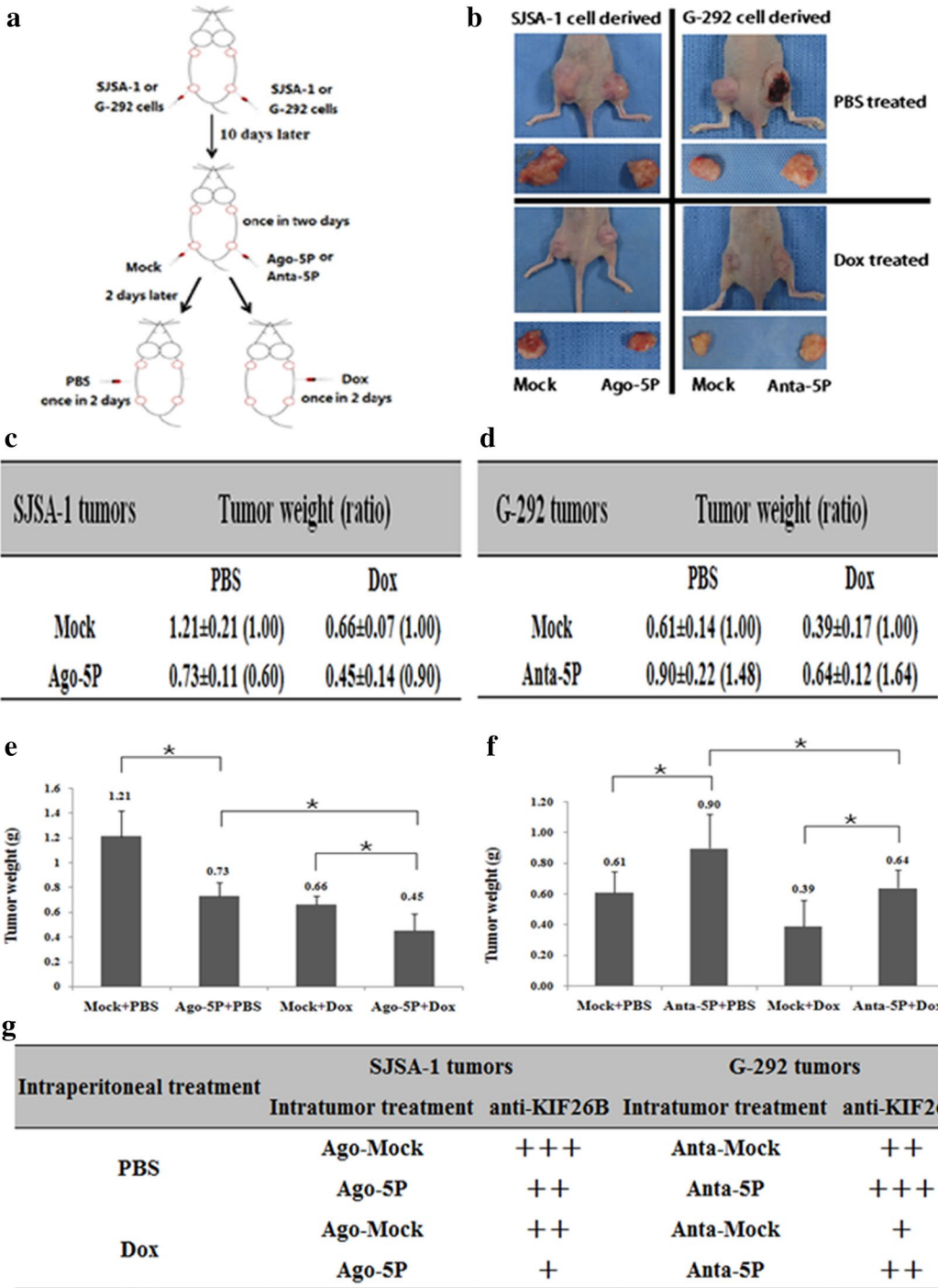
Further confirmation of the role of miR-20a-5p in OS cell resistance to Dox was obtained by immuno-histological analysis of KIF26B and Ki67 in tumor sections of Dox-treated versus PBS-treated mice. Intratumoral injection of the miR-20a-5p agomir/antagomir indeed led to the expected changes in KIF26B levels in tumor sections (Fig. 7g), which confirmed that miR-20a-5p has a profound negative effect on both the growth and chemoresistance of the OS cell-derived tumor xenografts in nude mice.

## **Discussion**

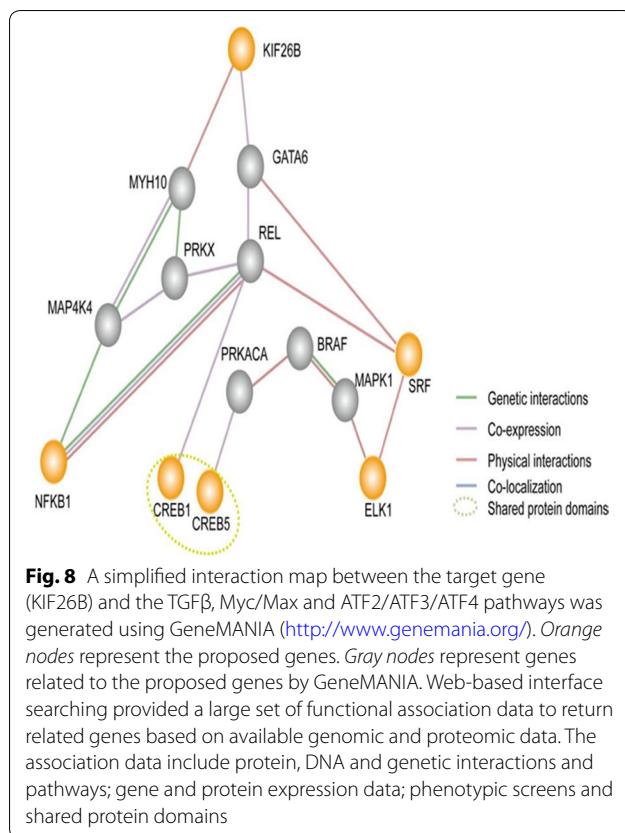
OS chemoresistance is an important topic in the design of clinical treatment protocols because this resistance contributes to relapse and poor prognosis. In this study, we demonstrated that the expression level of miR-20a-5p varies in OS cells with different levels of chemosensitivity, suggesting that miR-20a-5p might participate in the regulation of OS chemoresistance. miR-20a-5p expression has been shown to correlate with the development and progression of diverse cancer types [26–36]; for example, miR-20a-5p can be downregulated by glioblastoma hypoxia [31], which often promotes radioresistance and chemoresistance in cancer cells. However, knowledge of the contribution of miR-20a-5p to OS chemoresistance is still limited. In this investigation, we tested the impact of differential expression of miR-20a-5p on cell death in OS cells triggered by commonly used therapeutics.

To explore how miR-20a-5p affects chemoresistance regulation in OS, a luciferase reporter assay was performed to identify potential target genes of miR-20a-5p. The results showed that miR-20a-5p directly targeted kinesin family member 26B (KIF26B) in OS cells. Numerous studies have shown that abnormal expression and function of kinesins play key roles in the development and progression of many human cancers [37, 38]. KIF26B consists of 2108 amino acids and has a predicted molecular weight of 223.8 kDa. In mice, KIF26B plays a role in embryogenesis, specifically in the development of limbs, faces, and somites [39]. KIF26B also plays an important role in kidney development and is involved in the development and progression of certain types of tumors, including breast cancer, esophageal adenocarcinoma, and colorectal adenomatous polyposis [40–44]. Although studies of KIF26B effects with respect to tumor chemoresistance are rare, several studies have shown that overexpression of other kinesins might promote chemoresistance [45–51]. For example, a recent study demonstrated that KIF14 contributes to chemoresistance in breast cancer by promoting AKT phosphorylation [50], and other research has shown that overexpression of kinesins (including KIFC3, KIFC1, KIF1A and KIF5A) mediates docetaxel resistance in breast cancer cells [47]. The current study is the first to demonstrate that KIF26B mRNA and protein expression is upregulated in OS cells because of hypermethylation of its upstream regulator miR-20a. We further demonstrated that KIF26B overexpression promotes multidrug resistance in OS cells.

Given that kinesins are involved in mitosis, KIFs have attracted significant attention in the search for novel and alternative mitotic drug targets to treat cancer [52–54]. Several KIF11 inhibitors have entered Phase I or Phase



**Fig. 7** The effect of miR-20a-5p on both the in vivo growth and Dox chemoresistance of SJSA-1- and G-292-derived xenografts in nude mice. **a** The experimental scheme. SJSA-1 or G-292 cells were subcutaneously injected at two sites on the back of each nude mouse. Two sites/mouse, 6 mice for SJSA-1, and 6 mice for G-292. From the tenth day after cell injection, all six SJSA-1-generated tumors on the left side of the backs of the nude mice were intratumorally injected with 2 nM miR-20a-5p agomir, while the right side of their backs was injected with 2 nM Mock. G-292-generated tumors on the left side of the backs of the nude mice were injected with 2 nM miR-20a-5p antagomir, while the right side of their backs was injected with 2 nM Mock. After cell injection, 3 mice from SJSA-1 and 3 from G-292 were intraperitoneally injected with Dox (45 µg/mouse) once every 2 days for 4 times. The remaining 6 mice (3 from SJSA-1 and 3 from G-292) received PBS as a mock treatment control. **b** Image of the representative mice with tumors. The mean ± SD of tumor weight of the tumors from the same treatment was calculated, plotted (\*p < 0.05), and summarized in **c-f**. **g** Levels of KIF26B in each group were determined by immunostaining and summarized in the Table (Magnification: 200×)



II clinical trials, either in combination with other drugs or as monotherapies [37]. Vaccination with a KIF20A-derived peptide in combination with gemcitabine is a feasible and promising approach for the treatment of advanced pancreatic cancer [55]. We hypothesized that knockdown of KIF26B would reduce cancer cell proliferation and is therefore a potential therapeutic target. In this study, we showed that KIF26B knockdown in OS cells promoted cell death. In addition, exogenous expression of KIF26B significantly inhibited the cell death induced by multiple drugs. These data indicate that suppression of KIF26B inhibits cell survival and implicate KIF26B as a potential therapeutic target for OS.

To obtain further mechanistic understanding, we used GeneMANIA to search for interactions between KIF26B and the master transcription factor genes involved in the MAPK/ERK and cAMP/PKA signaling pathways (Fig. 8); we determined that KIF26B interacts with SRF and CREB. These proteins are likely involved in KIF26B-mediated OS chemoresistance, especially the protein MYH10, which physically interacts with KIF26B and GATA6, a co-expressor of KIF26B (Fig. 8). Myosin X (MYO10), which is encoded by the MYH10 gene and which acts as a molecular motor located at the tips of filopodia, is essential for many cell processes, including

wound healing [56], filopodial formation [57], angiogenesis [58], growth cone formation and turning regulation [59], and invadopodia formation [60]. Recently, MYO10 was reported to be overexpressed in breast cancer and to promote invasive growth [61, 62]. GATA6 is a member of the highly conserved GATA family, which contains six zinc-finger transcription factors that regulate lineage-restricted development, differentiation, and cellular aging [63–65]. GATA6 has been reported to be overexpressed in several tumors. For example, 18q11.2 gain/amplification with overexpression of GATA6 is detected in 9–19 % of pancreatic carcinomas [66, 67]. GATA6 is highly expressed in gastric, colonic, pancreatic, pulmonary, and prostatic cancer cell lines [68–70]. Moreover, GATA6 can promote cell survival by inhibiting apoptosis [71–74]. Therefore, GATA6 likely contributes to chemoresistance. Moreover, other KIF26B-associated proteins (e.g., MAP4K4, NF-κB, CREB, REL, PRKACA, and SRF) have been demonstrated to contribute to chemoresistance in previous studies. Therefore, induction of chemoresistance by KIF26B-regulated protein interaction networks in the MAPK/ERK and cAMP/PKA pathways is possible.

In summary, we demonstrated that a miR-20a-5p-centered axis dictates OS multi-chemoresistance. Expression of the miR-20a gene was negatively controlled by DNA methylation. Because of its repressive effect on KIF26B and other downstream effects on two signaling pathways, decreasing miR-20a-5p expression promotes OS multi-drug resistance (at least for Dox, Etop and Carb, which were studied in this report) both in vitro and in vivo. Moreover, we bioinformatically identified key links that connect miR-20a-5p to two signaling pathways via its target gene KIF26B, through which a chemoresistant phenotype is produced in OS cells. Our data suggested that the miR-20a-5p level might serve as a potential biomarker of chemotherapy-resistant OS and that miR-20a-5p overexpression might aid in overcoming OS drug resistance.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study is the first to illustrate that miR-20a-5p can regulate OS multi-drug resistance through its direct target gene KIF26B by targeting it in a classical 3'-UTR binding fashion. Our findings suggest that miR-20a-5p may function as a potential biological molecule for preventing chemoresistance of OS, which may lead to additional new diagnostic and therapeutic approaches for OS and provide new insights into the posttranscriptional regulation of KIF26B. Indeed, other regulators of KIF26B may also participate in OS chemoresistance, and our future studies should pay greater attention to examining how KIF26B is regulated in OS or other human tumors.



## Abbreviations

OS: osteosarcoma; miR: microRNA; MDR: multi-drug-resistant; UTR: untranslated region; WT: wild-type vector; Mut: mutant-type vector; BSP: bisulfite sequencing PCR; PBS: phosphate-buffered saline; Dox: doxorubicin; Etop: etoposide; CDDP: cisplatin; Carb: carboplatin; MTX: methotrexate; KIF26B: kinesin family member 26B.

## Authors' contributions

Conception and design: YGP and SBC. Acquisition of data: YGP, QYY, FFZ, HYW, and WJC. Analysis and interpretation of data: YGP and FFZ. Writing, review, and/or revision of the manuscript: YGP, QYY and SBC. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

## Ethics statement

Animal experiments were undertaken in accordance with the National Institutes of Health Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals. Animal research was approved by the biomedical ethics committee of Anhui Medical University, when we applying for the National Natural Science Foundation of China (81372868 granted to SBC) in 2013. The animal study proposal was approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) of the University of Science and Technology of China. All of the mouse experimental procedures were performed in accordance with the Regulations for the Administration of Affairs Concerning Experimental Animals approved by the State Council of People's Republic of China.

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