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A Fluorescent Sensor For Zn²⁺ Based on Rhodamine Thiophene Framework

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The thiophene-modified rhodamine derivative was synthesized and characterized. The fluorescent sensor **XQS** for Zn^{2+} have been studied. **XQS** showed fluorescent specific selectivity for Zn^{2+} against other metal ions in HEPES buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4)/CH₃CN (40:60, V/V) solution. The distinct color change and the rapid emergence of fluorescence emission provided naked-eyes detection for Zn^{2+} . The test strip results showed that the sensor **XQS** could act as a convenient Zn^{2+} test kit. The recognition mechanism of **XQS** toward Zn^{2+} was studied by IR, the Job's plots and ESI-MS analysis. The detection limits of **XQS** towards Zn^{2+} was calculated as 6.89 μ M. **XQS**- Zn^{2+} . In addition, cyclic voltammograms of **XQS** and **XQS**+ Zn^{2+} , fluorescence lifetime and fluorescence quantum yield were also determined.

Keywords: Rhodamine-6G; Fluorescent Sensors; Zn²⁺; Test Strip.

1. INTRODUCTION

The exploration of fluorescent sensors for the detection of metal ions have been received extensively attention in the last few decades [1-6]. Amongst the important transition metal ions, Zn^{2+} is known for their ability in comprehensive applications [7-10]. Meanwhile, the disruption of Zn^{2+} is dangerous to human health. For example, the disbalance of Zn^{2+} has been entwined with hypoxia ischemia, epilepsy and several neurological disorders [11-13]. So, it is absolutely necessary to develop the effective method to detect Zn^{2+} [14-16].

Fluorescent sensors which are capable of selectively recognizing guest species are of particular interest in supramolecular chemistry to check trace amount of transition metal ions in the last decades

[17, 18]. Because of low cost and high sensitivity, the research efforts have been paid attention to the design and synthesize novel sensors.

In recent years, the rhodamine-6G platform is widely used as fluorescent sensors by many investigators [19]. In particular, the modified spirolactam structure which enables colorless and nonfluorescent can be changed into the colored and highly fluorescent ring-opened amide form in the presence of the corresponding metal ions [20]. In order to improve the sensitivity and selectivity of fluorescent chemosensor, some heterocycles have been used to modify the rhodamine platform including thiophene, pyrrole and furan [21, 22]. However, most of them are designed through C=N by aromatic aldehydes reacting with rhodamine-6G amine derivatives [23-25]. But few fluorescent sensors linked by amide between heterocycles and rhodamine-6G have been reported. It is clear that the rhodamine-6G derivatives modified by amide have more potential coordination sites to bind metal ions than by C=N, which may enhance sensitivity and selectivity.

In this paper, the novel fluorescent chemosensor **XQS** was designed and synthesized (Scheme 1), which was modified by thiophene structure in use of amide. To our surprised, the fluorescent sensor **XQS** could "naked-eye" recognize Zn^{2+} in HEPES buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4)/CH₃CN (40:60, V/V). Meanwhile, other cations such as Fe³⁺, Cr³⁺, Hg²⁺, Ag⁺, Ca²⁺, Cu²⁺, Pb²⁺, Cd²⁺, Ni²⁺, Co²⁺ and Mg²⁺ could not cause any interference. In addition, cyclic voltammograms of **XQS** and **XQS**+Zn²⁺, fluorescence lifetime and fluorescence quantum yield were also determined.

2. EXPERIMENTAL

2.1. General methods of UV-Vis spectroscopy and fluorescent spectroscopy

The UV-vis spectra were measured on the Shimadzu UV-1601 spectrometer. And the fluorescent spectra were recorded by the HORIBA FLUOROMAX-4-NIR spectrometer. The **XQS** concentration was held invariably $(3.3 \times 10^{-4} \text{ M})$. The metal ions solution were prepared from the corresponding metal nitrate.

¹H NMR and ¹³C NMR spectra were tested on the Bruker at 400 MHz using TMS as an internal standard, DMSO- d_6 as the solvents. Melting points were examined on an X-4 digital melting-point apparatus (uncorrected). Infrared spectra were obtained on a Nicolete 5700 FT-IR spectrophotometer. Solvents were purified and dried using standard protocol; the other chemical reagents were obtained commercially and used as received without further purification. All reagents were used of analytical grade.

2.2. Cyclic voltammetry

Cyclic voltammetry (CV) was performed on CHI660E potentiostat in a three-electrode electrochemical cell with a 1 mm sized home-made glassy carbon electrode (Goodfellow) used as a working electrode, saturated calomel electrode (SCE, Radiometer) as a reference electrode, and a platinum wire (Goodfellow) as a counter electrode. The reference electrode was separated from the

bulk solution by a fritted-glass bridge filled with the solution of supporting electrolyte (0.1 M TBA \cdot BF4 in CH₃CN). CV experiments were measured at room temperature.

2.3. Synthesis of chemosensor XQS

Chemosensor **XQS** was synthesized as Scheme 1. According to the previous procedure, compound **A** was received.¹⁷ 2-Thiophenecarboxylic acid (10 mmol), DCC (dicyclohexylcarbodiimide) (20 mmol) and compound **A** (10 mmol) were dissolved in dichloromethane (10 mL) in a 25 mL round flask. The mixture was reacted for 12h at the ambient temperature. When the solvent was evaporated under reduced pressure, the crude product was purified by silica gel chromatography (ethyl acetate: petroleum ether = 1: 2) to get chemosensor **XQS.** Yield 81%, m.p. >300 °C, ¹H NMR (DMSO-*d*₆, 400 MHz) δ 8.33 (t, *J*=5.4 Hz, 1H), 7.81 (dd, *J*=5.8, 2.8 Hz, 1H), 7.69 (dd, *J*=4.9, 0.8 Hz, 1H), 7.61-7.55 (m, 1H), 7.53-7.45 (m, 2H), 7.08 (dd, *J*=4.9, 3.8 Hz, 1H), 6.95 (dd, *J*=5.8, 2.6 Hz, 1H), 6.27 (s, 2H), 6.13 (s, 2H), 5.06 (t, *J*=5.3 Hz, 2H), 3.24-3.07 (m, 7H), 2.99 (dd, *J*=8.5, 5.4 Hz, 2H), 1.85 (s, 6H), 1.21 (t, *J*=7.1 Hz, 6H). ¹³C NMR (100 MHz, DMSO) δ 167.96, 161.28, 157.08, 154.41, 151.40, 148.11, 140.18, 133.22, 131.06, 130.44, 128.66, 128.30, 128.23, 127.86, 124.11, 124.05, 122.88, 122.81, 118.76, 104.80, 96.16, 64.86, 37.95, 17.47, 14.64. HRMS (ESI) m/z: [M+H]⁺ Calcd for C₃₃H₃₄N₄O₃S: 567.2424; Found 567.2421.



Scheme 1. Synthetic route to fluorescent sensor XQS.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Spectral studies of chemosensor XQS

The spectral responses of compound **XQS** to various metal cations including Ag^+ , Fe^{3+} , Cr^{3+} , Hg^{2+} , Ca^{2+} , Zn^{2+} , Cu^{2+} , Pb^{2+} , Cd^{2+} , Ni^{2+} , Co^{2+} and Mg^{2+} were investigated in HEPES buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4)/CH₃CN (40:60, V/V) by UV-vis and fluorescence spectroscopy. To chemosensor **XQS**, any absorption was not detected above 500 nm. When Zn^{2+} was added into the solution of **XQS**, the colorless solution changed to yellow-green at once (Fig. 1). Meanwhile, a new absorption peak at 525 nm appeared. But the other metal ions could not cause the **XQS** solution color change except Fe³⁺ and Hg²⁺. Although Fe³⁺ and Hg²⁺ also led to color changes, their changes are less pronounced effect than

 Zn^{2+} . It indicated that only Zn^{2+} could cause the spirolactam of rhodamine to be open. And the results exhibited that **XQS** could discriminate Zn^{2+} from other ions.



Figure 1. Absorption spectra of the sensor XQS (3.3×10⁻⁴ M) in the presence of various metal ions in HEPES buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4)/CH₃CN (40:60, V/V). Inset: Photographs of chemosensor XQS (3.3×10⁻⁴ M) in the presence of various metal ions in HEPES buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4)/CH₃CN (40:60, V/V).



Figure 2. Fluorescence spectra changes of the sensor **XQS** $(3.3 \times 10^{-4} \text{ M})$ in the presence of various metal ions in HEPES buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4)/CH₃CN (40:60, V/V), $\lambda_{ex} = 525$ nm, detection from 540 to 720 nm. Inset: Photographs of chemosensor **XQS** $(3.3 \times 10^{-4} \text{ M})$ in the presence of various metal ions in HEPES buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4)/CH₃CN (40:60, V/V).



Figure 3. Fluorescence spectra of **XQS** $(3.3 \times 10^{-4} \text{ M})$ in the presence of different concentration of Zn²⁺ (0-1.9 equiv.)in HEPES buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4)/CH₃CN (40:60, V/V), $\lambda_{ex} = 525$ nm, detection from 540 to 700 nm.

The fluorescent responses of **XQS** to various cations were also studied. When **XQS** was excited by 525 nm, any obvious fluorescent emission peak did not appear. Interestingly, the clear emission peak arose out at 550nm by adding Zn^{2+} (Fig. 2). And it was found that the intensity at 550nm was improved along with the concentration of Zn^{2+} (Fig. 3). Although only Fe³⁺ and Hg²⁺ among other ions were observed the same phenomenon, their fluorescence intensity at 550 nm was much lower (Fig. 2). From the above data, chemosensor **XQS** could discriminate Zn^{2+} from other cations by fluorescent spectrum. And it was conceived that the weak fluorescent intensity structure of spirolactam was transformed into the strong fluorescent intensity ring-open amide form when Zn^{2+} was added.

In order to investigate the selectivity of **XQS** to Zn^{2+} , anti-interference experiments were applied. From Fig.2 and Fig.4, it was clear that the intensity at 550 nm caused by other cations was too weak to compare with that caused by Zn^{2+} . And it was found that the intensity change caused by chemosensor **XQS** was hardly affected by coexistent metal ions. So chemosensor **XQS** could interact with Zn^{2+} selectively. Moreover, the intensity at 550nm was increased by degree when 20 equivalents of Zn^{2+} was added to the solution of chemosensor **XQS** (3.3×10^{-4} M). After 30 min, the intensity was steady. So the interaction between **XQS** and Zn^{2+} completed within 30 min when 20 equivalents of Zn^{2+} was added to the solution of chemosensor **XQS** (3.3×10^{-4} M) (see SI Fig. S4).



Figure 4. Fluorescence response of **XQS** $(3.3 \times 10^{-4} \text{ M})$ in HEPES buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4)/CH₃CN (40:60, V/V) at 550 nm upon addition of respective metal ions, followed by addition of Zn²⁺ (1.5 equiv.), $\lambda_{ex} = 525$ nm. The anti-interference of **XQS** $(3.3 \times 10^{-4} \text{ M})$ for Zn²⁺ (1.5 equiv.) detection was carried out by adding a mixture of other metal ions and Zn²⁺ to the sensor solution.

To verify the stoichiometry between **XQS** and Zn^{2+} , fluorescence titrimetric method and Job's plots analyses and IR analyses were performed. According to the data, the stoichiometric ratio between them was 1:1 (see SI Fig. S5 and Fig. S6).

Based on the IR spectra, the mechanism of the interaction between **XQS** and Zn^{2+} was discussed. When **XQS** interacted with Zn^{2+} , the stretching vibration absorption peak which belonged to N-H at 3432cm⁻¹ disappeared. And new absorption peaks emerged at 1608 cm⁻¹ and 1650 cm⁻¹, which belonged to the stretching vibration of C=N. Because the spirolactam ring of **XQS** was open once **XQS** interacted with Zn^{2+} . And the amido bond (O=C-N-H) was deprotonated and tautomerized to carbon-nitrogen double bond (C=N). In addition, the peak at 1384cm⁻¹ belonged to NO₃⁻. So, chemosensor **XQS** might chelate with Zn^{2+} via N, O-donor atoms as shown in Scheme 2. The interaction between them was further approved by ESI-MS. From mass spectra, the ion peaks at m/z 675.6763 was identical to [**XQS**+Zn²⁺+NO₃⁻-H₂O+H⁺]⁺ (see SI Fig. S3).

From Scheme 2, it showed that the ring-closed spirolactam transformed to the ring-opened amide form once Zn^{2+} was added into the solution of **XQS**. So the colorless solution of **XQS** changed to yellow-green. And the new absorption peak at 525 nm appeared. Meanwhile, the emission peak at 550 nm arose when the solution of **XQS** was excited at 525nm. Besides, the detection limit of chemosensor **XQS** towards Zn^{2+} was figured out as 6.89 μ M (see SI Table S1) [26]. And the binding constant was also calculated. Moreover, the fluorescent life time and the fluorescence quantum yield of **XQS**-Zn²⁺ were measured (see SI Table S1).



Figure 5. IR spectra of compound XQS and $XQS+Zn^{2+}$ complex in KBr disks.



Scheme 2. The proposed reaction between XQS and Zn^{2+} .

In order to explore the application of **XQS** in practise, test strips were prepared after filter papers were immersed into a HEPES buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4)/CH₃CN (40:60, V/V) solutions of sensor **XQS** (6.6×10^{-4} M) and dried in the air. Then the obtained test strips were used to detect Zn²⁺ (6.6×10^{-4} M). As shown in Fig. 6, the obvious color change was observed while the strips were irradiated by the 365 nm UV lamp. So, it indicated that chemosensor **XQS** could still recognize Zn²⁺ by naked-eye in solid state as well.



Figure 6. Photographs of **XQS** $(6.6 \times 10^{-4} \text{ M})$ on test papers under irradiation at 365 nm.

3.2. Electrochemistry

Cyclic voltammetry was used to investigate the electrochemical behavior of sensor **XQS** and **XQS**+Zn²⁺. As showed in figure 7, sensor **XQS** alone exhibited E_{1R} and E_{1O} at -0.94 V and -0.80 V, respectively. However, E_{2R} and E_{2O} for **XQS**+Zn²⁺ were shifted to -1.06 V and -0.70 V when Zn²⁺ was added into the XQS solution. These notable shifts were displayed bonding attraction between the sensor **XQS** and Zn²⁺ [27, 28]. The results showed that sensor **XQS** explored some remarkable changes with Zn²⁺, and also provided useful information about electrochemical sensing nature of sensor **XQS**.



Potential / V

Figure 7. Cyclic voltammograms of **XQS** (0.2 mM) and **XQS**+Zn²⁺ (0.2 mM) in CH₃CN/ [TBA] [BF4] (0.1 M), performed at a scan rate of 100 mV/s.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In summary, thiophene-modified chemosensor **XQS** based on rhodamine was synthesized and characterized. Chemosensor **XQS** could discriminate Zn^{2+} from other metal ions in HEPES buffer (10 mM, pH 7.4)/CH₃CN (40:60, V/V) solution. The interaction between **XQS** and Zn^{2+} was studied based on different methods. Moreover, chemosensor **XQS** could still recognize Zn^{2+} effectively in solid state as well. All data indicated that thiophene-modified chemosensor **XQS** could identify potentially Zn^{2+} from other metal ions in physiological and environmental systems.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL



Fig. S1 ¹H NMR spectra of compound XQS









Fig. S4 Time-dependent changes of fluorescence intensity at λ = 550 nm of XQS (3.3×10⁻⁴ M) upon addition of Zn²⁺ in CH₃CN-PBS (10 mM, v/v=7:3, pH = 7.4). λ_{ex} =525 nm



equivalents ($\lambda ex = 525 \text{ nm}$).



Fig. S6 Job' plot for determination of the binding stoichiometry of probe **XQS** with Zn^{2+} in the presence of Zn^{2+} with different mole ratios of $[Zn^{2+}]/([Zn^{2+}+\mathbf{XQS}])$ at the constant total concentration $([Zn^{2+}] + [\mathbf{XQS}] = 6.6 \times 10^{-4} \text{ M})$ at $\lambda = 550 \text{ nm}$ in CH₃CN-PBS (10 mM, v/v=7:3, pH = 7.4), $\lambda_{ex} = 525 \text{ nm}$.

Table S1 Comparison of detection limits and fluorescence lifetime

The detection limits of **XQS** towards Zn^{2+} in CH₃CN were determined from the following equation:

DL=3•SD/S

Where SD is the standard deviation of the blank solution (**XQS**, 10 μ M) detected for 10 times; S is the slope of the calibration curve.

Binding constant was calculated according to the Benesi-Hildebrand equation. Ka was calculated following the equation stated below.

 $1/(F-Fo) = 1/{Ka(Fmax - Fo) [Zn^{2+}]} + 1/[Fmax-Fo]$

Here F_0 , F and Fmax indicate the emission in absence of, at intermediate and at infinite concentration of metal ion respectively. The binding constant Ka is determined from the ratio of intercept and slope of Benesi-Hildebrand plot. Plot of 1/ [F-F₀] vs 1/[Zn²⁺] gives a straight line indicating 1:1 complexation between **XQS** and Zn²⁺.

Probe	Standard Deviation	Slope	(3×Standar d deviation)/S lope	Detection Limit	Fluorescence Lifetime (Probes+Zn ²⁺)	Fluorescence quantum yield (Probes+Zn ²⁺)	The binding constant
XQS	0.16	69655.28048 M ⁻¹	6.89×10 ⁻⁶	6.89 µm	3.44 ns	61.71 %	$2.8 \times 10^4 \text{ M}^{-1}$



Fig. S7 Detection limit of **XQS** $(3.3 \times 10^{-4} \text{ M})$ towards the detection of Zn^{2+} , λ_{ex} = 525 nm

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