

Long Noncoding RNA GAS5 Inhibits Tumorigenesis and Enhances Radiosensitivity by Suppressing miR-135b Expression in Non-Small Cell Lung Cancer

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Growth arrest-specific transcript 5 (GAS5) has been demonstrated to correlate with clinicopathological characteristics and serve as a tumor suppressor in non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC). However, the underlying mechanism of the competing endogenous RNA (ceRNA) regulatory network involving GAS5 in NSCLC remains to be elucidated. In this study, qRT-PCR results showed that GAS5 was downregulated and miR-135b was upregulated in NSCLC tissues and cells. The expressions of GAS5 and miR-135b changed inversely in response to irradiation. Gain-of-function experiments revealed that GAS5 overexpression and miR-135b downregulation significantly suppressed tumorigenesis by repressing cell proliferation and invasion, and enhanced the radiosensitivity of NSCLC cells by reducing colony formation rates. Luciferase reporter assay confirmed that GAS5 could directly target miR-135b and negatively regulate its expression. Moreover, rescue experiments demonstrated that miR-135b upregulation markedly abolished GAS5 overexpression-induced tumorigenesis inhibition and radiosensitivity improvement. Furthermore, xenograft model analysis validated that GAS5 overexpression suppressed tumor growth and improved radiosensitivity of NSCLC cells in vivo. Taken together, GAS5 inhibits tumorigenesis and enhances radiosensitivity by suppressing miR-135b expression in NSCLC cells, deepening our understanding of the mechanism of miRNA-lncRNA interaction and providing a novel therapeutic strategy for NSCLC.

Key words: Non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC); Growth arrest-specific transcript 5 (GAS5); Tumorigenesis; Radiosensitivity; miR-135b

INTRODUCTION

Lung cancer is still the most prevalent cancer worldwide, with overall 5-year survival rates of less than 15%¹. The morbidity and mortality of lung cancer have been increasing and have taken the first place among malignant tumors in the world for decades². Non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) is the most common form and accounts for 80%–85% of all lung cancer cases³. Since up to 40% of NSCLC patients are diagnosed with medically inoperable or unresectable stage III disease, radiotherapy has been regarded as the main local and regional therapy for NSCLC patients^{4,5}. However, the therapeutic outcomes of radiotherapy in NSCLC patients are not entirely satisfactory in many cases, which may be attributed to the intrinsic or acquired radioresistance of many tumors⁶. Therefore, there is an urgent need for identifying more effective therapeutic targets to enhance the radiosensitivity of lung cancer cells and elucidating the molecular mechanism of radioresistance in lung cancer.

It has been demonstrated that fewer than 2% of the human genome encodes for proteins while the majority of the genome is transcribed into noncoding RNA (ncRNA), including short ncRNAs and long ncRNAs (lncRNAs)⁷. lncRNAs are generally defined as a class of non-protein-coding transcripts that are more than 200 nucleotides in length that regulate gene expression at the transcriptional or posttranscriptional level⁸. To date, lncRNAs have been proven to participate in a wide range of cellular processes, such as cell proliferation, differentiation, development, invasion, migration, and apoptosis⁹. Extensive studies also suggested that dysregulation of lncRNAs is a major contributor to the development and progression of tumors, including lung cancer¹⁰. For example, Ke et al. reported that the upregulation of lncRNA-ATB indicated a poor prognosis and promoted cell proliferation and metastasis in NSCLC¹¹. Fang et al. found that the overexpressed lncRNA XIST acted as an oncogene by driving tumorigenesis in NSCLC via epigenetically repressing KLF2

expression¹². Wang et al. demonstrated that the down-regulated lncRNA TUSC7 was a potential biomarker for NSCLC prognosis and promoted NSCLC progression¹³. Growth arrest-specific transcript 5 (GAS5), located at chromosome 1q25, is an lncRNA that was identified to be aberrantly expressed in various cancerous tissues, such as gastric cancer, breast cancer, and lung adenocarcinoma^{14–16}. Moreover, GAS5 was observed to be closely correlated with clinicopathological characteristics and serve as a tumor suppressor in NSCLC¹⁷. However, research on the underlying mechanism of GAS5 involved in NSCLC tumorigenesis and its association with radiosensitivity of NSCLC remains limited.

MicroRNAs (miRNAs) are short endogenous ncRNAs that play a crucial regulatory role in many physiologic processes including cell development, growth, migration, apoptosis, and differentiation, and tumor tumorigenesis, by targeting mRNA for degradation or translation inhibition^{18,19}. miRNAs have been well accepted as oncogenes and tumor suppressors in many tumors²⁰. Moreover, previous documents discovered that miRNAs are critical to regulate cellular response to irradiation and are involved in developing radioresistance of cancer^{21,22}. In recent years, the hypothesis that lncRNAs serve as a competing endogenous RNA (ceRNA) for miRNA to negatively regulate its expression and biological activity has been confirmed in numerous studies²³. Nevertheless, limited knowledge is available concerning whether GAS5 could interact with miRNAs in a similar manner to regulate NSCLC tumorigenesis and radiosensitivity.

The present study explores the functional roles of GAS5 in tumorigenesis and radiosensitivity of lung cancer and its underlying mechanism.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Patients and Tissue Samples

Paired NSCLC tissue and adjacent histologically normal tissues were collected from 31 patients undergoing surgery at Guizhou Provincial People's Hospital. The resected tissue specimens were freshly frozen and stored in liquid nitrogen until use. The pathologic diagnosis based on the histological features of the specimens was conducted by two senior pathologists. None of the patients recruited to this study received any treatments before surgery. This study was approved by the research ethics committee of Guizhou Provincial People's Hospital, and written informed consent was obtained from each patient.

Cell Line and Cell Culture

Human NSCLC cell lines (A549 and H1975) and a normal bronchial epithelial cell line, 16HBE, were purchased from the Cell Bank of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (Shanghai, P.R. China). All cells were maintained

in RPMI-1640 medium (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA) containing 10% heat-inactivated fetal bovine serum (FBS; Invitrogen), 100 U/ml penicillin/streptomycin at 37°C under 5% CO₂ in a humidified incubator.

Cell Transfection

siRNA oligo targeting GAS5 (si-GAS5), scrambled negative control siRNA (si-control), miR-135b mimics (miR-135b), miRNA negative control (miR-control), miR-135b inhibitor, and inhibitor control were purchased from Ambion (Austin, TX, USA). pcDNA-GAS5 and empty control vector (vector) were chemically synthesized by GenePharma (Shanghai, P.R. China). A549 and H1975 cells were seeded into six-well plates and grown to 70% cell confluence on the day of transfection. The transfection with miRNAs, siRNAs, and pcDNA plasmids was performed using Lipofectamine 2000 reagent (Invitrogen) according to the manufacturer's instructions. The cells were harvested for further experiments 24–72 h after transfection.

Irradiation Treatment

Cells were plated into six-well plates and cultured for 24 h to settle down. Cells were then exposed to different doses of X-ray irradiation (2, 4, 6, and 8 Gy) from a linear accelerator (RadSource, Suwanee, GA, USA) with a 6-MV photon beam at a dose rate of 3.2 Gy/min. In addition, cells receiving a single dose of 4-Gy X-ray irradiation were collected every 3 h within 24 h after irradiation for quantitative real-time (qRT)-PCR analysis.

Quantitative Real-Time (qRT)-PCR Analysis

Total RNAs were extracted from either tissue samples or cells with TRIzol reagent (Invitrogen). The extracted RNA (1 µg) was reversely transcribed into cDNA by the Reverse Transcription System Kit (Invitrogen). For GAS5 and miR-135b expression analyses, RT-PCR was performed using a SYBR Premix Ex Taq II (Takara, Dalian, P.R. China) and TaqMan miRNA assays (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA, USA) in the StepOne Plus system (Applied Biosystems), respectively. The sequences of specific primers used in this study were as follows: GAPDH, 5'-GTCAACGGATTTGGTCTGTATT-3' (forward) and 5'-AGTCTTCTGGGTGGCAGTGAT-3' (reverse); GAS5, 5'-CTTCTGGGCTCAAGTGATCCT-3' (forward) and 5'-TTGTGCCATGAGACTCCATCAG-3' (reverse); miR-135b, 5'-GCTTATGGCTTTTCATTCCT-3' (forward) and 5'-GTGCAGGGTCCGAGGT-3' (reverse). The relative gene expression was normalized to GAPDH level and calculated using the 2^{-ΔΔCT} method.

Cell Invasion Assay

Treated cells (1 × 10⁵) in 300 µl of serum-free medium were seeded into the top chamber of an insert (8-µm pore

size; Millipore, Temecula, MA, USA) that was precoated with Matrigel, and 500 μ l of complete medium with 10% FBS was added to the lower chamber as a chemoattractant. Following incubation for 24 h, cells remaining on the upper membrane surface were wiped off by cotton wool, and the cells that penetrated to the lower membrane surface were fixed with methanol and stained with 0.1% crystal violet for 2 h. Finally, invaded cells were counted and imaged using an IX71 inverted microscope (Olympus, Tokyo, Japan).

MTT Assay

Cell proliferation was measured using an MTT assay (Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO, USA). Cells were plated in 96-well culture plates (3×10^3 cells per well) and transfected with pcDNA-GAS5, miR-135b inhibitor, pcDNA-GAS5+miR-135b, or matched controls. Following incubation for 24, 48, and 72 h, 20 μ l of 5 mg/ml MTT (Sigma-Aldrich) was added to each well, and the mixture was incubated for another 2 h in a 37°C incubator. Then the cultured medium was discarded, and 200 μ l of dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO; Amresco, Solon, OH, USA) was added to dissolve the precipitate. Absorbance at a wavelength of 490 nm was measured using an ELISA microplate reader (BioTek, Winooski, VT, USA). The viability index was defined as the ratio of experimental OD value to control OD value.

Colony Formation Assays

Cells in the exponential growth phase were inoculated on six-well plates and exposed to a range of irradiation doses (0, 2, 4, 6, and 8 Gy) after adhesion. After incubation for 12 days at 37°C, the colonies were washed with PBS, fixed with 10% formaldehyde, and stained with 0.5 ml of 1.0% crystal violet overnight. The number of colonies that contained 50 or more cells was counted in accordance with a previous study²⁴. The survival fractions (SFs) were calculated as the number of colonies/(number of inoculated cells \times plating efficiency), and the radiation survival curve was drawn.

Luciferase Reporter Assay

GAS5 fragments containing the predicted wild type (wt) or mutant (mut) of miR-135b binding sites were inserted into the pGL3 vector (Promega, Madison, WI, USA), generating pGL3-GAS5-wt and pGL3-GAS5-mut. A549 and H1975 cells were seeded at 2×10^5 cells/well into six-well plates and incubated overnight. Then the cells were cotransfected with 0.4 μ g of pGL3 constructs, along with 0.02 μ g of pRL-CMV-encoding *Renilla* luciferase, and miR-135b or miR-control using Lipofectamine 2000 (Invitrogen). At 48 h after of transfection, the relative luciferase activity was measured using the Dual-Luciferase Reporter Assay System Kit (Promega)

on Modulus single-tube multimode reader (Promega) and normalized to the *Renilla* luciferase activity.

Xenograft Model Experiment

Twenty-four male BALB/c nude mice (6 weeks old, weighing 23 g) were purchased from the National Laboratory Animal Center (Beijing, P.R. China) and maintained under specific pathogen-free (SPF) conditions in The Animal Laboratory Center at Guizhou Provincial People's Hospital. The animal experiments were conducted strictly in accordance with the institutional guidelines of The Animal Care and Use Committee at Guizhou Provincial People's Hospital. Mice were randomly divided into four groups (six mice per group): vector group, pcDNA-GAS5 group, vector+radiation group, and pcDNA-GAS5+radiation group. A549 cells (1×10^7) transfected with pcDNA-GAS5 or vector were subcutaneously injected into the left flank of the nude mice using a 1-cc syringe. When tumors reached an average volume of 300 mm³, mice in vector+radiation group and pcDNA-GAS5+radiation group were irradiated with a single dose of 10 Gy. Tumor volumes and body weights were monitored every 4 days for 28 consecutive days after irradiation and calculated using a simplified volume formula: volume=(height \times width \times depth)/2. Mice were sacrificed 28 days after irradiation, and the individual tumor was excised and weighed.

Statistical Analysis

All data were expressed as mean \pm standard deviation (SD) from at least three independent experiments. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS (version 12.0; SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). Student's *t*-test or one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to analyze the significant differences. Differences between groups were deemed to be statistically significant at a value of $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS

GAS5 Was Downregulated and miR-135b Was Upregulated in NSCLC Tissues

To define the biological role of GAS5 and miR-135b in NSCLC progression, we first analyzed the expressions of GAS5 and miR-135b in NSCLC tissues and matched adjacent normal tissues from 31 patients by qRT-PCR. GAS5 expression was significantly decreased and miR-135b expression was dramatically increased in NSCLC tissues compared with the corresponding normal counterparts (Fig. 1A and B). Moreover, a significant negative correlation between GAS5 and miR-135b was observed in NSCLC tissues (Fig. 1C). These results demonstrated that abnormal expression of GAS5 and miR-135b may be implicated in the progression of NSCLC.

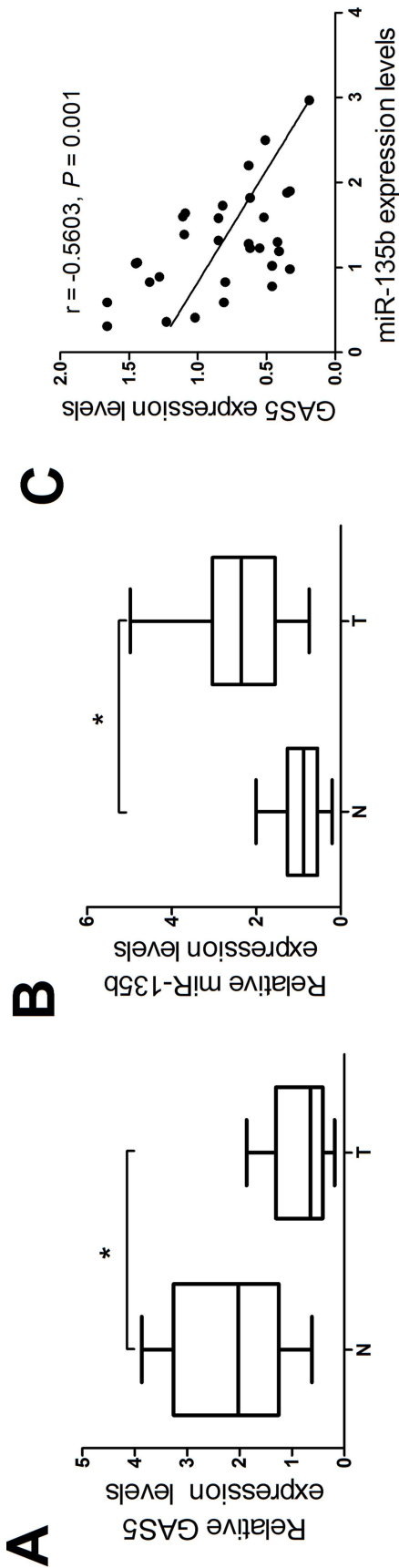


Figure 1. Expressions of GAS5 and miR-135b in non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) tissues. Quantitative real-time (qRT)-PCR was carried out to determine the expressions of GAS5 (A) and miR-135b (B) in 31 pairs of NSCLC tissues and matched adjacent normal tissues. (C) Pearson's correlation analysis of GAS5 and miR-135b in NSCLC tissues. * $p < 0.05$.

Irradiation Downregulated GAS5 and Upregulated miR-135b in NSCLC Cells

The expressions of GAS5 and miR-135b in NSCLC cells were further confirmed by qRT-PCR. The results indicated that NSCLC cells A549 and H1975 showed a lower level of GAS5 (Fig. 2A) and a higher level of miR-135b (Fig. 2B) than the normal bronchial epithelial cell line 16HBE. To explore the effect of irradiation on the expressions of GAS5 and miR-135b, A549 and H1975 cells were exposed to 4-Gy X-ray for radiotherapy. The cells were then sampled every 3 h to measure the level of GAS5 and miR-135b. Compared with cells without irradiation, GAS5 expression was obviously reduced (Fig. 2C) and miR-135b (Fig. 2D) was conspicuously improved in both A549 and H1975 cells after 9 h of irradiation exposure. These findings suggested that there was an inverse expression tendency for GAS5 and miR-135b in response to radiation.

GAS5 Overexpression Inhibited Tumorigenesis and Improved Radiosensitivity of NSCLC Cells

In view of the downregulation of GAS5 in NSCLC cells and its expression alteration under radiation exposure, we further investigated the functional role of GAS5 in NSCLC tumorigenesis and radiosensitivity by the gain-of-function approach. We first established A549 and H1975 cells stably overexpressing GAS5 by pcDNA-GAS5 transfection. qRT-PCR analyses showed that the expression of GAS5 was effectively improved in A549 and H1975 cells transfected with pcDNA-GAS5 (Fig. 3A). As demonstrated by the MTT assay, overexpression of GAS5 led to a significant inhibition on cell viability at 48 and 72 h in A549 and H1975 cells (Fig. 3B). Meanwhile, upregulation of GAS5 markedly suppressed cell invasion ability in A549 and H1975 cells (Fig. 3C). The colony formation assay was performed to explore whether GAS5 could impact the radiosensitivity of NSCLC cells. The dose-survival curves of A549 and H1975 cells were created according to the multitarget single hit. The results demonstrated that GAS5 overexpression substantially reduced clonogenic SF of both A549 and H1975 cells under irradiation (Fig. 3D). Taken together, these data suggested that GAS5 overexpression suppressed tumorigenesis and enhanced radiosensitivity of NSCLC cells.

miR-135b Inhibition Suppressed Tumorigenesis and Increased Radiosensitivity of NSCLC Cells

To investigate the biological role of miR-135b in NSCLC tumorigenesis and radiosensitivity, we interfered with miR-135b expression in A549 and H1975 cells by transfecting miR-135b inhibitor. MTT assay demonstrated that downregulation of miR-135b led to an obvious inhibition in cell viability at 48 and 72 h in both A549

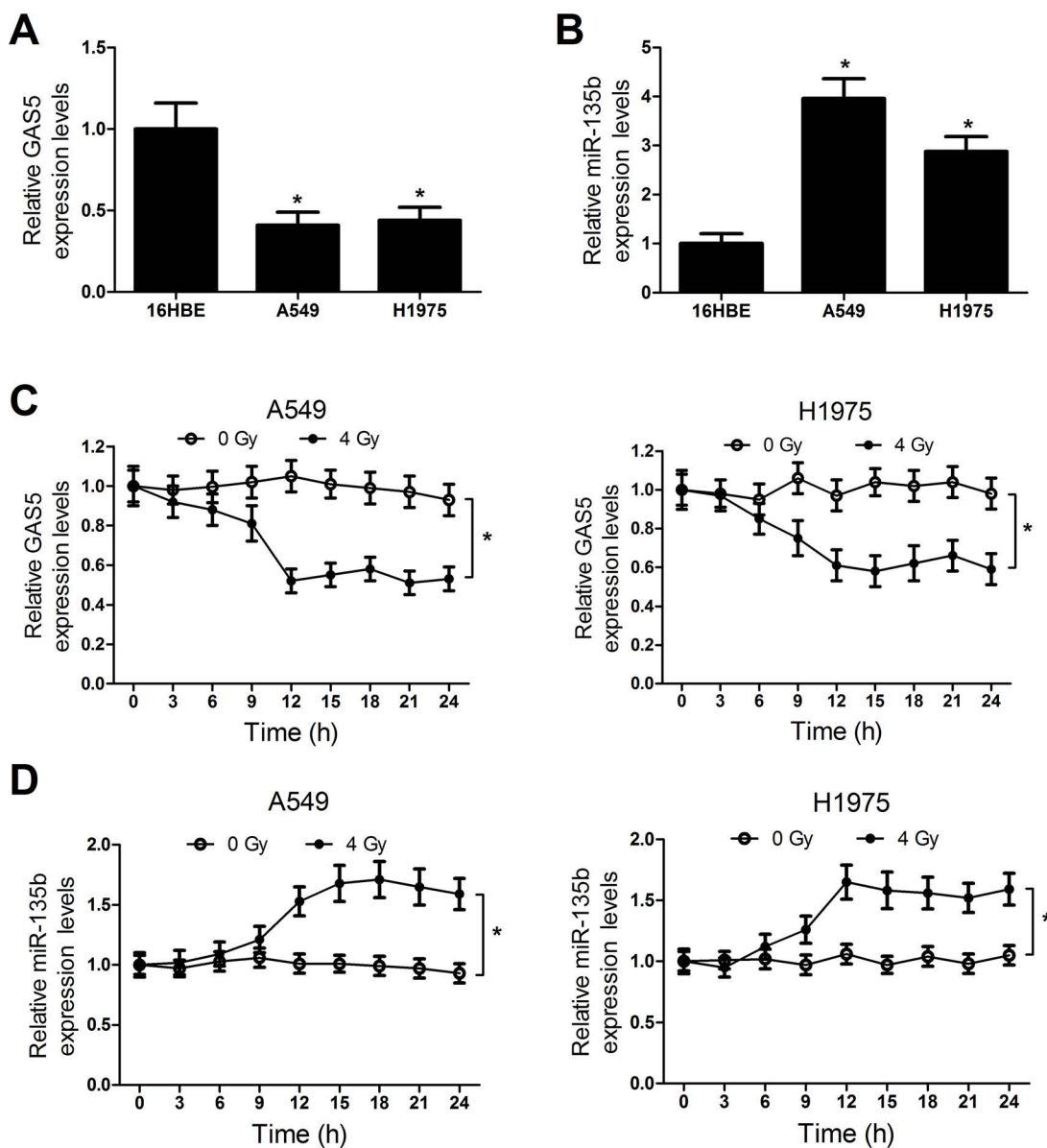


Figure 2. Expression changes of GAS5 and miR-135b in NSCLC cells in response to irradiation. The expressions of GAS5 (A) and miR-135b (B) in NSCLC cells (A549 and H1975) and normal bronchial epithelial cell line 16HBE were evaluated by qRT-PCR. The expressions of GAS5 (C) and miR-135b (D) in NSCLC cells were examined by qRT-PCR every 2 h within 24 h after 4-Gy irradiation. * $p < 0.05$.

and H1975 cells (Fig. 4A). Additionally, the Transwell invasion assay indicated that cell invasiveness was evidently repressed by inhibition of exogenous miR-135 in A549 and H1975 cells compared with the control group (Fig. 4B). Similarly, miR-135b inhibitor-transfected A549 and H1975 cells displayed a markedly decreased SF in comparison with control cells (Fig. 4C). All results revealed that miR-135b knockdown suppressed proliferation and invasion, and enhanced sensitivity to radiotherapy in NSCLC cells.

GAS5 Negatively Regulated miR-135b Expression

Increasing publications have reported that numerous lncRNAs contain a binding sequence complementary to specific miRNAs and could negatively regulate miRNA expressions and biological functions, thereby playing a pivotal role in tumorigenesis²⁵. To predict miRNAs that interact with GAS5, bioinformatics analysis was performed by using the online software starBase v2.0. GAS5 was found to contain putative binding sites for miR-135b (Fig. 5A). To further confirm whether GAS5 was able

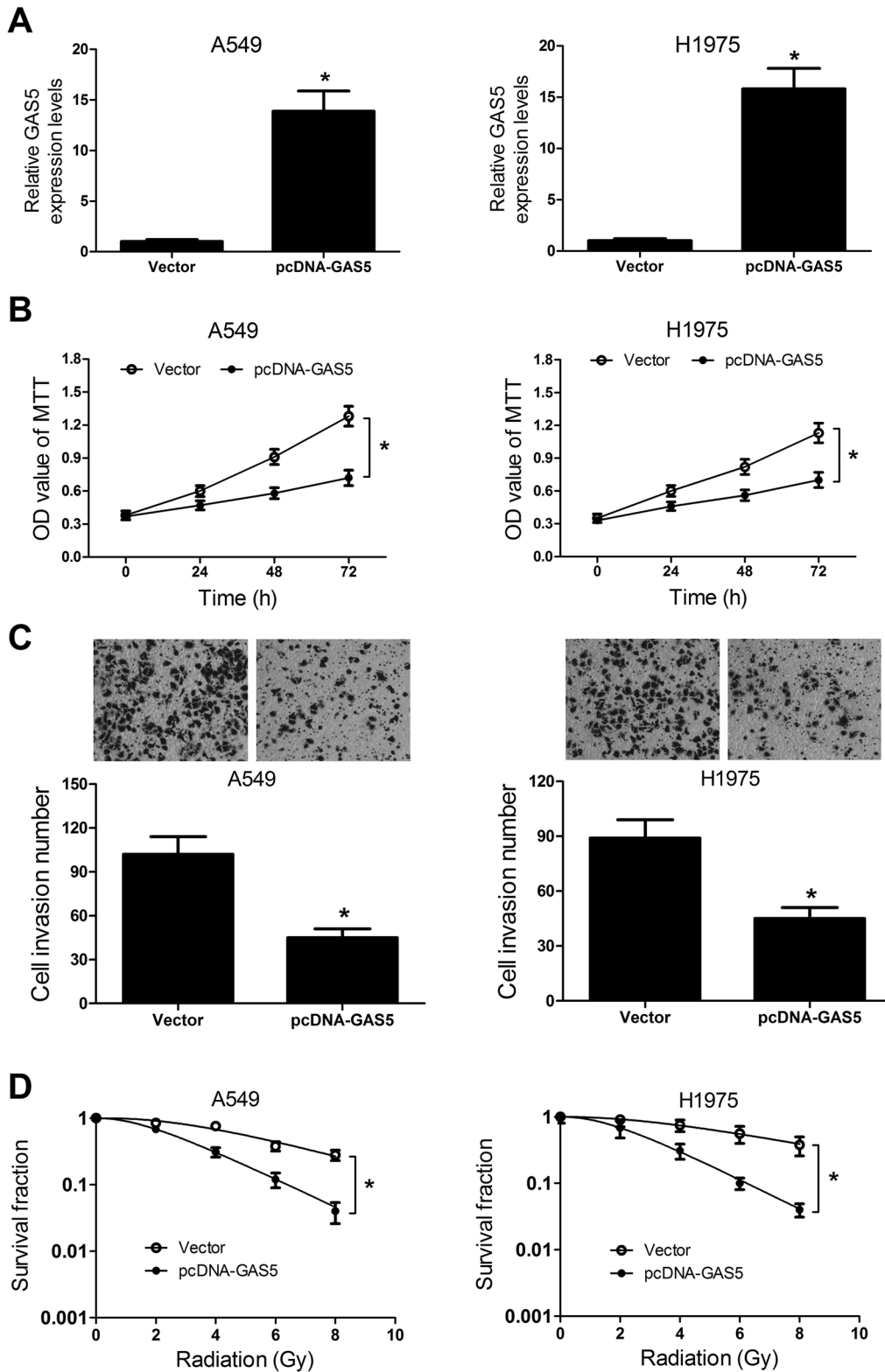


Figure 3. Effect of GAS5 overexpression on tumorigenesis and radiosensitivity of NSCLC cells. A549 and H1975 cells were transfected with pcDNA-GAS5 or empty vector and cultured for 48 h. (A) The expression of GAS5 in transfected A549 and H1975 cells was examined by qRT-PCR. (B) Cell viability at 24, 48, and 72 h in transfected A549 and H1975 cells was detected by MTT assay. (C) Transwell invasion assay was performed to determine cell invasiveness of transfected A549 and H1975 cells. (D) The clonogenic survival curves of transfected A549 and H1975 cells were established by the colony formation assay. * $p < 0.05$.

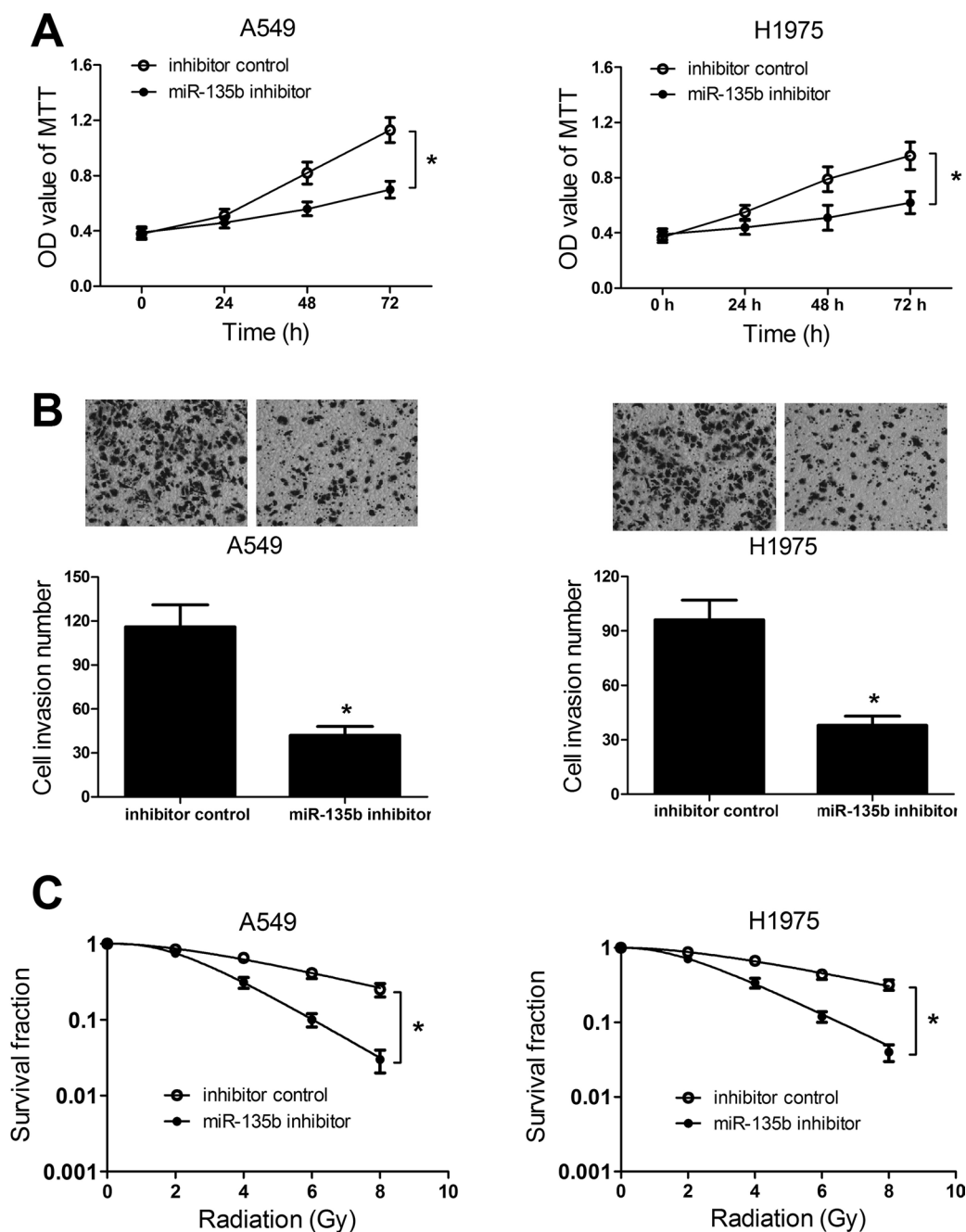


Figure 4. Effects of miR-135b inhibitor on NSCLC tumorigenesis and radiosensitivity. A549 and H1975 cells were transfected with the miR-135b inhibitor or negative control and incubated for 48 h. (A) MTT assay was performed to examine cell viability at 24, 48, and 72 h in transfected A549 and H1975 cells. (B) Transwell invasion assay was carried out to detect the cell invasive capacity in transfected A549 and H1975 cells. (C) Radiation-induced surviving fraction changes was investigated in transfected A549 and H1975 cells by colony formation assay. * $p < 0.05$.

to directly interact with miR-135b, a luciferase reporter assay was employed. We constructed luciferase reporters containing GAS5 sequence with either wt or mutated miR-135b binding sites to cotransfect with miR-135b or miR-control into A549 and H1975 cells. The results showed that, compared with the miR-control group,

miR-135 overexpression conspicuously reduced the luciferase activity of pGL3-GAS5-wt but not that of pGL3-GAS5-mut (Fig. 5B). Next, to assess whether GAS5 could indeed alter miR-135b expression, we employed qRT-PCR analysis to evaluate the expression of miR-135b in A549 and H1975 cells transfected with

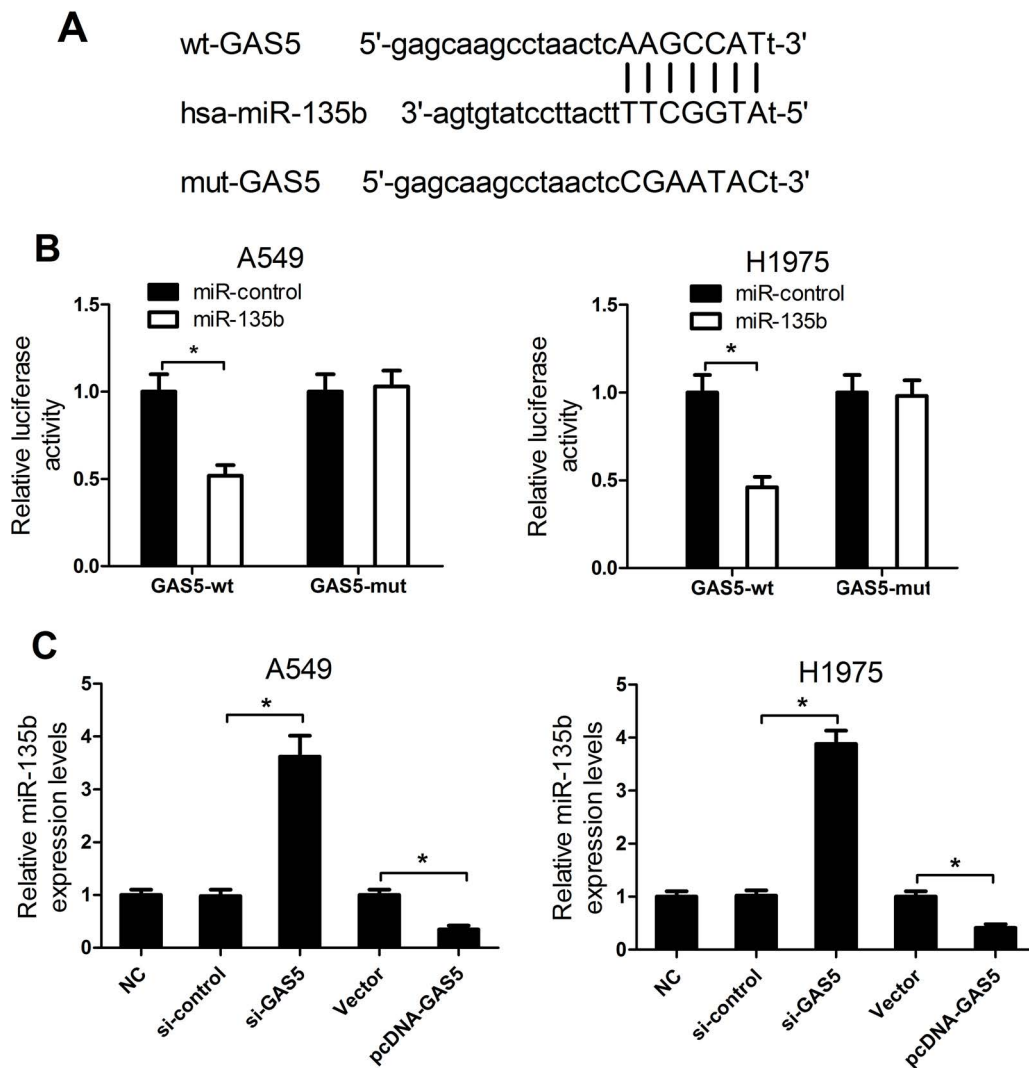


Figure 5. The interaction between GAS5 and miR-135b. (A) The predicted wild-type binding sites for miR-135b in GAS5 sequences and its mutant. (B) Luciferase reporter assay was performed to measure luciferase activities in A549 and H1975 cells cotransfected with pGL3-GAS5-wt or pGL3-GAS5-mut and miR-135b or miR-control. (C) qRT-PCR analyses of miR-135b expression in A549 and H1975 cells transfected with si-GAS5, pcDNA-GAS5, or respective controls. * $p < 0.05$.

si-GAS5, pcDNA-GAS5, or respective controls. miR-135b expression was remarkably higher in si-GAS5-transfected A549 and H1975 cells when compared with the si-control group (Fig. 5C). Conversely, GAS5 overexpression triggered a significant decrease in pcDNA-GAS5-transfected cells with respect to the empty vector control group. Taken together, these data demonstrated that GAS5 functioned as a ceRNA for miR-135b to modulate its expression.

GAS5 Overexpression Restrained Tumorigenesis and Enhanced Radiosensitivity of NSCLC Cells by Suppressing miR-135b Expression

To further explore the actual role of GAS5 and miR-135b on NSCLC tumorigenesis and radiosensitivity,

A549 and H1975 cells were transfected with pcDNA-GAS5 or with miR-135b. MTT assay results revealed that miR-135b overexpression significantly abolished GAS5 overexpression-induced cell proliferation inhibition in A549 and H1975 cells (Fig. 6A). Moreover, miR-135b overexpression dramatically reversed the suppression of cell invasiveness triggered by transfection of pcDNA-GAS5 in A549 and H1975 cells (Fig. 6B). Furthermore, GAS5 overexpression obviously reduced the SF of A549 and H1975 cells under radiation, while the effects were dismissed by cotransfection of pcDNA-GAS5 and miR-135b mimics (Fig. 6C). Thus, we concluded that GAS5 overexpression repressed tumorigenesis and improved radiosensitivity of NSCLC cells by suppressing miR-135b expression.

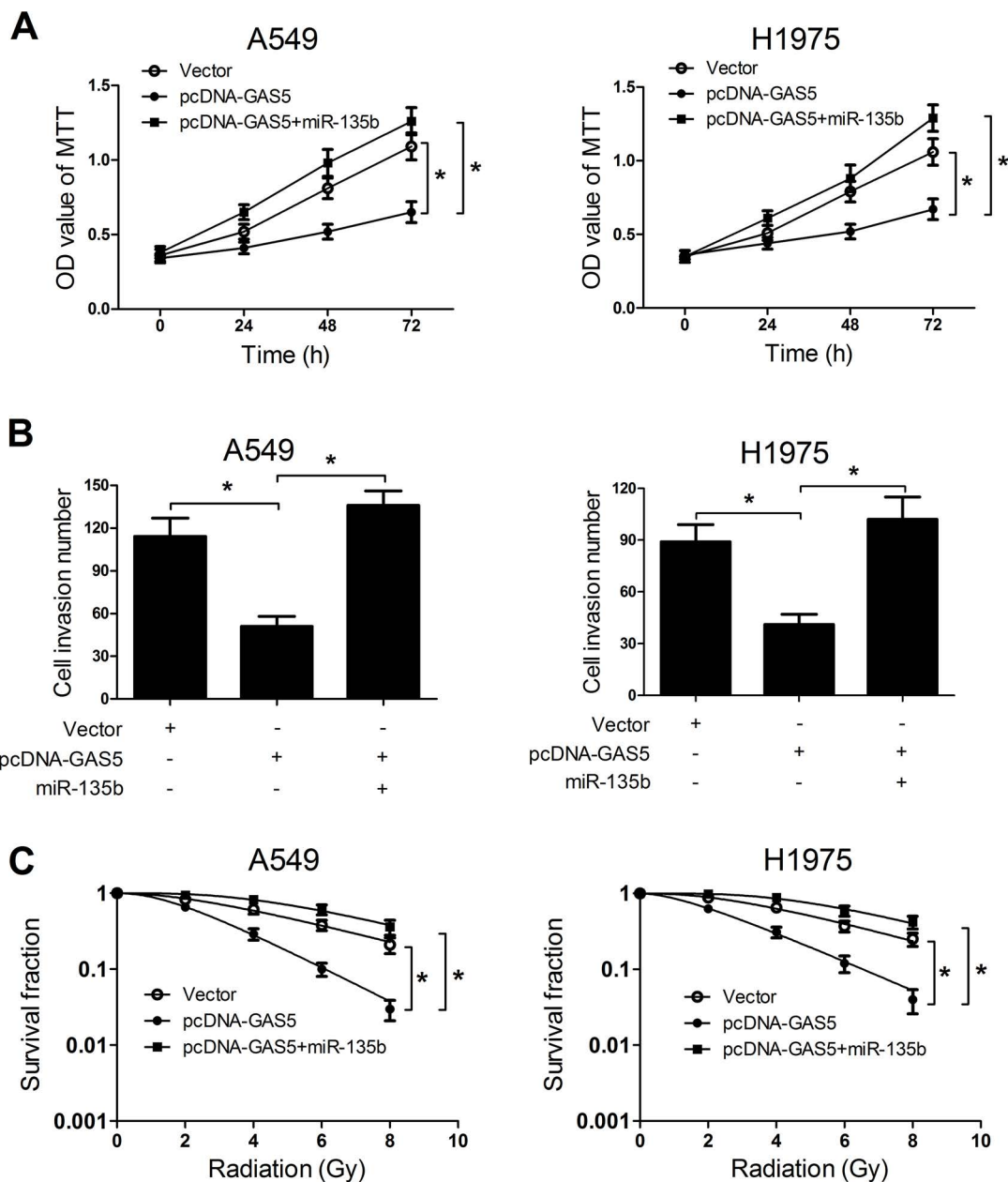


Figure 6. Overexpression of miR-135b abated the effects of GAS5 upregulation on tumorigenesis and radiosensitivity of NSCLC cells. A549 and H1975 cells were transfected with pcDNA-GAS5, empty vector, or pcDNA-GAS5+miR-135b. (A) Cell viability at 24, 48, and 72 h was investigated by MTT assay in transfected A549 and H1975 cells. (B) Cell invasion capacity was assessed by Transwell invasion assay in transfected A549 and H1975 cells. (C) Colony formation assay was used to evaluate survival fraction in transfected A549 and H1975 cells. * $p < 0.05$.

GAS5 Overexpression Suppressed Tumor Growth and Enhanced Radiosensitivity of NSCLC Cells In Vivo

To further verify our findings in vitro, we constructed a xenograft model in which A549 cells transfected with pcDNA-GAS5 or empty vector were subcutaneously injected into the left flank of nude mice. When the formed tumors were about 300 mm³, mice were exposed to a 10-Gy X-ray for radiotherapy. There was no significant

difference in the body weight of mice between the pcDNA-GAS5 and control groups with or without radiation exposure (Fig. 7A). Tumors from pcDNA-GAS5-transfected A549 cells grew slower than those of vector-transfected cells (Fig. 7B). Moreover, a combination of pcDNA-GAS5 transfection and radiation treatment led to more inhibition on tumor growth, compared with that of radiation treatment alone. After 28 days of incubation,

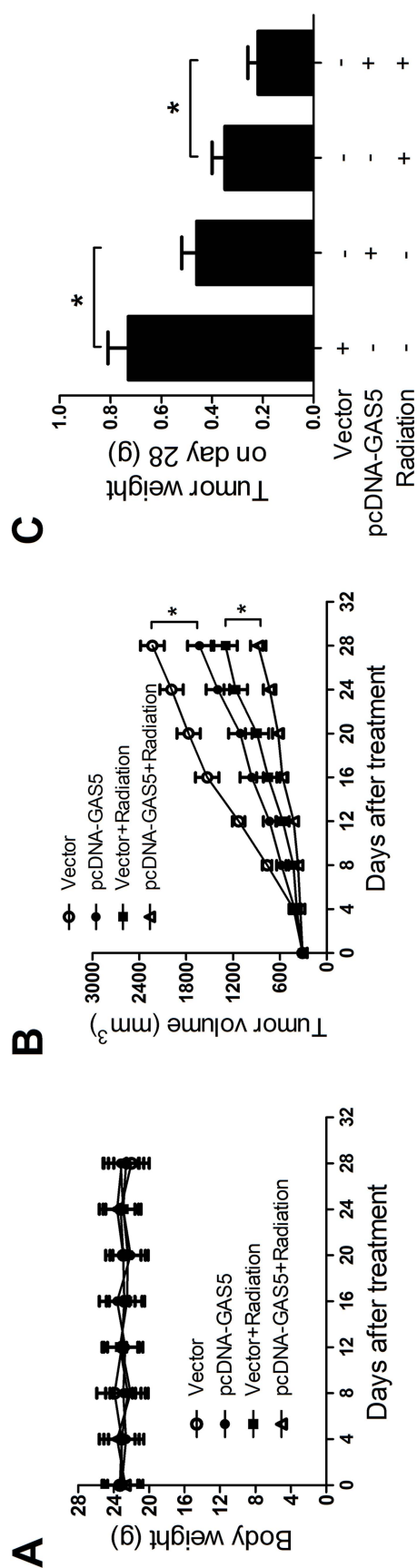


Figure 7. GAS5 overexpression suppressed tumor growth and sensitized NSCLC cells to irradiation treatment in vivo. A549 cells transfected with pcDNA-GAS5 or empty vector were subcutaneously injected into the left flank of nude mice, which was then irradiated with 10-Gy X-ray. Body weight (A) and tumor volume (B) were monitored every 4 days for 28 days after irradiation. (C) Tumor weight was measured at 28 days after irradiation. * $p < 0.05$.

the weight of tumors derived from pcDNA-GAS5-transfected A549 cells was apparently smaller than that from vector-transfected cells (Fig. 7C). Simultaneous GAS5 overexpression and ionizing radiation dramatically decreased tumor weight compared with irradiation treatment alone. These results demonstrated that GAS5 overexpression suppressed tumor growth and enhanced radiosensitivity of NSCLC cells in vivo.

DISCUSSION

Recently, lncRNAs have emerged as key regulators of diverse biological processes and are dysregulated in many tumors, such as gastric, ovarian, and lung cancers^{10,26,27}. Several studies have shown that lncRNAs serve as oncogenes or tumor suppressors in a wide variety of human cancers, including NSCLC^{28,29}. A substantial number of reports have demonstrated that GAS5 was implicated in the tumorigenesis of various types of tumors. For example, a low expression of GAS5 was reported to be an independent predictor for overall survival and promote cell proliferation and invasion, and inhibited apoptosis in hepatocellular carcinoma³⁰. GAS5 acted as a tumor suppressor by inhibiting cell proliferation in bladder cancer by suppressing CCL1 expression³¹. GAS5 was also identified to indicate a poor prognosis and promote cell proliferation in both colorectal cancer³² and gastric cancer¹⁴. Moreover, previous literature indicated that GAS5 was downregulated in NSCLC cells and that GAS5 overexpression suppressed tumorigenesis through inhibiting NSCLC cell proliferation and invasion and promoting apoptosis by inhibiting miR-23a³³. In accordance with the previous studies, our study confirmed that GAS5 was downregulated in NSCLC tissues and cells. Moreover, gain-of-function studies verified that enforced expression of GAS5 led to a marked suppression of cell proliferation and invasion. More interestingly, we noticed that GAS5 expression was strikingly decreased in response to irradiation exposure in NSCLC cells. Therefore, we guessed that GAS5 may be involved in radiosensitivity of NSCLC cells. As expected, A549 and H1975 cells with GAS5 overexpression both had a significantly lower capacity for colony formation than the control group in vitro. Meanwhile, GAS5 overexpression also remarkably restrained tumor growth in vivo. These results indicated that GAS5 suppressed tumorigenesis and increased radiosensitivity of NSCLC.

Ample evidence suggests that miRNAs are associated with radiosensitivity of various types of tumors, including lung cancer. For example, Liu et al. demonstrated that miR-133b was downregulated in radioresistant lung cancer cells and overexpression of miR-133b sensitized NSCLC to irradiation by inhibiting PKM2-mediated glycolysis³⁴. Tang et al. found that miR-208a was upregulated in NSCLC patients after radiation

treatment and increased the proliferation and radioresistance of NSCLC cells by targeting p21³⁵. Li et al. exhibited that miR-1323 expression was increased in the radioresistant lung cancer cells and knockdown of miR-1323 restored sensitivity to radiation by suppressing PRKDC activity in radiation-resistant lung cancer³⁶. Moreover, miR-135b was demonstrated to be upregulated in radioresistant glioblastoma multiforme (GBM) cells and enhanced radioresistance by targeting GSK3 β in GBM cells³⁷. miR-135b was upregulated in NSCLC cells and enhanced NSCLC cell invasion and migration by regulating multiple targets in the Hippo pathway and LZTS1³⁸. Consistently, our study showed that miR-135b was upregulated in NSCLC tissues and cells, and miR-135b expression was increased in response to radiation in NSCLC cells. Function studies elucidated that miR-135b downregulation by the miR-135b inhibitor suppressed tumorigenesis in NSCLC by repressing proliferation and invasion and improved radiosensitivity of NSCLC cells.

Increasing publications have reported that lncRNA plays a crucial role in multiple processes through functioning as a ceRNA or a molecular sponge to regulate the biological functions of miRNA³⁹. Downregulated GAS5 suppressed tumor malignancy by targeting miR-222 in glioma cells⁴⁰. In endometrial cancer cells, GAS5 was downregulated and played a tumor-suppressive role through inhibiting miR-103⁴⁰. GAS5 increased the p27 level by functioning as a ceRNA for miR-222 to suppress the activation and proliferation of hepatic stellate cell, thus inhibiting liver fibrogenesis⁴¹. In the current study, we analyzed the molecular mechanism of GAS5 involved in the ceRNA regulatory network in NSCLC. We found that there was a negative correlation between GAS5 and miR-135b expression. Luciferase reporter assay and qRT-PCR analysis disclosed that GAS5 functioned as a molecular sponge to bind to miR-135b and negatively regulated its expression. Further functional analysis elaborated that miR-135b overexpression conspicuously abolished GAS5 overexpression-induced inhibition on cell proliferation and invasion and improvement of radiosensitivity. These results revealed that GAS5 regulated the tumorigenesis and radiosensitivity of NSCLC cells by inhibiting miR-135b.

In conclusion, our data demonstrated that GAS5 was downregulated in NSCLC tissues and cells and was negatively correlated with miR-135b expression. Forced expression of GAS5 suppressed tumorigenesis by inhibiting cell proliferation and apoptosis and improved radiosensitivity by repressing miR-135b expression in NSCLC cells. This study provides a novel GAS5/miR-135b regulatory mechanism in NSCLC, suggesting that targeting GAS5/miR-135b interaction may serve as a potential therapeutic approach for NSCLC patients.

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