Molecular characterization and expression analysis of the β -actin gene from the ridgetail white prawn *Exopalaemon carinicauda*

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Genet. Mol. Res. 15 (2): gmr.15026872

Received July 20, 2015

Accepted January 4, 2016

Published April 25, 2016

DOI <http://dx.doi.org/10.4238/gmr.15026872>

ABSTRACT. Actin is a highly conserved protein that is found in all eukaryotic cells, and has been widely used as an internal control gene in gene expression studies. In this study, we cloned an actin gene (named *Ec β -actin*) from *Exopalaemon carinicauda* and determined its expression levels. The full-length cDNA of *Ec β -actin* was 1335 bp long, comprising a 1131-bp ORF encoding 376 amino acids, a 65-bp 5'-UTR, and a 139-bp 3'-UTR with a poly(A) tail. The A + T content was approximately 79% in the 3'-UTR of the *Ec β -actin* mRNA. The 3'-UTR contained two repeats of the AUUUA motif. The putative protein Ec β -actin showed high identity (97-99%) with other actins

from various species. Phylogenetic analysis revealed that *Ecβ-actin* belongs to Crustacea, although it formed a singleton sub-branch that was located a short distance from crabs and other shrimp species. *Ecβ-actin* expression was detected in the hepatopancreas, ovary, muscle, gill, stomach, and hemocytes, and was strongly expressed in the hemocytes and ovary of *E. carinicauda*. *Ecβ-actin* mRNA expression varied during ovarian development, with high levels observed at stages I and V. Therefore, caution should be taken when using the *Ecβ-actin* gene as an endogenous control gene.

Key words: *Exopalaemon carinicauda*; β -actin; Ovarian development; Internal control; Gene expression

INTRODUCTION

Actin, an important contractile protein in all eukaryotic cells, plays a key role in various cellular functions, including the maintenance of cytoskeletal structure, cell motility, cell division, intracellular movements, contractile processes, and transcription (Xiao et al., 2011). Actins, especially β -actin, are widely used as housekeeping genes because their expression is stable, making them suitable internal controls that can be used to normalize gene expression (Stürzenbaum and Kille, 2001). However, recent studies have shown that β -actin expression might change in response to biochemical stimuli during growth and differentiation, and in some disease states (Ruan and Lai, 2007). These findings challenge the reliability of β -actin when used as a reference gene.

β -actin genes have been studied in some fish species, such as *Epinephelus coioides* (Zhang et al., 2005), *Acipenser baerii* (Shi et al., 2010), and *Oreochromis aureus* (Hu et al., 2011). In addition, actin genes have been reported in crustaceans, including *Homarus gammarus* (Harrison and el Haj, 1994), *Gecarcinus lateralis* (Varadaraj et al., 1996), *Tigriopus japonicus* (Kim et al., 2003), *Macrobrachium rosenbergii* (Zhu et al., 2005b), *Litopenaeus vannamei* (Sun et al., 2007), *Sinopotamon yangtsekiense* (Gao et al., 2011), and *Scylla paramamosain* (Huang et al., 2012; Xu et al., 2013). The reliability of β -actin as an internal control was also discussed by these authors; however, few studies on the β -actin gene, and its suitability as a reference gene in *Exopalaemon carinicauda* have been reported.

The ridgetail white prawn *E. carinicauda* supports a large number of polyculture ponds in eastern China. However, the artificial-breeding technique for *E. carinicauda* is not advanced, which limits the further development of *E. carinicauda* cultures (Liang et al., 2014). Therefore, many studies have focused on gonadal development and immunity, including developmental and immune-related genes, which have been cloned and expressed using 18S as the reference gene (Li et al., 2012; Duan et al., 2013; Xu et al., 2014). Whether β -actin can be used as a reference gene in *E. carinicauda* is unknown as it has not yet been reported. The aim of the present study was to: 1) clone and characterize the β -actin gene (named *Ecβ-actin*) from *E. carinicauda*; 2) compare the β -actin amino acid sequence with β -actins known from other species; 3) analyze the pattern of *Ecβ-actin* mRNA expression in different tissues; 4) evaluate the *Ecβ-actin* expression profile in the ovary during ovarian development stages. These results are essential for determining whether *Ecβ-actin* can be used as an endogenous control gene in this species.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Shrimp and culture conditions

Female *E. carinicauda* were obtained from a commercial farm in Qingdao, China. The average weight of the shrimp was 1.46 ± 0.51 g. Shrimp were cultivated in aerated seawater (salinity 30) for 7 days at 18°-22°C before the test.

Ovarian development was divided into five stages (Stages I-V) on the basis of the color and size of the ovary as observed through the external carapace (Li et al., 2014).

RNA preparation and first-strand cDNA synthesis

Total RNA was extracted from the hepatopancreas following homogenization in TRIzol Reagent (Invitrogen) following the protocol of the manufacturer. Then, RNA was analyzed on 1.5% agarose gels to determine its quantity by electrophoresis, and the purity and integrity was determined spectrophotometrically (A_{260}/A_{280}). First-strand cDNA was synthesized from 5 μ g total RNA extracted from the hepatopancreas using M-MLV reverse transcriptase (Promega) according to the manufacturer instructions.

cDNA cloning for β -actin

A partial *Ec β -actin* cDNA fragment was obtained using a pair of degenerate primers, F1 and R1 (Table 1), which were designed by the Primer Premier 5.0 program, according to the sequence alignment result of five cDNA sequences of β -actin from *M. rosenbergii* (GenBank accession No. AY626840), *Fenneropenaeus chinensis* (GenBank accession No. AY871269), *Eriocheir sinensis* (GenBank accession No. HM053699), and *L. vannamei* (GenBank Accession No. AY646096) using the DNAMAN software. The polymerase chain reaction (PCR) conditions were as follows: 94°C for 5 min, 30 cycles of 94°C for 30 s, 58.1°C for 30 s, 72°C for 1 min, 72°C for 10 min, and cooling to 4°C. Having isolated the partial *Ec β -actin* sequence, the 5'- and 3'-ends of the mRNA were obtained by RACE using the gene-specific primers shown in Table 1. The PCR cycle was as follows: 94°C for 3 min, five cycles of 94°C for 30 s and 72°C for 3 min, five cycles of 94°C for 30 s, 70°C for 30 s, and 72°C for 3 min, 25 cycles of 94°C for 30 s, 68°C for 30 s and 72°C for 3 min, one cycle of 72°C for 10 min, then cooling to 4°C.

Table 1. Primers used for cDNA cloning and qPCR.

Primer name	Sequence (5'→3')
F1 (forward)	CACGGYATCATCACCAACTGGGA
R1 (reverse)	ATYTCCITTCTGCATGCGGTCAGC
3'-RACE	ACGGTCAGGTCATCACCATCGGTAACG
5'-RACE	CCATGTCGTCCAGTTGGTGATGATAC
UPM	CTAATACGACTCACTATAGGGCAAGCAGTGGTATCAACGCAGAGT
Actin-F	CCGAGACATCAAGGAGAAGC
Actin-R	ATACCGCAAGATTCCATACCC
18S-F	GGGGAGGTAGTGACGAAAAAT
18S-R	TATACGCTAGTGGAGCTGGAA

The amplified PCR products were isolated from 1% agarose gel and the target band was purified using a PCR purification kit (Promega), ligated into a PMD_{18-T} vector (TaKaRa), and transformed in *Escherichia coli* TOP10⁺ cells (Invitrogen). Recombinant bacteria were identified by blue/white screening and confirmed by PCR. The plasmids from several positive colonies were purified and sequenced.

Sequence and phylogenetic analysis

The amino acid sequence, molecular weight, and isoelectric point of the *Ecβ-actin* protein were deduced using DNASTAR. The deduced amino acid sequence of *Ecβ-actin* cDNA was compiled with other known β-actin sequences using the BLAST program in GenBank (<http://www.blast.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/Blast>). Multiple-amino acid sequence alignments were carried out with DNAMAN. The phylogenetic tree was constructed with MEGA 4.0.

Expression profiles of *Ecβ-actin*

Total RNA was obtained from various tissues (hemocytes, gill, stomach, ovary, hepatopancreas, and muscle) of identical mature female *E. carinicauda*. RNA was extracted from the ovaries of three animals at ovarian stages I-V. Extracted total RNA was digested using RNase-free DNase to remove any contamination. The RNA quantity was measured and the samples were made to the same concentration. First-strand cDNA was synthesized with 5 μg total RNA as described above.

The relative mRNA level of the *Ecβ-actin* gene was determined using an ABI 7500 real-time PCR system and SYBR[®] Green Premix Ex Taq (TaKaRa). The PCR mixtures contained 5 μL SYBR[®] Premix Ex Taq[™] II (2X) (TaKaRa), 0.4 μL each primer, 0.2 μL 50X ROX Reference Dye II, 1 μL cDNA, and 3 μL DEPC water. *Ecβ-actin* mRNA was amplified using the actin-F and actin-R primers, and 18S, was amplified using the 18S-F and 18S-R primers (GenBank accession No. HQ172894) to normalize the levels of expression between samples. The real-time quantitative PCR conditions were: 40 cycles of 95°C for 5 s, 60°C for 34 s, and 72°C for 34 s. Relative gene expression data were analyzed using the 2^{-ΔΔC_t} method (Livak and Schmittgen, 2001).

Gene expression levels were subjected to one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) by SPSS 13.0, followed by the Duncan test to test for differences among the different samples. Significance was set at $P < 0.05$ (González-Rodríguez et al., 2012).

RESULTS

Molecular characterization of the *Ecβ-actin*

The partial *Ecβ-actin* cDNA fragment of 734 bp, and the full-length *Ecβ-actin* cDNA obtained by RACE are shown in Figure 1. The *Ecβ-actin* cDNA was 1335 bp long, including 65 bp of a 5'-untranslated region (5'-UTR), a 1131-bp open-reading frame (ORF) encoding 376 amino acids, and 139 bp of a 3'-UTR with a poly(A) tail. An ATG codon began at nucleotide 32 and a stop codon (TAA) began at nucleotide 1196. The codon usage of *Ecβ-actin* showed a 52% preference for C or G at the third position. A high A + T content of approximately 79% was observed at the 3'-UTR of *Ecβ-actin* cDNA. The 3'-UTR of the *Ecβ-actin* cDNA also

contained two repeats of the AUUUA sequence and AREs, which were located at nucleotide 1222-1226 and 1292-1296, respectively (Figure 2). The molecular mass of the Ec β -actin protein was calculated as approximately 41,865 Da, and the estimated isoelectric point was 5.29. The full-length cDNA sequence of Ec β -actin has been deposited at GenBank (accession No. JQ045354).

Figure 1. Electrophoretograms of Ec β -actin fragments. **a.** Degenerate primer PCR. **b.** 5'-RACE PCR. **c.** 3'-RACE PCR.

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1  ACGCGGGGAG TGAATTCTAG CCTCAGGATA CGTCGTGACC TTTGTTAAGC GCCTAATCA CCAAA ATG TGT GAC GAA GAC GCA ACA GCC CTC
   H C D E D A T A L
93  GTT GTT GAC AAT GGC TCC GGC ATG GTC AAG GCC GGT TTC GCC GGT GAT GAC GCC CCT CGC GCC GTC TTC CCT TCC ATC GTC
   U U D N G S G H U K A G F A G D D A P R A U F P S I U
174  GGT CGC CCT CGT CAC CAG GGT GTG ATG GTC GGT ATG GGT CAG AAG GAC TCT TAT GTC GGC GAT GAG GCC CAG AGC AAG ACA
   G R P R H Q G U H U G M G Q K D S Y U G D E A Q S K R
255  GGT ATC CTC ACC CTA AAG TAC CCA ATT GAG CAC GGT ATC GTA ACT AAC TGG GAT GAC ATG GAG AAG ATT TGG CAT CAT ACC
   G I L T L K Y P I E H G I U T N W D D H E K I W H H T
336  TTC TAC AAT GAA CTT CGT GTT GCC CCC GAG GAG CAC CCG GTA CTC CTG ACA GAG GCT CCC TTG AAC CCT AAG GCT AAG AGG
   F Y N E L R U A P E E H P U L L T E A P L N P K A N R
417  GAG AAG ATG ACC CAG ATT ATG TTT GAA ACT TTC AAC ACC CCA GCC ATG TAC GTC GCC ATC CAG GCT GTG CTG TCC CTG TAT
   E K M T Q I M F E T F N T P A H Y U A I Q A U L S L Y
498  GCC TCT GGT CGT ACC ACT GGT ATC GTG CTG GAC TCT GGA GAT GGC GTC TCC CAC ACT GTG CCC ATT TAT GAG GGA TAT GCG
   A S G R T T G I U L D S G D G U S H T U P I Y E G Y A
579  CTT CCT CAC GCC ATC CTC CGT CTG GAC TTG GCA GGA CGT GAC TTA ACA GAC TAC CTC ATG AAG ATC CTT ACC GAA CGT GGC
   L P H A I L R L D L A G R D L T D Y L M K I L T E R G
660  TAC ACA TTC ACT ACC ACT GCT GAG CGA GAA ATC GTC CGA GAC ATC AAG GAG AAG CTC TGC TAT GTT GCC CTG GAC TTC GAG
   Y T F T T T A E R E I U R D I K E K L C Y U A L D F E
741  CAG GAA ATG ACC ACT GCC GCC TCC TCC TCC CTT GAG AAG TCC TAC GAG CTT CCC GAC GGT CAG GTC ATC ACT ATT GGT
   Q E M T T A A S S S S L E K S Y E L P D G Q U I T I G
822  AAC GAG AGG TTT AGG TGC CCC GAA GCT CTC TTC CAA CCA TCC TTC CTG GGT ATG GAA TCT TGC GGT ATC CAC GAG ACT ACT
   N E R F R C P E A L F Q P S F L G M E S C G I H E T T
903  TAC AAC TCA ATC ATG AAA TGC GAC GTA GAC ATC CGT AAG GAT TTG TAT GCC AAC ACT GTC CTG TCT GGA GGC ACC ACA ATG
   Y N S I M K C D U D I R K D L Y A N T U L S G G T M
984  TAC CCA GGA ATT GCT GAC AGA ATG CAG AAG GAA ATC ACT GCC CTG GCA CCT TCC ACC ATG AAG ATT AAG ATC ATC GCA CCT
   Y P G I A D R M Q K E I T A L A P S T M K I K I I A P
1065  CCC GAG CGC AAA TAC TCC GTC TGG ATC GGC GGA TCT ATC TTG GCC TCT CTA TCC ACA TTC CAG CAG ATG TGG ATT AGC AAA
   P E R K Y S U W I G G S I L A S L S T F Q Q M W I S K
1146  CAA GAA TAT GAT GAG TCT GGA CCA TCC ATT GTA CAC AGG AAA TGC TTC TAA GTCAATATCT TTATTTTTCG TTAATAATTGATTAAAG
   Q E Y D E S G P S I U H R K C F *
1234  TGTGTAGATTACA CGCAGATTTT CTATATAAAT TCTACACTTA ATTATAGGA TGCTAATTATAAATTAAATTTTGCACAAAAA
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Figure 2. Nucleotide and deduced amino acid sequences of β -actin from *Exopalaemon carinicauda*. The start and stop codons are indicated by open boxes. A consensus polyadenylation signal is underlined. The sequences complementary to AU-rich elements of the mRNA are shaded.

Homology analysis of *Ecβ-actin*

Bioinformatic analyses revealed that *Ecβ-actin* shares high identity with the β -actins of invertebrates and vertebrates (Table 2). Compared to other known β -actins, they are highly conserved (Figure 3).

Table 2. Sequence identity of the *Exopalaemon carinicauda* β -actin protein with other known β -actin proteins.

Species	Identity (%)	GenBank accession No.
<i>Macrobrachium rosenbergii</i>	99	AAU04441.1
<i>Litopenaeus vannamei</i>	99	AAG16253.1
<i>Fenneropenaeus chinensis</i>	99	ABB05541.1
<i>Eriocheir sinensis</i>	98	ADH43622.1
<i>Aedes albopictus</i>	98	ABG46341.1
<i>Rachycentron canadum</i>	98	ABX71624.1
<i>Oncorhynchus mykiss</i>	97	NP_001117707.1
<i>Bos taurus</i>	97	AAI42414.1
<i>Capra hircus</i>	97	AFN25402.1

Exopalaemon carinicauda	MCDEEVALVVDNGSGMCRAGFAGDDAPRAVFESIVGRFRHQGMVGMGQKDSYVGDEAQSRRGILLTKYPIBHG	75
Macrobrachium rosenbergii	MCDEEVALVVDNGSGMCRAGFAGDDAPRAVFESIVGRFRHQGMVGMGQKDSYVGDEAQSRRGILLTKYPIBHG	75
Litopenaeus vannamei	MCDEEVALVVDNGSGMCRAGFAGDDAPRAVFESIVGRFRHQGMVGMGQKDSYVGDEAQSRRGILLTKYPIBHG	75
Fenneropenaeus chinensis	MCDEEVALVVDNGSGMCRAGFAGDDAPRAVFESIVGRFRHQGMVGMGQKDSYVGDEAQSRRGILLTKYPIBHG	75
Eriocheir sinensis	MCDEEVALVVDNGSGMCRAGFAGDDAPRAVFESIVGRFRHQGMVGMGQKDSYVGDEAQSRRGILLTKYPIBHG	75
Aedes albopictus	MCDEEVALVVDNGSGMCRAGFAGDDAPRAVFESIVGRFRHQGMVGMGQKDSYVGDEAQSRRGILLTKYPIBHG	75
Rachycentron canadum	.MEEFIALVVDNGSGMCRAGFAGDDAPRAVFESIVGRFRHQGMVGMGQKDSYVGDEAQSRRGILLTKYPIBHG	74
Oncorhynchus mykiss	.MEDDIALVVDNGSGMCRAGFAGDDAPRAVFESIVGRFRHQGMVGMGQKDSYVGDEAQSRRGILLTKYPIBHG	74
Bos taurus	.MEDDIALVVDNGSGMCRAGFAGDDAPRAVFESIVGRFRHQGMVGMGQKDSYVGDEAQSRRGILLTKYPIBHG	74
Capra hircus	.MEDDIALVVDNGSGMCRAGFAGDDAPRAVFESIVGRFRHQGMVGMGQKDSYVGDEAQSRRGILLTKYPIBHG	74
Consensus	alvvdngsgm kagfagddapravfsvigrfrhqgmvmgmkdsyvgdeaqskrgilltkypa hg	
Exopalaemon carinicauda	IVTNWDDMEKIWHHTFYNELRVAPEEHFVLLTEAPLNFRANREKMTQIMGFNTFPMYVAICAVLSLYASGRIT	150
Macrobrachium rosenbergii	IVTNWDDMEKIWHHTFYNELRVAPEEHFVLLTEAPLNFRANREKMTQIMGFNTFPMYVAICAVLSLYASGRIT	150
Litopenaeus vannamei	IVTNWDDMEKIWHHTFYNELRVAPEEHFVLLTEAPLNFRANREKMTQIMGFNTFPMYVAICAVLSLYASGRIT	150
Fenneropenaeus chinensis	IVTNWDDMEKIWHHTFYNELRVAPEEHFVLLTEAPLNFRANREKMTQIMGFNTFPMYVAICAVLSLYASGRIT	150
Eriocheir sinensis	IVTNWDDMEKIWHHTFYNELRVAPEEHFVLLTEAPLNFRANREKMTQIMGFNTFPMYVAICAVLSLYASGRIT	150
Aedes albopictus	IVTNWDDMEKIWHHTFYNELRVAPEEHFVLLTEAPLNFRANREKMTQIMGFNTFPMYVAICAVLSLYASGRIT	150
Rachycentron canadum	IVTNWDDMEKIWHHTFYNELRVAPEEHFVLLTEAPLNFRANREKMTQIMGFNTFPMYVAICAVLSLYASGRIT	149
Oncorhynchus mykiss	IVTNWDDMEKIWHHTFYNELRVAPEEHFVLLTEAPLNFRANREKMTQIMGFNTFPMYVAICAVLSLYASGRIT	149
Bos taurus	IVTNWDDMEKIWHHTFYNELRVAPEEHFVLLTEAPLNFRANREKMTQIMGFNTFPMYVAICAVLSLYASGRIT	149
Capra hircus	IVTNWDDMEKIWHHTFYNELRVAPEEHFVLLTEAPLNFRANREKMTQIMGFNTFPMYVAICAVLSLYASGRIT	149
Consensus	ivtnwddmekiwhhtfyneilrvaeehfvlleaplnfrankrekmqim e fntfpmayvaicavlslyasgrit	
Exopalaemon carinicauda	GIVDSDGDSVHTPIYIEGYALPHAILRLDLAQRDLTDYMKILTERGVFTTTAERSIVRDIKERLCYVALDFE	225
Macrobrachium rosenbergii	GIVDSDGDSVHTPIYIEGYALPHAILRLDLAQRDLTDYMKILTERGVFTTTAERSIVRDIKERLCYVALDFE	225
Litopenaeus vannamei	GIVDSDGDSVHTPIYIEGYALPHAILRLDLAQRDLTDYMKILTERGVFTTTAERSIVRDIKERLCYVALDFE	225
Fenneropenaeus chinensis	GIVDSDGDSVHTPIYIEGYALPHAILRLDLAQRDLTDYMKILTERGVFTTTAERSIVRDIKERLCYVALDFE	225
Eriocheir sinensis	GIVDSDGDSVHTPIYIEGYALPHAILRLDLAQRDLTDYMKILTERGVFTTTAERSIVRDIKERLCYVALDFE	225
Aedes albopictus	GIVDSDGDSVHTPIYIEGYALPHAILRLDLAQRDLTDYMKILTERGVFTTTAERSIVRDIKERLCYVALDFE	225
Rachycentron canadum	GIVDSDGDSVHTPIYIEGYALPHAILRLDLAQRDLTDYMKILTERGVFTTTAERSIVRDIKERLCYVALDFE	224
Oncorhynchus mykiss	GIVDSDGDSVHTPIYIEGYALPHAILRLDLAQRDLTDYMKILTERGVFTTTAERSIVRDIKERLCYVALDFE	224
Bos taurus	GIVDSDGDSVHTPIYIEGYALPHAILRLDLAQRDLTDYMKILTERGVFTTTAERSIVRDIKERLCYVALDFE	224
Capra hircus	GIVDSDGDSVHTPIYIEGYALPHAILRLDLAQRDLTDYMKILTERGVFTTTAERSIVRDIKERLCYVALDFE	224
Consensus	giv dsdgdv htvpiegyalphailrldlaqrldtdylmkiltergv ftttaers ivrdikeklcyvaldfe	
Exopalaemon carinicauda	CEMTAASSSSLSKSYELPDGQVITIGNERFRCPEALFQPSFLGMECGGHETTNSIMKCDVDIRKDYANTVL	300
Macrobrachium rosenbergii	CEMTAASSSSLSKSYELPDGQVITIGNERFRCPEALFQPSFLGMECGGHETTNSIMKCDVDIRKDYANTVL	300
Litopenaeus vannamei	CEMTAASSSSLSKSYELPDGQVITIGNERFRCPEALFQPSFLGMECGGHETTNSIMKCDVDIRKDYANTVL	300
Fenneropenaeus chinensis	CEMTAASSSSLSKSYELPDGQVITIGNERFRCPEALFQPSFLGMECGGHETTNSIMKCDVDIRKDYANTVL	300
Eriocheir sinensis	CEMTAASSSSLSKSYELPDGQVITIGNERFRCPEALFQPSFLGMECGGHETTNSIMKCDVDIRKDYANTVL	300
Aedes albopictus	CEMTAASSSSLSKSYELPDGQVITIGNERFRCPEALFQPSFLGMECGGHETTNSIMKCDVDIRKDYANTVL	300
Rachycentron canadum	CEMTAASSSSLSKSYELPDGQVITIGNERFRCPEALFQPSFLGMECGGHETTNSIMKCDVDIRKDYANTVL	299
Oncorhynchus mykiss	CEMTAASSSSLSKSYELPDGQVITIGNERFRCPEALFQPSFLGMECGGHETTNSIMKCDVDIRKDYANTVL	299
Bos taurus	CEMTAASSSSLSKSYELPDGQVITIGNERFRCPEALFQPSFLGMECGGHETTNSIMKCDVDIRKDYANTVL	299
Capra hircus	CEMTAASSSSLSKSYELPDGQVITIGNERFRCPEALFQPSFLGMECGGHETTNSIMKCDVDIRKDYANTVL	299
Consensus	qem taasssslsksyelpdgqvitiqnerfrcpealqpsflgmcgghett nsimkcdvdirkdyantvl	
Exopalaemon carinicauda	SGGTTMYPGIADRMQKEITLAPSTMKIKIIAPPERKYSVWIGGSILASLSTFCQMWISQCYDESSESIVHRRC	375
Macrobrachium rosenbergii	SGGTTMYPGIADRMQKEITLAPSTMKIKIIAPPERKYSVWIGGSILASLSTFCQMWISQCYDESSESIVHRRC	375
Litopenaeus vannamei	SGGTTMYPGIADRMQKEITLAPSTMKIKIIAPPERKYSVWIGGSILASLSTFCQMWISQCYDESSESIVHRRC	375
Fenneropenaeus chinensis	SGGTTMYPGIADRMQKEITLAPSTMKIKIIAPPERKYSVWIGGSILASLSTFCQMWISQCYDESSESIVHRRC	375
Eriocheir sinensis	SGGTTMYPGIADRMQKEITLAPSTMKIKIIAPPERKYSVWIGGSILASLSTFCQMWISQCYDESSESIVHRRC	375
Aedes albopictus	SGGTTMYPGIADRMQKEITLAPSTMKIKIIAPPERKYSVWIGGSILASLSTFCQMWISQCYDESSESIVHRRC	375
Rachycentron canadum	SGGTTMYPGIADRMQKEITLAPSTMKIKIIAPPERKYSVWIGGSILASLSTFCQMWISQCYDESSESIVHRRC	374
Oncorhynchus mykiss	SGGTTMYPGIADRMQKEITLAPSTMKIKIIAPPERKYSVWIGGSILASLSTFCQMWISQCYDESSESIVHRRC	374
Bos taurus	SGGTTMYPGIADRMQKEITLAPSTMKIKIIAPPERKYSVWIGGSILASLSTFCQMWISQCYDESSESIVHRRC	374
Capra hircus	SGGTTMYPGIADRMQKEITLAPSTMKIKIIAPPERKYSVWIGGSILASLSTFCQMWISQCYDESSESIVHRRC	374
Consensus	sggtmypgiadrmqkeit lapstmkikiiapperkysvwiggsilaslstfcqmwisqcydesse ivhrkc	

Figure 3. Multiple alignment of the deduced amino acid sequence of β -actin from *Exopalaemon carinicauda*.

Phylogenetic analysis of *Ec β -actin*

A molecular phylogenetic tree was constructed using MEGA 4.0 (Figure 4) based on the amino acid sequences of β -actin. β -actin proteins from 24 species were divided into two distinct branches in an unrooted tree containing invertebrates and vertebrates. Along the invertebrate branch, shrimps, crabs, and insects formed distinct groups. Along the second branch of vertebrates, all fish and terrestrial animals were clustered together and formed two small branches, respectively. The phylogenetic analysis was consistent with traditional taxonomy. *Ec β -actin* should belong to Crustacea, but it was a singleton sub-branch, a short distance away from crabs and other shrimp species.

Figure 4. Phylogenetic tree of β -actin amino acid sequences constructed by the neighbor-joining method. *Scylla paramamosain* (ADG03642.1), *Polyrrhachis vicina* (ACX37099.1), *Gallus gallus* (CAA25004.1), *Acanthopagrus schlegelii* (AAR84618.1), *Carassius auratus* (BAA92339.2), *Struthio camelus* (AIE38011.1), *Paramisgurnus dabryanus* (AFA41501.1), *Drosophila melanogaster* (AAA28314.1), *Anas platyrhynchos* (ABR87937.1), *Platichthys flesus* (AAF63665.1), *Cirrhinus molitorella* (AAY25518.1), *Sus scrofa* (AAS55927.1), *Phascolarctos cinereus* (AAY53911.1), *Ornithodoros moubata* (BAE46505.1), *Aedes albopictus* (ABG46341.1), *Bos taurus* (AAI42414.1), *Capra hircus* (AFN25402.1), *Eriocheir sinensis* (ADH43622.1), *Fenneropenaeus chinensis* (ABB05541.1), *Litopenaeus vannamei* (AAG16253.1), *Macrobrachium rosenbergii* (AAU04441.1), *Oncorhynchus mykiss* (NP_001117707.1), *Rachycentron canadum* (ABX71624.1), *Exopalaemon carinicauda* (AEY68535.1).

Tissue expression of the *Ecβ-actin* transcript

Levels of *Ecβ-actin* expression in different tissues are shown in Figure 5. mRNA transcripts of *Ecβ-actin* were widely detected in all tested tissues including the hemocytes, gill, stomach, ovary, hepatopancreas, and muscle. The highest expression was observed in the hemocytes, in which levels 2-90 times higher than those in other tissues were observed ($P < 0.05$). *Ecβ-actin* was expressed at moderately high levels in the ovary, and the lowest expression was found in the hepatopancreas, muscle, gill, and stomach.

Figure 5. *Ecβ-actin* transcripts in hepatopancreas (HE), ovary (OV), muscle (MU), gill (GI), stomach (ST), and hemocytes (HA).

Expression of the *Ecβ-actin* transcript during ovarian maturation

Ecβ-actin cDNA expression in the ovary differed as the ovary developed. *Ecβ-actin* mRNA was expressed at high levels in the ovary at stages I and V, and at low levels at stages II, III, and IV (Figure 6).

Figure 6. *Ecβ-actin* transcripts in the ovary of *Exopalaemon carinicauda* during maturation.

DISCUSSION

β -actin genes have previously been reported in other crustaceans. In the present study, *Ec β -actin* was cloned, for the first time, from the ridgetail white prawn, *E. carinicauda*. Full-length *Ec β -actin* cDNA was 1335 bp long, comprising a 1131-bp ORF that encoded 376 amino acids. The ORF of *Ec β -actin* had a high G + C content (approximately 52%), reflecting a preference towards codons with G or C at the third position, while the 3'-UTR had an A + T content of approximately 79%. A similar preference has been found in *G. lateralis* (Varadaraj et al., 1996), *M. rosenbergii* (Zhu et al., 2005b), *L. vannamei* (Sun et al., 2007), and *S. paramamosain* (Huang et al., 2012). However, the G + C content of actin mRNA is low in *Artemia* and *H. americanus*, and is often replaced by either A or T (Macias and Sastre, 1990; Harrison and el Haj, 1994).

AUUUA sequences within the 3'-UTR of cDNA named AU-rich elements (AREs) might affect the stability of some mRNAs in the 3'-UTR (Brawerman, 1993). Two copies of the AUUUA sequence are present in the 3'-UTR of *Ec β -actin* cDNA (Figure 1). AREs have been recognized as potent destabilizing elements in a wide variety of short-lived mRNAs, like those of proto-oncogenes and cytokines (Guhaniyogi and Brewer, 2001; Dearth and DeWille, 2003). The A + U-rich sequences in the 3'-UTR of *Ec β -actin* mRNA are typical of AREs. The AUUUA sequences have been observed in the 3'-UTR of actin mRNA from other animals such as *G. lateralis* and *Sinonovacula constricta* (Varadaraj et al., 1996; Feng et al., 2011). The role of AREs in the 3'-UTR of *Ec β -actin* mRNA needs further study.

Sequence analysis indicated that *Ec β -actin* protein shares high identity (97-99%) with other vertebrate and invertebrate β -actins. Phylogenetic analysis revealed that β -actins can be divided into four distinct branches: terrestrial vertebrates, aquatic vertebrates, insects, and crustaceans. *Ec β -actin* should belong to Crustacea, but it formed a singleton sub-branch, which was a short distance away from crabs and other shrimp species. The relationships between different animals as shown in the phylogenetic tree are in good agreement with the traditional classification scheme based on morphology.

In the present study, *Ec β -actin* expression was observed in many tissues, including the hepatopancreas, ovary, muscle, gill, stomach, and hemocytes, with a higher level detected in the ovary and hemocytes compared with other tissues. Previous studies have demonstrated that β -actin is mainly expressed in the muscle tissue of other crustaceans, such as *H. americanus* (Harrison and el Haj, 1994), *M. rosenbergii* (Zhu et al., 2005b), and *S. paramamosain* (Xu et al., 2013). However, expression of β -actin is barely detectable in the skeletal muscle of *E. coioides* (Zhang et al., 2005). Therefore, *Ec β -actin* might not be suitable as an endogenous control gene for use to normalize gene expression between different tissues.

Expression of the *Ec β -actin* gene was analyzed across ovarian developmental stages and was found to be significantly higher at stages I and V than at other stages of ovarian development. In shrimp and crab, the oogonia pass through different maturation stages before becoming a mature oocyte. Mitosis mainly occurs in immature oocytes, while the mature oocytes are found in the metaphase of the first meiosis. This phenomenon indicates that the first meiosis occurs at maturation stage, and the second meiosis is completed after spawning (Yano, 1988; Minagawa and Sano, 1997; Zhu et al., 2005a). There is evidence that female *E. carinicauda* have the potential to carry more than one batch of eggs within a reproductive period. A large number of mitotic oogonia were also observed in stage I and V ovaries from *E. carinicauda*, while their daughter cells increased in size upon entering the first meiosis at the

maturation stage in ripe ovaries (Li et al., 2014). These results imply that the *Ecβ-actin* might be involved in oögonia mitosis, and is associated with SWI/SNF-like chromatin-remodeling complexes and histone modifiers (Chen and Shen, 2007). *Ecβ-actin* might not be suitable for use as an endogenous control gene during ovarian development of *E. carinicauda*.

In conclusion, we successfully cloned the full-length cDNA of β -actin from *E. carinicauda*. *Ecβ-actin* was found to be differentially expressed in the gill, stomach, hepatopancreas, ovary, muscle, and hemocytes. *Ecβ-actin* expression differed between ovarian developmental stages, and expression levels were higher at stages I and V than at other stages. *Ecβ-actin* gene might not be suitable for use as a reference gene in RT-PCR analyses of gene expression.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Research supported by the Modern Agro-Industry Technology Research System (#CARS-47), the Special Fund for Agro-Scientific Research in the Public Interest (#201103034), the National Natural Science Foundation of China (#31502185), and the PhD Scientific Research Initiation Foundation of Henan Normal University (#QD13054).

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