

# Hsa\_circ\_0013731 Mediated by E2F1 Inhibits Ferroptosis in Hepatocellular Carcinoma Cells by Sponging miR-877-3p and Targeting SLC7A11

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## Research

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# Abstract

**Background:** The regulatory loop between circular RNAs and microRNAs has a vital role in cell death. Ferroptosis is the form of iron-dependent cell death, which is distinct from necroptosis and apoptosis. Increasing evidences showed that ferroptosis is an important form of cell death in hepatocellular carcinoma.

**Methods:** Real-time PCR were used to examine the expression level of circ\_0013731 in hepatocellular carcinoma tissues. Edu and colony formation were performed to detect the cell proliferation. A luciferase reporter assay was used to determine the relationship between circ\_0013731, miR-877-3p and SLC7A11. ChIP-qPCR assays were performed to examine the potential binding of E2F1 to the circ\_0013731 promoter. Iron Assay Kit (Sigma Aldrich) was used to detect total iron or Fe<sup>2+</sup>. C11 BODIPY 581/591 staining and flow cytometer were used to examine the Lipid ROS. The role of circ\_0013731 was examined in xenograft tumors model.

**Results:** We revealed that the expression level of circ\_0013731 was elevated in hepatocellular carcinoma. Moreover, E2F1 promote the transcription of circ\_0013731. Overexpression of circ\_0013731 promoted cell growth and inhibited ferroptosis in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 in vitro. miR-877-3p was proved as the direct target of circ\_0013731. Then, inhibition of miR-877-3p enhanced cell growth and inhibited ferroptosis. Further mechanism research demonstrated that circ\_0013731 upregulated the expression level of SLC7A11 by sponging miR-877-3p. Finally, circ\_0013731 promoted HCC growth via miR-877-3p/SLC7A11 axis in vivo.

**Conclusions:** Our data reveal that circ\_0013731 mediated by E2F1 facilitates cell growth and suppressed the ferroptosis via miR-877-3p/SLC7A11 axis in hepatocellular carcinoma. Therefore, circ\_0013731 could be acted as potential therapeutical target for hepatocellular carcinoma.

## Background

Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is a lethal digestive malignancy worldwide and it is considered the second cause of cancer-related death [1, 2]. The current problem is that HCC still has high recurrence and mortality rate, even though patients received standardized treatment including operation, chemotherapy and radiotherapy [3]. Moreover, a part of patients are usually diagnosed at late stages, thus missing the time window for radical cure [4]. Thus, finding a novel target for treatment is vital for curing of HCC.

CircRNAs are non-coding RNAs with closed loop and they are lack of 5' and 3' polarity and a polyadenylated tail [5, 6]. The different roles of circRNAs have been reported in HCC. circRNA\_101237 is acted as a vital prognostic biomarker for HCC [7]. circRNA\_104075 promotes YAP-dependent HCC progression via bounding to HNF4a [8].

circRNA\_cSMARCA5 suppresses metastasis by upregulation of TIMP3 in HCC [9]. Based on circBase (<http://www.circbase.org/>), circ\_0013731 (chr1:117944807-117945063) was translated from exon2 of

MAN1A2 by back-splicing (256 bp). circ\_0013731 was upregulated in triple-negative breast cancer, but its role in tumor is still unknown.

MicroRNAs (miRNAs), small noncoding RNAs of 20–25 nucleotides in length, regulate the expression of downstream targets by post-transcriptional modulation [10, 11]. CircRNAs serve as molecular sponge and adsorbed miRNAs abiding by base complementary pairing principle [12, 13]. circTRIM33-12 in HCC inhibits the immune evasion by sponging miR-191 and releasing TET1 [14]. Overexpression of circMTO1 facilitates HCC tumorigenesis by sponging miR-9 and downregulating p21 expression [15]. Circ\_0001955 in HCC up-regulates TRAF6 and MAPK11 expression, the target of miR-516a-5p, resulting in promotion of cell invasion [16]. miR-877-3p was identified as a novel anti-tumor regulator in malignant tumor. miR-877-3p in gastric cancer inhibited metastasis by targeting VEGFA [17]. miR-877-3p suppressed the cell proliferation in bladder cancer [18]. However, the role of miR-877-3p in ferroptosis is largely unclarified.

The reprogramming of cell death is vital for HCC progression. The great progress has been achieved in necrotic cell death and apoptotic [19, 20]. Ferroptosis is the form of iron-dependent cell death, which is distinct from necroptosis and apoptosis [21]. In this study, we found circ\_0013731 was elevated in HCC and mediated by E2F1. Moreover, circ\_0013731 facilitates cell growth and inhibited ferroptosis in HCC. Furthermore, we found that circ\_0013731 suppressed ferroptosis through miR-877-3p /SLC7A11 axis. Finally, we elaborated circ\_0013731 promoted HCC growth and regulated miR-877-3p/ SLC7A11 axis in vivo.

## Methods

### Cell culture

The HCC lines, namely, SMMC-7721, QGY-7703 and Huh7 were purchased from Academy of Sciences of Shanghai (Shanghai, China). HCC lines were maintained at 37 °C with 5% CO<sub>2</sub> and cultured in RPMI1640 medium (Gibco, Carlsbad, CA, USA) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (Gibco, Carlsbad, CA, USA).

### Tissue samples

45 HCC tissues were enrolled in this study. HCC diagnosis was based on histopathology. The study was carried out under the approval by the Ethics Committee of Affiliated Lishui Hospital of Zhejiang University. Participants all provided their informed written consent.

### EdU assay

EdU assay was performed in HCC cells. Briefly, HCC cells were plated into 96-well plates. HCC cells were cultured for 2 hours after treated with 50 μM EdU. Cells were fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde then stained by Hoechst 33342 and Apollp reaction cocktail. Results were counted five random fields by using a fluorescence microscopy.

## Cell transfection

LV- circ\_0013731 and sh- circ\_0013731 were purchased from GeneCreate Biological Engineering Co., Ltd. (China). Mimic- miR-877-3p or inhibition-miR-877-3p was purchased from (RiboBio Corporation, Guangzhou, China). Cells were transfected with LV/sh- circ\_0013731 or mimic/inhibitor-miR-877-3p by using Lipofectamine 3000 (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA).

## qRT-PCR

Total RNA was obtained using TRIzol reagent. RT-PCR was conducted using a SYBR Premix Ex Taq (TaKaRa, Dalian, China). Relative expression of genes was calculated by  $2^{-\Delta\Delta CT}$ . and SLC7A11, GAPDH and Tubulin expression levels were examined using the following specific primers:

SLC7A11: F-5'TCTCCAAAGGAGGTTACCTGC3' and

R-5' AGACTCCCCTCAGTAAAGTGAC3';

GAPDH: F-5'GGAGCGAGATCCCTCCAAAAT3' and

R-5'GGCTGTTGTCATACTTCTCATGG3';

Tubulin: F-5' GGCCAAGGGTCACTACACG3' and

R-5' GCAGTCGCAGTTTTTCACTC3'.

## Western blot

HCC cells and tissues were lysed and protein concentration of total cell lysates was tested by the BCA assay. Protein samples (25-30ug) were loaded to electrophoresis and then transferred to PVDF membrane. After blocked in 5.5% non-fat milk for 2 hours, primary antibodies were used for incubation. Specific primary antibodies were used in this research included anti-SLC7A11, anti-GAPDH and anti-Tubulin (Abcam, Cambridge, UK, 1:1000) for overnight at 4°C. Finally, the membrane was analyzed by the QuantityOne software (BioRad, Hercules, CA, USA).

## Luciferase activity assay

The potential putative sequences of the binding site in MAN1A2 promoter/E2F1, circ\_0013731/miR-877-3p and miR-877-3p/ SLC7A11 and corresponding mutated sequences were cloned into pGL3 vector. About  $1.8 \times 10^5$  HCC cells were seeded in 48-well plate before transfection. After transfection with inhibitor-miR-877-3p, LV- circ\_0013731 or corresponding negative control, the relative luciferase absorbance value of each group was examined by Dual-Luciferase Reporter Assay System (Promega, #E1910).

## Immunofluorescent staining

Histological section was fixed by cold acetone for 10 min and incubated in a 1% BSA/PBS solution. Antibodies against SLC7A11 (1:100, Santa Cruz, Dallas, TX, USA) was used for incubation with section overnight at 4°C. Next, secondary antibody (1:500, Santa Cruz, Dallas, TX, USA) were incubated with section. Wide-field fluorescence microscopy (Carl Zeiss, Jena, Germany) was used to visualize the slide.

### **RNA Immunoprecipitation**

Magna RIP RNA Binding Protein Immunoprecipitation Kit was used for RNA Immunoprecipitation. HCC cell extract was incubated with RIPA buffer with magnetic beads conjugated with human Ago2 antibody for 9 h. Normal IgG was used for negative control. Finally, immunoprecipitated RNA was collected and subjected to qRT-PCR analysis.

### **Biotin labeled probe pull down assay**

HCC cells were lysed in lysis buffer. Next, 3µg biotin labeled probe was added to the buffer lysis and incubated for 4 hours at 25°C. To pull down the circRNA-microRNA complex, streptavidin magnetic beads (Thermo Fisher) were added to the buffer and slowly rotated for another 4 hours. Then, washing step was carried out for 4 times. Finally, the binding RNA was extracted with TRIzol reagent and subjected to qRT-PCR analysis.

### **Lipid ROS assays**

Following instructions [22], HCC cells were treated by C11-BODIPY (10 µM) and incubated for half hour. Afterward, washing step was performed twice times. C11-BODIPY was removed by cold PBS. The fluorescence of C11-BODIPY581 was examined by the simultaneous acquisition of green (484/510 nm) and red signals (581/610 nm) using a flow cytometer.

### **Iron assays**

Following instructions [23], Iron Assay Kit (Sigma Aldrich) was used to detect total iron or Fe<sup>2+</sup> in HCC. Following instructions, Iron Assay buffer and Iron Reducer were added in turn to the samples. In dark conditions, samples were mixed well and incubated for half hour after adding Iron Reducer. Samples were incubated for one hour after adding Iron Probe. Lastly, the absorbance was examined at 593 nm (A593).

### **In vivo study**

Female nude mice (5 weeks old) were purchased from Shanghai Vital River Animal Company. A circ\_0013731 stable overexpression or knockout SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 cell line was constructed by LV-circ\_0013731 or sh-circ\_0013731. Xenograft tumors model were established by subcutaneous transplantation. For the xenograft tumor model,  $6.4 \times 10^6$  cells were subcutaneously injected into the left inguinal of nude mice. The volume of tumor was counted for 0, 7, 14, 21, 28 days. Tumor weight was counted at 28 days. This work was under the Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals of the National Institutes of Health.

## Statistical analysis

All the data were analyzed using SPSS software. Student t test was used to compare the difference of data between groups.  $P < 0.05$  represents significant difference. The asterisks \*, \*\* and \*\*\* stand for  $p < 0.05$ ,  $p < 0.01$  and  $p < 0.001$ , respectively.

## Results

### circ\_0013731 was elevated in hepatocellular carcinoma

To investigate the abundance of circ\_0013731, RNase R digestion was used to identify circ\_0013731 circular transcripts and MAN1A2 linear transcripts. Results shown that circ\_0013731 was more resistant to RNase R digestion than MAN1A2 and GAPDH linear transcripts (**Figure.1a**). circ\_0013731 in HCC samples (N=45) showed an increased level compared with that in normal subjects as shown in **Figure. 1b**. Histogram and pie chart of the proportions of HCC samples in which circ\_0013731 expression were downregulated (9/45, 20%, blue), no change (2/45, 4.4%, green), or upregulated (34/45, 75.6%, red) as shown in **Figure. 1c**. Then, the relative expression of circ\_0013731 in primary tumor and portal vein tumor thrombus (N=26) was detected by qRT-PCR. Results showed that an increased level in portal vein tumor thrombus than that in primary tumor (**Figure.1d**). As shown in **Figure.1e**, the expression level of circ\_0013731 was elevated in T3-T4 subjects (N=30) than that in T1-2 subjects (N=15). Moreover, the expression level of circ\_0013731 was upregulated in N1 samples (N=11) than N0 samples (N=34) (**Figure.1f**). Finally, the expression level of circ\_0013731 was also elevated in HCC cells (**Figure.1g**). Thus, the expression level of circ\_0013731 was elevated in HCC.

### The expression of circ\_0013731 was mediated by transcription factor E2F1

E2F1 is a vital transcription factors and it can upregulate the circRNA expression at transcriptional level by binding to promoter. Based on circBase (<http://www.circbase.org/>), circ\_0013731 was generated from MAN1A2 gene by back-splicing (256 bp). Four putative E2F1-binding sites on MAN1A2 promoter were found by bioinformatics prediction (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/gclib/html/index>) and that of wild type or mutant promoter was established (**Figure.2a**). Then, SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 were transfected with pcDNA3.1-E2F1 or si-E2F1. The expression level of MAN1A2 was upregulated in pcDNA3.1-E2F1 group and was downregulated in si-E2F1 group (**Figure.2b-2e**). Then, correlation analysis revealed positive correlation between the levels of MAN1A2 and E2F1 mRNA in 45 HCC samples (**Figure.2f**). Moreover, luciferase reporter assays were performed in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703. Cells were transfected by pcDNA3.1-E2F1 or si-E2F1. Results showed that luciferase activity was elevated by overexpression of E2F1 and was decreased by knockdown of E2F1 (**Figure.2g-2j**). Afterwards, ChIP-qPCR assays were performed in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 cells. We proved that putative E2F1 binding site the MAN1A2 promoter was bound to in HCC cells, IgG was used as a negative control (**Figure. 2k, 2l**). The expression levels of circ\_0013731 in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 cells transfected with pcDNA3.1-E2F1 or si-E2F1 were assessed. circ\_0013731 was positively regulated by pcDNA3.1-E2F1 and was negatively regulated by sh-circ\_0013731 in HCC cells (**Figure.2m-2p**). Finally, correlation analysis revealed positive correlation

between the levels of circ\_0013731 and E2F1 mRNA in HCC samples (N=45) (**Figure.2q**). Therefore, E2F1 increased the expression of circ\_0013731 through the binding to the MAN1A2 promoter.

### **Overexpression of circ\_0013731 promoted cell growth and inhibited ferroptosis**

The function of circ\_0125310 was furtherly investigated. LV-circ\_0013731 was transfected into HCC cells and the efficiency of LV-circ\_0013731 was detected by qRT-PCR. Results showed that the expression level of circ\_0013731 was successfully upregulated by LV- circ\_0013731 in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 cells (**Figure.3a, 3b**). EDU assays and colony formation assays indicated that LV-circ\_0013731 enhanced the growth of SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 cells (**Figure. 3c-3f**). Then, erastin or RSL3 was used to induce ferroptosis of HCC cells. Results indicated that circ\_0013731 overexpression weakening the effect of erastin or RSL3 on proliferation in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 cells (**Figure.3g, 3h**). Moreover, LV-circ\_0013731 reduced intracellular concentrations of iron and Fe<sup>2+</sup> in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 cells after treating with erastin (**Figure. 3i-3l**). Moreover, C11 BODIPY 581/591 staining coupled with flow cytometry analysis was performed. To validate the effect of circ\_0013731 on ferroptosis, SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 cells were transfected by sh-circ\_0013731. HCC cells were treated by erastin and detected after 0 (red), 4 (green), 8 (orange), 12 (blue) hours. Lipid ROS showed an increased level after transfection with sh-circ\_0013731 compared with that in negative control as shown in **Figure.3m, 3n**. Thus, circ\_0013731 promoted cell proliferation and inhibited ferroptosis in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 cells.

### **miR-877-3p was the direct target of circ\_0013731**

As shown in **Figure.4a**, we consulted bioinformatics method using <http://www.bioinf.com.cn/> and the putative binding sites of predicted miRNAs on circ\_0013731 were shown. Luciferase activity of circ\_0013731 in HCC cells transfected with five miRNA mimics was detected. Among the five candidates, the luciferase activity got the largest reduction compared with the negative control after transfection with mimic-miR-877-3p (**Figure.4b, 4c**). Moreover, the luciferase activity had a largest raise compared with the negative control after transfection with inhibitor-miR-877-3p (**Figure.4d, 4e**). Correlation analysis revealed negative correlation between the levels of circ\_0013731 and miR-877-3p in HCC samples (N=45) (**Figure.4f**). The expression levels of miR-877-3p in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 transfected with LV-circ\_0013731 or sh-circ\_0013731 were assessed. circ\_0013731 was negatively regulated by circ\_0013731 in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 (**Figure.4g-4j**). The direct binding sites between circ\_0013731 and circ\_0013731 were presented in **Figure.4k**. The luciferase reporter activity of Wt-circ\_0013731 in HCC cells co-transfected with miR-877-3p mimic was reduced while induced by the inhibitor. But, Mut-circ\_0013731 could not be increased or decreased by mimic-miR-877-3p or inhibitor-miR-877-3p (**Figure.4l, 4m**). Next, circ\_0013731 and miR-877-3p in cell lysis were greatly pulled down and biotin-coupled miR-877-3p captured a fold change of circ\_0013731 in the complex in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 (**Figure.4n, 4o**). Afterwards, RIP was performed using Ago2 antibody in HCC cells transfected with miR-877-3p mimic or mimic NC. We proved that the enrichment of circ\_0013731 was increased by circ\_0013731 mimic (**Figure.4p, 4q**). Therefore, miR-877-3p was the direct target of circ\_0013731.

## **Inhibition of miR-877-3p enhanced cell growth and inhibited ferroptosis.**

The function of miR-877-3p was furtherly explored. Inhibition-miR-877-3p was transfected into SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 cells and the efficiency of inhibition-miR-877-3p was detected by qRT-PCR. Results showed that the expression level of miR-877-3p was downregulated by inhibition-miR-877-3p in HCC cells (**Figure.5a, 5b**). EDU assays and colony formation assays indicated that inhibition-miR-877-3p enhanced the growth of SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 cells (**Figure. 5c-5f**). After treated with erastin or RSL3, HCC cells were transfected with inhibition-miR-877-3p. Results indicated that inhibition-miR-877-3p decreased the erastin-induced or RSL3-induced growth inhibition of SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 cells (**Figure.5g, 5h**). Additionally, inhibition-miR-877-3p reduced intracellular concentrations of iron and  $Fe^{2+}$  in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 cells (**Figure. 5i-5l**). Finally, lipid ROS was detected by C11 BODIPY 581/591 staining coupled with flow cytometry analysis. C11 BODIPY 581/591 staining coupled with flow cytometry analysis was performed. To validate the effect of miR-877-3p on ferroptosis, SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 cells were transfected by mimic-miR-877-3p. HCC cells were treated by erastin and detected after 0 (red), 4 (green), 8 (orange), 12 (blue) hours. Results showed that lipid ROS showed an increased level after transfection with mimic-miR-877-3p in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 cells (**Figure. 5m, 5n**). Thus, inhibition of miR-877-3p enhanced HCC cell proliferation and suppressed ferroptosis.

## **circ\_0013731 suppressed ferroptosis through miR-877-3p /SLC7A11 axis**

Next, six genes predicted by Targetscan ([http://www.targetscan.org/vert\\_72/](http://www.targetscan.org/vert_72/)) were screened in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 transfected with inhibition-miR-877-3p. Among these candidates, SLC7A11 expression got the largest upregulation compared with the negative control after transfection with inhibition-miR-877-3p (**Figure.6a, 6b**). Then, the protein expression of SLC7A11 in HCC cells was negatively modulated by inhibition-miR-877-3p (**Figure.6c, 6d**). The direct binding sites predicted by Targetscan between miR-877-3p and SLC7A11 were presented in **Figure.6e**. The luciferase reporter activity of Wt-SLC7A11 in HCC cells co-transfected with inhibition-miR-877-3p was upregulated, while Mut-SLC7A11 could not be increased by inhibitor-miR-877-3p (**Figure.6f, 6g**). Correlation analysis revealed negative correlation between the levels of miR-877-3p and SLC7A11 in HCC samples (N=45) (**Figure.6h**). Then, the relationship between circ\_0013731 and SLC7A11 was investigated. In **Figure. 6i**, the protein expression level of SLC7A11 was enhanced by LV- circ\_0013731. Moreover, the luciferase reporter activity of Wt-SLC7A11 was increased by LV-circ\_0013731, but Mut-SLC7A11 could not be increased by inhibitor-miR-877-3p (**Figure.6j, 6k**). Then, SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 were treated with LV-circ\_0013731 or mimic-miR-877-3p. The protein expression level of SLC7A11 was induced by LV-circ\_0013731, which could be reduced by mimic-miR-877-3p (**Figure.6l, 6m**). C11 BODIPY 581/591 staining coupled with flow cytometry analysis was performed. HCC cells were divided into four groups: LV-circ\_0013731+mimic-NC (orange), LV-circ\_0013731+ mimic-miR-877-3p (red), LV-NC+mimic.NC (green), LV-NC+ mimic-miR-877-3p (blue). As shown in **Figure.6n and 6o**, the lipid ROS expression level was decreased by LV-circ\_0013731, which could be reduced by mimic-miR-877-3p. Then, intracellular concentrations of iron in HCC cells transfected with LV-circ\_0013731 or mimic-miR-877-3p. Results showed that intracellular concentrations of iron were downregulated by LV-circ\_0013731, which could be upregulated by mimic-miR-877-3p (**Figure.6p, 6q**).

Therefore, above results indicated that circ\_0013731 inhibited ferroptosis through miR-877-3p /SLC7A11 axis.

### **circ\_0013731 promoted HCC growth in vivo**

Then, in vivo assays were carried out to assess the effect of circ\_0013731 on HCC progression. The xenograft tumor models of HCC were constructed by using SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 cells infected with LV-circ\_0013731, sh-circ\_0013731 and negative control (every group=4). A picture of the xenograft is shown in **Figure.7a**. The weight of the xenografts was calculated. The xenograft tumor was significantly heavier in the LV-circ\_0013731 group than that in the LV-NC group (**Figure.7b**). The xenograft tumor was significantly lighter in the sh-circ\_0013731 group than that in the sh-NC group (**Figure.7c**). The sizes of the xenograft in the LV-circ\_0013731 and sh-circ\_0013731 groups were calculated every 7 days. circ\_0013731 overexpression promoted tumor growth and circ\_0013731 knockdown suppressed tumor growth (**Figure.7d-7g**). Moreover, the miR-877-3p /SLC7A11 axis was determined. The expression level of miR-877-3p was downregulated in the LV-circ\_0013731 group, whereas that was upregulated in the sh-circ\_0013731 group. The expression level of SLC7A11 was upregulated in the LV-circ\_0013731 group, whereas that was downregulated in the sh-circ\_0013731 group (**Figure.7h-7k**). Moreover, the expression level of SLC7A11 was measured in each group tissues by IHC or IF assays. Results showed that SLC7A11 expression was upregulated in the LV-circ\_0013731 group, whereas that was downregulated in the sh-circ\_0013731 group (**Figure.7l-7o**). Finally, a schematic diagram of mechanism of circ\_0013731/ miR-877-3p /SLC7A11 in HCC progression was provided in **Figure.7p**.

## **Discussion**

In this study, we discovered that circ\_0013731 was increased in the HCC tissues and HCC cell lines. circ\_0013731 greatly promoted proliferation and suppressed ferroptosis in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 cells. Moreover, we found that E2F1 enhanced the expression of circ\_0013731 through the binding to the circ\_0013731 promoter. miR-877-3p was predicted as the target of circ\_0013731. We verified the direct association between circ\_0013731 and miR-877-3p. Inhibition of miR-877-3p enhanced HCC cell growth and inhibited ferroptosis. Then, SLC7A11 was predicted as the downstream target for miR-877-3p. circ\_0013731 in HCC could promote growth and suppressed ferroptosis by sponging miR-877-3p and regulating SLC7A11 expression.

The occurrence and development of tumors is closely associated with deficiencies in programmed cell death [24, 25]. Because of uncontrolled growth, tumor cells have a higher demand for iron than normal cells. Ferroptosis is the form of iron-dependent cell death, which is distinct from necroptosis and apoptosis [26, 27]. Thus, tumor cell is more susceptible to ferroptosis than normal cell because of abnormal iron metabolism [21, 28]. Increasing evidences have showed that ferroptosis acts important roles in HCC treatment. Ferroptosis is a vital part of mechanisms for sorafenib, which is first line therapy for HCC [29]. LDL-DHA nanoparticles, a potential new drug for HCC, cause ferroptosis in HCC tissues [30]. Thus, the role of circ\_0013731 in ferroptosis of HCC captured our attention.

It has been elucidated that circ\_0013731 expression is increased in HCC tissues and cells. Furtherly, the upstream regulators of circ\_0013731 was investigated. Predicted by GCBI (<https://www.gcbi.com.cn/gclib/html/index>), E2F1, a vital transcription factor for circRNA, was chosen as the upstream regulators of circ\_0013731. Our finding elucidated that E2 upregulated the circ\_0013731 expression via binding to the circ\_0013731 promoter. Then, overexpression of circ\_0013731 in HCC inhibited cell growth and ferroptosis. Competing endogenous RNAs (ceRNA) is one of main molecular mechanisms for circRNA [31, 32]. Thus, the potential downstream miRNAs of circ\_0013731 was investigated by bioinformatics method. miR-877-3p was confirmed as a target of circ\_0013731. The role of miR-877-3p in HCC is unknown. We discovered that inhibition miR-877-3p could promote the HCC cell proliferation and repress the ferroptosis.

Solute carrier family 7 membrane 11 (SLC7A11) is a key coding gene of cystine/glutamate antiporter system xc- [33, 34]. SLC7A11 promotes the synthesis of glutathione by mediating cystine uptake and glutamate release. Through the above way, SLC7A11 protects cells from oxidative stress, maintains the redox balance of cells, and prevents cell death induced by lipid peroxidation [35, 36]. Iron regulates the transcription of SLC7A11 by ROS-Nrf2-ARE axis. It was confirmed that SLC7A11 could inhibit the cell iron death induced by iron overload in murine models [37]. SLC7A11 was confirmed as a target of miR-877-3p. Moreover, we discovered that the expression level of SLC7A11 was induced by circ\_0013731, which could be reduced by mimic-miR-877-3p. Therefore, circ\_0013731 up-regulated the expression level of SLC7A11 by sponging miR-877-3p in HCC cells. Finally, effect of circ\_0013731 on HCC was detected in xenograft tumor models. Our data showed that circ\_0013731 promoted HCC growth and regulated miR-877-3p/SLC7A11 axis in vivo.

In this study, we further verified that circ\_0013731 has oncogenic roles in HCC progression. Thus, our data discovered that circ\_0013731/miR-877-3p/SLC7A11 regulatory loop may be potential therapeutic targets for HCC.

## Conclusions

In summary, circ\_0013731 is identified an important regulator in HCC. circ\_0013731 is up-regulated by E2F1 and promoted cell growth in HCC. Furthermore, circ\_0013731 suppresses the ferroptosis by regulation of miR-877-3p/ SLC7A11 axis. Thus, circ\_0013731 could be acted as potential therapeutical target for HCC.

## Abbreviations

HCC: hepatocellular carcinoma; MicroRNAs: miRNAs; EdU: ethynyl deoxyuridine; RIP: RNA immunoprecipitation.

## Declarations

## **Ethics approval and consent to participate**

The study was carried out under the approval by the Ethics Committee of Affiliated Lishui Hospital of Zhejiang University. Participants all provided their informed written consent. And all animal experiments were under the Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals of the National Institutes of Health.

## **Consent for publication**

Not applicable.

## **Availability of data and materials**

The data supporting the conclusions of this article are available from the corresponding author on request.

## **Competing interests**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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## **Authors' contributions**

JJ contributed to conception, design and revision of the manuscript sections; ZZ and JS performed the experiments and wrote the manuscript; DZ, FW and JT collected the data and did the analysis; MX providing critical feedback and revision. All authors approved the final manuscript.

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Not applicable.

## **Authors' information (optional)**

Not applicable.

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## Figures

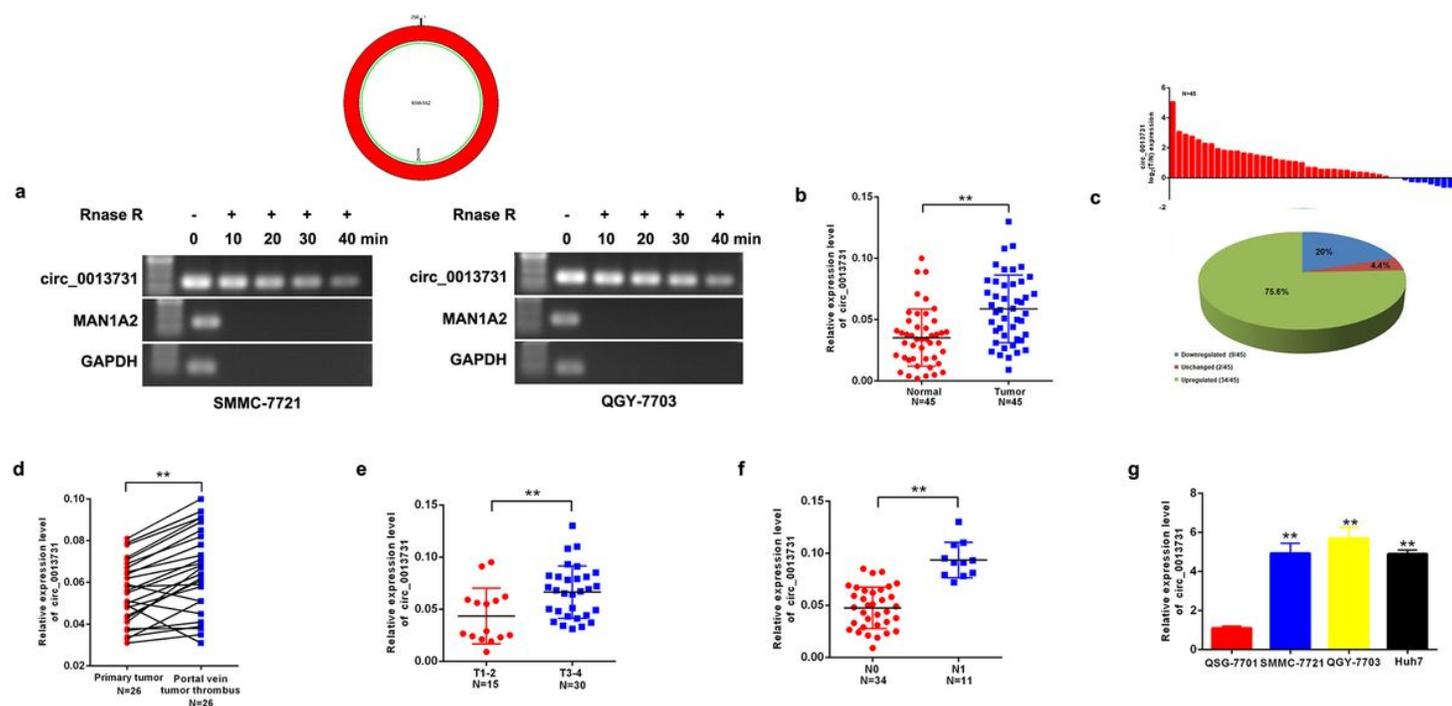
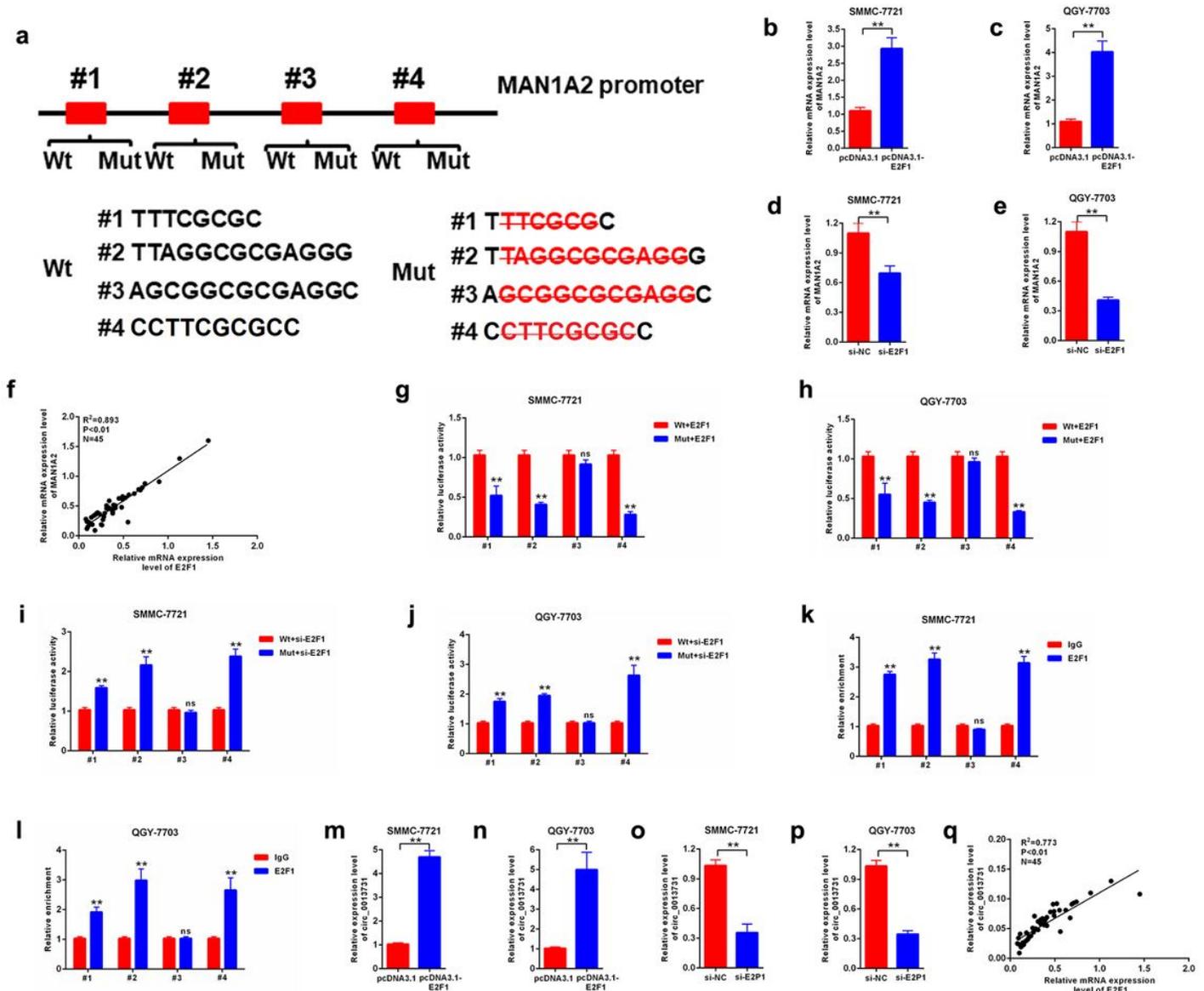


Figure 1

circ\_0013731 was upregulated in hepatocellular carcinoma a Validation of circ\_0013731 in HCC cells by RNase R treatment and reverse transcription PCR analysis. b,c Left: expression levels of circ\_0013731 in additional 45 paired samples of HCC were determined by qRT-PCR. Right: histogram and pie chart of the proportions of HCC samples in which circ\_0013731 expression was downregulated (9/45, 20%, blue), no change (2/45, 4.4%, green), or upregulated (34/45, 75.6%, red). d Expression levels of circ\_0013731 in primary tumor and portal vein tumor thrombus (N=26). e Expression levels of circ\_0013731 in T1-2 and T3-4 (N=45). f Expression levels of circ\_0013731 in N0 and N1 (N=45). g Expression levels of circ\_0013731 in HCC cell lines.



**Figure 2**

E2F1 enhanced the expression of circ\_0013731 through the binding to the MAN1A2 promoter a Schematic illustration of wild type (Wt) and mutant (Mut) sequences of four putative binding sites of E2F1 on MAN1A2 promoter are shown. b-e The expression of MAN1A2 was detected in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 transfected with E2F1 overexpression plasmids or siRNAs targeting E2F1 by qRT-PCR. f

Correlation analysis revealed positive correlation between the levels of MAN1A2 and E2F1 mRNA in the tumorous tissues of the 45 HCC patients. g-j The relative luciferase activities were detected in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 co-transfected with luciferase reporter plasmids containing wild type or mutant MAN1A2 promoter sequence and overexpression or siRNA of E2F1. k,l ChIP-qPCR assays were performed to determine which putative E2F1 binding site the MAN1A2 promoter was bound to in HCC cells, IgG was used as a negative control. m-p The circ\_0013731 expression was valued in HCC cells transfected with E2F1 overexpression plasmids or si-E2F1 by qRT-PCR. q Correlation analysis revealed positive correlation between the levels of circ\_0013731 and E2F1 mRNA in the tumorous tissues of the 45 HCC patients.

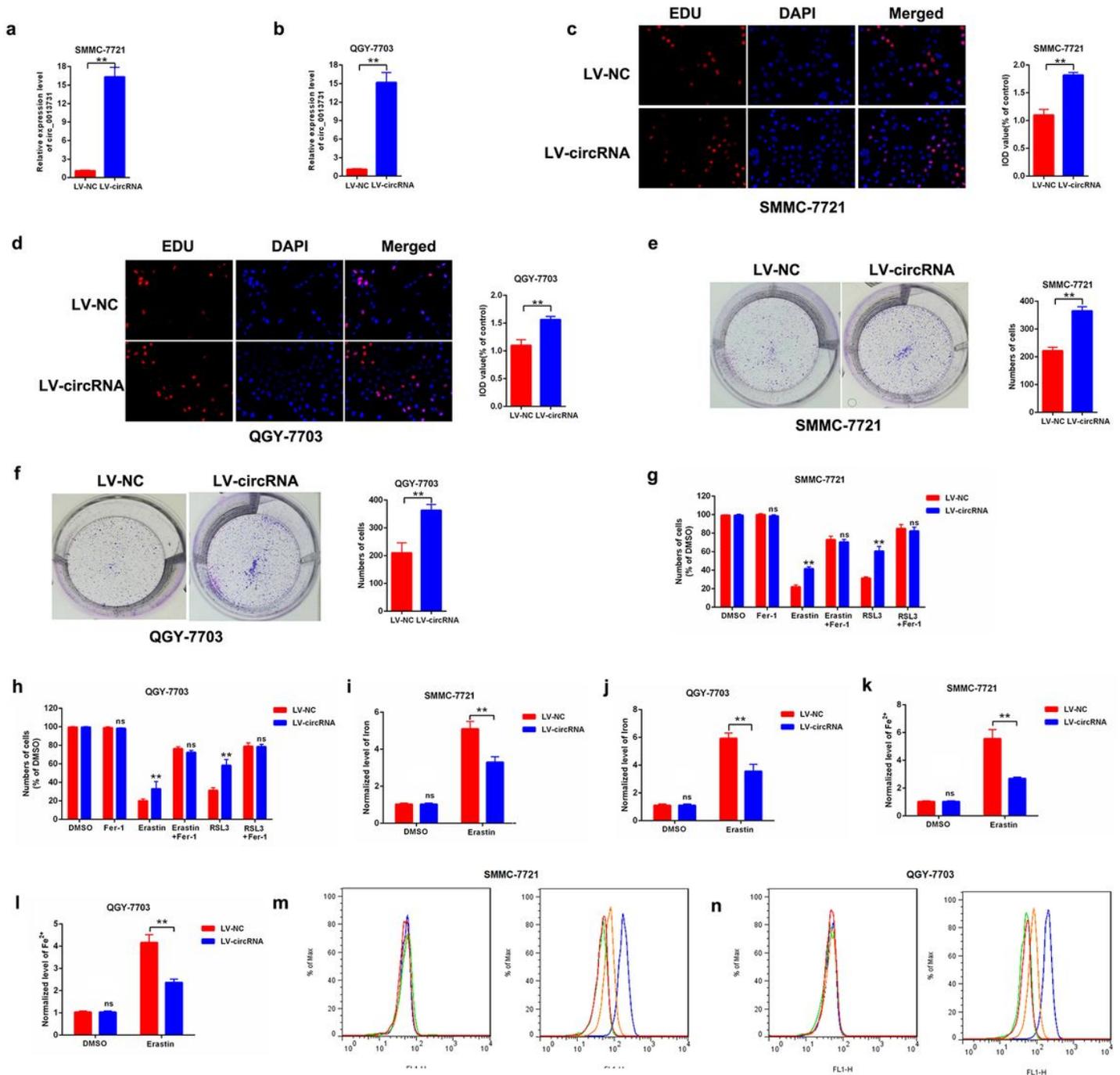


Figure 3

Overexpression of circ\_0013731 promoted cell growth and inhibited ferroptosis a,b qRT-PCR analysis was conducted to detect the level of LV-circ\_0013731 in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703. c,d Proliferating mesangial cells were labeled with EdU. HCC cells were treated with LV-circ\_0013731. e,f Colony-formation assay of SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 cells overexpressing circ\_0013731. g,h MTT assays were used to analyze the responses of SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 cells overexpressing circ\_0013731 to ferrostatin (2.0  $\mu$ M), erastin (10.0  $\mu$ M), and RSL3 (2.0  $\mu$ M). i-l Total iron (i,j), ferrous iron (k,l) were analyzed in HCC cells by overexpressing circ\_0013731. m,n HCC cells transfected with sh-circ\_0013731 were treated with erastin (10  $\mu$ M) for 0 (red), 4 (green), 8 (orange), 12 (blue) hours and the accumulation of lipid ROS was assessed by C11 BODIPY 581/591 staining coupled with flow cytometry analysis.

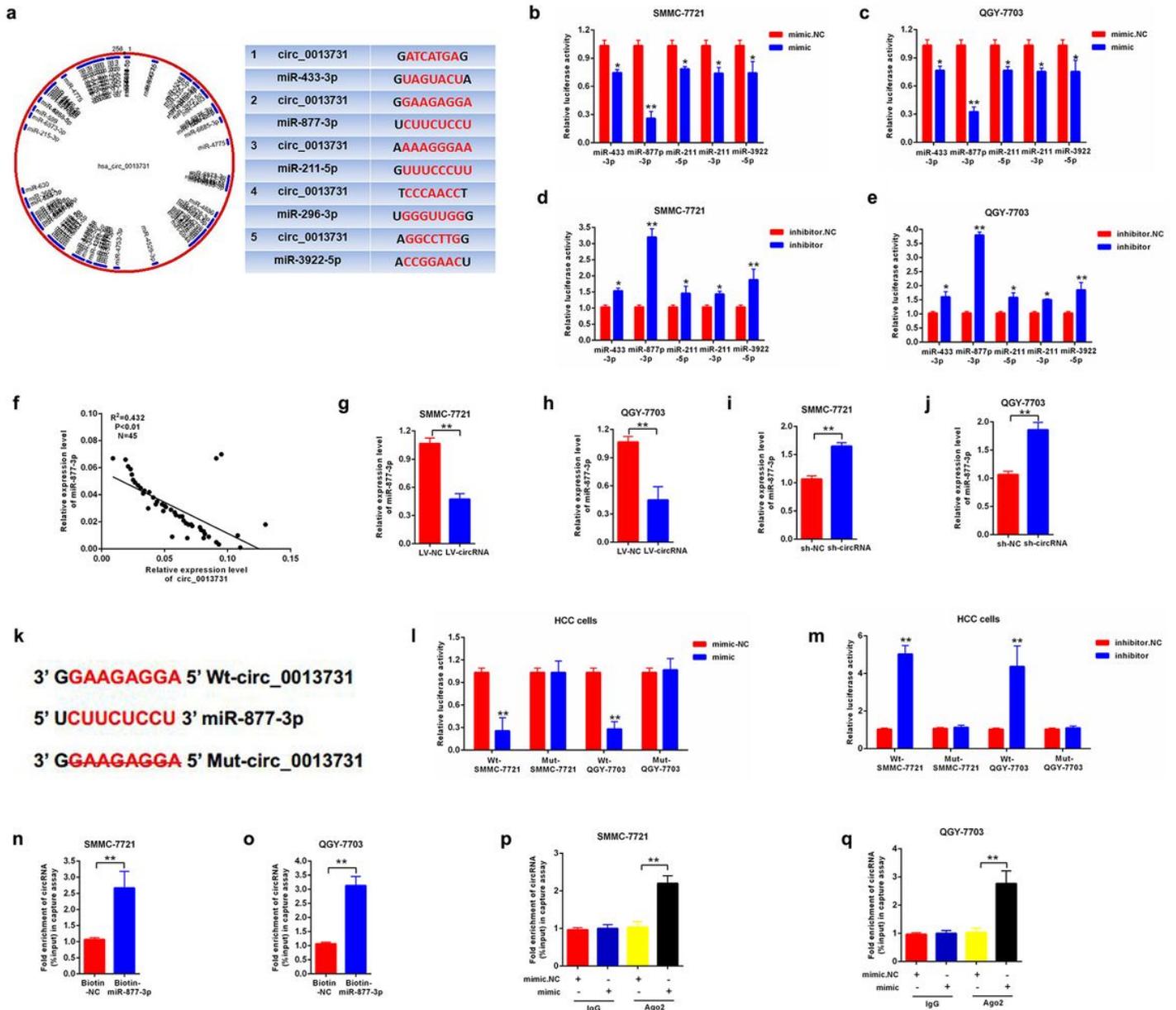
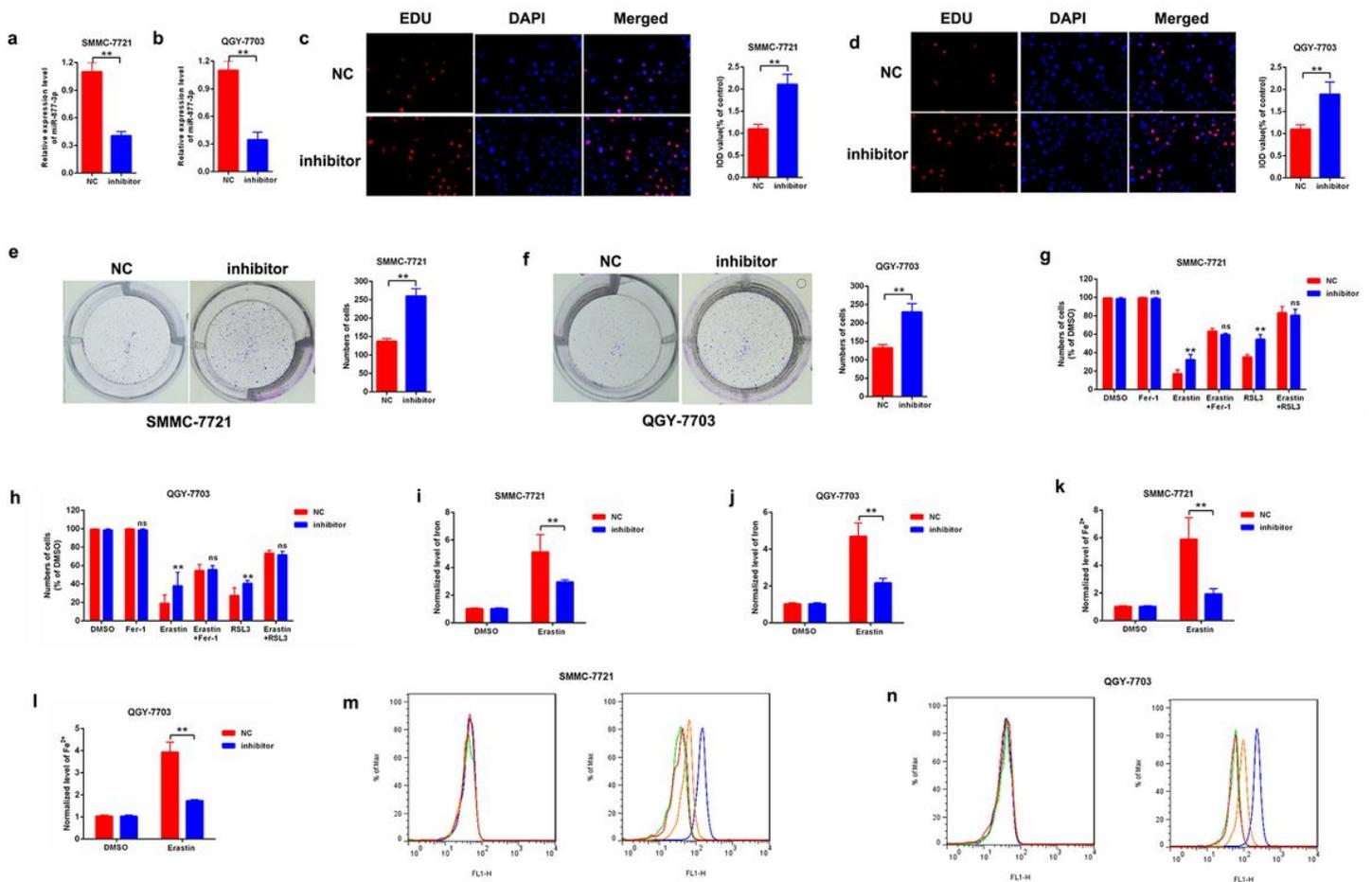


Figure 4

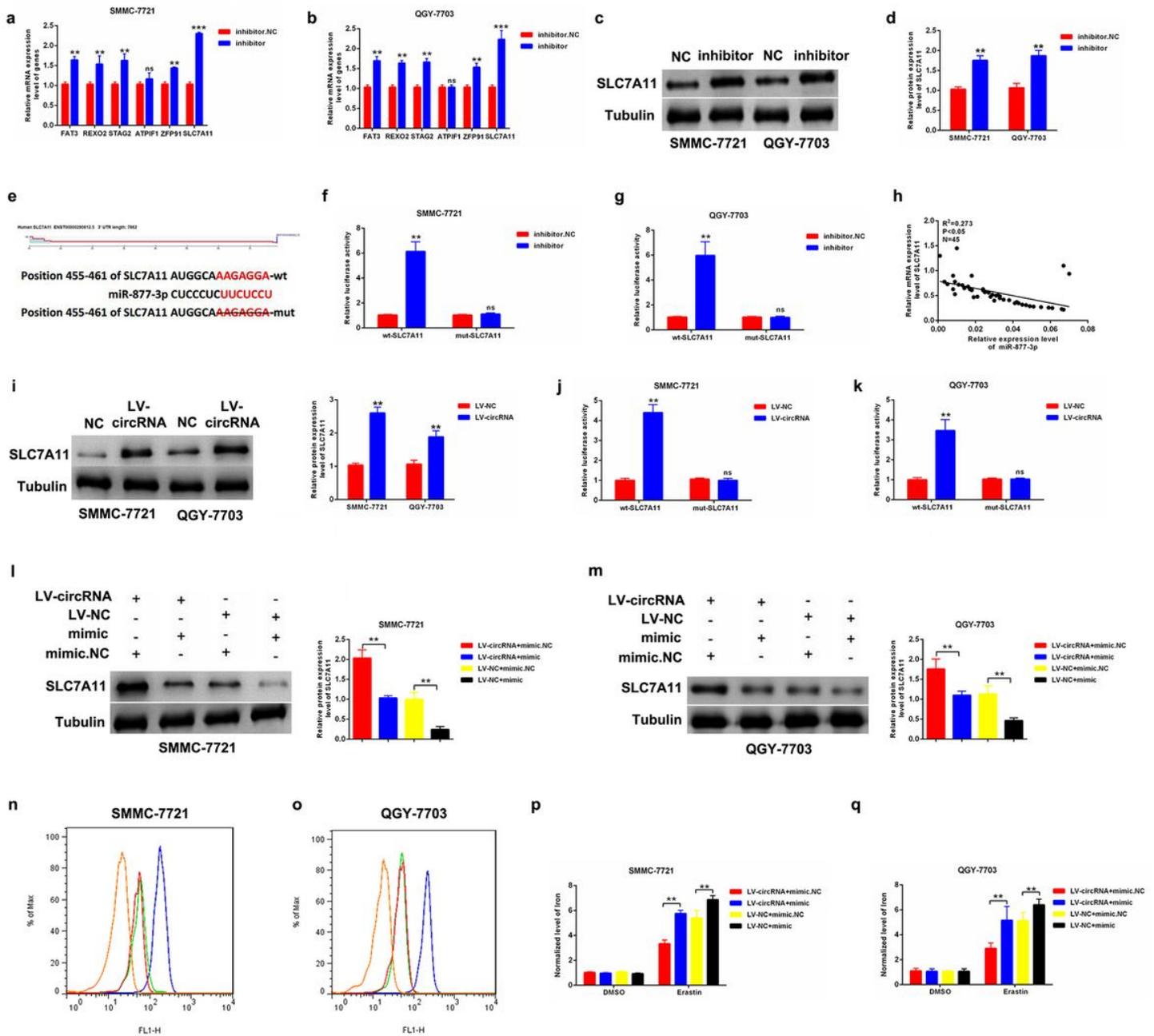
circ\_0013731 functioned as a sponge for miR-877-3p. Schematic illustrations of sequences of five putative binding sites of circ\_0013731 on potential target miRNAs are shown. b-e The relative luciferase activities were detected in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 co-transfected with luciferase reporter plasmids containing binding sites sequence and mimic or inhibitor. f Correlation analysis revealed positive correlation between the levels of circ\_0013731 and miR-877-3p in the tumorous tissues of the 45 HCC patients. g-j The expression of miR-877-3p was detected in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 transfected with LV-circ\_0013731 or sh-circ\_0013731 by qRT-PCR. k The wild or mutant binding sites sequence of circ\_0013731 and miR-877-3p were showed. l,m The relative luciferase activities were detected in HCC co-transfected with pGL3-circ\_0013731-wt, pGL3-circ\_0013731-mut or mimic-miR-877-3p. n,o RNA pull-down with a biotin-labeled circ\_0013731 probe was implemented in HCC cells, followed by qRT-PCR and RT-PCR to test the enrichment of circ\_0013731 and miR-877-3p. p,q RIP was performed using AGO2 antibody in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 transfected with miR-877-3p mimics or mimics NC, then the enrichment of circ\_0013731 was detected.



**Figure 5**

Inhibition of miR-877-3p enhanced cell growth and inhibited ferroptosis. a,b qRT-PCR analysis was conducted to detect the level of inhibitor-miR-877-3p in HCC cells. c,d Proliferating mesangial cells were labeled with EdU. HCC cells were treated with inhibitor-miR-877-3p. e,f Colony-formation assay of SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 cells were treated with inhibitor-miR-877-3p. g,h MTT assays were used to analyze

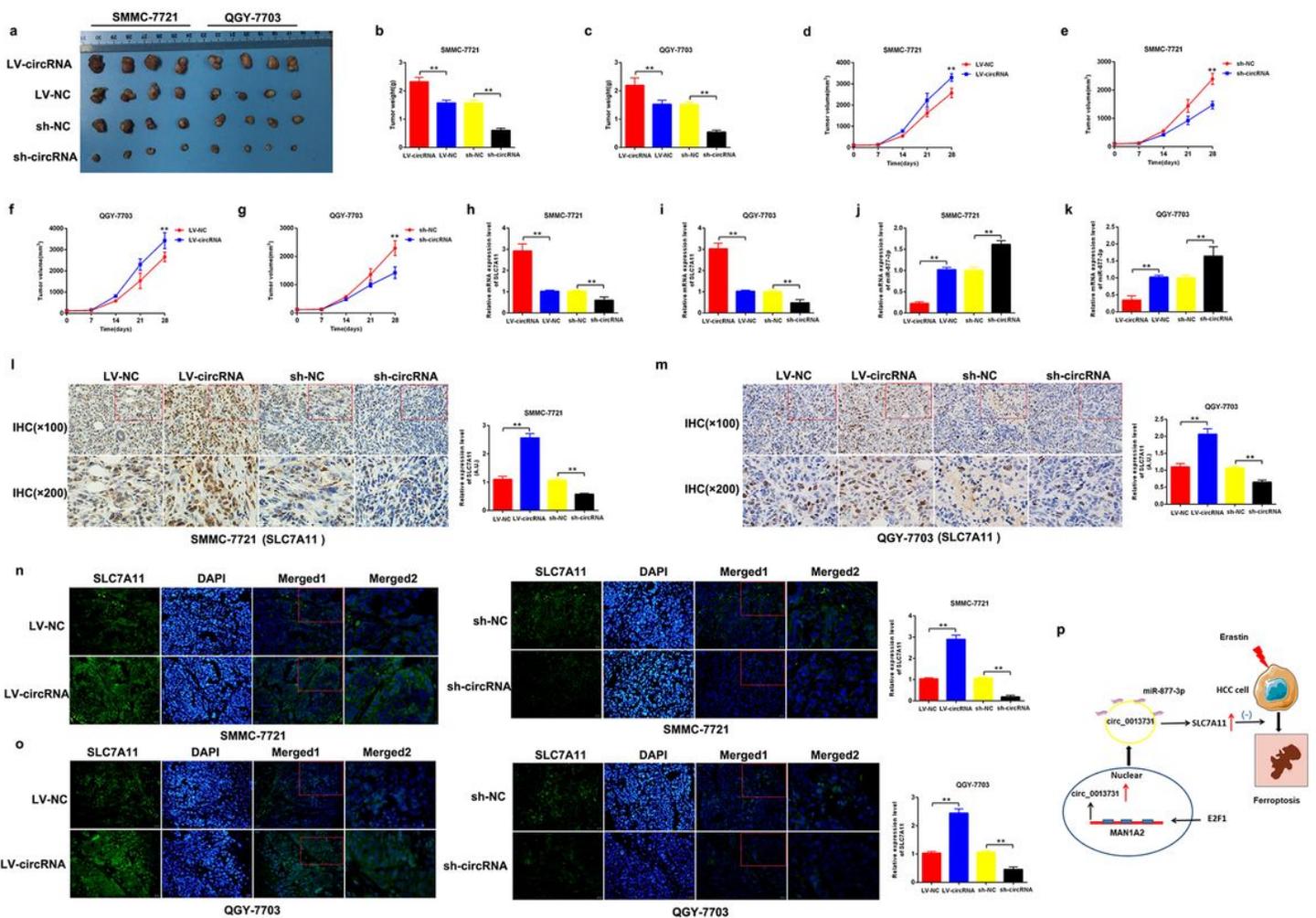
the responses of SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 cells inhibitor-miR-877-3p to ferrostatin (2.0  $\mu$ M), erastin (10.0  $\mu$ M), and RSL3 (2.0  $\mu$ M). i-l Total iron (i,j), ferrous iron (k,l) were analyzed in HCC cells by inhibition of miR-877-3p. m,n HCC cells transfected with mimic-miR-877-3p were treated with erastin (10  $\mu$ M) for 0 (red), 4 (green), 8 (orange), 12 (blue) hours and the accumulation of lipid ROS was assessed by C11 BODIPY 581/591 staining coupled with flow cytometry analysis.



**Figure 6**

circ\_0013731 suppressed ferroptosis through miR-877-3p / SLC7A11 axis a,b Six potential target genes of miR-877-3p were screened by qRT-PCR in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 transfected by inhibitor-miR-877-3p. c,d Western blot was conducted to determine the expression of SLC7A11 in HCC cells after transfection with inhibitor-miR-877-3p. e The wild or mutant binding sites sequence of SLC7A11 and miR-877-3p were

shown. f,g The relative luciferase activities were detected in HCC cells co-transfected with pGL3-SLC7A11-wt, pGL3-SLC7A11-mut or inhibitor-miR-877-3p. h Correlation analysis revealed positive correlation between the levels of miR-877-3p and SLC7A11 HCC tissues. i The protein expression level of SLC7A11 was detected in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 transfected by LV-circ\_0013731. j,k The relative luciferase activities were detected in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 co-transfected with pGL3-SLC7A11-wt, pGL3-SLC7A11-mut, or circ\_0013731. l,m HCC cells were transfected by LV-circ\_0013731 or mimic-miR-877-3p. The protein expression level of SLC7A11 was detected in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 transfected. n,o HCC cells were divided into four groups: LV-circ\_0013731+mimic-NC (orange), LV-circ\_0013731+mimic-miR-877-3p (red), LV-NC+mimic.NC (green), LV-NC+mimic-miR-877-3p (blue). C11 BODIPY 581/591 staining was performed. HCC cells treated by erastin (10  $\mu$ M) were co-transfected by LV-circ\_0013731 or mimic-miR-877-3p. p,q Ferrous iron was detected in SMMC-7721 and QGY-7703 co-transfected with LV-circ\_0013731 or mimic-miR-877-3p.



**Figure 7**

circ\_0013731 facilitated HCC growth in vivo a The representative images of xenograft tumor in each group were displayed (N= 4). b,c Tumor weight of was analyzed in each group. d-g Tumor volumes were measured once a week in each group. h,i The expression level of SLC7A11 was measured in each group tissues by qRT-PCR analysis. j,k The expression level of miR-877-3p was measured in each group. l-o The

expression level of SLC7A11 was measured in each group tissues by IHC or IF assays. p Schematic diagram of mechanism on this research was showed.