Computational Methods for Enzyme Design and Its Biological Significance

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Abstract: Enzymes are large biological molecules responsible for the thousands of metabolic processes that sustain life. They are highly selective catalysts, greatly accelerating both the rate and specificity of metabolic reactions, from the digestion of food to the synthesis of DNA. Most enzymes are proteins, although some catalytic RNA molecules have been identified. Enzymes adopt a specific three-dimensional structure, and may employ organic (e.g. biotin) and inorganic (e.g. magnesium ion) cofactors to assist in catalysis. Multiple experimental approaches have been applied to generate nearly all possible mutations of target enzymes, allowing the identification of desirable variants with improved properties to meet the practical needs. Meanwhile, an increasing number of computational methods have been developed to assist in the modification of enzymes during the past few decades. With the development of bioinformatics algorithms, computational approaches are now able to provide more precise guidance for enzyme engineering and make it more efficient and less laborious. In this review, we summarize the recent advances of method development with significant biological outcomes to provide important insights into successful computational protein

Keyword: Enzymes, computational approaches

I. INTRODUCTION

Enzymes are large biological molecules responsible for the thousands of metabolic processes that sustain life.[1][2] They are highly selective catalysts, greatly accelerating both the rate and specificity of metabolic reactions, from the digestion of food to the synthesis of DNA. Most enzymes are proteins, although some catalytic RNA molecules have been identified. Enzymes adopt a specific three-dimensional structure, and may employ organic (e.g. biotin) and inorganic (e.g. magnesium ion) cofactors to assist in catalysis.

In enzymatic reactions, the molecules at the beginning of the process, called substrates, are converted into different molecules, called products. Almost all chemical reactions in a biological cell need enzymes in order to occur at rates sufficient for life. Since enzymes are selective for their substrates and speed up only a few reactions from among many possibilities, the set of enzymes made in a cell determines which metabolic pathways occur in that cell.

Like all catalysts, enzymes work by lowering the activation energy (Ea‡) for a reaction, thus dramatically increasing the rate of the reaction. As a result, products are formed faster and reactions reach their equilibrium state more rapidly. Most enzyme reaction rates are millions of times faster than those of comparable un-catalyzed reactions.

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As with all catalysts, enzymes are not consumed by the reactions they catalyze, nor do they alter the equilibrium of these reactions. However, enzymes do differ from most other catalysts in that they are highly specific for their substrates. Enzymes are known to catalyze about 4,000 biochemical reactions.[3] A few RNA molecules called ribozymes also catalyze reactions, with an important example being some parts of the ribosome.[4][5] Synthetic molecules called artificial enzymes also display enzyme-like catalysis.[6]

Enzyme activity can be affected by other molecules. Inhibitors are molecules that decrease enzyme activity; activators are molecules that increase activity. Many drugs and poisons are enzyme inhibitors. Activity is also affected by temperature, pressure, chemical environment (e.g., pH), and the concentration of substrate. Some enzymes are used commercially, for example, in the synthesis of antibiotics. In addition, some household products use enzymes to speed up biochemical reactions (e.g., enzymes in biological washing powders break down protein or fat stains on clothes; enzymes in meat tenderizers break down proteins into smaller molecules, making the meat easier to chew. Rational design, the earliest approach applied to the modification of enzymes [3-5], requires the availability of detailed structural information and catalytic mechanism of the targets. Computational tools have been developed to deal with a large number of data produced in rational enzyme design. In the meanwhile, such development leads to the emergence of "de novo computational design" approach [6], which commonly refers to the generation of novel protein scaffolds or enzymatic activity. Limited but exciting goals have been achieved in this field [7-9], making de novo computational design a promising approach in enzyme engineering. As another common methodology, directed evolution, was only applied to improve desired properties of enzymes recently [10, 11], but it has quickly become a powerful and popular tool in enzyme engineering [12]. Nevertheless, the bottleneck of directed evolution lies in the development of an efficient high-throughput screening technology, despite that there are quite a few successful examples that used directed evolution to modify important enzymes Consequently, the commercial combined approaches involving rational or de novo design with directed evolution may offer significant advantages over individual approaches [8].

In paper, we highlight the strengths of a number of effective computational methodologies/tools that can assist in the rational and de novo enzyme design (see Figure 2). Successful examples, especially those concerning improvement of enzymatic activity and stability, which are the most important properties from a practical perspective, are discussed in the following respective sections.

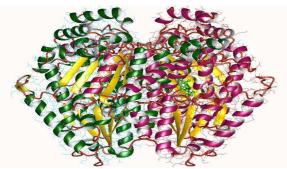


Figure 1: Natural Enzyme

II. DESIGN AND TOOLS

The success of rational design depends on our in-depth knowledge about sequence and structure features of target proteins. A popular strategy to identify functionally related residues of unknown targets is the use of sequence features. Analysis of these features can provide enough information about evolutionary relationship, functional sites, correlated mutations and so on. The most useful tools for extracting sequence information are multiple sequence alignment (MSA) and coevolutionary analysis while the latter sometimes requires structural information. As a matter of fact, structure-based design is no doubt more efficient to locate key residues, because the execution of the protein function is directly linked with the maintenance of the 3D structure in functionally related regions. Structure-based rational design can benefit considerably from the rapidly growing number of solved protein structures, however, these account for only a small portion of naturally occurring proteins. To make a better use of structural information, 3D structure prediction or analysis tools are extremely important and greatly desired. Fortunately, a variety of computational methodologies/tools have been available to facilitate processing and data analysis, which have significantly contributed to the progress of rational enzyme design. Among them, several noteworthy tools are discussed below.

III. CO EVOLUTIONARY ANALYSIS

Coevolution (also known as covariation, correlated mutation or co-substitution) refers to "reciprocal evolutionary change in evolutionarily interacting loci" [43], and occurs at many levels in biologyIn this review, only the correlated mutations between amino acids within a protein are discussed. Coevolutionary analysis methods have a number of important applications in the prediction of protein structure identification of functional sites and candidate design sites. The identified coevolving residues have been experimentally validated in some studies implying the potential application of coevolutionary analysis in rational enzyme design.

In the past few decades, a number of coevolutionary analysis algorithms have been developed [56]. These methods share a common procedure of three steps: MSA construction, coevolutionary measure calculation and experimental validation. Most coevolutionary analyses start with the construction of an MSA of the query protein. Although certain automatic software can be applied (see Table 1), manual refinement, including filtering of sequences with large gaps, low homology or wrong annotation, is often required to ensure a high-quality MSA [57]. The second step is to calculate coevolutionary

measures, which can be done by using different correlated mutation algorithms, followed by statistical significance tests and analyses to extract significant convolution values, eliminate background noise [58] and evaluate the performance and robustness of the convolution measures [59]. Finally, "wet" experiments need to be performed to validate the obtained co evolutionary results. experimental scientists, co evolutionary web servers seem to be more straightforward, attractive and practical. Up to now, several online tools have been made publicly available [56, 60]. However, how to choose an optimal scoring function of co evolutionary measures in the second step remains to be a critical factor that will determine the quality of co evolutionary analysis. To address this, Fodor et al. [61] assessed the performance of four different methods in detecting co evolutionary site, namely Statistical Coupling Analysis (SCA) [62], Observed Minus Expected Squared (OMES) [63], McMahan Based Substitution correlation (McBASC) [64] and Mutual Information (MI) [57]. In their research, OMES and McBASC were found to outperform the other two algorithms in favoring poorly conserved residue pairs and decreasing sensitivity to background conservation, and were of considerable similarity in Sensitivity to background noise. The OMES-based programs, OMES-KASS [63] and Fodor package [61], which were more recently developed, have been applied to perform reliable co evolutionary analysis.

Yip et al. developed an integrated online program by embedding several coevolutionary algorithms into one system instead of using a single algorithm only. These algorithms include SCA, MI, Explicit Likelihood of Subset Variation (ELSC) [68] and correlation-based methods [64, 69], making this system a convenient comparative analysis tool of different co evolutionary methods. The integrated system also provides an MSA preprocessing option to further improve its performance. In addition, users can also choose to treat the gaps in the MSA as noise or as an additional 21st residue, based on the observation that gaps might contain important co evolutionary information [60]. Despite the functional significance, how to combine co evolutionary analysis with rational enzyme design remains a challenging issue. In 2011, Zeng and colleagues applied SCA to analyze the sequences of the regulatory domains of the aspartokinase (AK) family to characterize the allotter interaction network [53] and integrated such information with rational enzyme design. AK is the central enzyme in the biosynthesis of aspartate family amino acids, and the allotter inhibition of AK by end-products obstructs the [70]. As a result, their co evolutionary analysis of 500 sequences from the AK family identified 25 highly correlated positions, in which 14 sites were mutated to construct AK mutants of C.glutamicum. All the mutants showed resistance to allosteric inhibition to different extents, suggesting that the choice of target mutations was largely successful. In this study, a major strategy was to select residues that had the potential to interrupt allosteric interaction, whereas in researches that aim to modify other properties of enzymes, amino acidsites that regulate the target property can probably be selected as candidates according to expert knowledge or structural analysis. There were two general rules to mutate the wild-type amino acids at the selected sites: (i) mutating the wild-type amino acids to those with less usage frequency at the corresponding positions; (ii) or substituting the wild- type amino acids by those with different chemical properties with the purpose of making

more obvious changes in terms of the target properties [53]. In another work of Chen and co-workers, AK3 from Escherichia coli was investigated via an integrative analysis of convolution and molecular dynamics (MD) [71].

IV. D STRUCTURE OF PROTEIN

There are an increasing number of proteins with highresolution solved 3D structures, greatly facilitating the rational and computational protein design. Numerous previous successes have shown that when 3D structural information is available, protein design can be much more precise and accurate [18, 72, 73]. It is apparent that the knowledge of 3D structure of the target enzyme is a prerequisite and foundation for structure-based design. Although only a small portion of proteins have authentic crystal structures, those with unknown structure information can be reliably modeled via protein 3D structure prediction software, provided that there is a known structure of one or several homologous proteins to the target protein [74, 75]. According to the availability of template structures, protein 3D structure prediction can be generally divided into two categories: homology modelling and ab initio modelling. The former refers to the construction of an atomic-resolution model of a protein from its primary sequence using the

experimentally solved 3D structure of a homologous protein as the "template", while the latter is called "free modelling" or "de novo modelling" in some cases, referring to 3D structure prediction generated from scratch when structural analogs are not available or detectable. The majority of methods used in homology modelling can be further grouped into two types: comparative modelling (CM) [76] and threading [77]. The root mean square deviation (rmsd) of a CM constructed model from the structure obtained from experiments can usually achieve 1-2 Å when a highly sequence identity) template is homologous (>30% employed. Models with such accuracy can compete with the low- resolution X-ray or medium-resolution NMR structures [78]. In contrast, the threading approach usually has a remarkable performance when dealing with target protein modelling using relatively distant templates, and the corresponding rmsd is 2-6Å [79] with most errors occurring in loops. Ab initio modelling, however, continues to be the most challenging topic in protein 3D structure prediction. Although there has been an exciting progress in modelling small proteins, no substantial progress has been achieved in de novo structure prediction of proteins with more than 150 residues [80]. In view of this, we mainly focus on the homology modelling methods in this mini-review.

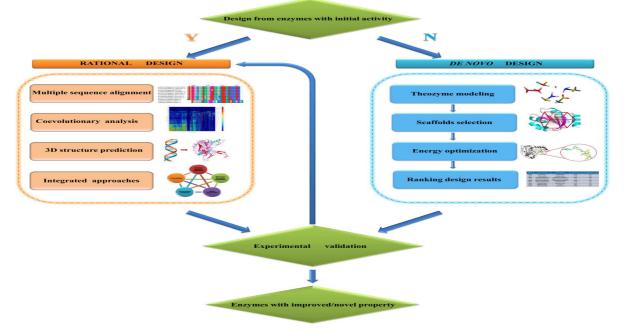


Figure 2. Strategies of rational and de novo enzyme design

Programs	Application	URL address	Operating system	Ref.
Rational design progr		<u> </u>		
ClustalW		http://www.clustal.org/clustal2/	Windows, Linux, MacOS	[27, 122]
ClustalOmega	Multiple sequence alignment	http://www.clustal.org/omega/	Windows, Linux, MacOS	[30]
Maffe		http://mafft.cbrc.jp/alignment/software/	Windows, Linux, MacOS	[32, 37, 39]
T-Coffee		http://www.tcoffee.org/Projects/tcoffee/	Linux, MacOS	[123]
Muscle		http://www.drive5.com/muscle/	Windows, Linux, MacOS	[33]
Integrated system		http://coevolution.gersteinlab.org/coevolution/	Windows, Linux, MacOS	[60]
OMES-KASS	Coevolutionary analysis	http://bip.weizmann.ac.il/correlated_mutations/	Linux	[63]
Fodor package		http://www.afodor.net/	Windows, Linux, MacOS	[61]
Swiss-Model		http://swissmodel.expasy.org/		[124, 125]
HHpred2	3D structure prediction	http://toolkit.tuebingen.mpg.de/hhpred	-	[83]
I-TASSER		http://zhanglab.ccmb.med.umich.edu/FTASSER/	Linux	[84, 126]
FoldX		http://foldx.crg.es/	Windows, Linux, MacOS	[96, 127]
PopMuSiC	Protein stability prediction	http://babylone.ulb.ac.be/popmusic	0-00	[94, 97, 128
I-Mutant3.0	Protein stability prediction	http://gpcr2.biocomp.unibo.it/cgi/predictors/I-Mutant3.0/I- Mutant3.0.cgi	252	[129]
DMutant		http://sparks.informatics.iupui.edu/hzhou/mutation.html		[130]
De novo design progra	arms			
RosettaMatch	Scaffold search	-	0.T00	[108]
RosettaDesign	Protein design for low free energy sequences	http://rosettadesign.med.unc.edu/	Linux	[109]
ORBIT	Optimal sequences search for given folds		_	[118]

By submitting an amino acid sequence or its UniProtID, users start the modelling procedure with or without providing a template protein. Swiss-Model server can automatically select several suitable templates from a refined library derived from the Protein Data Bank (PDB), and then a structural alignment between the target and the template is generated and improved for the sake of modelling [87]. A pH sensitive member Kir2.3 was aligned with all the Kir2 channel proteins, and histidine 117 (H117) located close to the putative selectivity filter was identified to contribute to pH sensitive phenotype [91]. However, contradictory results were obtained by directed mutagenesis experiments, suggesting that there were other factors related to the pH effect. The observation that the ability of Zn2+ to bind cysteines/histidines could inhibit the pH effect indicated that a cysteine within atomic distance to H117 might interact to exert this functional effect. Consequently, the 3D structure of Kir2.3 was created by Swiss-Model using distant templates in order to narrow down the range and locate the target cysteine.. The active sites of the predicted structure were then superimposed on the template and indicated that the spatial orientation of D199 in the target EH was different from its counterpart in the template. Attempts to modify D199 into a proper orientation were also made to redesign the surrounding residues so that they could have direct or indirect interactions with D199. To achieve this, F193 and Y194 were chosen, and the 3D structures of various mutants of these two residues were constructed by Swiss-Model instead of "wet" experiments. Analysis of the corresponding 3D structures, particularly

V. DE NOVO COMPUTATIONAL DESIGN

The ultimate test of our understanding of the mechanism of enzymatic catalysis is de novo computational design, which refers to creation of novel protein folds, substrate binding pockets, and catalytic activities and so on. De novo protein design was first conducted to create a four-helix bundle protein in 1988 [6]. Since then, various protein folds have been de novo designed [100]. However, only a few possessed catalytic functions. Accordingly, de novo computational design of naturally occurring enzymes with novel catalytic activity is considered as a grand challenge, and in recent years, great efforts in this field have been made to expand our knowledge in enzyme engineering [7-9, 101-103]. To illustrate this, in this section we discuss three distinguished design examples of enzymes that catalyze synthetic reactions. The overwhelming performance of enzymatic catalysis over chemical catalysis is partly due to the free energy decrease of transition state (TS) via the interaction with catalytic residues [104]. Hence, the first step of de novo design for a given reaction is to model its theozyme which consists of TS model and catalytic groups [105] based on quantum chemical calculations [106]. How well the the ozyme models correlate with their corresponding crystal structures, will have a significant influence on the ultimate designs. Dechancie et al. mimicked the active sites of nine distinct enzymes with quantum mechanical optimizations [107]. The rmsd of the sets of catalytic atoms was 0.64Å, suggesting that the predicted geometries were remarkably consistent with the corresponding X-ray structure. For a desired reaction, there usually exist more than one possible catalytic mechanism. As result, the 3D models of each catalytic motif for each mechanism will have to be built, and hence the degree of freedom and the orientation of different bonds in each model can vary greatly, giving rise to a great number of possible 3D active sites, which are called "theozyme library". search for optimal protein scaffolds that are able to fulfill a target reaction can be launched once the theozyme library has been generated. Numerous scaffolds with ligand-binding cavities and high- resolution X-ray structures are available in several public protein databases. If there are certain restrictions on potential scaffolds, for example, in cases where a thermophilic scaffold is required, the selection range could be narrowed down. However, this process depends on de novo design algorithms such as Rosetta Match [108] that relies on hashing techniques and pruning of the majority of potential active centers at a very high speed but very little cost. At this step, the description of TS and a set of protein scaffolds are input into Rosetta Match. Once a TS position is compatible with the geometry of catalytic sites in one scaffold and satisfies other catalytic constraints, the result will be output as a "match" [106, 108]. Because there are still substantial candidate matches after the scaffold selection, and there remain certain steric clashes between the TS position and the catalytic side chains in the matches, further optimization is necessary. In this regard, the Rosetta Design methodology [109] can be applied to improve the binding affinity to TS and the stability of the active centers by redesigning or repacking of related residues. It is suggested that users run a single task for ten times owing to astochastic sampling algorithm adopted by Rosetta Design which will probably produce 10 distinct outputs. The resulting designs are supposed to be lower energy sequences for a given scaffold with the maximized TS affinity.

After optimizing all unique matches, a next step is to select designs with optimal performance for experimental validation. Several important factors, especially the ligand binding energy feature, are often used to evaluate and rank all the designs as described in [106]. As it is unlikely that a design has the highest score for each factor, extensive examinations to assist in further selection are preferred. In addition, Kiss et al. found that the MD technology was the most effective procedure for predicting the catalytic potentiality of designs [110].

The same protein scaffolds can execute diverse functions, such as α/β -barrel motif, which constitutes approximately 10% of proteins that perform a wide range of catalytic reactions [111]. This indicates that the designable potentiality of certain scaffolds underlies the foundation of computational engineering of novel functions. With similar strategies, Baker's group has performed a series of pioneering studies in redesigning enzymes that catalyze retro-aldol reaction [7], Kemp elimination [8] and Diels-Alder reaction [9]. The enhancement of target reactions by designed enzymes was assessed by the ratio of the catalytic rate constant and uncatalyzed rate constant kcat/kuncat. In the above cases, the values of kcat/kuncat ranged from 102 to 105 for the most active designs, indicating the effectiveness of such design strategies. De novo computational enzyme design provides important insights into the structure-function relationship of the enzyme and the starting points for directed evolution and rational design. Considerable experimental efforts, including development of technologies discussed in the Rational design strategies and tools section, were made to enhance the activities of the artificial Kemp eliminases [112-114]. Subsequent crystal and experimental data confirmed the accuracy of the

predicted model and an apparently increased activity. These examples discussed above highlight the importance and complimentarily of these alternative de novo design strategies, whichcan be applied to similar scaffold-based studies

Table 2. Summary of representative examples referred in this review.

Enzyme/protein	Target property	Method		Result			
		Design strategy	Bioinformatic tool	No. of mutants	Fold- improvement	Library size	Ref.
R.speratusendo1,4-glucanase	Activity	Functional and activity-related residues identified via an MSA analysis of eight sequences	e e	7	7-13	24	[19]
S.capsulata	Activity; stability	An MSA of 100 homologues evaluated by multiple scoring functions identified mutations	ClustalW, SeqDist, KaKs, probCons, SUB	6(1st round)	20%(activity)	47(1st round)	[28]
prolyl endopeptidases				9(2nd round)	200(stability)	48(2nd round)	
KDO8P Synthase family	Stability	Integrated analysis by MSA, G changes calculation, MD simulation and coevolutionary analysis	Mafft, T-Coffee, Muscle, HMMER 3.0, Prime 2.1, Desmond, X-Cluster, FoldX	No experimental validation			[42]
C.glutamicum ispartokinase	Allosteric inhibition	Correlated positions were identified by coevolutionary analysis of 500 sequences	Muscle, ClustalX	1	2	14	[53]
E.coli							
aspartokinase	Allosteric inhibition	Integrated analysis byMD simulation and coevolutionary analysis	Modeller, AMBER, Muscle	6	5-7	18	[71]
M. cephalus	Activity	Activity-related residues were identified by superimposition of a predicted structure and a solved structure template	Swiss-Model, RasMol, Deep- View	1	35	5	[92]
epoxide hydrolase		•					
K. pneumonia glyceroldehydratase	pH stability; activity	Stability-related residues were designed based on a predicted structure	Swiss-Model, PoPMuSiC	1	2(pH stability) 2(activity)	2	[93]
Retro-aldol reaction		TS simulated by QM/MM was used for scaffold selection and followed by individual optimization and ranking	RosettaMatch, RosettaDesign	32	2 × 10 ⁴	72	[7]
Kemp elimination	Activity			8	>106	59	[8]
Diels-Alder reaction				2	89M	84	[9]
E. coli	PNPA	Potential active sites and surrounding active-site	ORBIT	2	180	2	[115
thioredoxin	hydrolase	mutations were identified and computed					
Sperm whale myoglobin	Nitric oxide reductase	Creating a non-haem Fe ²⁺ -binding site based on the predicted structure overlaid with the reference structure	VMD, NAMD	1	N.A.	<10	[11]

VI. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper to provide a useful guide on the selection of the basic design methodologies and tools that are frequently employed in enzyme engineering (Table 1), and a brief summary of these aforementioned examples is depicted in Table 2. For many naturally occurring enzymes, it is often necessary to modify

and design their properties in order to meet the needs of commercial or industrial applications. Bioinformatic strategies and tools, particularly those with freely accessible webservers, offer biologists tremendous help to narrow down their experimental efforts. MSA can efficiently identify consensus, highly conserved and variable positions within a family of homologous proteins, while MSA-based coevolutionary analysis of a set of enzymes with similar functions provide critical clues about catalytic and other functionally related residues.

with the increasing availability of high-quality 3D structures in the PDB, there are a growing number of structure-based approaches being developed. Because experimentally solved structures only cover a limited portion of the protein repertoire, sequence-based 3D structure prediction has become a prevalent methodology in enzyme engineering. This is important, because reliable prediction of protein structure can still provide valuable information regarding potential candidate sites whose mutations might lead to improved properties of the enzyme, even if its real structural information is not at hand. As a symbol of the engineering of the third wave of biocatalysts [119], de novo enzyme design has achieved a significant success in the last 20 years. Despite these advances, there are challenges for

rational enzyme design. A first challenge is that there are inevitable experimental errors in "wet" experiments [120], resulting in less reliable designs based on such low-quality

A second challenge is related to the conformational dynamic nature of the enzyme. Conformational changes of the enzyme are frequently occurring under catalytic conditions, leading to a deviation of the real orientation of residues and enzyme structure from that of the designed or modeled enzymes. A third challenge is how to select the most appropriate tool that best suits the study of a particular target enzyme, from a pool of different tools that have both pros and cons. In this mini-review, we attempt to

provide a useful guide to summarize some of the popular, reliable and academic free tools. Moreover, many examples have proved that integrative strategies can usually outperform individuals. In this regard, development of metaservers is promising for providing a better performance and reliability of computation design. A fourth challenge is that some modified catalysts still cannot meet the practical needs of large-scale applications, particularly de novo designed enzymes. As such, there is often a need for assistance of experimental approaches, such as directed evolution. In fact, the boundary of rational design and directed evolution has become more and more blurred in practical applications, as evidenced by a number of recent studies that involve a combination of both [5]. Therefore, improving experimental techniques, such as high-quality mutagenesis and highthroughput screening, is another related future direction.

Due to the aforementioned challenges, many attempts of computational protein design failed. However, future development of the field will be advanced by a better understanding of the underlying reasons that led to both

failures and successes [121]. Recent advances in computational enzyme design have largely expedited the evolution of enzymes, and have greatly revolutionized the way of enzyme engineering. With the development of improved experimental techniques, computational enzyme design will gain a momentum and achieve significant successes in the future.

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