COMMENTARY

Spectral imaging fluorescence microscopy

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The spectral resolution of fluorescence microscope images in living cells is achieved by using a confocal laser scanning microscope equipped with grating optics. This capability of temporal and spectral resolution is especially useful for detecting spectral changes of a fluorescent dye; for example, those associated with fluorescence resonance energy transfer (FRET). Using the spectral imaging fluorescence microscope system, it is also possible to resolve emitted signals from fluorescent dyes that have spectra largely overlapping with each other, such as fluorescein isothiocyanate (FITC) and green fluorescent protein (GFP).

Since the discovery of the jellyfish green fluorescent protein (GFP) and its colour variants, multiple wavelength fluorescence imaging has become a useful tool in studies of cell biology. For imaging multiple wavelength fluorescence images, computer-controlled microscope systems that automatically switch optical filters during observation have been developed (Hiraoka et al. 1991; Haraguchi et al. 1999). While such microscope systems can collect fluorescence images at multiple wavelengths, fluorescence emissions with a spectral overlap can cause cross-talk between the emitted signals, thus limiting the choice of fluorescent dyes.

Here we introduce a microscope technique that is capable of resolving the spectra of fluorescence images without switching optical filters; the fluorescence spectra are obtained as a series of images as a function of fluorescence wavelength. This capability of spectral resolution makes it possible to unmix the cross-talk between overlapping fluorescence emissions. It also provides a unique capability for detecting spectral changes in fluorescent indicators; for example, an indicator for fluorescence resonance energy transfer (FRET). Such techniques have been devised by the use of an acousto-optic tunable filter (AOTF) or a grating (Wachman et al. 1997; Hanley et al. 2000; Tsurui et al. 2000; Ford et al. 2001; Lansford et al. 2001).

The hardware design we used is an implementation of the previously reported technology of two-photon imaging spectroscopy (Lansford et al. 2001) to a commercial single-photon confocal scanning microscope; the technology is applicable to a single-photon or multiphoton fluorescence microscope. In this spectral imaging microscope system (LSM510 META; Carl Zeiss, Jena, Germany), fluorescence spectra are resolved using grating optics; resolved fluorescence spectra at each pixel are detected by an array of 32 photomultiplier tubes (PMT) placed at the confocal plane, and recorded on a pixel-by-pixel basis during scanning to generate a set of images, each corresponding to the fluorescence wavelength resolved at 10 nm intervals. The maximum range of wavelength is 380–720 nm, resolved to 32 divisions.

Spectral resolution of fluorescence images

We first demonstrate that the use of grating optics allows us to obtain multiple-wavelength images without switching optical filters. An example of spectral imaging, or imaging spectroscopy, is shown in Fig. 1A. A mixture of four fluorescent beads emitting light of different wavelengths (515 nm, 560 nm, 605 nm and 645 nm; see legend to Fig. 1) was observed. Figure 1A shows a set of 20 spectral images ranging from 485 to 688 nm, and Fig. 1B shows selected images at 417 nm, 570 nm, 602 nm and 656 nm. Figure 1C shows spectra for each of the four beads. These beads have distinct spectral
profiles, and can thus be separated without further processing. Figure 1D shows a pseudocolour representation of the beads.

This capability of spectral imaging makes it possible to resolve the fluorescence images of dyes that have a large spectral overlap of fluorescence emission. The fluorescence spectra of an observed image is a linear combination of the spectra of multiple fluorescent dyes used to stain the specimen. By knowing the fluorescence spectra of each of the dyes, observed mixed spectra can be unmixed to each component; this calculation is generally called ‘linear unmixing’ (Lansford et al. 2001). Such processing of the observed image on a pixel-by-pixel basis produces a set of spectrally resolved images. Figure 2 shows an example of colour separation of GFP and fluorescein isothiocyanate (FITC) in fixed HeLa cells. Because the fluorescence of GFP and FITC is separated by only 7 nm at their emission peak, images of GFP and FITC are not resolved using a standard filter combination for the GFP/FITC wavelength. A set of spectral images were obtained for these cells (Fig. 2A), and the fluorescence spectra of GFP and FITC measured at the regions labelled 1 and 2, respectively (Fig. 2B). Using these spectra as a reference spectrum for each dye, the observed spectral images were processed to resolve FITC and GFP images by a linear unmixing algorithm (Fig. 2C).
Figure 3 shows another example of the colour separation of GFP and yellow fluorescent protein (YFP) in HeLa cells (see legend to Fig. 3 for details). Thus, the linear unmixing demonstrates a colour separation of fluorescence images with a large spectral overlap such as GFP and FITC, or GFP and YFP, as an extreme example.

**Spectral imaging of living cells**

Spectral imaging provides an opportunity for rapidly recording multiple wavelength images with no need for switching optical filters. This capability is especially useful in time-lapse observations of living cells. The spectral imaging of living cells produces a temporal series of spectral images, as shown in Fig. 4A. In this example, the nuclear membrane was stained with lamin B receptor (LBR) protein with cyan fluorescent protein (CFP) (Haraguchi et al. 2000), and protein import into the nucleus was detected using YFP fused to the protein STAT1 (signal transducer and activator of transcription). STAT1 is usually distributed in the cytoplasm, and enters the nucleus following treatment with γ-interferon (Köster & Hauser 1999; Sekimoto et al. 1997). This example demonstrates the spectral and temporal resolution of fluorescently stained living cells; the linear unmixing of the images clearly separated the CFP staining of the nuclear membrane and YFP staining of STAT1 (Fig. 4B).

**Detection of spectral changes**

The capability of this system for the temporal and spectral resolution of fluorescence microscope images provides a unique opportunity for detecting spectral changes of fluorescence in living cells. Figure 5 demonstrates an example of spectral change of a dye induced by changes in the intracellular calcium concentration in HeLa cells. In this example, we used a split version of yellow chameleon-2 (YC2.1) as a FRET-based calcium indicator dye (Miyawaki et al. 1999). Split YC2.1 generates FRET by interaction between calmodulin (CaM) and...
M13 in the presence of Ca\(^{2+}\) (Fig. 5A). To detect such a spectral change associated with FRET, CFP-CaM and M13-YFP were introduced into living HeLa cells, and the calcium uptake to the cells was induced by the addition of ionomycin. Images were obtained as a temporal series of spectral images; fluorescence intensity is displayed in Fig. 5B as a pseudocolour representation. The fluorescence of YC2.1 changed its spectra shortly after the addition of ionomycin (Fig. 5B,C). In Fig. 6C, fluorescence intensities at an excitation wavelength of 484 nm and at 527 nm are plotted as a function of time; the acceptor signal (at 527 nm) increased and the donor signal (at 484 nm) decreased following the induction, indicating that FRET occurred. In spectral imaging,
Spectral changes can be measured directly at multiple wavelengths, as shown in Fig. 6A and B, whereas the fluorescence intensity measured conventionally at only two wavelengths is used to estimate FRET efficiency. Thus, spectral imaging can take full advantage of fluorescent indicator dyes that undergo spectral changes, and will provide wider applications for such fluorescent indicators.

**Concluding remarks**

Spectral imaging solves some of the technological limitations that complicate multiple-wavelength imaging. In this manner, efficient multiple colour image acquisition is achieved by the use of grating optics to resolve fluorescence spectra. Using spectral imaging, it is now possible to detect the spectra of fluorescence microscope images, which has not been possible before. This capability is useful for efficiently resolving spectral cross-talk by linear unmixing computation.

Spectral imaging is best appreciated as a tool for detecting spectral changes in fluorescence, for example, those of FRET indicators. This capability will also eliminate problems associated with autofluorescence. Fluorescence staining is often interfered with by the autofluorescence of cells or tissues—especially in plants. Spectral imaging and linear unmixing can remove autofluorescence by separating its spectra from the spectra of fluorescently stained organelles and cell structures of interest.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the advent of spectral imaging will provide an impetus for the
development of a new class of fluorescent dyes. Currently available fluorescent dyes are not necessarily optimal for spectral imaging. Wavelength selection by optical filters requires fluorescent dyes with different wavelengths for both excitation and emission. On the other hand, for spectral imaging, dyes excited by the light of a single excitation wavelength and emitting light of separate wavelengths will be more preferable, allowing a single laser to excite multiple dyes simultaneously. Dyes that change their spectra under certain conditions (e.g. phosphorylation and dephosphorylation events, molecular interactions or conformational changes of proteins) are also awaited for applications in spectral imaging to detect changes in the intracellular environment. This methodology could therefore prove useful for the real-time detection of biochemical reactions inside single cells.
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References


