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Programmed death–ligand 1 (PD-L1) expression on tumor cells is essential for T cell impairment, and PD-L1 blockade therapy has shown unprecedented durable responses in several clinical studies. Although higher expression of PD-L1 on tumor cells is associated with a better immune response after Ab blockade, some PD-L1–negative patients also respond to this therapy. In the current study, we explored whether PD-L1 on tumor or host cells was essential for anti–PD-L1–mediated therapy in 2 different murine tumor models. Using real-time imaging in whole tumor tissues, we found that anti–PD-L1 Ab accumulates in tumor tissues, regardless of the status of PD-L1 expression on tumor cells. We further observed that, while PD-L1 on tumor cells was largely dispensable for the response to checkpoint blockade, PD-L1 in host myeloid cells was essential for this response. Additionally, PD-L1 signaling in defined antigen-presenting cells (APCs) negatively regulated and inhibited T cell activation. PD-L1 blockade inside tumors was not sufficient to mediate regression, as limiting T cell trafficking reduced the efficacy of the blockade. Together, these findings demonstrate that PD-L1 expressed in APCs, rather than on tumor cells, plays an essential role in checkpoint blockade therapy, providing an insight into the mechanisms of this therapy.

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PD-L1 on host cells is essential for PD-L1 blockade–mediated tumor regression

Haidong Tang,1 Yong Liang,2 Robert A. Anders,3 Janis M. Taube,3,4 Xiangyan Qiu,1 Aditi Mulgaonkar,5 Xin Liu,6 Susan M. Harrington,7 Jingya Guo,2 Yangchun Xin,5 Yahong Xiong,7 Kien Nham,4 William Silvers,4 Guiyang Hao,5 Xiankai Sun,8 Mingyi Chen,1 Raquibul Hannan,9 Jian Qiao,1 Haidong Dong,6 Hua Peng,2 and Yang-Xin Fu1,2

1Department of Pathology, University of Texas (UT) Southwestern Medical Center, Dallas, Texas, USA. 2Chinese Academy of Sciences Key Laboratory for Infection and Immunity, Institute of Biophysics, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China. 3Department of Pathology, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, Maryland, USA. 4Department of Dermatopathology and the Bloomberg-Kimmel Institute of Cancer Immunotherapy and 5Department of Radiology, UT Southwestern Medical Center, Dallas, Texas, USA. 6Departments of Urology and Immunology, College of Medicine, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota, USA. 7Department of Applied Chemistry, College of Materials and Energy, South China Agricultural University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China. 8Department of Radiology and Advanced Imaging Research Center and 9Department of Radiation Oncology, UT Southwestern Medical Center, Dallas, Texas, USA.

Programmed death–ligand 1 (PD-L1) expression on tumor cells is essential for T cell impairment, and PD-L1 blockade therapy has shown unprecedented durable responses in several clinical studies. Although higher expression of PD-L1 on tumor cells is associated with a better immune response after Ab blockade, some PD-L1-negative patients also respond to this therapy. In the current study, we explored whether PD-L1 on tumor or host cells was essential for anti–PD-L1-mediated therapy in 2 different murine tumor models. Using real-time imaging in whole tumor tissues, we found that anti–PD-L1 Ab accumulates in tumor tissues, regardless of the status of PD-L1 expression on tumor cells. We further observed that, while PD-L1 on tumor cells was largely dispensable for the response to checkpoint blockade, PD-L1 in host myeloid cells was essential for this response. Additionally, PD-L1 signaling in defined antigen-presenting cells (APCs) negatively regulated and inhibited T cell activation. PD-L1 blockade inside tumors was not sufficient to mediate regression, as limiting T cell trafficking reduced the efficacy of the blockade. Together, these findings demonstrate that PD-L1 expressed in APCs, rather than on tumor cells, plays an essential role in checkpoint blockade therapy, providing an insight into the mechanisms of this therapy.

Introduction

The programmed death-1 receptor/programmed death–ligand 1 (PD-1/PD-L1) signaling pathway plays an important role in tumor evasion of host immune responses (1). Recent clinical trials with PD-1/PD-L1 blockade therapy have shown unprecedented durable response in patients with a variety of cancers (2, 3). However, only a minority of patients benefit from such therapy. Thus, it has become a top priority to identify biomarkers that can predict patient responses (4). It has been suggested that PD-L1 on tumor cells plays an important role in preventing T cell–mediated killing. Higher expression of PD-L1 on tumor cells has been shown to be associated with a better immune response after checkpoint blockade (5–8). However, clinical responses were also observed in some patients that were negative for PD-L1 in tumors (9, 10). The contributions of PD-L1 expression from relevant cells to inhibition of T cell responses remains unknown (11–13).

Expression of PD-L1 is limited in normal tissues (14). In contrast, many tumor cells overexpress PD-L1 as a strategy to evade immune responses. Interestingly, PD-L1 can be upregulated on many cells when stimulated by inflammatory cytokines, especially IFNs (4, 14–16). In the context of tumor microenvironment, cells including macrophages, DCs, myeloid-derived suppressor cells (MDSCs), Tregs, and endothelial cells, can upregulate PD-L1 due to inflammation responses (15). However, the relative contributions of PD-L1 in these cells are unclear. Our previous study compared a series of well-established mouse tumor lines for their PD-L1 expression and responsiveness to anti–PD-L1 treatment (17). Some tumor cells express similar high levels of PD-L1, but respond differently to PD-L1 blockade. This raises the possibility that PD-L1 expressed in tumor cells is not sufficient for the response to checkpoint blockade therapy. In the current study, we sought to define the roles of PD-L1 from tumor versus host cells during checkpoint blockade therapy.

Results

PD-L1 on tumor cells is dispensable for checkpoint blockade therapy. To test this hypothesis, tissues were collected from MC38 tumor-bearing mice and the PD-L1 expression profiles were evaluated by flow cytometry (Figure 1A). Surprisingly, myeloid cells, including macrophages (CD11b+F4/80+), MDSCs (CD11b’Gr-1’), and DCs (CD11c+), expressed much higher levels of PD-L1 than tumor and stromal (CD45−) cells (Figure 1, B–D). Furthermore, myeloid cells in tumor-draining lymph nodes (dLNs) expressed even higher PD-L1 than these cells in tumor tissues (Figure 1, C...
some recent studies showed that most tumor cells do not express high levels of PD-L1, while adjacent cells around tumor cells and inflammation cells express higher levels of PD-L1 (7, 8, 18). Taken together, these data raise the possibility that higher levels of PD-L1 expression in lymphocytes, including CD8+ T cells, CD4+ T cells, and B cells, was much lower (Supplemental Figure 1, A-D; supplemental material available online with this article; https://doi.org/10.1172/JCI96061DS1). Consistently, and D). In contrast, PD-L1 expression in lymphocytes, including CD8+ T cells, CD4+ T cells, and B cells, was much lower (Supplemental Figure 1, A-D; supplemental material available online with this article; https://doi.org/10.1172/JCI96061DS1). Consistently,
A20 tumors also responded to PD-1 blockade therapy well (Supplemental Figure 2, A and B). To find out whether there are differences in host PD-L1 expression between MC38.WT and MC38.PD-L1–/– tumors, tissues were collected and PD-L1 expression was evaluated by flow cytometry. Interestingly, while tumor cells completely lost PD-L1 expression, the levels of PD-L1 in myeloid cells from MC38.PD-L1–/– tumor-bearing mice were similar to their counterparts in WT tumor-bearing mice (Supplemental Figure 1E and Figure 1, J–L). Collectively, these data suggest that PD-L1 on tumor cells is not essential for the response to PD-L1 blockade in these models. It is possible that myeloid cell–expressed PD-L1 is sufficient to limit immune responses, and thus myeloid cells may mediate the response to checkpoint blockade therapy.

Anti–PD-L1 Ab targets to tumor tissue regardless of the status of tumor-expressed PD-L1. Lack of PD-L1 expression on a biopsy specimen cannot exclude PD-L1 expression in different areas of tumor tissues or subsequent expression after sampling. Additionally, the lack of approaches that can detect PD-L1 in real-time within in vivo, whole tumor tissues during PD-L1 therapy might complicate clinical interpretations of PD-L1 as biomark-
Preexisting tumor-infiltrating lymphocyte is insufficient for the antitumor effects of PD-L1 blockade. To test whether T cells are essential for anti–PD-L1–mediated tumor regression, immunodeficient mice were utilized to test the role of lymphocytes. Data suggest that T cells are essential in anti–PD-L1–mediated tumor regression, as immunodeficient mice did not respond to PD-L1 blockade therapy (Figure 3A and Supplemental Figure 4A). Consistent results have been obtained when CD8+ T cells were depleted by Abs (Figure 3B and Supplemental Figure 4B).

If PD-L1 on tumor cells is not essential, the role of PD-L1 on antigen-presenting cells (APCs), inside or outside tumor tissues, might be underestimated in suppressing T cell priming or reactivation. To test whether PD-1/PD-L1 interaction is essential for suppressing T cell activation, we utilized FTY720 to block activated lymphocyte trafficking to tumor tissues. FTY720 is a small molecule analogue of sphingosine 1-phosphate (S1P) (17). Treating mice with FTY720 induces the internalization and degradation of the S1P receptor, thereby preventing lymphocyte egress from the secondary lymphoid tissues. FTY720 treatment alone has no effects on tumor growth (Supplemental Figure 4C). When mice were treated with FTY720 on the day of tumor inoculation, Molecular in vivo imaging with radiolabeled anti–PD-L1 Ab allows noninvasive real-time detection of PD-L1 expression (20).

To address whether PD-L1 on tumor or immune cells is essential for Ab targeting, anti–PD-L1 Ab was labeled with 89Zr for tracking. 89Zr–anti–PD-L1 Ab bound to PD-L1 with an affinity similar to that of unconjugated Ab (data not shown). To image PD-L1 in vivo, MC38 tumor-bearing mice were injected with 89Zr–anti–PD-L1. Whole-body PET/CT was performed 1, 2, 3, and 6 days post injection (d.p.i) (Figure 2A and Supplemental Figure 3A). At 1 d.p.i., strong signals of Ab were detected in the liver, spleen, heart, and tumor tissues. Twenty-four hours later, Ab concentrations in other organs gradually reduced, while concentrations in tumor tissues remained high (Figure 2B and Supplemental Figure 3B). Therefore, anti–PD-L1 Ab targeting to tumor tissues can be imaged in real time. We further tested the impact of tumor cell–expressed PD-L1 on Ab targeting. Interestingly, the accumulations of Ab in tumor tissues were similar between WT and PD-L1+/– MC38 tumors (Figure 2, B and C, and Supplemental Figure 3C) or A20 tumors (Figure 2D and Supplemental Figure 3, D and E). Together, these data support the notion that tumor cell–expressed PD-L1 is dispensable for Ab targeting.

Preexisting tumor-infiltrating lymphocyte is insufficient for the antitumor effects of PD-L1 blockade. To test whether T cells are essential for anti–PD-L1–mediated tumor regression, immunodeficient mice were utilized to test the role of lymphocytes. Data suggest that T cells are essential in anti–PD-L1–mediated tumor regression, as immunodeficient mice did not respond to PD-L1 blockade therapy (Figure 3A and Supplemental Figure 4A). Consistent results have been obtained when CD8+ T cells were depleted by Abs (Figure 3B and Supplemental Figure 4B). If PD-L1 on tumor cells is not essential, the role of PD-L1 on antigen-presenting cells (APCs), inside or outside tumor tissues, might be underestimated in suppressing T cell priming or reactivation. To test whether PD-1/PD-L1 interaction is essential for suppressing T cell activation, we utilized FTY720 to block activated lymphocyte trafficking to tumor tissues. FTY720 is a small molecule analogue of sphingosine 1-phosphate (SIP) (17). Treating mice with FTY720 induces the internalization and degradation of the SIP receptor, thereby preventing lymphocyte egresses from the secondary lymphoid tissues. FTY720 treatment alone has no effects on tumor growth (Supplemental Figure 4C). When mice were treated with FTY720 on the day of tumor inoculation,
PD-L1 in host APCs is essential for the responses to PD-L1 blockade. PD-L1−/− mice were inoculated with 1 × 10^6 WT MC38 cells. Mice were treated with 200 μg IgG or anti–PD-L1 on days 9 and 12 (n = 4). Tumor growth was measured twice weekly. B and C C57BL/6 mice were reconstituted with bone marrow from WT (B) or PD-L1−/− (C) mice. Eight weeks after reconstitution, mice were inoculated with 1 × 10^6 MC38 cells and treated with 200 μg anti–PD-L1 on days 7, 10, and 13 (n = 7 for WT, n = 5 for PD-L1−/−). Data indicate mean ± SEM and are from a pool of 2 independent experiments. Statistical analysis was performed using an unpaired Student’s 2-tailed t test. **P < 0.01.
with 200 μg culture supernatants were harvested, and IFN-γ from dLNs of MC38 tumor–bearing mice and cocultured for 4 days. Anti–PD-L1 or control IgG was added into medium at a concentration of 10 μg/ml. Cell culture supernatants were harvested, and IFN-γ levels were measured by CBA. Data indicate mean ± SEM and are representative of 2 (A, B, E) or 3 (F, G) independent experiments. Statistical analysis was performed using an unpaired Student’s 2-tailed t test. *P < 0.05; **P < 0.01; ***P < 0.001.

Figure 5. PD-L1 signaling in myeloid cells harnesses antitumor immunity. (A) C57BL/6 mice (n = 5) were inoculated with 1 × 10^6 WT MC38 cells and treated with 200 μg anti–PD-L1 or anti–IgG on days 9 and 12. For cell depletion, 300 μg anti-CSF1R, or anti–Gr-1 Abs were injected from day 8. (B–D) C57BL/6 mice were reconstituted with mixed bone marrow cells from CD11b-DTR and PD-L1–/– mice. Eight weeks after reconstitution, mice were inoculated with 1 × 10^6 MC38 cells and treated with 200 μg anti–PD-L1 treatment on days 11 and 14 (n = 5). DT was injected intraperitoneally every other day from day 11. Twenty-four hours after the second DT injection, PD-L1 levels in tumor-infiltrating CD11b+ cells were measured by flow cytometry (B). Tumor growth without (D) or with (D) DT was measured twice a week. (E and F) BMDCs from WT or PD-L1–/– mice were loaded with SIY peptide, then cocultured with 2C T cells for 3 days. (E) IFN-γ levels in culture supernatant were measured by CBA. (F) T cell activation was evaluated by flow cytometry. (G) DCs and CD8+ T cells were isolated from dLNs of MC38 tumor–bearing mice and cocultured for 4 days. Anti–PD-L1 or control IgG was added into medium at a concentration of 10 μg/ml. Cell culture supernatants were harvested, and IFN-γ levels were measured by CBA. Data indicate mean ± SEM and are representative of 2 (A, B, G) or 3 (E, F), or a pool of 2 (C, D) independent experiments. Statistical analysis was performed using an unpaired Student’s 2-tailed t test. *P < 0.05; **P < 0.01; ***P < 0.001.

A variety of cancers. PD-L1 can be expressed in many different cells besides tumor cells. However, the essential or sufficient role of PD-L1 on tumor versus nontumor cells for immune evasion is still unclear (1, 22, 23). Recently, the importance of PD-L1 on tumor versus host cells during tumor growth has been intensively debated (24–27). In one study, the role of PD-L1 during tumor formation was studied (25). It is suggested that both host- and tumor–PD-L1 contribute to immune suppression during the establishment of tumors (25). In contrast, another study shows that PD-L1 in tumor cells is sufficient for immune evasion (26). In the latter study, a lower cell number was used to slow tumor growth and induce a more robust adaptive immune response. In such a situation, PD-L1 on tumor cells may play a dominant role to prevent tumor clearance in an early phase (26). In addition, it is worth noting that different studies utilized different mouse strains and reagents. Nevertheless, these studies focus on the roles of PD-L1 signaling during tumor establishment. The contributions of PD-L1 signaling during checkpoint blockade therapy, especially the cell populations that respond to PD-L1, is not well defined. In our current study, we found that PD-L1 in tumor cells is dispensable for the responses to PD-L1 blockade therapy after tumor establishment in 3 different models (MC38, A20, and E.G7). Anti–PD-L1 Abs accumulate in tumor tissues regardless of the status of tumor-expressed PD-L1. By using a mixed bone marrow chimera model, we further show that PD-L1 expressed in myeloid cells is essential. PD-L1 is not only highly expressed in myeloid cells, but also contributes to the inhibition of T cell activation. Blocking PD-L1 signaling by Ab releases such inhibition, leading to better T cell activation. Our data suggest that blocking PD-L1 signaling in myeloid cells is essential for tumor control.

Some recent retrospective clinical studies have shown a correlation between tumor cell–expressed PD-L1 and positive responses to checkpoint blockade therapy (2, 23). However, clinical responses were also observed in some patients that were negative for PD-L1 in tumors (9, 10). It is unclear why negative patients can still respond. First, it is possible that there might be temporal and spatial heterogeneity of PD-L1 expression in tumor tissues. A false-negative result might result if only a small piece of previously collected specimen is stained (28). Second, another possibility is that several Ab clones with different cut-off values have been utilized to evaluate PD-L1 expression in different studies (29). Some specimens negative in one test might turn out to be positive in other assays. Third, since PD-L1 expression can be induced during inflammatory responses, it is possible that PD-L1 in some negative tumors can become positive after treatment (19). Here, our study raises the fourth possibility, that high PD-L1 expression outside tumor tissues can also contribute to overall immune suppression. Some patients may have high PD-L1 expression in the myeloid compartment, either inside tumor or lymphoid tissues, which is responsible for their responses. A recent study using a different tumor model and human tissues also showed that PD-L1 is highly expressed in APCs and correlates with type I IFN signaling for combined therapy resistance (30). However, it is worth noting that our study does not rule out the possibility that tumor-derived PD-L1
could play important roles in some cases, especially during the early phase of tumor establishment or when PD-L1 is constitutively highly expressed on tumor cells. Early studies have shown that ectopic expression of PD-L1 in tumor cells is able to promote tumor evasion in vivo, which can be subverted by PD-L1 blockade therapy (5, 6). However, few patients have high tumor cell–expressed PD-L1 in the absence of PD-L1 on host cells (7).

In fact, PD-L1 expression is mostly detected around tumors and inflammatory margins (7, 8). Therefore, PD-L1 on nontumor cells, either in tumors or lymphoid tissues, may contribute to overall responses in most cases.

During antitumor immune responses, APCs uptake tumor antigens from tumor tissues, migrate to dLN, and present antigens to T cells, leading to T cell activation (31, 32). After that, activated T cells traffic to tumor tissues for destruction. PD-L1 signaling plays an important role in inhibiting T cell functions. In the absence of host PD-L1, we observed that tumors grew slower in PD-L1–/– host or chimeric mice reconstituted with PD-L1–/– bone marrow (Figure 4, A and C). In contrast, we didn’t see significant differences in tumor growth between WT and PD-L1–deficient tumors after tumors were established. These observations are consistent with our conclusion that PD-L1 signaling on the host is more important. In the presence of PD-L1 blockade, responding T cells can come from 2 major sources. Some are preexisting T cells, while others are newly activated T cells migrating from dLN to the tumor. It has been shown that some immunotherapies, such as CTLA-4 and PD-L1 dual blockade, are able to expand T cells inside the tumor. In those cases, blocking T cell trafficking has limited effects (33). In contrast, our data show that blocking T cell trafficking reduces the majority of the antitumor effects of PD-L1 mono-blockade. These data suggest that PD-L1 blockade therapy may require T cell activation/reactivation both inside and outside the tumor (Figure 3, C–E). Consistent with our observations, a recent study shows that surgical dLN ablation completely abrogates the antitumor effects of PD-L1 blockade (34). Together, our data suggest that the impact of PD-L1 blockade outside the tumor needs to be revisited. These findings further demonstrate that PD-L1 expressed in APCs, even outside tumor tissues, plays an essential role in checkpoint blockade therapy, providing new insight into the mechanisms and potential biomarkers of checkpoint blockade therapy.

**Methods**

*Mice.* C57BL/6, BALB/c, Rag1–/–, CD11b-DTR, and NSG mice were purchased from the Mouse Breeding Core at UT Southwestern Medical Center or the Jackson Laboratory. PD-L1–/– mice were provided by L. Chen (Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, USA). All mice were maintained under specific pathogen–free conditions at UT Southwestern Medical Center.

}*Cell lines and reagents.* MC38, A20, and E.G7 cells were purchased from ATCC. Cells were cultured in 5% CO2 and maintained in vitro in DMEM or RPMI 1640 medium supplemented with 10% FBS (Sigma-Aldrich), nonessential amino acids, 100 U/ml penicillin, and 100 μg/ml streptomycin. Anti–PD-L1 (10F.9G2), anti–PD-1 (RMP1-14), anti-CSFIR (AFS98), and anti–Gr-1 (RB6-8C5) Abs were purchased from BioXCell. Anti–CD8 (YTS) was produced in house. FTY720 and L. Chen (Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, USA). All mice were maintained under specific pathogen–free conditions at UT Southwestern Medical Center.

*Mouse PET/CT imaging.* PET/CT imaging was performed using the Siemens Inveon PET/CT Multi-Modality system (Siemens Medical Solutions), as described previously (35). Briefly, tumor-bearing mice were injected intravenously with 50 μCi of 89Zr-radiolabeled deferoxamine-conjugated anti–PD-L1 (10F.9G2) Abs. On 1, 2, 3, and 6 d.p.i., static PET images were acquired. PET images were reconstructed using the 3D Ordered Subsets Expectation Maximization (OSEM3D/MAP) algorithm. CT images were acquired immediately after PET. PET and CT images were coregistered in the Inveon Acquisition Workspace for analysis. The target activity was calculated as percentage of injected dose per gram (%ID/g).

*Tumor growth and treatments.* MC38 cells (1 × 10⁶) were subcutaneously injected into the right flank of mice. Mice were randomized to treatment groups when tumors reached certain sizes and treated intraperitoneally with 200 μg anti–PD-L1 (10F.9G2) on days 8 and 11. Tumor volumes were measured twice weekly and calculated as length × width × height/2. Mice were sacrificed when tumor size was greater than 500 mm³. To inhibit lymphocyte trafficking, mice were injected intravenously with 25 μg FTY720 on day 0 or 8 after tumor inoculation. Five micrograms of FTY720 were given every day to maintain inhibition. For the A20 model, 3 × 10⁶ cells were inoculated and mice were treated on days 9, 12, and 15. For macrophage and MDSC depletion, mice were treated intraperitoneally with 300 μg Ab every other day (anti-CSFIR) or every 4 days (anti–Gr-1).

*Generation of bone marrow chimeras.* WT C57BL/6 mice were lethally irradiated at 10 Gy. Seven to eight hours later, 2 × 10⁶ bone marrow cells from WT or PD-L1–/– mice were transferred into irradiated mice. Mice were used for experiments 8 weeks after reconstitution. To generate mixed bone marrow chimera, bone marrow cells from CD11b-DTR and PD-L1–/– mice were mixed 1:1 before adoptive transfer.

*Cell isolation from tissues.* Tissues were collected and analyzed as previously described (17). Briefly, tumor tissues were collected, cut into small pieces, and resuspended in RPMI 1640 medium with 1.5 mg/ml collagenease and 100 μg/ml DNase I. Tumors were digested for 45 minutes in a 37°C shaking incubator, then passed through a 70-μm cell strainer to make single-cell suspensions. Similarly, spleens and dLNs were digested for 30 or 15 minutes, respectively, before passing through a cell strainer.

*ELISPOT.* Draining LNs from MC38 tumor-bearing mice were isolated and single-cell suspensions were prepared. LN cells and
irradiated tumor cells were cocultured at a ratio of 10:1 for 36 hours. ELISPOT assay was performed using an IFN-γ ELISPOT assay kit (BD Biosciences) according to the manufacturer’s instruction. Spots were enumerated by ImmunoSpot Analyzer (CTL).

In vitro and ex vivo culture and function assays. Bone marrow cells were obtained from WT or PD-L1– mice. Cells were cultured in 10-cm petri dishes in an RPMI 1640 medium containing 10% FBS and 55 μmol/l 2-mercaptoethanol, supplemented with 20 ng/ml mouse M-CSF. Fresh medium with M-CSF was added every 3 days. BMDMs were harvested and cocultured with 2G T cells at a ratio of 1:10. SIY peptide was added at a concentration of 5 μg/ml. Cells were harvested after 72 hours and analyzed by flow cytometry. Cytokine levels in culture supernatants were measured using a cytometric bead array (CBA) kit (BD Biosciences).

DCs were purified from dLNs of MC38 tumor–bearing mice by EasySep Mouse CD11c Positive Selection Kit (STEMCELL Technologies). CD8+ T cells were purified from the same mice using the EasySep Mouse CD8+ T cell Isolation Kit (negative selection, STEMCELL Technologies). DC and T cells were cocultured at a ratio of 1:10 for 7 days. Cytokine levels were measured by CBA.

Statistics. For in vivo studies, sample size was estimated using data from others’ and our previous studies to see an effect at the P < 0.05 significance levels. The number of animals and replicates are indicated in each figure legend. All data are presented as mean ± SEM. Mean values were compared using an unpaired Student’s 2-tailed t test. Statistical analysis was performed using GraphPad Prism 6.0 software (GraphPad). Investigators were blinded to the group allocation during the experiment and drug treatment whenever possible.

Study approval. Animal experiment protocols were consistent with NIH guidelines. All studies were approved by the Animal Care and Use Committee of UT Southwestern Medical Center.

Author contributions

HT and XFX designed experiments, analyzed data, and wrote the manuscript. HT, YL, XL, XQ, RAA, JMT, Y Xin, Y Xiong, KN, and AM performed experiments. WS, GH, and XS analyzed data. MC, RH, SMH, and JG provided reagents. XS, JQ, and HD contributed to manuscript preparation. HP, HD, and YXF supervised the project.

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Address correspondence to: Haidong Dong, Departments of Urology and Immunology, College of Medicine, Mayo Clinic, 200 First Street SW, Rochester, Minnesota 55905, USA. Phone: 507.284.5482; Email: Dong.Haidong@mayo.edu. Or to: Hu Peng, Chinese Academy of Science Key Laboratory for Infection and Immunity, Institute of Biophysics, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100101, China. Phone: 8610.6488.1152; Email: hpeng@moon.ibo.cas.cn. Or to: Yang-Xin Fu, Department of Pathology, UT Southwestern Medical Center, 6000 Harry Hines Blvd., Dallas, Texas 75235, USA. Phone: 214.648.6538; Email: Yang-Xin.Fu@UTSouthwestern.edu.