



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# An in vitro DNA phosphorothioate modification reaction

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## Abstract

Phosphorothioation (PT) involves the replacement of a nonbridging phosphate oxygen on the DNA backbone with sulfur. In bacteria, the procedure is both sequence- and stereo-specific. We reconstituted the PT reaction using purified DndCDE from *Salmonella enterica* and IscS from *Escherichia coli*. We determined that the in vitro process of PT was oxygen sensitive. Only one strand on a double-stranded (ds) DNA substrate was modified in the reaction. The modification was dominant between G and A in the GAAC/GTTC conserved sequence. The modification between G and T required the presence of PT between G and A on the opposite strand. Cysteine, S-adenosyl methionine (SAM) and the formation of an iron-sulfur cluster in DndCDE (DndCDE-FeS) were essential for the process. Results from SAM cleavage reactions support the supposition that PT is a radical SAM reaction. Adenosine triphosphate (ATP) promoted the reaction but was not essential. The data and conclusions presented suggest that the PT reaction in bacteria involves three steps. The first step is the binding of DndCDE-FeS to DNA and searching for the modification sequence, possibly with the help of ATP. Cysteine locks DndCDE-FeS to the modification site with an appropriate protein conformation. SAM triggers the radical SAM reaction to complete the oxygen-sulfur swapping.

## KEYWORDS

cysteine, iron-sulfur cluster, phosphorothioate modification, radical SAM reaction, S-adenosyl methionine (SAM), sulfur incorporation

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Most FDA-approved oligonucleotide drugs incorporate phosphorothioate (PT) linkages for enhanced pharmacokinetic profiles. Many PT-containing candidates for various diseases are undergoing clinical evaluation. The advantages of PT are metabolic stability and improved cellular uptake due to its nuclease resistance. Efforts are made to control stereochemical variation introduced by PT linkages to improve pharmacologic properties of drugs. DNA PT modification occurs in bacteria, ranging from about 10% to 60% in different bacterial strains (Alonso et al., 2005; Wang et al., 2011, 2007; Zhou et al., 2005). The incorporation of sulfur in this manner endows the PT-modified DNA with altered redox and nucleophilic properties

(Xie et al., 2012), providing it a special ability to be involved in complicated biological functions, such as antioxidation, restriction modification, virus defense, gene transcriptional control and the maintenance of cellular redox homeostasis (Chen et al., 2017; Kellner et al., 2017; Ray, Mills, & Dyson, 1995; Tong et al., 2018; Wang, Jiang, Deng, Dedon, & Chen, 2018; Wu et al., 2017; Xie et al., 2012; Xiong et al., 2019; Xu, Yao, Zhou, Deng, & You, 2010; Yang et al., 2017).

Since the discovery of PT modification in bacteria (Zhou, Deng, Firmin, Hopwood, & Kieser, 1988; Zhou et al., 2005), a long-sought goal has been determining the mechanisms that are involved in the incorporation of sulfur into the DNA phosphate backbone. Preliminary bioinformatical and biochemical suggestions have indicated how it occurs (You, Wang, Yao, Zhou, & Deng, 2007; Zhou

et al., 2005). The enzyme involved in PT was identified as a four-protein complex, IscS-DndCDE (Cao et al., 2015; Xiong, Zhao, Yu, & He, 2015). IscS is a cysteine desulfurase that catalyzes the reconstitution of the [Fe-S] cluster in DndC (An et al., 2012; You et al., 2007). The DndD protein shows high similarity to SMC (structural maintenance of chromosomes) proteins. Both DndC and DndD hydrolyze ATP (Yao, Xu, Zhou, Deng, & You, 2009; You et al., 2007) and DndE has a tetrameric form that preferentially binds to nicked DNA (Hu et al., 2012). Based on these information, it has been hypothesized that the incorporation of sulfur into the DNA backbone involves the nicking of double-stranded (ds) DNA, and the consumption of energy (Eckstein, 2007; Zhou et al., 2005). PT has also been studied *in vitro* in an attempt to better understand the sequence recognition process (Cao et al., 2015).

Here, we report detailed findings from experiments conducted to investigate and characterize the biochemical activity(ies) of the cloned recombinant PT protein complex from *Salmonella enterica* serovar Cerro 87 *in vitro* and *in vivo* under both oxic (DndCDE) and anoxic (DndCDE-FeS) conditions. We observed that when the protein complex was prepared under anoxic conditions, PT modification activity actually occurred. The PT activity of the protein could not be observed when the protein was prepared under oxic conditions or when the Fe-S cluster was disrupted. Furthermore, SAM is essential for the PT modification reaction. Overall, our results suggest that PT modification occurs by a radical SAM reaction.

## 2 | RESULTS

### 2.1 | DNA PT modification by DndCDE and DndCDE-FeS

In a previous *in vitro* investigation where others looked for phosphorothioate modification of DNA, recombinant DndCDE recovered by a one-step nickel affinity column purification from a total cellular extract of *Escherichia coli* BL21 (Cao et al., 2015) was used. Although PT activity was detected, key questions such as the mechanism of activation of the DNA backbone (Eckstein, 2007) and the role of and requirement for cofactors involved in the reaction were not addressed. To carry out the investigation, we needed to determine the best conditions for the promotion of PT, and in initial experiments, we employed DndCDE purified to homogeneity using a three-step protocol (Pu et al., 2019; Xiong et al., 2015). Unfortunately, when we mixed DndCDE with IscS, ATP, cysteine, substrate DNA,  $Mg^{2+}$  and pyridoxal phosphate to initiate the PT reaction, no PT activity was observed by HPLC-MS. Given the other data reported so far (Pu et al., 2019), we suspected that the integrity of the Fe-S cluster of the DndCDE could have been compromised during its oxic purification, and to see if this was the case we then generated DndCDE-FeS and used it in anoxic PT assays; these assays still did not produce PT activity.

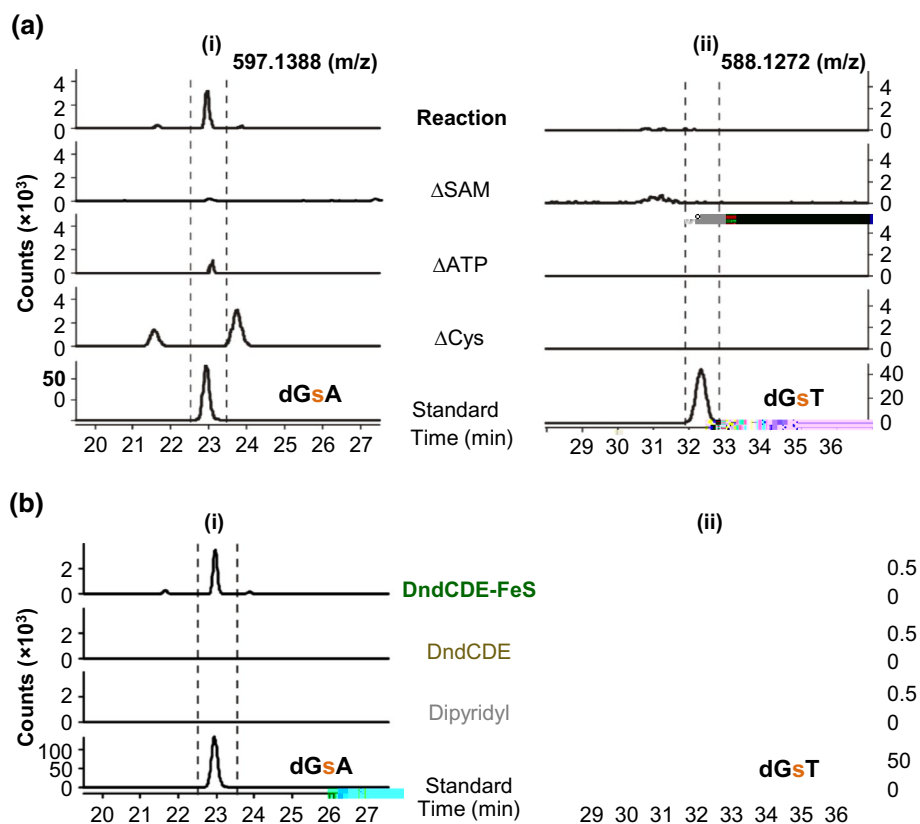
Recently, we showed that the Fe-S cluster of DndC is in the [4Fe-4S] configuration (Pu et al., 2019). The cluster has a *g* value peak of 2.005 at 13 K. The cluster can be deprived off by  $\alpha, \alpha'$ -dipyridyl

treatment and reconstituted back using cysteine and  $(NH_4)_2Fe(SO_4)_2$  with the catalysis of IscS under anoxic conditions (Figure S2). The [4Fe-4S] cluster in the radical SAM-type enzymes (Mulliez, Duarte, Arragain, Fontecave, & Atta, 2017) mediates their radical reaction. We thus added SAM to the PT reaction mixture. The canonical dGsA mass signal was successfully observed (Figure 1a(i)). Consequently, this *in vitro* anoxic reaction allowed us to analyze the contribution of individual cofactors to the PT reaction. From these experiments, it was clear that SAM, cysteine and ATP were all required for the reaction to proceed (Figure 1a(i)). Without the presence of ATP, the PT activity of DndCDE-FeS significantly decreased, yet ATP was not essential to the reaction (Figure 1a(i)). Fe-S cluster involvement in PT was reconfirmed by treating DndCDE-FeS with  $\alpha, \alpha'$ -dipyridyl, which abolished this activity (Figure 1b(i)). PT occurred under only strictly anoxic conditions, and the oxic addition of SAM into the reaction mixture failed to promote PT even with anoxically generated DndCDE-FeS.

It is well reported that PT modification *in vivo* involves 4 bp of substrate DNA (Liang et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2011) and that in the cases of *E. coli* and *S. enterica*, the core conserved sequence involved is GAAC/GTTC (Wang et al., 2011). It is also known that no significant flanking sequence preferences appear to be involved in the specific site modification that occurs during PT (Cao et al., 2014). Finally, *in vivo* PT occurs as a ds DNA modification with both strands thought to be modified simultaneously (single-stranded (ss) modification has also been observed (Cao et al., 2014)). Consequently, we imagined that in our experiments, we would make similar observations, and we were surprised when, as part of our general investigation of PT and during the optimization of the assay described in the Experimental procedures, this was not the case. The dGsT formation was not observed in the PT reaction (Figure 1a(ii),b(ii)).

### 2.2 | DndC in DndCDE-FeS probably represents a new family of radical SAM enzymes

The N-terminal region of DndC (from residue 1 to 300) shows similarity to the sequences of adenosine 5'-phosphosulfate reductase (APS reductase) (27% identity to APS reductase from *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*) and phosphoadenosine phosphosulfate reductase (PAPS reductase) (20% identity to PAPS reductase from *E. coli*) (Figure S1), which all belong to the CysH superfamily. Both PAPS reductase and APS reductase are not radical SAM-type enzyme (see below). The crucial difference between APS reductase and PAPS reductase is that APS reductase contains a [4Fe-4S] cluster, while PAPS reductase does not. In the *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* APS reductase, the four cysteine residues at positions 139, 140, 228 and 231 are responsible for the ligation of the [4Fe-4S] cluster. It is noteworthy that three of the cysteine residues (C146, C280 and C283) are conserved between DndC and the APS reductases (Figure S1). In DndC, these three cysteine residues are also involved in the [4Fe-4S] coordination (Pu et al., 2019), while the fourth cysteine residue is absent from DndC proteins. There are additional two cysteine residues (C<sub>262</sub> and C<sub>273</sub>) that are absent from APS reductase.



**FIGURE 1** The phosphorothioate reaction catalyzed by DndCDE-FeS. The reaction mixture contained 1.5 mM SAM, 1 mM Mg<sup>2+</sup>, 1 mM ATP, 1 mM cysteine and 20 μM DndCDE-FeS or DndCDE plus 20 μM IscS and 0.4 μM substrate DNA. After PT reaction, DNA was digested using nucleases by established protocols (Wang et al., 2011, 2007), as described in the Methods section. Successful PT reactions should yield the deoxynucleotide dGsA or dGsT, which have a calculated *m/z* of 597.1393 and 588.1272 respectively. The reaction products were detected using HPLC/MS for deoxynucleotide (i) dGsA or (ii) dGsT. (a) Effects of small molecules on the PT reaction. The small molecules were omitted from the reaction mixture one by one. (b) The involvement of the iron-sulfur cluster in the PT reaction. The Dnd protein complex used in the reaction was anoxically reconstituted (dark green, resulting in a [4Fe-4S] cluster; Pu et al., 2019), oxically purified (brown, [3Fe-4S]) or treated using 1 mM α,α'-dipyridyl (gray), which removed the Fe-S cluster [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

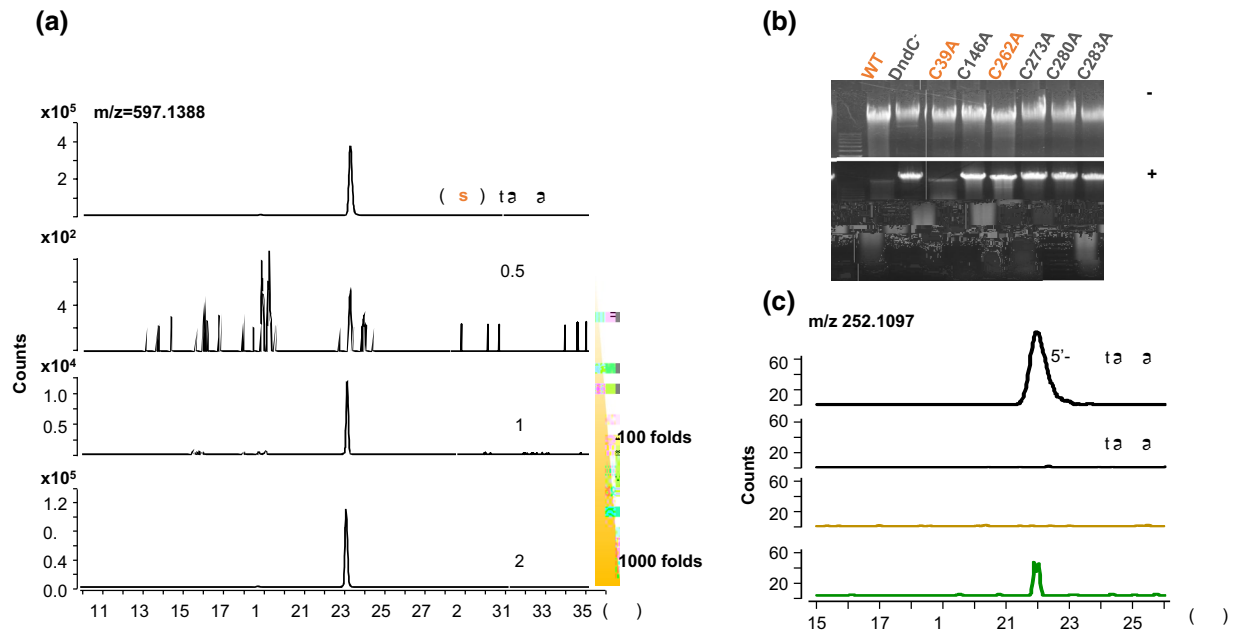
The radical SAM superfamily (RSS) contains a tremendous number of homologous enzymes that catalyze a remarkably broad range of reactions (Lanz & Booker, 2015; Wang et al., 2014). They exhibit varied and complex domain architectures. The lengths of the RSS functional domains range from 46 to 1,449 residues (Holliday et al., 2018). Three characteristics are minimally required for an enzyme to be considered a radical SAM enzyme: a unique three-cysteine motif that ligates the [4Fe-4S] cluster, with the apical iron free to bind the SAM moiety; a common activation step involved in the generation of the 5'-deoxyadenosyl (5'-dA) radical (SAM reductive cleavage); and reduction of the [4Fe-4S] cluster by an external electron donor.

DndC protein from *S. lividans* was previously shown to contain a 4Fe-4S cluster (You et al., 2007). We characterize recently the 4Fe-4S cluster using EPR (Pu et al., 2019). We suspected that DndC is a radical SAM enzyme because the 4Fe-4S cluster is coordinated by three rather than four cysteine residues (Figure S1). We varied the SAM concentration in the PT reaction. Figures 2a shows 100-fold increases in PT yield with increases in the SAM concentration from 0.5 to 2 mM, as indicated by the dGsA signal. We then used the cysteine

mutants of DndC to analyze its involvement in DNA PT modification. Figures 2b and S3 show that cysteine residue 39 is not required for PT. Cysteine residues 146, 280 and 283, which are responsible for the ligation of the [4Fe-4S] cluster, are essential for PT. Cysteine residues 262 and 273 are also required for PT. To further confirm a radical SAM enzyme being involved in the PT modification, reaction products were analyzed using HPLC-MS. Figure 2c shows that in contrast to the reaction products from DndCDE purified oxically, the canonical 5'-dA mass signal was successfully detected from reaction using the anoxic DndCDE-FeS. These observations suggest that PT is a radical SAM-type reaction. Nevertheless, the detection of the dGsT signal failed, even with 2 mM SAM in the reaction mixture (not shown).

### 2.3 | R217 in DndD is involved in DNA complexation by DndCDE

We briefly investigated the effect of ds DNA substrate length (6 to 50 bp, DNA3/4/5/8/12 in Table 1 respectively) on PT by



**FIGURE 2** The radical SAM enzyme of DndCDE-FeS. (a) HPLC traces showing the effect of SAM concentration on the PT reaction yield. An increasing amount of SAM was used in the PT reaction. The reaction product deoxynucleotide dGsA was detected using HPLC/MS. The quantities of dGsA were estimated from the HPLC peak areas. (b) Analysis of genomic DNA PT modification in DndC mutants. Genomic DNA was extracted from *E. coli* DH10B strains harboring the *dnd* gene cluster with a *dndC* mutation. Each of the six cysteine residues in DndC was mutated to an alanine residue. The genomic DNA was cleaved using peracetic acid (PAA; An et al., 2012; Xie et al., 2012). The DNA samples were subjected to agarose gel electrophoresis. The smear pattern of the DNA band indicates PT modification. DNA with PT modification is marked with orange color. (c) The SAM cleavage reaction. The reaction mixture contained 1.5 mM SAM, 1 mM Mg<sup>2+</sup>, 1 mM ATP, 1 mM cysteine and 20 μM DndCDE-FeS (dark green) or DndCDE (brown) plus 20 μM IscS and 0.4 μM DNA. The reaction products were analyzed using HPLC/MS. In radical SAM reactions, reductive cleavage of SAM gives rise to 5'-deoxyadenosine (5'-dA), which has a calculated *m/z* of 252.1097 [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

DndCDE-FeS using a combination of three different approaches: HPLC-MS to detect the PT reaction products; circular dichroism (CD) spectroscopy to analyze conformational changes in DndCDE upon binding to DNA substrates; and electrophoresis mobility shift assays (EMSAs) to determine the avidity of DNA binding by the protein complex. The results from the HPLC-MS experiment indicated that the minimum ds DNA substrate length required for DndCDE-FeS to cause PT was 8 bp and that PT yield increased with increasing substrate DNA length up to 24 bp (Figure 3a). CD spectroscopy showed that an increase of 6.8% in  $\alpha$ -helix content was detected for a ds DNA substrate length of 8 bp. The  $\alpha$ -helix content increased with increasing DNA length (Figure 3b), suggesting that the conformation of DndCDE changed upon DNA binding. Figure 3c shows that the DNA complexation signal was barely detectable at a length of 16 bp (DNA5), and the signal was greater at length of 24 bp (DNA8).

To analyze the effects of [Fe-S] on DndC DNA binding, we made an accidental double mutant in which cysteine 280 in DndC was mutated to alanine and arginine 217 in DndD was mutated to a cysteine. Figure 3d(i) shows that mutations at cysteine residues in DndC did not affect DNA binding, while the C280A-R217C mutant abolished DNA binding of the DndCDE. The role of R217 was further confirmed by the DndD site-directed mutant R217C (Figure 3d(ii)). The DndD R217 mutant allowed us to analyze the avidity of DNA binding by DndCDE and how it affected PT. Figure 3d(iii) shows that

genomic DNA was still PT-modified in the DndD R217 mutant, but the PT abundance reduced to about 60%.

## 2.4 | PT modification at dGT required DNA substrate with ss PT modification at dGA

An interesting additional observation was that while in vivo, PT has most commonly been reported as a ds modification of DNA (Dyson & Evans, 1998; Wang et al., 2011; Zhou et al., 2005), in our experiments using HPLC-MS, a mass peak corresponding to dGsT was not detected, suggesting that PT had occurred in a ss manner. Since DNA PT is believed to be a post-replicative (Dyson & Evans, 1998) bi-stranded process, we suggest that a possible resolution to this apparent paradox could be that after DNA replication, the PT GsAAC/GsTTC modification of a single DNA strand is converted to a ds form. To test this hypothesis, we synthesized and HPLC-purified *Rp* and *Sp* configuration oligomers (Figure S4), and made the 24 bp DNA fragments with a single PT site in the *Rp* form (GsAAC/GTTC, GAAC/GsTTC, DNA10/11 in Table 1 respectively) as substrates for the PT assay (Figure 4a). A definite peak at *m/z* 588.1272 was detected by HPLC-MS assay, indicating that PT had occurred at dGT using the GsAAC/GTTC substrate (Figure 4a). When DNA containing GAAC/GsTTC was employed

TABLE 1 DNA fragments

#	DNA		Sequence 5'→3'	Source/Reference
1	24 nt-ss-GsA <sup>a</sup>		CCTCTGCGGGsAACTCTCGCTTTG	This study
2	24 nt-ss-GsT		CAAAGCGAGAGsTTCCCGCAAGAGG	This study
3	6 bp-ds-GA/GT	Sense	GGAACT	This study
		Antisense	AGTTCC	
4	8 bp-ds-GA/GT	Sense	GGGAACTC	This study
		Antisense	GAGTTCCC	
5	16 bp-ds-GA/GT	Sense	TTGCGGGA ACTCTCGC	This study
		Antisense	GCGAGAGTTCCCGCAA	
6	18 bp-ds-GA/GT	Sense	CTTGC GGGA ACTCTCGCT	This study
		Antisense	AGCGAGAGTTCCCGCAAG	
7	20 bp-ds-GA/GT	Sense	TCTTGCGGGA ACTCTCGCTT	This study
		Antisense	AAGCGAGAGTTCCCGCAAGA	
8	24 bp-ds-GA/GT	Sense	CCTCTGCGGGA ACTCTCGCTTTG	Pu et al. (2019)
		Antisense	CAAAGCGAGAGTTCCCGCAAGAGG	
9	24 bp-ds-GsA/GsT	Sense	CCTCTGCGGGsAACTCTCGCTTTG	This study
		Antisense	CAAAGCGAGAGsTTCCCGCAAGAGG	
10	24 bp-ds-GsA/GT	Sense	CCTCTGCGGGsAACTCTCGCTTTG	This study
		Antisense	CAAAGCGAGAGTTCCCGCAAGAGG	
11	24 bp-ds-GA/GsT	Sense	CCTCTGCGGGA ACTCTCGCTTTG	This study
		Antisense	CAAAGCGAGAGsTTCCCGCAAGAGG	
12	50bp-ds-GA/GT	Sense	GAAAGTACCCCTCTTGCGGGA ACTCTCGCTTTGGCTGCTGGACCTGTAC	This study
		Antisense	GTACAGGTCCAGCAGCAAAGCGAGAGTTCCCGCAAGAGGGGTACTTTC	

<sup>a</sup>s: phosphorothioation at site.

as substrate, dGsA PT was decreased compared to that observed for substrate without modification (The concentrations of dGsA or dGsT produced by substrates GAAC/GsTTC, GsAAC/GTTC and GAAC/GTTC were estimated in Table 2).

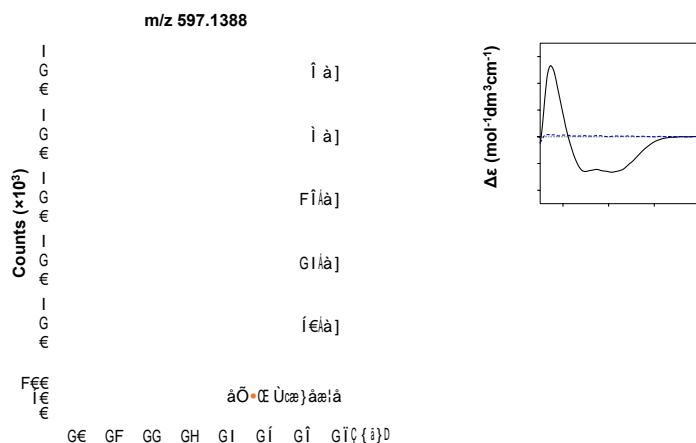
Controlled and directed DNA binding by DndCDE is very likely to be important for the delivery of the enzyme complex to the potential sites for subsequent PT modification. In parallel EMSA assay and CD spectral analysis, we found that ss PT modification at ds DNA substrate slightly increased the avidity of DndCDE to DNA (Figure 4b). There was no obvious difference between the binding to 5'-GsAAC/GTTC-3' and binding to 5'-GAAC/GsTTC-3' (Figure 4b). Figure S5 illustrates that there was no significant difference in the binding of DndCDE to *Rp* and *Sp* substrate DNA. The increase in the  $\alpha$ -helix content of DndCDE was similar between binding to normal ds DNA and binding to DNA with PT modification at dGsT (Figure 4c). In sharp contrast, a decrease of 7.29% in  $\alpha$ -helix content was detected upon binding to ds DNA with PT at dGsA. These results imply that DndCDE recognizes ds DNA with/without PT at dGsA/dGsT and adopts different conformations after binding to its target.

The above observations support the view that the DndCDE-FeS might not modify both strands of ds DNA simultaneously and that modification first occurs between G and A, followed by modification between G and T.

## 2.5 | Small molecules dramatically tweaked the conformation of DndCDE

In the case of experiments in which the effect of small molecules on DndCDE DNA complexation was investigated, cysteine significantly enhanced the binding of DndCDE to non-PT substrates, while SAM had little effect on the binding of DndCDE to ds DNA (Figure 5a). ATP reduced DndCDE complexation with substrate DNA8 (Figure 5b), and at 8 mM ATP, DNA binding was very significantly reduced. Adenosine monophosphate (AMP) and adenosine diphosphate (ADP) were both observed to have less effect than ATP on the binding of DndCDE to the substrate (Figure 5b). To test whether ATP hydrolysis played a role in the DNA complexation of DndCDE, an EMSA was carried out using ADP•AlF<sub>3</sub> (a mimic of ATP that is not hydrolysable), and it was observed that, as in the case of ATP, DndCDE binding to substrate 8 was significantly lessened (Figure 5b).

Conformational changes might have been induced in DndCDE by the small molecules in the DndCDE PT reaction. CD spectral analysis showed that SAM, ATP and cysteine were all responsible for inducing conformational changes in the protein, and in all cases, the percentage of protein in the  $\alpha$ -helix conformation decreased by approximately 30%, while the  $\beta$ -sheet conformation content increased by between 3% and 6% (Figure 5c).



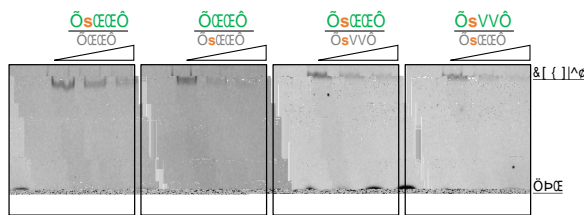
**FIGURE 3** DNA chain length requirement for PT reaction. (a) HPLC traces showing DNA substrates with increasing chain length and the yield of dGsA from PT. (b) Circular dichroism spectra of DndCDE protein upon binding to DNA substrate. The content of  $\alpha$ -helices and  $\beta$ -strands were analyzed using K2D3 software. (c) EMSA analysis of DndCDE binding to DNA of increasing chain length. (d) Mutational analysis of DNA binding by DndCDE and the related PT activity. (i) DNA binding by DndCDE with mutation of cysteine residues on DndC. The green color marks the accidental introduction of an arginine residue mutation in DndD. (ii) DNA binding by DndCDE with the site-directed mutation on DndC or DndD. (iii) HPLC traces showing DNA PT modification by DndD R217 mutant. The columns show the percentage of PT modification in DndD R217 mutant relative to the wild type [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

### 3 | DISCUSSION

We found that PT by DndCDE-FeS occurs under only strictly anoxic conditions and that even mixing the anoxically prepared protein with SAM under oxic condition can abolish it. The Fe-S cluster in the [4Fe-4S] configuration being ligated by three cysteine residues and the reaction requirement for SAM suggested that DndCDE-FeS functions as a radical SAM-type enzyme. The radical SAM proteins usually contain a highly conserved CxxxCxxC motif, which is used to coordinate the [4Fe-4S] cluster (Sofia, Chen, Hetzler, Reyes-Spindola, & Miller, 2001). Therefore, according to this definition, DndC can be classified as a non-canonical radical SAM enzyme. Modification of nucleic acids or compounds by insertion of a sulfur is commonly found in radical SAM enzymes (Wang et al., 2014). Interestingly, our studies have illustrated that DndC shows similarity to the PAPS and APS reductase family of proteins (Zhou et al., 2005), which do not hydrolyze ATP during the reactions they catalyze (Savage, Montoya, Svensson, Schwenn, & Sinning, 1997). The requirement for SAM during PT also suggests that the nucleotide binding domain of DndC might actually bind SAM and not ATP. Common to almost all radical SAM enzymes is the formation of a 5-deoxyadenosyl radical (5'-dA•) radical via reductive cleavage of SAM in the first step (Stich, Myers, & Britt, 2014) of the reaction, which could then be used in the current context to 'activate' the 'inert' DNA phosphate backbone (Figures 2 and 6).

We postulated that the sulfur of PT bond comes directly from cysteine rather than from SAM or the 4Fe-4S cluster on DndC. This is evidenced by the requirement of cysteine for the reaction to proceed (Figures 1a and 6). The mobilization of sulfur could be catalyzed by IscS (desulfurase), which cannot be replaced by SufS (An et al., 2012). The direct delivery of sulfur to DNA could potentially be catalyzed by the Cys262 and Cys273 residue in DndC, because site-directed mutation of these two cysteine residues abolished the PT modification (Figure S3). It should be noted that key biochemical intermediates are waiting to be identified and there is a considerable uncertainty to propose a solid mechanism pathway for the PT reaction. Nevertheless, we envisage a potential involvement of thiol/perthiyl radicals (Schöneich, 2017) in the reaction (Figure 6), laying the ground for further investigations.

Sulfur incorporation during PT has been suggested to require energy (Eckstein, 2007), while both DndC and DndD proteins in phosphorothioating enzymes have been shown to hydrolyze ATP (An et al., 2012; Yao et al., 2009). The findings presented here support the hypothesis that ATP is helpful but not essential for PT to occur (Figure 5b). We suggest that rather than being directly involved in PT, the ATP binding capability possessed by DndD might help to release DndCDE from substrate DNA post PT or to find conserved GAAC/GTTC modification sites. In accordance with the involvement of ATP in the PT modification process is the observation that in the



**FIGURE 4** DNA PT modification at the GTTC side. (a) HPLC traces showing PT reaction with substrate DNA containing one PT modification. Substrate 1 contained a dGsA modification. Substrate 2 contained a dGsT modification. PT modification on the opposite side was then analyzed using HPLC/MS. For example, for substrate 1, dGsT was analyzed. (b) EMSA analysis of DndCDE binding to ds DNA with PT modification at one strand. Substrate DNA fluorescence is indicated by green color. Cold DNA is indicated with gray color. Ten- or 20-fold more unlabeled cold DNA was used for the experiments. (c) CD spectra of DndCDE protein binding to DNA with PT modification at one of the ds strands [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

presence of ATP, DndB, the repressor of the *dnd* gene cluster, disassociates from DNA to allow the transcription of the PT modification genes (Xia et al., 2019).

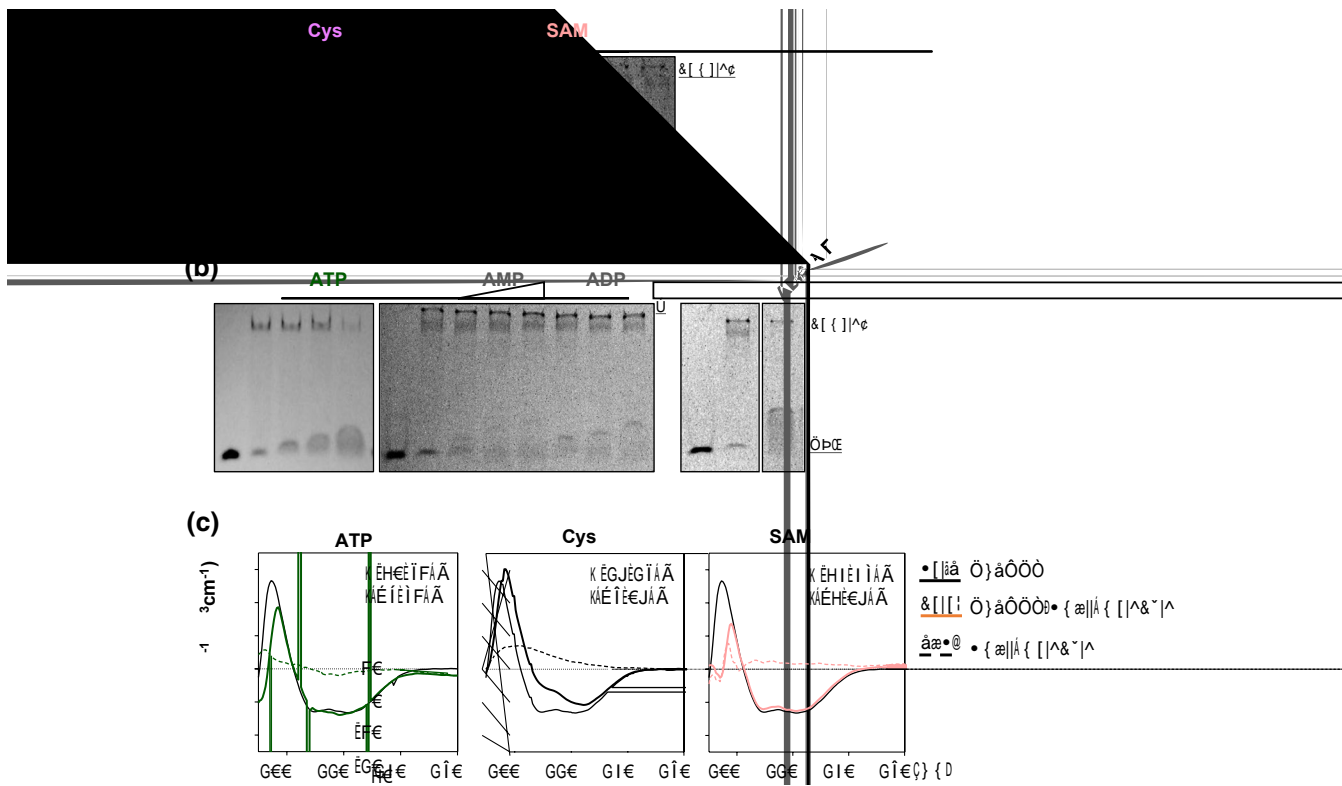
PT occurs on both strands of DNA in vivo (Dyson & Evans, 1998; Liang et al., 2007; Zhou et al., 2005), and it is a one-step process, with the substitution occurring simultaneously on both strands (Cao et al., 2015). Our work does not support that suggestion; rather, we observed that in vitro PT occurred on only one strand of ds DNA substrate. The previous observations that genomic DNA extracted from bacteria mostly bears the PT modification on both DNA strands (Dyson & Evans, 1998; Liang et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2011; Zhou et al., 2005) does not necessarily disagree with our finding. The explanation could be that since PT has been reported to be a post-replicative (Boybek, Ray, Evans, & Dyson, 1998; Dyson & Evans, 1998) process, PT of the newly synthesized DNA strand may rely on PT of the conserved strand for directing the phosphorothioating enzyme second-strand binding and activity. Therefore, ss PT modification

would be the first step in what eventually becomes ds PT DNA in vivo. At present, this seems to be the best possible explanation for the differences between our results in vitro and those previously reported (Cao et al., 2015). This is especially the case as so far no evidence has been provided to show or suggest that anything other than the phosphorothioating enzyme is involved in the simultaneous PT of both strands of ds DNA. A possible advantage of ss PT might be the avoidance of DNA degradation during the modification itself. Modification of one strand at a time would avoid the generation of two radical species simultaneously, which could increase the chance of DNA ds breakage. The preferential binding of DndCDE to ss PT oligonucleotides (Figure 4b) reported in this study and the requirement of first-strand PT modification before second-strand PT (Figure 4a), revealed in our studies, support this notion. In summary, with the results we have obtained and the hypothesis we have advanced, we have provided a possible description of the PT activity of DndCDE-FeS.

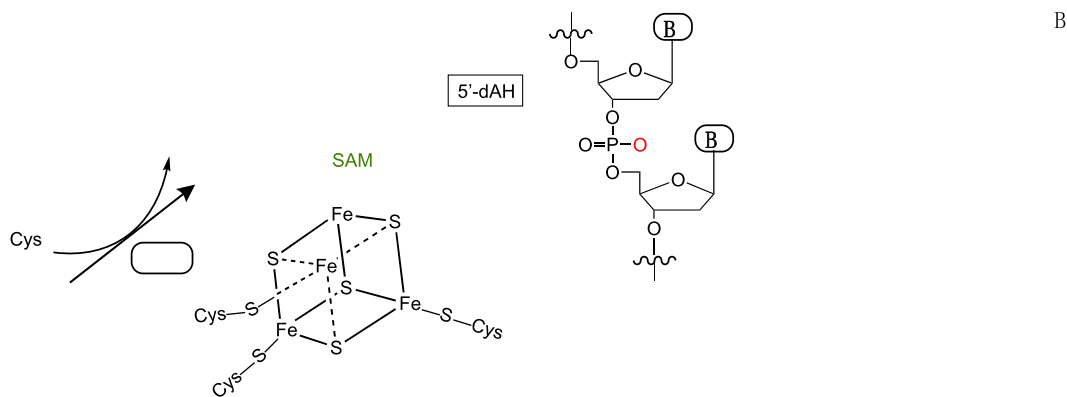
## 4 | EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES

### 4.1 | Bacterial strains, plasmids, culture conditions, protein expression and purification

The compounds 5'-dA, cysteine, SAM, ATP and DTT were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (Merck KGaA, Darmstadt, Germany).



**FIGURE 5** Effects of small molecules on DndCDE conformation and DNA complexation. In these experiments, 1 mM (if not indicated specifically) small molecules were used. In addition, 3.38  $\mu$ M DndCDE and 0.4  $\mu$ M DNA were used in the EMSA study. (a) EMSA analysis of DndCDE binding to substrate DNA in the presence of ATP, ADP, AMP, (2.5, 5.0 and 7.5 mM, respectively) and ADP•AlF (7.5 mM). (b) EMSA analysis of DndCDE binding to substrate DNA in the presence of cysteine (0, 1 and 2 mM) and SAM (0–6 mM). (c) CD spectra of DndCDE in the presence of ATP, Cys and SAM. DndCDE (0.2  $\mu$ M) in CD buffer was used for the study [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



**FIGURE 6** Pathway for the formation of PT. Small molecules are indicated by squares. Proteins are indicated by round corner squares. The perthiyl radical is indicated by the green dot. The dashed arrows indicate the suggested chemical steps that need to be investigated [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Synthetic dinucleotide dG<sub>5</sub>A and dG<sub>5</sub>T standards were purchased from GENEWIZ (Jiangsu, China). The bacterial strains and plasmids used in this work, except for the DndD mutant R217C, have been described in previous publications (Pu et al., 2019; Xiong et al., 2015). The primers used to generate the DndD mutant R217C were 5'-TTATCAAATGCCAGCAAACCTGCCAGTTGGGTGGCTC-3' and 5'-GTTTGCTGGCATTGTGATAAAAATCATCAGATCATTTT-3'. The mutation protocol had been described by Pu et al. (2019). Bacterial cell culture conditions, protein expression and purification

of His-tagged cysteine desulfurase (IscS) and DndCDE were also described in detail in a previous publication. In vitro anoxic enzymatic formation of the Fe-S cluster in DndCDE (DndCDE-FeS) and EMSAs used previously established protocols without modification (Pu et al., 2019).

In vitro measurement of PT activity under anoxic and oxic conditions. Experiments reported in this work relating to the detection of DNA PT by DndCDE-FeS were designed and carried out to elucidate the factors important in mediating and contributing to the process



and investigated the effects of cofactors on the reaction and why only one strand of DNA is phosphorothioated *in vitro*. DndCDE was never observed to possess PT activity.

For the preparation of substrate DNA, short, ds substrate DNA fragments of 6, 8, 16, 24 and 50 bp (DNA3/4/5/8/12) in length were used as a basis for measuring PT and were synthesized by and obtained from GENEWIZ (Jiangsu, China) as sense and antisense oligonucleotides (Table 1). Substrate DNA solutions used in PT assay reactions were prepared as 500  $\mu$ l volumes containing 50  $\mu$ l of 400  $\mu$ M sense and antisense oligonucleotide, 100  $\mu$ l of 5  $\times$  annealing buffer (150 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.0, 50 mM MgCl<sub>2</sub> and 240 mM NaCl) and 300  $\mu$ l of water. Prior to use in PT assay reactions, these mixtures were heated to 100°C for 10 min and then slowly cooled to room temperature to remove any misannealing that may have occurred in the case of ds DNA substrates. The substrate DNA solutions were then either used immediately in PT reactions or stored frozen until required. In the case of anoxic DNA PT assays, the whole procedure was performed in an anoxic glove box.

Phosphorothioate assay reactions were performed in three steps. The first step was DNA binding by DndCDE. A 1.2 ml (total volume) solution contained 750  $\mu$ l of DndCDE (20  $\mu$ M), 75  $\mu$ l of IscS (200  $\mu$ M) in storage buffer (see previous) and 375  $\mu$ l of substrate DNA (DNA12). The solution was dialyzed for 3 hr in 1 L of Bis-Tris buffer (50 mM Bis-Tris pH 6.5, 150 mM NaCl, and 5% glycerol) previously degassed in an anoxic glove box for 2 days. The decrease in pH to 6.5 increased the effectiveness of DNA binding by the complex. The second step was the formation of an iron-sulfur cluster and hence the 'active' DndCDE-FeS on DNA. DTT, Fe(NH<sub>4</sub>)<sub>2</sub>(SO<sub>4</sub>)<sub>2</sub> and cysteine were added to the mixture at final concentrations of 7.5, 0.5 and 0.5 mM, respectively, which was then incubated anoxically at 4°C overnight. The mixture was then dialyzed for 3 hr at 4°C in 1 L of Bis-Tris buffer to remove the DTT, cysteine and Fe(NH<sub>4</sub>)<sub>2</sub>(SO<sub>4</sub>)<sub>2</sub>. The dialysis step can be performed for a longer time or overnight which is not harmful to the PT reaction. Removing the small molecules using a desalt column also works. The third step was the initiation of the PT reaction. The mixture was divided into 100  $\mu$ l aliquots in sterile microcentrifuge tubes and ATP (1 mM), Mg<sup>2+</sup> (1 mM), cysteine (1 mM), and/or SAM (1.5 mM) were added to initiate PT which was allowed to proceed for 2 to 3 hr at room temperature under anoxic conditions in a glove box. Finally, the reaction mixtures were boiled for 10 min, rapidly chilled on ice and centrifuged at 15,000 *g* for 10 min at room temperature to remove protein precipitate.

For the detection of the PT reaction product, the supernatant was carefully removed and added to 400  $\mu$ l of sterile double-distilled water, and the entire 500  $\mu$ l was loaded into sterile, dialysis tubing (Sangon Biotech) that was suspended in 1 L of sterile double-distilled water and allowed to dialyze overnight. At the end of that time, the sample volume had increased to approximately 1 ml. The dialyzed sample was then lyophilized in a FreeZone 12 Liter Console Freeze Dryer (LABCONCO, Missouri, USA) under vacuum at -70°C, and the resulting DNA was resuspended in 100  $\mu$ l of 90% v/v aqueous

methyl alcohol and centrifuged at 15,000 *g* for 20 min to remove salt. The supernatant was collected and dried in a rotary evaporator (CHRIST RVC 2-25 CD plus, CHRIST, Osterode, Germany) under vacuum at 37°C. Finally, the resultant DNA pellet was resuspended in 60  $\mu$ l of sterile double-distilled water and digested with P1 and FastAP nuclease and analyzed for PT using HPLC-MS as described previously.

## 4.2 | Protein secondary structure determination by circular dichroism spectroscopy

One milliliter of purified DndCDE (equivalent to 10 nmoles of protein) in storage buffer (20 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.0, 150 mM NaCl, 5% glycerol) was dialyzed in 1 L of CD buffer (20 mM Na<sub>2</sub>HPO<sub>4</sub>·NaH<sub>2</sub>PO<sub>4</sub> pH 7.0, 150 mM NaF and 5% glycerol) for 6 hr at 4°C. Subsequently, the protein concentration was adjusted to 0.42  $\mu$ M with CD detection buffer, and 400  $\mu$

#### 4.4 | HPLC/MS detection of PT DNA

The HPLC-MS standard assay employed in PT DNA analysis in this study was setup using phosphorothioated genomic DNA isolated from the IPTG-induced *E. coli* strain BL21(DE3)/plyS possessing pDndBCDE<sub>H</sub> using a Dzap Genomic DNA Isolation Reagent kit (Sangon Biotech, Shanghai, China) and was based upon the procedure reported by Wang et al. (2007, 2011).

Briefly, 50 µg of phosphorothioated DNA in 89 µl of water was digested with 1 unit of P1 nuclease (Sigma, Shanghai China) at 50°C in 1× nuclease P1 buffer (30 mM NaAc pH 5.3, 5 mM ZnCl<sub>2</sub>, 50 mM NaCl) for 4 hr in a sterile microcentrifuge tube. Subsequently, 1 unit of FastAP (Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc., Massachusetts, USA) and 1× FAST AP buffer were added to the mixture, which was incubated for an additional 4 hr at 37°C. The reaction was then terminated by boiling for 10 min and centrifuged at 18,000 g at 4°C for 20 min to remove denatured protein. The reaction supernatant was loaded into an Amicon<sup>®</sup> Ultra 0.5 ml centrifugal filter (Merck) and centrifuged at 8,000 g for 2 hr at 4°C. The eluate was collected, and 20 µL was loaded onto an Agilent-C18 reverse-phase column (250 mm × 4.6 mm, 5 µm Agilent Technologies) fitted to an Agilent 1290-MS 6230 HPLC. Sample separation was achieved by using a two-solvent mixture (A: 0.1% acetic acid in water and B: 0.1% acetic acid in acetonitrile) at a flow rate of 0.4 ml/min and a temperature of 30°C. Gradient conditions were 1% to 13% solvent B for 10 min, 13% to 30% solvent B for 20 min and finally 1% solvent B for 10 min. The ionization was set to positive mode, gas flow was 10 L/min, nebulizer pressure to 30 psi, drying gas temperature to 325°C and capillary voltage to 3,100 V. Dinucleotide dGsA was monitored at *m/z* 597.1388, while dGsT was monitored at *m/z* 588.1272. Synthetic control oligonucleotides (24 bp-ds-GsA/GsT, DNA9 in Table 1) were purchased from GENEWIZ, Jiangsu, China.

Quantification of PT abundance was performed as follows. To make a standard curve for the nucleotides, 10 µl 5, 12.5, 25, 50, 100 µM of dGsA or dGsT were detected with HPLC/MS respectively. The linear relationships between the nucleotide peak area and the concentrations of the dinucleotides were then obtained. To calculate the PT reaction production, 10 µl of the nuclease digestion product was analyzed using HPLC/MS. Peak areas of dGsA and dGsT were obtained. The yields of the dGsA and dGsT products were then calculated using the standard curve.

#### 4.5 | Analysis of 5'-dA in the enzymatic product of PT assay reactions

In contrast to the detection of PT dinucleotides in PT assay reactions, reaction mixtures (100 µl) were treated with 900 µl of methanol to inactivate and precipitate the protein after 2–3 hr of incubation in the glove box. The mixtures were centrifuged at 15,000 g for 10 min at room temperature to remove protein precipitate. The supernatants were then collected and dried in a rotary evaporator (CHRIST RVC 2-25 CD plus, CHRIST, Osterode, Germany) under vacuum at

30°C. The resultant pellet was resuspended in 40 µl of sterile double-distilled water.

Liquid chromatogram–high resolution mass spectrum (LC-HRMS) analysis of 5'-dA was performed on an Agilent 1200 series coupled with a 6530 Accurate-Mass Q-TOF mass spectrometer in positive mode using a reversed-phase column (Agilent, 250 × 4.6 mm, 5 µm) based on the method described by Jin, Wu, Jian, Yuan and Tang (2018). The mobile phase comprised solvent A (0.1% formic acid in Milli-Q water) and solvent B (0.1% formic acid in acetonitrile). The gradient was as follows: 5% B (0–5 min); 5% B to 20% B (5–20 min); 20% to 90% B (20–24 min); 90% B (24–27 min); 90% B to 5% B (27–29 min) and 5% B (29–35 min). The flow rate was 0.3 ml/min, and the detection wavelength was 254 nm. The gas flow was 8 L/min, the nebulizer pressure was 35 psi and the drying gas temperature was 300°C. The presence of 5'-dA was monitored at *m/z* 252.1097.

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#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

(i) The conception or design of the study: ZJW, JDL, ZXD, TNP; (ii) the acquisition, analysis or interpretation of the data: TNP, ZLM, WZ; (iii) writing of the manuscript: TNP, ZJW, JDL, LWJ, XFZ.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section.

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