ABSTRACT
RNA is ideally suited for in vitro evolution experiments, because a single RNA molecule possesses both genotypic (replicable sequence) and phenotypic (selectable shape) properties. Using systematic evolution of ligands by exponential enrichment (SELEX), we found a single 58-nt aptamer sequence that assumes two structures with different functions, both of which are required to inhibit the GluR2 AMPA receptor channel. Yet, the two structures, once formed during transcription, appear to be incapable of interconverting through unfolding and refolding, presumably due to their extraordinary structural stability. Thus, our results suggest more broadly that natural RNA molecules can evolve to acquire alternative structures and associated functions. Such divergence of RNA phenotype may precede gene duplication at the genome level.

INTRODUCTION
Both theoretical (1) and experimental (2) work demonstrated that a single RNA sequence can assume multiple, distinctly folded structures with different functions. These structures, or more precisely conformations, are different structural folds of the same sequence generated through reversible thermodynamic pathways. For example, a selected RNA sequence can adopt a fold that catalyzes RNA cleavage or a different fold that catalyzes RNA ligation (2). On binding of small metabolites, riboswitches can switch their conformations and consequently functions (3). However, here we describe that a single RNA sequence assumes two structures with different functions, both of which are required to work together in order to inhibit the GluR2 AMPA receptor. Yet, the two structures, once formed during transcription, are not interconvertible through unfolding and refolding or refolding after denaturation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS
Transcription and purification of M1 and M2
The enzymatic transcription reaction of the AN58 DNA template generated two RNA species, which we termed as M1 and M2. The in vitro transcription was carried out using the MEGAscript T7 transcription kit (Ambion) with a 1:1 mixture of the single stranded DNA template synthesized based on the complementary sequence of AN58 and the T7 promoter oligo, i.e. 5'-TAA TACGACTCACTATA-3'. The M1 and M2 were separated from the transcription reaction mixture in a Prep Cell polycrylamide gel electrophoresis (PAGE) column (Bio-Rad) and were individually passed through a Q column (Bio-Rad) to remove polycrylamide bound to RNA samples, as monitored in NMR (6). The pooled sample was then dialyzed against an appropriate buffer, such as the external buffer for electrophysiology (150 mM NaCl, 3 mM KCl, 1 mM CaCl₂, 1 mM MgCl₂, 50 mM HEPES, pH 7.4), and concentrated using an Amicon
Ultra centrifugal filter (Millipore). It should be emphasized that the purification of M1 and M2, described above, was necessary to ensure that the inability of interconversion between M1 and M2 (as shown in Figure 4A) was not due to the presence of acrylamide bound to these RNA molecules, causing an artificial stabilization of M1 and M2 in the folding/refolding experiments.

**Transcription and purification of AN59 M1 and AN59 M2 by using glmS ribozyme**

To create an even 3′-end of M1 and M2 species by *in vitro* transcription reaction, we cloned AN58 DNA sequence into pRAV23 vector (9) that contains the sequence of the glmS ribozyme (10). In our construct, the AN58 DNA sequence was ligated into the EcoRI 1 (5′-) and Kpn 1 (3′-) sites, respectively, and the AN58 sequence was inserted upstream of the glmS sequence with an additional nucleotide A. The glmS ribozyme cleaved the RNA sequence at the AG site upstream at its 3′-end, releasing a single, cleavage fragment (10). Therefore, the constructed plasmid was linearized and used as the template for *in vitro* transcription of AN59 M1 and AN59 M2. After transcription reaction by using the MEGAscript T7 RNA kit, the transcription product was incubated with 1 mM glucosamine-6-phosphate (Sigma), a metabolite that accelerates the cleavage reaction, for 2 h in a buffer containing 50 mM Tris–HCl (pH 8.3), 10 mM MgCl2 and 200 mM KCl. The reaction mixture, which contained AN59 M1/M2, was separated through a PAGE column and further purified by passing through a Q column, as described above for the AN58 M1/M2 purification.

**Modification of RNA with glyoxal and characterization of the glyoxalation products**

To evaluate the electrophoretic mobility of AN58 M1 and M2 without interference of base paring, we treated M1 and M2 with glyoxal (11). Glyoxalation introduces a bulky adduct into guanosine residues, which then sterically hinders GC-pair formation (11). Experimentally, 100 ng of an RNA sample in 5 μl was mixed with equal volume of glyoxal loading buffer (supplied by Applied Biosystems/Ambion and it contained glyoxal, DMSO, ethidium bromide and bromophenol blue). The mixture was incubated at 50°C for 1 h. After incubation, the sample was kept on ice before loading on a 12% sequencing PAGE gel. The RNA sample obtained from the PAGE gel was ethanol precipitated, air dried and re-dissolved in 10% native PAGE. The RNA sample obtained from the gel was ethanol precipitated, air dried and re-dissolved in 10 mM Tris–HCl buffer (pH 7.4). SynAN58 RNA was used as the control, which was prepared in the same way. The in-line probing experiments were carried out by the following procedure. Samples were mixed with external buffer (note that the pH was adjusted to pH 8.6) and kept at 37°C for up to 72 h. The samples were then ethanol precipitated, air dried, and re-dissolved in 5 mM Tris–HCl buffer containing 47.5% formamide. All of the samples were loaded onto a 12% sequencing PAGE containing 8 M urea. The gel was dried, which was then exposed to a phosphorimage screen. The image was captured by a phosphorimage scanner and analyzed by ImageQuant TL.

**Selecting 2′-hydroxyl acylation analyzed by primer extension (SHAPE)**

SHAPE experiments were carried out to probe the structures of M1, M2 and SynAN58. For the SHAPE experiment, an RNA sample was dissolved in 10 mM Tris buffer, and the salt concentration was adjusted to (in mM) 150 NaCl, 3 KCl, 1 CaCl2, 1 MgCl2, 10 HEPES (pH 7.4).
The sample was heated to 95°C for 3 min, placed on ice for 1 min and then was left at 37°C for 30 min. N-Methylisatoic anhydride (NMIA) dissolved in DMSO was added to the sample, which reacted with the 2'-hydroxyl group of a ribose, generating a corresponding ester adduct (13). The NMIA reaction was run at 37°C for 50 min. The sample was then ethanol precipitated, air-dried and re-dissolved into dH2O for primer extension. The primer extension reaction was run by the method described earlier, except that a 15-nt oligo, 3P15 (5'-GG ACGAAACTTGTCC-3'), was used.

Receptor expression

The homomeric GluR2Qhip AMPA receptor channel was transiently expressed in human embryonic kidney (HEK)-293S cells as described (14). The cells were maintained in Dulbecco’s modified Eagle’s medium supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum, in a 37°C, 5% CO2, humidified incubator. The cells were used for electrophysiology from 48 h after transfection.

Electrophysiology

The inhibitory function of an aptamer was measured using whole-cell recording, as described previously (6,15). Briefly, the electrode had a resistance of ~3 MΩ after it was filled with the electrode solution (in mM): 110 CsF, 30 CsCl, 4 NaCl, 0.5 CaCl2, 5 EGTA, and 10 HEPES (pH 7.4 adjusted by CsOH). All reagents, including aptamers and glutamate, were dissolved in the external buffer and used for whole-cell recording. The external buffer composition was described earlier in purification of M1 and M2 of the receptor. Glutamate-induced whole-cell current was recorded at -60 mV and 22°C. Unless noted otherwise, each data point in Figure 1C and 1D was an average of at least three measurements collected from at least three cells. Origin 7 was used for data analysis and plotting. Uncertainties reported refer to standard deviation from the mean.

RESULTS

Different functional roles of M1 and M2

We previously showed that RNA aptamer AN58 and its longer versions were all potent inhibitors of GluR2 AMPA receptors (6). In a native PAGE (Figure 1A), AN58 and its longer versions exhibited two or more than two bands. Surprisingly, however, the two bands of AN58, generated by in vitro transcription and labeled as M1 and M2 in Figure 1A, did not individually inhibit the GluR2 receptor, as characterized by whole-cell recording of the GluR2 receptor channel expressed in HEK-293 cells (14) (Figure 1B). Yet, when mixed with equal molar ratio, M1 and M2 inhibited the receptor as fully as they did before they were separated (Figure 1C).

More surprisingly, M1 and M2 were found to have different functional roles in inhibiting the GluR2 receptor, a conclusion drawn from a series of whole-cell recording experiments (Figure 1D). First, an equal molar mixture of the non-inhibitory 53-nt transcript (AN53) with the purified M2 yielded no inhibition, but the mixture of the 53-nt transcript with the purified M1 produced an inhibition as strong as the mixture of purified M1 and M2 (Figure 1D). As a control, RN87 whose RNA sequence is different from either AN58 or AN53 showed no inhibition itself or when mixed with either M1 or M2 (Figure 1D). These results (Figures 1C and D) indicated that M1 and M2 functioned differently, by binding separately to two different sites, but M1 and M2 were required to act as a collaborating pair to inhibit GluR2 (Figure 1E).

We previously concluded that AN58 was a competitive inhibitor based on the fact that the original sequence of AN58 was evolved from SELEX using 6-nitro-7-sulfamoylbenzo[f]quinoxaline-2,3-dione (NBQX) as the selection pressure to displace aptamers from their binding sites or a site that was mutually exclusive (6), and that the NBQX is a classic competitive inhibitor of the AMPA/kainate subtypes of glutamate receptors (16). Furthermore, AN58 was shown to displace NBQX bound to the receptor in a radio-ligand binding assay and also to right-shift the dose-response curve established by whole-cell current recording (6). Based on this mechanism of the collective action of M1 and M2 (Figure 1E), the intrinsic inhibition constant or KI for M1 and M2 was estimated to be 25±4 and 27±7 nM, respectively (Supplementary Figure 1). The experiment using different ratios of M1 and M2 further revealed that the relative stoichiometry of the inhibition was 1:1 (Supplementary Figure 1).

Sequencing of M1 and M2

Based on the finding that M1 and M2 had different functional roles but had to act together in order to inhibit the receptor (Figure 1C and D), we hypothesized that the functional difference between M1 and M2 was a result of different structures assumed from the same sequence. To test this hypothesis, we first sequenced M1 and M2 by primer extension, using the synthetically made AN58 or SynAN58 with the known sequence as the ladder. As expected, the sequence of M1 and M2 was identical (Supplementary Figure 2) (note that the 3'-end sequence was not resolved due to the annealing of a 15-nt primer for the sequencing). Using either a 12-nt or 17-nt primer annealed at the 3'-end also produced the same sequencing information for M1 and M2 (data not shown). We further demonstrated that M1 and M2, once chemically modified by glyoxal, were able to migrate with the same mobility (Figure 2A) in PAGE, suggesting that M1 and M2 also had the same length. The use of glyoxal to completely denature RNAs by glyoxalating their bases, thus prohibiting base pairing, allowed RNAs to migrate in PAGE without interference of secondary structures (11).

Structural differences in M1, M2 and SynAN58

Evidence that M1 and M2 had the same length, resolved in glyoxal/PAGE (Figure 2A), and the same sequence, revealed by primer extension (Supplementary Figure 2),
but exhibited different electrophoretic mobility in both native (Figures 1A and 2A) and denatured PAGE (Figure 4A) suggested that M1 and M2 had different secondary and perhaps tertiary structures. Indeed, the primer extension reaction by using the same 3'-end primer revealed a difference in the reverse transcription or RT pattern between M1 and M2 (Figure 2B). The existence of intermediate RT stops or pauses during elongation of reverse transcription, like those observed here, is known to be induced by structured regions in an RNA template (17,18). As such, the different RT pause patterns at various nucleotide positions between M1 and M2 supported the notion that M1 and M2 assumed two distinct structures from the same sequence (see the bar chart in Figure 2B).

We further preformed in-line probing experiment with M1 and M2, using SynAN58 as a control (Figure 2C). The in-line probing experiment was useful because it directly revealed the precise nucleotide positions that define the structural differences between M1 and M2 even possibly in the last 15-nt region that was not observable in primer extension experiments, such as in the RT stop patterns (or Figure 2B). In-line probing experiment is based on the inherent intramolecular phosphoester transfer or transesterification reaction of an RNA due to a nucleophilic attack by the 2'-oxygen from the 2'-OH group on the adjacent phosphorus atom, severing internucleotide linkage (19). The transesterification reaction occurs when the 5'-oxyanion leaving group is positioned directly at or ‘in-line’ with the opposing side of the target phosphorus center relative to the nucleophile (19–21). Therefore, internal RNA structures affect, as anticipated, the rate of the transesterification reaction (19). For this reason, in-line probing is a sensitive method to detect subtle structural difference in RNA without any chemical labeling of the RNA. As seen in Figure 2C, robust cleavage was observed in M2 but not in M1 in the regions of A49–A46 and of G37–G15. The difference in the in-line probing pattern covering a wide sequence range, i.e. A49–A46 and G37–G15, suggested that the secondary (and tertiary) structure of M1 is quite different from M2 and that M1 might be folded to a greater complexity in its secondary and tertiary structures that were less prone to cleavage (19). Furthermore, internucleotide linkages near the ends of RNA are generally more susceptible to cleavage (22), presumably due to RNA fraying (23,24). In fact, M2 (and even M1) showed a greater tendency of fragmentation at both ends, as compared with its middle part of the structure. Surprisingly, however, the 3'-end region of SynAN58, i.e. C57–G55, exhibited a much stronger resistance to cleavage than both M1 and M2, despite the fact that M2 was generally similar in cleavage pattern to SynAN58. The structural uniqueness of the C57–G55 region in SynAN58 is currently unknown. However, the C57–G55 region was critical because deletion of the last five bases at the 3'-end, which covered this region, led to the total loss of inhibitory activity for either the synthetic RNA (i.e. SynAN53) or the enzymatic transcript of AN53.
Together, these results support the hypothesis that M1 and M2 can assume two distinct structural folds encoded by the same sequence. Furthermore, the synthetic AN58 seemed to have a structure different from either M1 or M2 despite the fact that SynAN58 shared the same sequence with the enzymatic transcripts M1 and M2 (Supplementary Figure 2).

SHAPE analysis of M1, M2 and SynAN58

The ribose 2'-hydroxyl group of an RNA is known to react with NMIA to form ester adducts at the 2' position, but the acylation reactivity is influenced by the local structure such that a flexible nucleotide reacts with NMIA more readily than a nucleotide constrained by either base pairing or a tertiary interaction (13). Therefore, the
The reactivity of the acylation can be used to reveal locations of those conformationally dynamic nucleotides in an RNA. Experimentally, the reactivity can be detected by primer extension experiment because the formation of a 2'-ester adduct causes a RT stop (13). Using NMIA, we performed SHAPE experiment to probe the conformational dynamics of the structure for M1, M2 and SynAN58. Shown in Figure 3A is the gel electrophoresis analysis of the reactivity of NMIA at single nucleotide position up to nucleotide 43 (whereas the last 15 nt in the 58-nt RNA were covered by the primer annealing). The band intensities in the gels, which reflected RT stops, were quantified, using SAFA program, and the SHAPE reactivity for each species was calculated by a method previously described (25).

Based on the quantitative SHAPE reactivity (Figure 3B), both the overall number of nucleotides that were labeled and their respective positions were different for M1, M2 and SynAN58, consistent with the notion that each of the three species had a distinct structure. In particular, M1 had the least number of the nucleotide positions labeled overall. Furthermore, in the two major segments where both M2 and SynAN58 reacted prominently with NMIA, e.g. A18–A22 and A33–A36, the same nucleotides

Figure 3. SHAPE analysis of M1, M2 and SynAN58. (A) The pattern of NMIA reactivity was probed by a reverse transcription reaction using a 5'-end, 15-nt oligo or 3P15, and visualized on a 12% denaturing PAGE containing 8 M urea. Other parameters were described in ‘Materials and Methods’ section. The sequencing ladder, shown on the right, was generated by dideoxy nucleotide incorporation during the primer extension, similar to Figure 2B. (B) Band intensity in the presence and absence of NMIA was quantified by using SAFA software (38). For each nucleotide position, the reactivity was calculated as the intensity difference between the NMIA labeled lane and the negative control lane; the negative control corresponded to a 10% DMSO (final concentration) in the same reaction mixture but without NMIA. There were also nucleotide positions where no reactivity could be detected or a negative reactivity was detected, due to strong RT stops in the absence of NMIA (Figure 2B). These positions, along with the last 15 nt for primer annealing, all marked in light gray in Figure 3C, were set to be zero in the reactivity value. The SHAPE reactivity score was calculated based on a method described previously (25,27). The long-dashed blue line indicates the threshold of 0.75 SHAPE reactivity score whereas the short-dashed line represents the threshold of 0.35 SHAPE reactivity score (see text for detailed explanation). (C) Secondary structures generated using RNAstructure (version 4.6) (26), based on the SHAPE reactivity score. The number of the structures displayed corresponded to those whose free energy differed by less than 10% from the lowest free energy in each of the structures.
In M1 exhibited no NMIA reactivity. In general, non-reactive nucleotides were thought to be Watson–Crick base-paired. A number of non-canonical base pairing, such as U–G, A–A and A–G, could also become non-reactive. We therefore concluded that a major network of base pairing and possibly tertiary interactions existed in M1, rendering only a few nucleotide residues solvent accessible. This conclusion is also consistent with result from the in-line probing experiment with M1 (Figure 2C), where a large portion of its structure showed considerable resistance to degradation on the same time scale, as compared with either M2 or SynAN58.

In contrast, the overall patterns of SHAPE reactivity between M2 and SynAN58 were similar (Figure 3B), suggesting the two were structurally similar. However, there were still clear differences. For instance, the SHAPE reactivity terminated at A36 for SynAN58, whereas it continued from G37–U42 for M2. This result indicated that the 3′-region may be the location that distinguishes M2 from SynAN58. Consistent with this result, the in-line probing experiment showed that M2 and SynAN58 had key structural difference in G55–C57 at the 3′-end (these nucleotides were not detectable in SHAPE experiment because they were part of the primer annealing site). It is further worth noting that in between G37–U42, SynAN58 showed no SHAPE reactivity, while M1 was labeled but only at U39 and U42, as compared to a broader reactivity in M2. Together, these results highlight the importance of the 3′-region in defining the uniqueness of the structures of these species.

Based on both the primary RNA sequence and more importantly the three sets of SHAPE reactivity scores (Figure 3B), we further predicted the secondary structures for M1, M2 and SynAN58, using an RNA structure prediction algorithm (26). The SHAPE reactivity was especially useful in the secondary structure prediction, because it provided experimental evidence to constrain the locations of the conformationally dynamic nucleotides (25). However, it should be noted that the following factors were taken into consideration in structural prediction (25,27). First, the reactivity score of 0.75 (i.e. the long-dashed line in Figure 3B and the nucleotides colored in red in Figure 3C) corresponded to the threshold of single-stranded, highly reactive nucleotide residues. The reactivity score between 0.75 and 0.35 (i.e. the short dashed-line in Figure 3B and the nucleotides colored in orange in Figure 3C) was considered to be those that were either base-paired or adjacent to bulges, mismatches, or G-U pairs, which could be more dynamic than nucleotides in the center of an uninterrupted helix. For the reactivity score below 0.35, however, the nucleotides were thought to be base-paired (25,27). According to these SHAPE reactivity constraints, the secondary structures were generated for M1, M2 and SynAN58 (Figure 3C). As seen (Figure 3C), their secondary structures are clearly different. For instance, in the constant region of the RNA aptamer or nucleotides of G1–C25 (6), a stem-loop was predicted (Figure 3C), supported by the SHAPE reactivity at some nucleotides in both M2 and SynAN58. However, the lack of NMIA reactivity in M1 roughly in the same loop position suggested that M1 might have a more complex structure involving with this region, such as its participating in a tertiary interaction. Furthermore, for both M1 and M2, there seemed to be another stem-loop near A40. However, such a region showed no SHAPE reactivity for SynAN58 (Figure 3C). The lack of the SHAPE reactivity near A40 for SynAN58 suggested a conformationally constrained local structure or is indicative of the involvement of this loop in a tertiary interaction.

M1 and M2, two non-convertible RNA folds

To begin to understand the structure-function relationship of the three RNA species, M1, M2 and their synthetic counterpart, SynAN58, we first asked whether M1 and M2 were interconvertible folds. If so, one species would be a transcription product whereas the other was the product of folding. To answer this question, we attempted to unfold and refold M1 and M2. However, even after boiling or ethanol precipitation or freezing, M1 and M2 remained individual bands, as visualized on native PAGE, and their biological activities also remained intact, as tested by whole-cell recording. After boiling in the presence of ~50% formamide for 15 min, M1 did partially unfold into a species that had mobility seemingly identical, on denaturing PAGE, to that of M2 (Figure 4A, the middle panel; the lower band of the M1). However, the lower band originating from the M1 sample disappeared upon refolding, suggesting that M1, under such a harsh denaturing condition, could partially unfold to some other structure(s) but not to M2. M2, on the other hand, appeared intact after such treatments as it remained a single band. We also attempted to denature M1 and M2 by raising solution pH to an extreme (28). In this experiment, a brief (i.e. 3 min) exposure of 10mM NaOH (i.e. pH ~12) readily caused degradation or alkaline hydrolysis of both M1 and M2 but not denaturation or interconversion from one to the other (Supplementary Figure 3). Based on these results, we concluded that M1 and M2 were different conformers or products of folding/refolding. Instead, M1 and M2 were different structural entities assumed from the same sequence.

It should be noted that for drawing the conclusion as stated above, we also carried out a control experiment. Specifically, we constructed a 59-nt RNA producing plasmid (i.e. pRAV–AN59; see the ‘Materials and Methods’ section), which contained the glmS ribozyme sequence (9) linked to the 3′-end of the AN58 sequence. As the glmS ribozyme spliced between the AG sites (29), the 59-nt RNA that contained the AN58 aptamer sequence with an additional ‘A’ at the 3′-end was produced. As expected, the 59-nt RNA aptamer appeared as two bands at the similar positions on a native PAGE, which were similarly termed AN59 M1 and AN59 M2 (Figure 4B). Furthermore, AN59 M1 and AN59 M2 had identical length (see their LC–MS mass spectra in Supplementary Figure 4). More importantly, AN59 M1 and AN59 M2 exhibited the same properties as M1 and M2 (or AN58 M1 and M2) in that they were not interconvertible when subject to the same unfolding/refolding experiments (Figure 4B), yet they had inhibitory function identical
to AN58 M1/M2, evidenced by the finding that as a pair, but not alone, AN59 M1 and AN59 M2 acted as an inhibitor on GluR2Qflip AMPA receptors and with an identical inhibitory potency to the AN58 M1/M2 pair (data not shown). This control experiment demonstrated that the functional and structural difference between M1 and M2 were not attributed to the possibility of an uneven length between M1 and M2.

It is possible, however, that M1 and M2, regardless of AN58 or AN59 version, might be folded and refolded in their own repertoires of conformations or folding networks (at least this may be true for M1), there is not a thermodynamic pathway through which a conformation from one conformational repertoire can become the origin of the other conformational repertoire (i.e. the so-called conformational diffusion between the two networks) (1). Although we cannot rule out that there may be yet an unidentified denaturing condition under which M1 and M2 can both be denatured post-transcriptionally, the conditions used in this study are to our knowledge the strongest denaturing conditions known. The lack of an apparent pathway through which M1 and M2 can be interconverted by unfolding and refolding or refolding after denaturation suggests an unusual folding landscape with an energy barrier that is sufficiently high to irreversibly separate the two different structures. Thus the structural differences between M1 and M2 seem not to be a result of RNA-folding process or conformational partitioning (1,30).

Co-transcriptional formation of M1 and M2

Our finding that M1 and M2 are not different folds that can be reversibly formed or interconverted post-transcriptionally by any unfolding/refolding pathway suggests that both M1 and M2, rather than just one species, should be enzymatic products of in vitro transcription, as observed (Figures 1A and 2A). Furthermore, our results also suggest that the two structural entities, i.e. M1 and M2, are generated during the transcription or are co-transcriptional products. Characteristic of an enzymatic reaction, both the rate and the yield of the transcription reaction of M1 and M2 were shown to depend on temperature and Mg²⁺ concentration (see Figure 4C and also Supplementary Figure 5). Interestingly, the transcription rate of M2 was always faster than M1 (Figure 4C and Supplementary Figure 5). How M1 and M2 are formed during transcription is currently not known. One possibility is the existence of a nascent knot or a topologically entangled helix formed during the transcription perhaps for one or both species, which may set M1 and M2 apart. The interhelical stacking on a basis of a three-way junction, as in the case of the hammerhead ribozyme, could provide additional stability through base pairing between the two closing loops of helices (31). Such a structure is known to be stable even in as low an Mg²⁺ concentration as 100 μM (32). In our case, the M1 and M2, once folded during transcription, were stable either alone or together even at zero concentration of Mg²⁺. It should also be emphasized that M1 and M2 were both the transcription reaction products generated in the presence of the T7 RNA polymerase, because M1 and M2 were generated despite the fact that T7 RNA polymerases from different sources, e.g. Ambion transcription kit, and purified wild type, were used. Furthermore, when the DNA
template was replaced with the SynAN58 RNA, which was then subject to a transcription reaction with T7 RNA polymerase, SynAN58 remained intact, namely, it did not convert to either M1 or M2 (Supplementary Figure 6). Together, these results show that M1 or M2 is not a chemically modified product by any potentially contaminating sources such as another enzyme, etc., in the transcription reaction; rather, M1 and M2 were the transcription products from the T7 RNA polymerase-catalyzed reaction. However, it should be noted that these results did not rule out the possibility of a chemical modification of one or both transcripts by T7 RNA polymerase during the transcription reaction. Such a chemical modification is possible given the extraordinary stability of these two species, which made it impossible, at least with known denaturing agents, to unfold them.

The synthetically made AN58 or SynAN58 was different from AN58 M1 and M2 in several ways. First, SynAN58 appeared as a single band in native PAGE and exhibited a different mobility from either the M1 or the M2 (Figure 4D). SynAN58 had a different RT pause pattern in the reverse transcription reaction (Figure 2B) and a different in-line probing profile (Figure 2C) from either the M1 or the M2, although by and large SynAN58 was more similar to the AN58 M2 (Figures 2C and 3B). Furthermore, SynAN58 inhibited the GluR2 AMPA receptor with an inhibition constant being ~4-fold lower than transcriptionally generated AN58 or the mixture of M1 and M2 (6). The apparent differences in both the function and the structure between the synthetically made AN58 and enzymatic products, although all shared the same sequence, may be due to the possibility that the folding of an RNA during transcription is known to occur sequentially from the 5' end to the 3'-end of an RNA molecule. The directionality of the transcription, together with the speed of the transcription reaction, may create an order of the folding events different from the refolding of the full-length RNA with the same sequence (33,34). The fact that SynAN58 does not fold into either M1 or M2, even after SynAN58 was subjected to the same denaturation/refolding treatment (Figure 4E) as in AN58 M1/M2 (Figure 4A) and AN59 M1/M2 (Figure 4B), is further consistent with the hypothesis that M1 and M2 are co-transcriptional products. Presently, studies using chemical and enzymatic probing as well as structural techniques, together with mutational analysis, are ongoing to refine the secondary structures and to probe the tertiary structures for the three species.

DISCUSSION

The results from this study provide interesting implications to the evolution of RNA structure and function in nature. As shown in Figure 4A, for example, it was not possible to unfold/refold the AN58 M1 and M2 post-transcriptionally, and consequently the M1 and M2 were not able to convert to each other, despite the fact that the M1 and M2 were assumed from the same sequence. However, as shown (Figure 2B), both the M1 and M2 could be fully reverse-transcribed in spite of different RT pauses during elongation. This result suggested that reverse transcriptase was the 'denaturant' to 'melt' the RNA during the in vitro evolution (6). Then the prediction could be made that running separate reverse transcription/PCR reactions for M1 and M2, the two non-convertible RNA isolates, followed by two separate in vitro transcriptions, would yield both M1 and M2 as transcription products, independent of the input RNA template. In fact, this was exactly what we found (Supplementary Figure 7). This result further suggested that the original, full-length sequence of AN58 or aptGluR2-99 that contained the functional M1 and M2 domains would be expectedly capable of surviving pheno-typic selection, which required reverse transcription in each SELEX cycle. Clearly, the evolution of the aptamer sequence (genotype) was driven by the selection of that aptamer (desired genotype) for its binding to receptor (35). In fact, AN58 and aptGluR2-99 were both shown to bind to the extracellular glutamate-binding domain (or the S1S2 protein) assayed by radio-ligand binding and were both functionally active as inhibitors of the GluR2 AMPA receptor assayed by whole-cell recording (6).

The results described above suggested that the survival and evolution of one phenotype (selectable shape), such as the M1-containing RNA, was enough to ensure the concurrent survival of the other phenotype or the M2-containing aptamer, because the two phenotypes are encoded by the same genotype (replicable sequence). Here evolution can be viewed as a walk over the set of genotypes preferring ‘fitter’ offspring (36). In our case, because the two phenotypes are not conformers that are reversibly interconvertible and because both are selected with distinct functions, both of them are therefore fitter. The ability of the same genotype to encode two phenotypes during the course of evolution is surprisingly and profoundly meaningful in that the two phenotypes, both of which are apparently very stable and functionally useful (as part of the inhibitory pair), must survive through a shared evolution origin and history. It would be otherwise almost impossible or too fortuitous that two phenotypes could have been selected against all odds among a vast number of possible RNA molecules or selectable shapes. Thus, our results suggest more broadly that natural RNA molecules can evolve to acquire alternative structures and associated functions that are genealogically linked by even one phenotype.

The transfer of sequence information between two different classes of nucleic acids is not generally considered difficult because such a process uses the one-to-one correspondence of Watson–Crick pairing (37). However, the transfer of function is difficult because function is a property of a macromolecule that is inherently more complex than sequence. In a recent study, it was shown that the evolutionary conversion of a ribozyme (RNA) to a deoxyribozyme (DNA) of the same function can be accomplished but only with some critical sequence mutations (37). The finding from this study shows that the survival of one genotype can entail more than one phenotype through in vitro evolution, suggesting that transfer of different functions through the same sequence from DNA to RNA is possible. Furthermore, it is perhaps not surprising that the structures assumed from the same sequence


formed during transcription must be so stable thermodynamically as to ensure the integrity of a particular function. Therefore RNA may be more phenotypically adaptable than proteins, given the fact that unlike RNA, a real protein does not unify genotype and phenotype in one molecule (36). Currently, no protein sequence is known to fold autonomously into two different structures endowing two functions (2). Therefore, our results support the hypothesis (2), albeit in a different way, that RNAs that show structural dissimilarities with different functions can nevertheless share a common ancestry and bear the same evolution memory. It is possible that in a real organism a single RNA sequence could evolve to ‘duplicate’ RNA molecules with structure-dependent functional dissimilarities, which, in some cases, may precede gene duplication.

SUPPLEMENTARY DATA
Supplementary Data are available at NAR Online.

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REFERENCES
The inhibitory property of an aptamer, such as M1, was determined by the ratio of the glutamate-induced whole-cell current amplitude via GluR2Qflip channel expressed in HEK-293 cells in the absence \([A]\) and presence of the aptamer \([A/(I)]\). Previously we determined that the IC\(_{50}\) value for the inhibition of AN50 at 500 \(\mu\)M glutamate is 121\(\pm\)7 nM (1). This value corresponds to \(A/A_{I}\) value to be \(~3.4\) at 280 nM AN58 and \(~1.5\) at 60 nM AN58 (see the ratios in this figure), respectively. In both cases, M1 and M2 were mixed at equal molar to make up to the total
concentration. However, when any one of the species was used as the limiting concentration (i.e. 25.5 nM as compared to 255 nM of the other; see the ratios above), the inhibition was comparable to the $A/A(I)$ value at 60 nM of AN58. These results suggested that M1 and M2 acted as a pair to inhibit the GluR2Q\_\text{flip} receptor with 1:1 ratio. The quantitative determination of the inhibition constant for M1 and M2 was described below. A general scheme was formulated, below, in which binding of glutamate or ligand ($L$) to the unliganded receptor form ($R$) leads to the opening of the channel ($\overline{RL}$). Both steps of binding were assumed to have the same equilibrium dissociation constant ($K_i$). The number of ligand molecules bound to open an AMPA receptor channel was assumed to be two (2,3).

$$R + nL \xleftarrow{K_1} RL_n \xrightarrow{I} \overline{RL}_n$$

Shown in the same scheme is the competitive inhibition by an aptamer. By this mechanism, the apparent inhibition constant ($K_{I,\text{app}}$) was obtained from the plot of $A/A(I)$ vs. the inhibitor concentration ($I$) using Equ. 1, and the intrinsic inhibition constant ($K_i$) was calculated using Equ. 2

$$\frac{A}{A(I)} = 1 + \frac{I}{K_{I,\text{app}}}$$

$$K_{I,\text{app}} = K_i \left[ \frac{1}{\Phi} \left( \frac{L}{K_i} \right)^2 + \left( \frac{L + K_i}{K_i} \right)^2 \right]$$

$$S2$$
where $\Phi^{-1}$ is the channel-opening equilibrium constant which we determined before (4). This scheme was used to estimate the apparent and intrinsic inhibition constants for aptamer AN58, assuming AN58 was a single molecule. The same equation was also used to estimate the intrinsic inhibition constant for M1 and M2 individually. Specifically, the inhibition constant for one structure, such as M1, was determined when the concentration of the other or M2 was 10-fold in excess. Because binding of one structure did not elicit any current reduction (see Fig. 1c), the single species-bound receptor state (i.e., either RM1 or RM2 state) was considered functionally equivalent to the R form (i.e., unliganded receptor form); only the RM1-M2 state was inhibitory. By the method described above, the $K_i$ for M1 and M2 was calculated to be $25 \pm 4$ and $27 \pm 7$ nM, respectively.
M1 and M2 had the same sequence as revealed using dideoxy-mediated RNA sequencing. The synthetic AN58 or SynAN58 (commercially made in Tri-Link Biotechnologies) with the known sequence was used as the ladder. The RNA sequencing was carried out as described in Methods. Specifically, a 15-nt oligo (5´-GGACGAAACTTGTCC-3´) complementary to the 3´ end of AN58 was 5´-labeled using [γ-32P]ATP. The dideoxy-mediated reverse transcription reaction consisted of 0.5 pmol RNA, 0.5 pmol of 15-nt oligo, 25% DMSO, 50 mM Tris-HCl (pH 8.3), 40 mM KCl, 8 mM MgCl₂, 1 mM DTT, 0.75 mM dNTP and 0.225 mM ddNTP. The reaction was
carried out in the presence of an enhanced avian reverse transcriptase (Sigma) at 42 °C for 1 hour.

The sample was treated using RNase H (New England Biolabs) and run through a sequencing PAGE. For sequencing each RNA molecule, a set of 4 primer extension reactions were set up. Each reaction contains one type of 4 dideoxy nucleotide triphosphates. The derived RNA sequence is shown on the right side of the image.
Supplementary Figure 3

A 3 min exposure of M1 and M2 to NaOH at 22 ℃. For this experiment, each sample containing 20 ng of M1 or M2 in 1× external buffer was mixed with NaOH to a final concentration of 5 and 10 mM, as indicated. The samples then were loaded on a 10% native PAGE, and the gel was visualized under UV light after stained by ethidium bromide. A 3 min exposure of 5 mM NaOH, as shown, caused no visible change of the samples, unlike the 10 mM NaOH treatment. However, exposing the samples to 5 mM NaOH for 5 min or longer would also cause visible degradation, similar to 3 min, 10 mM NaOH treatment as shown in the figure.
Mass spectra of AN59 M1, AN59 M2 and SynAN58 obtained from the LC-ESI-MS experiment. Pure AN59 M1, AN59 M2, and SynAN58 samples were individually injected onto a reverse phase-C18 trapping column (Waters) followed by desalting using solution A (0.75% hexafluoroisopropylol, 0.0375% triethylamine, and 10 µM EDTA, pH 7.9). RNA samples were then eluted from the column by using 50% of solution A and 50% of solution B (50% acetonitrile and 50% methanol), and were then analyzed on-line by an ESI-Q-TOF II mass spectrometer (Micromass/Waters). The instrument was operated in a negative mode. Software MaxEnt 1 was used to deconvolute a multiple charged mass spectrum into a true mass scale. As shown in the figure, the mass of SynAN58 was detected to be 18677 Dalton, which matched to 18676.3 g/mole according to the sequence of AN58, as reported by Trilink Biotechnologies (where the SynAN58 was synthesized). Furthermore, the mass of AN59 M1 and AN59 M2 was shown to be equal or 19311 Dalton, which matched to the prediction that both RNA species have the mass according to the sequence of AN59 (or AN58 with one additional nucleotide “A”). Furthermore, both RNA species have a triphosphate group at the 5’-end and a 2’,3’-cyclic
phosphate group at the 3′-end, as compared with the SynAN58 RNA molecule, the latter of which contained hydroxyl groups on both ends. The cyclic phosphate group at the 3′-end of AN59 M1 and AN59 M2 was produced in the splicing by the glmS ribozyme (5). All the mass spectra were obtained at the Proteomics Facility, Center for Functional Genomics, at the University of Albany, SUNY.
Supplementary Figure 5

The transcription of M1 and M2 at different conditions. Under the standard condition, the transcription reaction contained 40 mM Tris-HCl (pH 8.0), 2 mM spermidine-HCl, 10 mM DTT, 20 mM MgCl₂, 7.5 mM ATP, CTP, GTP, UTP, 40 U T7 RNA polymerase, 25 U placental RNase inhibitor, 40 U inorganic pyrophosphate, and 1 µg DNA template. The transcription reaction was run overnight (~12 hours) at 37 °C. Then the transcription products or M1 and M2, labeled as “C” in both (a) and (b), were visualized on a 10% native PAGE by ethidium bromide staining. a, Temperature dependence of the transcription of M1 and M2. Three transcription reactions were carried out at 10, 18, and 37 °C. M1 and M2 from each transcription reaction at 15 and 30 minutes, 1, 2, 4, 7 and 18 hours were visualized on a PAGE. b, Mg²⁺ concentration affected the transcription yield. The transcription reaction was carried out with varying Mg²⁺ concentrations in the buffer, as shown (i.e., 4, 8, 20, and 40 mM; final concentration). For each reaction, samples from 15, 30 and 45 minutes, 1, 2, 4 and 8 hours were taken and visualized on a PAGE. All of these results show that M1 and M2 are produced as enzymatic products during transcription.
Supplemental Figure 6

The incubation of SynAN58 with Ambion T7 RNA polymerase. Here, 200 ng of SynAN58 was mixed with Ambion Megashortscript T7 RNA polymerase (40 unit) in 20 µl transcription reaction containing 40 mM Tris_HCl (pH7.5), 20 mM MgCl₂, 2 mM spermidine, 10 mM DTT, 1.25 u/µl RNase inhibitor, 7.5 mM of each NTPs (G, C, A, U), and 15 unit/µl of inorganic pyrophosphatase. The reaction mixture didn’t contain the DNA template. The reaction mixture was incubated at 37°C overnight. The reaction and the reaction mix were the same as a normal transcription reaction to produce M1 and M2. After incubation, ¼ of the mixture was loaded on a 10% native polyacrylamide gel. Untreated SynAN58 and AN58 showing the M1 and M2 were also loaded on the gel as controls.
The use of either M1 or M2 alone as the RNA template resulted in the production of both M1 and M2 through RT-PCR and transcription reactions. M1 and M2 were isolated from AN58 by running through a native 10% PAGE column. The isolated M1 and M2 were purified individually by passing through Amicon Ultra centrifugal filter (Millipore). A 17-nt oligo or 3P17 (i.e., 5′-GGACGAAACTTGTCCTA-3′) complement to the 3′-end of AN58 sequence, was used as the RT annealing primer. Two separate RT reactions were carried out, one for M1 and the other for M2. The procedure of the reverse transcription was described in Primer Extension in Materials and Methods. For the PCR reaction, equal amount of M1 and M2 from their respective RT mixtures was used. Another primer or P40 (5′-GTAATACGACTCACTATAG-GGCGAATTCAACTGCCATCTA-3′; P40 included the 18-nt T7 promoter sequence) was also added to each PCR reaction mixture. Shown in the middle panel was the PCR product after 22 rounds of amplification for both M1 and M2. For transcription reaction, 1 µg of cDNA template of M1 and M2, respectively, obtained from the RT/PCR reaction was used in a 20 µl transcription reaction containing a T7 enzyme mix (MEGAscript kit, Ambion). The transcription products were visualized in a 10% native PAGE by ethidium bromide staining, shown on the right panel. As shown, the cDNA template originating from either M1 or M2 by RT-PCR was able to produce, through in vitro transcription reaction, both M1 and M2. The
transcription products from the lane labeled as “AN58” were from the control or the transcription products from the synthetic cDNA template.
References in the Supplementary Figures


