Genomes reveal selective sweeps in kiang and donkey for high-altitude adaptation

Lin Zeng1,5,*, He-Qun Liu1,10,*, Xiao-Long Tu11,9, Chang-Mian Ji2,23,*, Xiao Gou3,8, Ali Esmailzadeh4, Sheng Wang1, Ming-Shan Wang1, Ming-Cheng Wang23, Xiao-Long Li23, Hadi Charati1,5, Adeniyi C. Adeola12,*, Rahamon Akinyele Moshood Adedokun13, Olatunbosun Oladipo14, Sunday Charles Olagun15, Oscar J. Sanke15, Mangbon Godwin F.16, Sheila Cecily Ommeh1,18, Bernard Agwanda18, Jacqueline Kasiti Lichoti19, Jian-Lin Han22, Hong-Kun Zheng23, Chang-Fa Wang20,21,*, Ya-Ping Zhang1,7,*, Laurent A. F. Frantz2,24,*, Dong-Dong Wu1,7,8,*

1 State Key Laboratory of Genetic Resources and Evolution, Kunming Institute of Zoology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Kunming, Yunnan 650223, China
2 Hainan Key Laboratory for Biosafety Monitoring and Molecular Breeding in Off-Season Reproduction Regions, Institute of Tropical Bioscience and Biotechnology, Chinese Academy of Tropical Agricultural Sciences, Haikou, Hainan 571101, China
3 College of Animal Science and Technology, Yunnan Agricultural University, Kunming, Yunnan 650201, China
4 Department of Animal Science, Faculty of Agriculture, Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, Kerman, PB 76169-133, Iran
5 Kunming College of Life Science, University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, Kunming, Yunnan 650204, China
6 Sino-Africa Joint Research Center, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Kunming, Yunnan 650223, China
7 Center for Excellence in Animal Evolution and Genetics, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Kunming, Yunnan 650223, China
8 Institute of Three-River-Source National Park, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Xining, Qinghai 810008, China
9 School of Biological and Chemical Sciences, Queen Mary University of London, London E1 4NS, UK
10 Department of Genetics, Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Bronx, New York, NY 10461, USA
11 Annoroad Gene Tech. (Beijing) Co., Ltd., Beijing 100176, China
12 State Key Laboratory of Genetic Resources and Evolution, Yunnan Laboratory of Molecular Biology of Domestic Animals, Germplasm Bank of Wild Species, Kunming Institute of Zoology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Kunming, Yunnan 650223, China
13 Department of Veterinary Medicine, University of Ibadan, Ibadan 200204, Nigeria
14 Federal College of Animal Health and Production Technology, Moor-Plantation, Ibadan 234102, Nigeria
15 Taraba State Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Jalingo 660221, Nigeria
16 Division of Veterinary Office, Serti 663101, Nigeria
17 Institute For Biotechnology Research Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Nairobi 0200-00200, Kenya
18 Department of Zoology, National Museums of Kenya, Nairobi 40658-00100, Kenya
19 State Department of Livestock, Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Utilization of Bio-Resources in Yunnan, Yunnan University 200284, Nigeria
20 Second Tibetan Plateau Scientific Expedition and Research (STEP) Program of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (XDA2004010302), and Second Tibetan Plateau Scientific Expedition and Research (STEP) Program (2019QZKK05010703). D.D.W. was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (91731304, 31822048), Strategic Priority Research Program of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (XDB13020600), Qinghai Department of Science and Technology Major Project, and State Key Laboratory for Conservation and Utilization of Bio-Resources in Yunnan, Yunnan University (2018KF001). Sampling of this work was also supported by the Animal Branch of the Germplasm Bank of Wild Species, Chinese Academy of Sciences (Large Research Infrastructure Funding)
*Authors contributed equally to this work
*Corresponding authors, E-mail: wangdf1967@163.com; zhangyp@mail.kiz.ac.cn; laurent.frantz@qmul.ac.uk; wudongdong@mail.kiz.ac.cn

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ABSTRACT

Over the last several hundred years, donkeys have adapted to high-altitude conditions on the Tibetan Plateau. Interestingly, the kiang, a closely related equid species, also inhabits this region. Previous reports have demonstrated the importance of specific genes and adaptive introgression in divergent lineages for adaptation to hypoxic conditions on the Tibetan Plateau. Here, we assessed whether donkeys and kiangs adapted to the Tibetan Plateau via the same or different biological pathways and whether adaptive introgression has occurred. We assembled a de novo genome from a kiang individual and analyzed the genomes of five kiangs and 93 donkeys (including 24 from the Tibetan Plateau). Our analyses suggested the existence of a strong hard selective sweep at the EPAS1 locus in kiangs. In Tibetan donkeys, however, another gene, i.e., EGLN1, was likely involved in their adaptation to high altitude. In addition, admixture analysis found no evidence for interspecific gene flow between kiangs and Tibetan donkeys. Our findings indicate that despite the short evolutionary time scale since the arrival of donkeys on the Tibetan Plateau, as well as the existence of a closely related species already adapted to hypoxia, Tibetan donkeys did not acquire adaptation via admixture but instead evolved adaptations via a different biological pathway.

Keywords: Kiang; Donkey; High altitude; Adaptation; Selection

INTRODUCTION

Domestic donkeys have been used as draft animals by humans for over 5 000 years (Beja-Pereira et al., 2004). Despite the highly restricted distribution of their wild progenitor, the and-adapted African wild ass (Beja-Pereira et al., 2004; Ma et al., 2020), donkeys demonstrate a propensity to adapt to a wide range of environments, including high-altitude habitats on the Tibetan Plateau.

The genetic mechanisms underlying high-altitude adaptation have been studied extensively in multiple mammalian species, including dog, yak, chihu, human, and many other animals (Beall et al., 2010; Foll et al., 2014; Ge et al., 2013; Gou et al., 2014; Huerta-Sánchez et al., 2014; Lorenzo et al., 2014; Qi et al., 2012; Qu et al., 2013; Simonson et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2016). Various studies have demonstrated the importance of the endothelial PAS domain-containing protein 1 (EPAS1) gene, also known as hypoxia-inducible factor-2-alpha (HIF-2α), which exhibits activity under low oxygen conditions (Beall et al., 2010; Huerta-Sánchez et al., 2014; Miao et al., 2017; vonHoldt et al., 2017). Specifically, these studies show that both dogs and humans from Tibet obtained the EPAS1 allele, which is necessary for their adaptation to high-altitude conditions, via hybridization with closely related lineages that were already adapted to the Tibetan Plateau (Huerta-Sánchez et al., 2014; Miao et al., 2017; vonHoldt et al., 2017).

Interestingly, kiangs, which belong to a lineage that shared a common ancestor with donkeys ~1.47–1.75 million years ago (Jónsson et al., 2014), also inhabit the Tibetan Plateau. The close geographic proximity of these two closely related species suggests the possibility that, as for dogs (Gou et al., 2014), cattle (Wu et al., 2018), and humans (Huerta-Sánchez et al., 2014), adaptive admixture may have facilitated the adaptation of donkeys to low-oxygen conditions. This scenario is likely given the propensity of equid species to interbreed, including kiangs and donkeys, despite their large karyotypic differences (2n\text{donkey}=52, 2n\text{kiang}=52) (Jónsson et al., 2014). Alternatively, the kiang and Tibetan donkey may have acquired their high-altitude adaptations independently, potentially via the same or different biological pathways. To test these hypotheses, we de novo assembled the genome of a kiang individual and analyzed the genomes of 93 domestic donkeys (24 from Tibetan Plateau, 28 from Chinese lowland, eight from Iran, 26 from Africa, and seven from Middle Asia) and five kiangs.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

De novo assembly of kiang genome

A blood sample of a male kiang was collected from Beijing Zoo in 2015. We de novo assembled its genome via a whole-genome shotgun approach. DNA was isolated from blood tissue using standard cetyltrimethylammonium bromide (CTAB) extraction and libraries were prepared following the protocols provided by Illumina. Multiple paired-end and mate-pair libraries were constructed with variable fragment lengths ranging from 220 bp to 17 kb (Supplementary Table S1). All libraries were sequenced through the Illumina HiSeq 2000 &
Tissues for DNA extraction were stored in alcohol at −80 °C. Genomic DNA was prepared by standard phenol-chloroform extraction. Sequence libraries were constructed according to the Illumina library preparation pipeline and sequenced using the Hiseq 2500 platform. The genomes of five kiangs and 75 domestic donkeys (24 from Tibetan Plateau, 13 from Chinese plains, eight from Iran, 23 from Africa, and seven from Middle Asia) were re-sequenced in this study (genomes of 18 domestic donkeys were provided by Wang et al. (2020) (Supplementary Table S9). Zebra data were downloaded from a previously published study as an outgroup (Jönsson & Schubert, 2014).

Read mapping and variant calling
Before alignment, reads were trimmed based on their quality scores using the quality trimming program Btrim (Kong, 2011). Quality-filtered reads were mapped to our kiang de novo reference using the alignment algorithm BWA-MEM (Pavlidis et al., 2013). Single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) were detected using the Genome Analysis Toolkit (GATK) (McKenna et al., 2010). Duplicate read pairs were first identified using the Picard tools (http://picard.sourceforge.net/). We applied hard filters according to GATK guidance, with the following criteria used to filter raw SNPs: QD<2.0, FS>60.0, MQ<40.0, HaplotypeScore>13.0. MappingQualityRankSum<-12.5, ReadPosRankSum<-8.0,-cluster 3 -window 10. All SNPs were annotated using the ANNOVAR program (Wang et al., 2010).

Population structure analysis
To infer the population relationships among different domesticated donkey populations, population structure was deduced using ADMIXTURE, a tool for maximum-likelihood (ML) estimation of individual ancestries from multi locus SNP genotype datasets (Alexander et al., 2009), with different K values from 2 to 5.

Detection of selective sweep
We calculated the genome-wide distribution of population fixation statistics $F_{ST}$ and nucleotide diversity $\theta$ with a window size of 50 kb and a step size of 25 kb. Putative selection targets were extracted with the top 5% of log ratios for both $\theta$ and $F_{ST}$. Our approach was to identify genomic regions with high differentiation between Chinese plain donkeys ($n=28$) and Tibetan donkeys ($n=24$). The locus-specific branch length ($LSBL$) of Tibetan donkeys was calculated by pairwise $F_{ST}$ distances with $d_{TP}$, $d_{TF}$, and $d_{PF}$ (P represents Chinese plain donkeys, F represents foreign donkeys, T represents Tibetan donkeys), where $LSBL_{Tibetan}=d_{TP}+d_{TF}+d_{PF}$ (Shriver et al., 2004).

To detect whether a selective sweep (a beneficial allele that recently reached fixation due to strong positive natural selection) has occurred in the kiang population, we calculated nucleotide diversity around exonic substitutions with a non-overlapping window size of 10 kb using vcftools v0.1.11 (Danecek et al., 2011).

SweeD analysis
The SweeD v4.0.0 program (Pavlidis et al., 2013) was used to detect selective sweeps for the three populations (i.e., kiangs, donkeys, and domestic donkeys). We compared the SweeD analysis results of kiangs and domestic donkeys to detect selective sweeps (Yang, 2007) was used to detect PSGs in the kiang lineage, with 164 PSGs thus identified.
Tibetan donkeys, and plain donkeys) using a 10 kb non-overlapping window. This program implements the composite-likelihood ratio (CLR) statistic, which identifies regions with significant deviations from the neutral site frequency spectrum (SFS).

Coalescent simulation
To determinate the threshold for detection of outlier windows, we conducted coalescent simulations using the msms v3.2rc program (Ewing & Hermisson, 2010) based on demographic parameters derived from the best-fitting model inferred by δaδi (Gutenkunst et al., 2009) (Supplementary Table S21). For neutrality, only intergenic SNPs with more than 40-fold coverage at the population-level and minor allele frequencies (MAF)>0.01 were considered. Fixed sites in the kiang population were considered as ancestor alleles. A total of 15 divergence models were considered among the three populations, i.e., Chinese plain, Tibetan, and Foreign plain donkeys (Nigeria, Kenya, Egypt, Iran, and Kyrgyzstan). The model with the maximum log-likelihood value was chosen as the best one. We simulated genotypes corresponding to a 50–100 kb region with the same sample size as the real data 10 000 times according to the estimation from the best model. We converted the .ms format files into .vcf format by a custom Perl script. We calculated the FST, LSLB, and log π-ratio using the same pipeline as mentioned above for these sequences. The statistical significance between the simulated and observed data was measured using the randtest function in the ade4 R package. The recombination rate used here was 1 cM/kb, and the mutation rate and generation time were \(7.242 \times 10^{-8}\) per site per generation and eight years, respectively (McVean et al., 2004; Orlando et al., 2013).

The commands used for running the msms software were as follows: For Chinese plain, Tibetan, and Foreign plain donkey:
```
java -jar msms3.2rc-b163.jar -ms 186 10000 -N 10000 -i 3 82 56 48 -l 14.484 -r 400 50000 -n 1 0.9474 -n 2 0.642 -n 3 1.0904 -m 1 2 2.2049 -m -1 2 1.552 -m -2 3 1.9153 -m 3 2 0.2053 -g 1 0.926 -g 2 0.898 -g 3 0.769 -ej 0.001953 3 2 -en 0.001953 2 0.8279 -ej 0.00897 2 1 -en 0.00897 1 0.5171 -threads 10. For kiang: java -jar msms3.2rc-b163.jar -ms 12 10000 -l 107.2 -r 400 100000 -threads 10.
```

Analysis of genetic introgression
We inferred gene flow among the different donkey (Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria, Kenya, Egypt, Iran, Tibet, and Chinese plain) and kiang populations, with zebra as the outgroup species, based on maximum-likelihood (ML) implemented in TreeMix. The command was "-i input -noss -m migration events -root zebra -o output", and migration events from 1 to 4 were gradually added to the ML tree. Genetic introgression events were also detected using the D-statistic (ABBA-BABA test) in ADMIXTOOLS (Patterson et al., 2012). We calculated the \(f_2\) statistic, a modified version of the D-statistic described in Martin et al. (2015), using sliding window analysis with 50 kb windows.

Gene enrichment analysis
Gene Ontology (GO) enrichment analyses were performed using the DAVID program (https://david.ncifcrf.gov/).

RESULTS
Kiанг genome assembly
We first de novo assembled the kiang genome using ~400 Gb of data sequenced by the Illumina Hiseq 2000 & 2500 platform from multiple paired-end and mate-pair libraries constructed with varying length fragments (220 bp to 17 kb). The scaffold and contig N50 sizes of the draft genome were 17 Mb and 264 kb, respectively (Figure 1A; Supplementary Text, Figures S1, S2 and Tables S1–S3). We assessed the completeness of our assembly by aligning the protein-coding genes of the horse to the kiang genome using BLAT software (Kent, 2002). We retrieved 22 308 of 22 632 horse coding sequences (>98%) in the kiang assembly, indicating a gene region completeness of over 98.00% (Supplementary Table S4). This completeness was also supported by a high BUSCO (Benchmarking Universal Single-Copy Orthologs) score (Simão et al., 2015) of >96%, which indicated that our assembly contained the vast majority of near-universal single-copy orthologs (Supplementary Table S5). The gene model sets predicted by multiple methods were integrated using GLEAN to form a comprehensive and non-redundant gene set. After filtering short genes (<150 bp), we identified a total of 27 178 protein-coding genes with an average gene length of ~17 204 bp and a mean exon length of ~157 bp (Supplementary Tables S6, S7). Approximately 760 Mb of repeat sequences were identified by RepeatMasker, accounting for ~32% of our assembly (Supplementary Table S8).

Rare genetic introgression between kiangs and Tibetan donkeys
To assess the possibility of introgression between kiangs and Tibetan donkeys, we analyzed the genomes of five kiangs and 93 domestic donkeys (24 from Tibetan Plateau, 28 from Chinese lowland, eight from Iran, 26 from Africa, and seven from Middle Asia), including the 80 genomes generated in this study (Figure 2A; Supplementary Table S9), with a median depth of 7.50× and coverage of 96.75% of the assembled genome. We mapped the re-sequenced reads to the draft kiang genome for polymorphism calling for analysis of population genetics. After mapping the sequenced reads to the kiang reference genome, we called a total of 22 056 186 SNPs, including 81 592 non-synonymous and 68 064 synonymous SNPs, using the GATK pipeline (Supplementary Tables S10, S11 and Figures S3–S5).

ADMIXTURE analysis separated kiangs from Tibetan donkeys without any admixture signals (Figure 2B). TreeMix analyses did not detect a migration edge between the Tibetan donkeys and kiangs, further suggesting that introgression between these lineages did not occur (Figure 2C; Supplementary Figure S6). Considering potential introgression between the Asian wild ass and domestic donkey (Jönsson et al., 2014), we calculated the D-statistic (ABBA-BABA test) of ADMIXTOOLS in the form (Tibetan donkey, Somali wild ass; Kiang, Zebra), which yielded a D-value<0 (2)-3; Figure 2D; Supplementary Figure S7 and Table S12). This pattern suggested gene flow between the Somali wild ass and kiang or between the Tibetan donkey and zebra. Additional analyses...
using the $f_d$ statistic (Martin et al., 2015) did not identify any gene flow signals between kiangs and Tibetan donkeys (Supplementary Table S13).

We then computed the $f_d$ statistics in non-overlapping 50 kb sliding windows across the Tibetan donkey genome to further assess whether undetected low-level gene flow (i.e., below the detection threshold of ADMIXTURE and D-statistics) could have left a localized footprint in the genome. The level of divergence ($d_{xy}$) between the kiang and Tibetan donkey in the top 1% of $f_d$ regions, was, on average, slightly higher (0.3337) than in the rest of the genome (0.3105). This pattern did not support genetic introgression. Furthermore, we manually checked the windows with the top four highest $f_d$ values. The phylogenetic tree suggested a potential genetic introgression signature in these segments from Tibetan donkeys to kiangs (Supplementary Figure S8), although it may also be attributable to incomplete lineage sorting. Therefore, these results suggest rare genetic introgression between kiangs and Tibetan donkeys, although we cannot absolutely exclude introgression at some small regions.

**Genomic substitutions underlying kiang evolution**

The lack of admixture between kiangs and Tibetan donkeys indicates that these species acquired their adaptation to high altitude independently. To assess whether these processes of adaptation involved similar pathways, we used the $d_{xy}/d_{ty}$ ratio to identify rapidly evolving genes (REGs) in the kiang genome. After identifying 5 778 high-confidence one-to-one orthologous genes among the kiang, human, donkey, horse, pig, and rhino genomes, we used the branch site model in the Codeml program of PAML (Yang, 2007) to detect genes under positive selection in the kiang lineage. This analysis yielded 164 protein-coding REGs with elevated $d_{xy}/d_{ty}$ ratios in the lineage leading to kiangs ($P<0.05$) (Supplementary Table S14) (Zhang et al., 2005).

We then used the BioGPS dataset (Wu et al., 2016), which contains expression data from 84 human tissues/cell types, to characterize the function of the REGs, as described in our previous study (Li et al., 2013). The REGs displayed high expression levels in cell lines and tissues related to the immune system, thus supporting the function of some REGs in immunity (Figure 1B). The rapid evolution of immune genes has been commonly reported in different mammals and is likely due to an evolutionary “arms race” with pathogens (Kosiol et al., 2008). Additional gene enrichment analysis did not identify any significantly enriched terms but indicated that eight REGs were involved in the pathway “regulation of growth”, and four REGs (EP300, P2RX3, CREBBP, and ALDH2) were involved in the pathway “response to oxygen levels” (Supplementary Table S15).

We then examined gene interactions among REGs using the BioGRID database (Stark et al., 2006) (https://thebiogrid.
We found frequent gene-gene interactions among the REGs. Interestingly, many of these interactions involved **EP300** as a hub gene, which showed the second highest number of interactions with other genes (Supplementary Figure S9). **EP300** has been identified as a co-activator of HIF1α and plays a role in the stimulation of hypoxia-induced genes such as **VEGF** (Zhang et al., 2013). However, as **EP300** has many other functions, future studies are necessary to identify the functional consequences of rapid **EP300** evolution.

False-positive branch site tests can be high due to many confounding factors, like multi-nucleotide mutations (Venkat et al., 2018). Therefore, we further leveraged our re-sequencing data to identify fixed amino acid substitutions in the kiang lineage using the McDonald-Kreitman (MK) test in the PopGenome package (Pfeifer et al., 2014). This analysis identified a total of 30 genes under positive selection in the kiang lineage, including genes related to immunity, DNA damage, energy metabolism, and angiogenesis (Figure 1C; Supplementary Table S16, P<0.05). None of these genes, however, overlapped with the REGs identified by PAML, likely due to the different statistical principles used. PAML assumes that amino acid differences are fixed. This assumption, however, is likely to be violated when comparing closely related lineages such as kiangs and donkeys. Interestingly, the MK test detected some genes involved in vascular development, an important component for hypoxia adaptation. For example, the **TEK** gene encodes the TEK receptor tyrosine kinase, a receptor that binds to the ligand angiopoietin-1 and mediates a signaling pathway during embryonic vascular development (Puri et al., 1999). **NOTCH1** encodes the notch receptor 1 in the notch signaling pathway, a key pathway for angiogenesis (Limbourg et al., 2005).

### Hard selective sweep in **EPAS1** in kiangs

To detect positive-selection signals in the kiang population, we explored population genetics including nucleotide diversity (in 10 kb windows) and CLR of a sweep model using the SweeD program (Pavlidis et al., 2013). We identified a total of 248 genes in the top 1% of CLR values and 1 141 genes in windows that showed the lowest 1% of nucleotide diversity. A total of 34 genes were found to overlap between these analyses (Supplementary Table S17). Demographic history

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**Figure 2** Population genetics analysis of kiangs and domestic donkeys

A: Geographical location of domestic donkeys with re-sequenced genomes. Blue through light green indicate low to high altitude. B: Population structure analysis by Admixture with K from 2 to 5. C, D: No genetic introgression between kiang and Tibetan donkey was revealed by D-statistic and TreeMix.
simulation also indicated that these genes evolved under positive selection compared to the null demographic model \((P<0.01)\). However, no GO category was significantly enriched in this set of 34 genes. The functional consequences of these candidate PSSOs were unclear, and thus require future validation and study. In addition to the high-altitude environment, there may be other forces driving the rapid evolution of these genes.

The adaptive evolution of EPAS1 is tightly coupled to hypoxia adaptation in Tibetan people and animals (Beall et al., 2010; Gou et al., 2014; Huerta-Sánchez et al., 2014; Lorenzo et al., 2014; Simonson et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2014). Here, simulation of demographic history supported signatures of selective sweep across EPAS1 in the kiang population with significantly lower nucleotide diversity and higher CLR values \((P<0.01)\). By comparing population re-sequencing data from donkeys and kiangs, at the EPAS1 locus, we found a non-synonymous substitution in the kiang population (Figure 3). However, using the same methodology, we found no evidence of positive selection at EPAS1 in the Tibetan donkey and no evidence that it was affected by adaptive admixture from the kiang (see following section).

The signature of selection in EPAS1 corroborates the hard selective sweep, in which a beneficial allele has recently reached fixation due to strong positive natural selection. We further evaluated the hard selective sweep mode of adaptation at the genome-wide scale in the kiang. A hard selective sweep will deepen diversity around those changes most likely to have functional consequences (i.e., amino acid substitutions) (Enard et al., 2014). As described in previous research investigating the patterns of hard selective sweeps in humans (Hernandez et al., 2011), we explored diversity levels across non-synonymous and synonymous mutations fixed in the kiang population (Figure 4). Consistent with the finding in the human population (Hernandez et al., 2011), the diversity around the non-synonymous mutations was similar to that around the synonymous mutations (Figure 4). This indicates that genome-wide hard selective sweeps may be rare in kiangs, as reported in humans (Hernandez et al., 2011).

**Evidence for selective sweep at EGLN1 in Tibetan donkeys**

To investigate the potential genetic mechanism underlying high-altitude adaptation in Tibetan domestic donkeys, we performed population genetics analyses on the genomes of 93 donkeys. The phylogenetic tree and ancestry estimate analysis by ADMIXTURE (Supplementary Figures S10, S11) indicated that Tibetan donkeys are a genetically homogeneous subpopulation that diverged from the other six populations of donkeys (Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria, Kenya, Egypt, Iran, and lowland China) sequenced in this study. The pattern of population variation also supports the out-of-Africa theory.
for the domestic donkey, with a higher level of genetic diversity (Supplementary Table S18), private variants (Supplementary Figure S12), and a higher decay rate of linkage disequilibrium (LD) (Supplementary Figure S13).

To investigate natural selection in the Tibetan donkey, we first computed the $F_{ST}$ (Akey et al., 2002) between Tibetan and Chinese plain donkeys across their genomes. Here, we found that the genic region exhibited a significantly higher $F_{ST}$ value than the intergenic region (Figure 5A, $P<2.2e^{-16}$). In addition, we divided SNPs into different classes according to the $F_{ST}$ value (e.g., $0.0-0.1$, $0.1-0.2$, $0.2-0.3$, $0.3-0.4$, $0.4-0.5$, $>0.5$), and found that population differentiation was more pronounced at non-synonymous SNPs than other types of SNPs (Figure 5B, $P=0.003$ by chi-square test; Supplementary Figure S14). A pattern of excess genic SNPs with high $F_{ST}$ values ($>0.4$) between Tibetan domestic donkeys and lowland donkeys was found when we constrained the analyses to SNPs presenting similar minor allele frequencies (Figure 5C; Supplementary Figure S14). This suggests that positive natural selection has, at least partly, driven population differentiation between Tibetan and lowland donkeys.

To further explore the genetic mechanisms underlying high-altitude adaptation, we identified PSGs in the Tibetan donkey lineage by computing the $F_{ST}$, $LSBL$, and nucleotide diversity ratio ($\Delta m$) between Tibetan and Chinese plain donkeys using sliding windows across the donkey genomes (Figure 5D; Supplementary Figure S15). These summary statistics were compared to simulated ones based on a neutral demographic model inferred by $\delta a \delta i$ (Gutenkunst et al., 2009). A total of 158 candidate genes were identified by all three methods (FDR-corrected $P<0.01$) (Supplementary Figure S16 and Table S19). However, no gene category was found to be significantly

**Figure 4** Rare hard selective sweep in kiangs at genome-wide scale
Normalized nucleotide diversity was calculated as nucleotide diversity level in kiang population divided by donkey-kiang divergence around fixed substitutions using a non-overlapping window size of 10 kb.

**Figure 5** Evidence of high-altitude adaptation in Tibetan domestic donkeys
A: By comparing the genomes of Tibetan donkey populations and others, the genic region exhibited significantly higher $F_{ST}$ values than the intergenic region. Statistical significance was calculated by Mann-Whitney U test. B: Population differentiation was more pronounced in non-synonymous SNPs than other types of SNPs. Statistical significance was calculated by chi-square test. C: A pattern of excess genic SNPs with high $F_{ST}$ values ($>0.4$) between Tibetan domestic donkeys and lowland donkeys was found when constraining analyses to SNPs presenting similar minor allele frequencies (MAF). Statistical significance was calculated by chi-square test. D: Landscape of $F_{ST}$, $Pi$ (nucleotide diversity), and $LSBL$ values corroborates strong positive selection on $EGLN1$ gene. $-\log10$ transformed FDR $P$-values are presented.

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enriched. We also manually checked the candidate PSGs detected by each method. One specific candidate was particularly noted: i.e., EGLN1. This gene displayed a significantly higher LSL (FDR-corrected $P=0.0044$), significantly lower nucleotide diversity (FDR-corrected $P=0.0043$), and borderline significant $F_{ST}$ (FDR-corrected $P=0.014$) (Figure 5D). The EGLN1 gene, which encodes for HIF prolyl 4-hydroxylase 2 (PHD2), is a key gene for hypoxia adaptation in Tibetans, alongside EPAS1 (Bigham et al., 2010; Lorenzo et al., 2014; Peng et al., 2011; Simonson et al., 2010; Xiang et al., 2013; Xu et al., 2011). Therefore, our results indicate that Tibetan donkeys did not acquire their ability to withstand high altitude via adaptive introgression or through mutations of the EPAS1 gene, suggesting that kiangs and Tibetan donkeys acquired adaptations independently and through different biological pathways.

Potential independent adaptation to high altitude between kiangs and Tibetan domestic donkeys

Although EPAS1 and EGLN1 do not appear to have evolved in parallel in kiangs and Tibetan donkeys, it is possible that their parallel adaptation to high altitudes involved other genes. To test this hypothesis, we aligned sequencing reads from kiangs and donkeys to the horse reference genome (outgroup) and ran SweeD using these alignments. This allowed us to limit any issue arising from reference bias and identify candidate PSGs in both kiangs and Tibetan domestic donkeys (Figure 6). Among the 2 243 10 kb windows (top 1%) under potential positive selection, only 11 windows (0.49%) distributed on different chromosomes were shared between the two populations, covering 22 protein-coding genes (hypergeometric $P=8.08e-11$), none of which were related to high-altitude adaption (Supplementary Table S20). Thus, our results suggest that no parallel adaptation to high altitude occurred between these two closely related species.

DISCUSSION

The extreme environment of plateau regions can lead to hypoxia in animals, representing a considerable challenge for life, particularly for introduced livestock. In the present study, we assembled a draft de novo genome of the kiang and performed large-scale re-sequencing of kiang and domestic donkey genomes. Our findings demonstrated that kiangs and Tibetan donkeys have utilized different genes (EPAS1 and EGLN1, respectively) to adapt to the low-oxygen conditions associated with living at high altitudes. Interesting, both EPAS1 and EGLN1 are the two most important genes for high-altitude adaptation in Tibetans and other plateau animals (Beall et al., 2010; Foll et al., 2014; Ge et al., 2013; Gou et al., 2014; Huerta-Sánchez et al., 2014; Lorenzo et al., 2014; Qiu et al., 2012; Qu et al., 2013; Simonson et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2016). This suggests that the number of potential biological pathways involved in high-altitude adaptation in mammals may be limited.

While EPAS1 is a clear candidate for adaptation to high altitudes in kiangs, other genes not detected in our analyses may also be involved. This is likely to be the case given the small sample size ($n=5$) of kiang genomes available for this study. Future study based on additional samples will help to clarify the population structure and demographic history of kiangs, as well as identify signatures of positive natural selection.

Our findings indicate that Tibetan donkeys did not acquire
their ability to withstand high altitudes via adaptive introgression with kiangs. Although hybrids between kiangs and horses, donkeys, and wild asses have been reported in captivity (Gray, 1972; Hay, 1859; Kinloch, 1869), e.g., a male kiang-donkey hybrid was born in London Zoological Gardens in 1920 (Flower, 1929), no evidence exists that kiang hybrids can reproduce. Rare genetic introgression between kiangs and Tibetan donkeys may also be due to limited encounters given the short time that donkeys have been living on the Tibetan Plateau. Given their biological similarities, however, the adaptive variants in both EGLN1 and EPAS1 described here could provide markers for breeding more resilient donkeys in other high-altitude regions of the world.

DATA AVAILABILITY

All sequences reported in this study have been deposited in the Genome Sequence Archive database (http://gsa.big.ac.cn/) under Accession ID (CRA001222).

SUPPLEMENTARY DATA

Supplementary data to this article can be found online.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

AUTHORS’ CONTRIBUTIONS

D.D.W. and Y.P.Z. designed and led the project, D.D.W., L.Z., and L.A.F.F. prepared the manuscript. L.Z., H.Q.L., X.L.T., and C.M.J. performed data analysis. C.F.W., X.G., S.W., M.S.W., M.C.W., X.L.L., J.L.H., and H.K.Z. performed part of the data analysis, H.C., A.E., A.C.A., R.A.M.A., O.O., S.C.O., O.J.S., M.G.F., S.C.O., B.A., and J.K.L. performed some sampling. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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