Genome engineering using a synthetic gene circuit in *Bacillus subtilis*

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ABSTRACT

Genome engineering without leaving foreign DNA behind requires an efficient counter-selectable marker system. Here, we developed a genome engineering method in *Bacillus subtilis* using a synthetic gene circuit as a counter-selectable marker system. The system contained two repressible promoters (\(B. subtilis\) xylA (\(P_{xyl}\)) and spac (\(P_{spac}\)) and two repressor genes (\(lacI\) and \(xylR\)). \(P_{xyl}\)-\(lacI\) was integrated into the *B. subtilis* genome with a target gene containing a desired mutation. The \(xylR\) and \(P_{spac}\)-chloramphenicol resistant genes (\(cat\)) were located on a helper plasmid. In the presence of xylose, repression of \(XylR\) by xylose induced LacI expression, the LacIs repressed the \(P_{spac}\) promoter and the cells become chloramphenicol sensitive. Thus, to survive in the presence of chloramphenicol, the cell must delete \(P_{xyl}\)-\(lacI\) by recombination between the wild-type and mutated target genes. The recombination leads to mutation of the target gene. The remaining helper plasmid was removed easily under the chloramphenicol absent condition. In this study, we showed base insertion, deletion and point mutation of the *B. subtilis* genome without leaving any foreign DNA behind. Additionally, we successfully deleted a 2-kb gene (amyE) and a 38-kb operon (\(ppsABCDE\)). This method will be useful to construct designer *Bacillus* strains for various industrial applications.

INTRODUCTION

*Bacillus* species are spore-forming Gram-positive bacteria and are the most frequently used bacteria for industrial enzyme production. Currently, about 60% of commercially available enzymes are produced from *Bacillus* species. *Bacillus* strains have also been used to produce nucleotides, vitamins, ribose and poly-\(\gamma\)-glutamic acid and as expression hosts to produce foreign recombination proteins (1–3). Industrial-scale production of commercial enzymes or metabolites requires strain engineering because wild-type *Bacillus* strains have not been adapted for overproducing specific enzymes or metabolites. Strain engineering often requires multiple mutations in the genome. However, the number of antibiotic selection markers available for use in *Bacillus subtilis* is limited. Thus, an effective method for genome engineering that is free of any antibiotic resistance markers is needed. Furthermore, the method must be usable to construct food-grade recombinant strains.

Genome modifications in *B. subtilis* have been achieved by using various positive selection markers, usually antibiotic-resistance markers. Traditional methods for the genome engineering without inserting any foreign DNA used negative selections that screened antibiotic-sensitive strains. Sometimes the mutant generation was based on the activity of a thermo-sensitive replication origin (4). However, the negative selections are laborious and time-consuming. Thus, a positive selection system using an efficient counter-selectable marker is required to facilitate genome engineering (5). Several counter-selectable markers based on the upp (6), blaI (7), mazF (8,9), araR (10) and hewI (11) genes have been used in *Bacillus* species. However, the method using upp, blaI or araR requires a strain with a specific mutation or insertion of a foreign gene in the chromosome. When these methods are applied to different strains, prerequisite mutants must be prepared. In the case of using toxic genes, such as mazF and hewI, tightly controlled expression is required. However, this is often unsuccessful and spontaneous resistant strains without the desired recombination are frequently generated. Thus, we developed a new and highly efficient marker-free method for *Bacillus* genome engineering without prior modifications of the bacterial strain.

Synthetic genetic circuits designed to program new biological behavior, dynamics and logic control have become valuable and widely applicable tools for studying genetics and cell biology. In addition to academic research, they have...
been applied commercially for the production of pharmaceuticals, biofuels and chemicals (12). In this study, we constructed a synthetic genetic circuit involving negative feedback loops; we also show its utility as a counter-selectable marker system. The system was demonstrated to be highly efficient for genome engineering in *B. subtilis* by constructing mutants having point modifications and deletions of a gene or an operon in the genome. Furthermore, the system showed that false-positive clones were generated infrequently.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### Strains and culture conditions

The *B. subtilis* strains used in this study are listed in Table 1. *Escherichia coli* MC1061 was used to construct the recombinant plasmids. Bacillus cells were cultured in Luria-Bertani (LB), tryptic soy broth (TSB, Difco, Detroit, MI, USA) or tryptic soy agar (TSA, Difco). To test the tryptophan auxotrophic phenotype, CHP minimal medium (13) was used. The cells were cultured in 2× SG medium (14) for the protease assay. Transformation of *B. subtilis* was carried out by a method described previously (15). When required, the medium was supplemented with chloramphenicol (5 or 50 μg/ml), neomycin (10 μg/ml) or ampicillin (100 μg/ml).

### Plasmids

The primers used in this study are listed in Table 2. The helper plasmid (pA-xylR2) containing the *Bacillus* replication origin (rep), *xylR* repressor gene and spac promoter (*P*<sub>spac</sub>)–chloramphenicol resistant gene (*neo*), the *B. subtilis* xylIA promoter (*P*<sub>xyl</sub>)-lacI fusion cassette and multiple cloning sites was constructed as follows. The *P*<sub>xyl</sub> was obtained by PCR from the plasmid pAX01 with primers PxyF3 and PxyR2. *lacI* was amplified by PCR with primers lacI-F2 and lacI-R2 from pMUTIN4, and fused to *P*<sub>xyl</sub> by fusion PCR to obtain the fusion cassette. Plasmid pUC18 was digested with AatII and PvuII and inserted into the corresponding sites of plasmid pUC18 to construct the integration vector (pULac-neo) containing the neomycin resistant gene (*neo*), the *B. subtilis* xylIA promoter (*P*<sub>xyl</sub>)-lacI fusion cassette and multiple cloning sites was constructed as follows. The *P*<sub>xyl</sub> was obtained by PCR from the plasmid pAX01 with primers PxyF3 and PxyR2. *lacI* was amplified by PCR with primers lacI-F2 and lacI-R2 from pMUTIN4, and fused to *P*<sub>xyl</sub> by fusion PCR to obtain the fusion cassette. Plasmid pUC18 was digested with AatII and PvuII, and the large fragment was fused to the *P*<sub>xyl</sub>-cat cassette using a cold fusion cloning kit to construct pUCxyl-lacI. The neo gene was amplified by PCR with primers neo-f5 and neo-r5 from plasmid pMLK83 (20), digested into HindIII and BamHI, and inserted into the corresponding sites of plasmid pUCxyl-lacI to construct pULac-neo. To construct an insertion mutation in *trpC* of *B. subtilis*, the *trpC* gene from the chromosome of *B. subtilis* KCTC1028 was obtained by PCR with primers trpC-F2 and trpC-R2. The PCR fragment was digested with XhoI and XbaI and inserted into corresponding sites of pULac-neo to construct the integration vector pULac-trpCI028. The integration vector (pULac-aprE) for the deletion mutation in *aprE* of *B. subtilis* 168 was constructed as follows. N- and C-terminus of *aprE* were amplified by PCR with primer sets aprD1/aprE-D2 and aprE-D3/aprE-D4, respectively, and fused into two PCR products by fusion PCR. The resulting *aprE* fragment was digested with XhoI and XbaI and inserted into corresponding

### Table 1. *Bacillus* strains used

| Strain     | Description                                                                 | Source                |
|------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 168        | trpC                                                                         | Laboratory stock      |
| BS5417     | BS168 thrC::P<sub>xyl</sub>-comK                                            | This study            |
| BS5465     | BS168 + pA-xylR2                                                             | This study            |
| BS5438     | BS168 + pA-xylR2 + pULac-trpC1028 (single crossover)                         | This study            |
| BS5444     | BS168 trpC<sup>+</sup>                                                       | This study            |
| BS5446     | BS168 trpC<sup>+</sup> + pA-xylR2                                             | This study            |
| BS5449     | BS168 trpC<sup>+</sup> + pA-xylR2 + pULac-aprE (single crossover)             | This study            |
| BS5450     | BS168 trpC<sup>+</sup> + pA-xylR2 + pULac-nprE (single crossover)             | This study            |
| BS5451     | BS168 trpC<sup>+</sup> aprE<sup>-</sup> + pA-xylR2                            | This study            |
| BS5452     | BS168 trpC<sup>-</sup> nprE<sup>-</sup> + pA-xylR2                            | This study            |
| BS5456     | BS168 trpC<sup>-</sup> aprE<sup>-</sup> + pA-xylR2 + pULac-nprE (single crossover) | This study            |
| BS5458     | BS168 trpC<sup>-</sup> aprE<sup>-</sup> + nprE<sup>-</sup> + pA-xylR2           | This study            |
| BS5460     | BS168 trpC<sup>-</sup> aprE<sup>-</sup> + pA-xylR2                            | This study            |
| BS5461     | BS168 trpC<sup>-</sup> aprE<sup>-</sup> + pA-xylR2                            | This study            |
| BS5462     | BS168 trpC<sup>-</sup> aprE<sup>-</sup> nprE<sup>-</sup>                        | This study            |
| BS5589     | BS168 + pA-xylR2 + pULac-amyE (single crossover)                              | This study            |
| BS5590     | BS168 ΔamyE + pA-xylR2                                                        | This study            |
| BS5591     | BS168 + pA-xylR2 + pULac-pps (single crossover)                               | This study            |
| BS5592     | BS168 Δpps + pA-xylR2                                                         | This study            |
Table 2. Primers used

| Primer   | Sequence (5′ → 3′)1 |
|----------|---------------------|
| rep-F1   | ATAAGCTTCGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| rep-R1   | CATACGTCGTCGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| xylR-F1  | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| xylR-R3  | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| Pspac-F2 | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| Pspac-R1 | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| Cm-F3    | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| Cm-R3    | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| MCS      | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| Pxyl-F3  | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| Pxyl-R2  | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| lacI-F2  | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| lacI-R2  | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| Neo-F5   | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| Neo-R5   | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| trpC-F2  | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| trpC-R2  | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| aprE-D1  | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| aprE-D2  | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| aprE-D3  | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| aprE-D4  | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| pps-F1   | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| pps-R1   | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| pps-F2   | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| pps-R2   | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| pps-F3   | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| pps-R3   | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| ppsA-F1  | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| ppsA-R1  | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| ppsB-F1  | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| ppsB-R1  | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| ppsE-F1  | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |
| ppsE-R1  | AGCTTCGAGATGATGACAGCTAAATACTGCACTTCTTTTATACTCTATAATTTTC |

1 Underlines indicate restriction enzyme sites.

sites of the pUlac-neo to construct integration vector pUlac-aprE. The integration vector (pUlac-nprE) for the point mutation in nprE of B. subtilis 168 was constructed as follows. The N- and C-termini of nprE were amplified by PCR with primer sets nprE-PM1/nprE-PM2 and nprE-PM3/nprE-PM4, respectively, and fused to two PCR products by fusion PCR. The resulting nprE fragment was digested with XhoI and XbaI, and inserted into corresponding sites of the pUlac-neo to construct the integration vector pUlac-nprE. The integration vector (pUlac-pps) for the deletion of pps operon of B. subtilis 168 was constructed as follows. N- and C-terminus of pps operon were amplified by PCR with primer sets pps-F1/pps-R1 and pps-F2/pps-R2, respectively, and fused into two PCR products by fusion PCR. The resulting PCR fragment was digested with XhoI and XbaI and inserted into corresponding sites of the pUlac-neo to construct integration vector pUlac-pps. The plasmids pA-xylR2 and pUlac-neo are available for the academic community, and their sequences were submitted to GenBank with the accession no. KP216525 and KP216524, respectively.
Protease assay

*Bacillus* cells cultured in 1 ml of LB medium at 37°C for 16 h were inoculated in 10 ml of a 2x SG medium. After further culturing for 7 h at 37°C, the cultures were centrifuged to obtain the supernatants. Next, azocasein (Sigma, St. Louis, MO, USA) was dissolved at a concentration of 2% in an assay buffer containing 0.1 M sodium chloride, 0.01 M PIPES, 1 x 10^{-5} M zinc acetate and 5 mM calcium chloride (pH 7). The azocasein solution (300 µl) was then mixed with 100 µl of the supernatants from the *Bacillus* cultures and incubated in a 37°C water bath for 1 h. The reactions were stopped by adding 1.2 ml of 10% trichloroacetic acid, after which the reaction mixtures were allowed to stand at ambient temperature for 5 min. The tubes were then centrifuged for 3 min at 8000 x g, after which 600 µl of each supernatant was added to 700 µl of 1 M NaOH. The absorbance at 440 nm was then determined using a spectrophotometer.

RESULTS

Construction of a synthetic gene circuit

The regulatory network of synthetic gene circuits is artificial and can function as a molecular switch. The controllable switch can be applicable to signal a pop-in or pop-out of specific genes from chromosones. In this study, a genetic circuit was constructed for the genome engineering of *B. subtilis* as a counter-selectable marker system. The system contained two repressible promoters and two repressor genes (Figure 1). Repressor 2 was transcribed from the promoter 1, and promoter 2 was located upstream of the reporter. Repressor 1 was expressed constitutively. In the absence of the inducer, the expressed repressor 1 repressed expression of repressor 2 from promoter 1, resulting in overexpression of the reporter. When inducer 1 was added to the system, promoter 1 was released from repression of the repressor 1 and overexpressed repressor 2 blocked expression of the reporter from promoter 2. Thus, the promoter 1-repressor 2 cassette should be deleted to express the reporter, and could be used as a counter-selectable marker. The promoter 2-reporter cassette and repressor 1 gene were located on the plasmid so they could be removed later. We used *B. subtilis* xylA (P<sub>xyl</sub>) and spac (P<sub>spac</sub>) promoters for promoters 1 and 2, respectively. P<sub>xyl</sub> can be induced by xylose. We also used xylIR, lacI, and cat genes as the repressor 1, 2 and reporter genes, respectively.

Construction of an insertion mutant

*B. subtilis* 168 requires tryptophan to grow in a minimal medium. Sequence analysis of trp operon revealed that the tryptophan requirement phenotype (Trp<sup>+</sup>) of the 168 strain came from a three base (ATT) deletion in the trpC gene (21). To obtain a Trp<sup>+</sup> revertant, the bases (ATT) were inserted in the missing region of the trpC gene (Figure 3A). The scheme for constructing the Trp<sup>+</sup> strain is depicted in Figure 2. The trpC gene harboring the missing three bases (ATT) was cloned into the integration vector containing the P<sub>xyl-lac</sub> cassette and neomycin resistant gene (*neo*). The vector was inserted into the *B. subtilis* 168 chromosome by single crossover integration. Then, the strain was transformed with the helper plasmid pA-xyIr2. The resulting strain BS5438 showed resistance to both neomycin and chloramphenicol, because the constitutively expressed XylR repressed the lacI expression from the P<sub>xyl</sub> promoter, and the repression led to overexpression of the cat gene from the P<sub>spac</sub> promoter. If xylose were added to the cells, it would inhibit XylR function, and LacI would be overexpressed; cat expression from the P<sub>spac</sub> promoter would be repressed so that the cells would now be chloramphenicol sensitive. Thus, the P<sub>xyl-lac</sub> cassette should be deleted to grow the cells in the presence of chloramphenicol. The deletion occurred by recombination between N or C fragments in Figure 2. The *neo* gene was also deleted by the recombination. To demonstrate this hypothesis, strain BS5438 was cultured overnight in 1 ml of TSB containing a high concentration of chloramphenicol (50 µg/ml) and 1% xylose at 37°C. After spreading the cultured cells onto a TSA plate containing 50 µg/ml chloramphenicol and 1% of xylose, the cells were cultured overnight at 37°C. One hundred colonies were randomly selected and grown on TSA containing 10 mg/ml neomycin or 5 mg/ml chloramphenicol. Among them, 99 colonies displayed the neomycin-sensitive phenotype, indicating that xylose efficiently induced the recombination to delete the P<sub>xyl-lac</sub> cassette and *neo* gene. Only 1% of the colonies were false positives. Recombination can occur with equal frequency between N or C fragments. One recombination returns the cells to the wild-type, and the other generates a mutation. When the randomly selected 100 colonies were cultured in a CHPG1 medium without tryptophan, 88 colonies were grown, indicating that 88% of the colonies were converted to the Trp<sup>+</sup> phenotype. The trpC2 genes from the four Trp<sup>+</sup> strains were amplified by PCR with primers trpC-F2 and trpC-R2, and were analyzed by sequencing. The result showed that all of them contained the three base (ATT) insertion into the trpC gene, which restored TrpC function. The resulting strain BS5446 was neomycin-sensitive, chloramphenicol-resistant and the Trp<sup>+</sup> phenotypes (Figure 3B), and could grow in a minimal medium without adding tryptophan (Figure 3C).

To remove the helper plasmid, the Trp<sup>+</sup> strain BS5446 containing the helper plasmid pA-xylr2 was cultured in 1 ml of TSB for 24 h at 37°C, spread onto a TSA plate and further cultured overnight at 37°C. Then, 100 randomly selected colonies were picked and cultured on TSA or TSA containing 5 µg/ml chloramphenicol to select chloramphenicol-sensitive colonies. Among them, 36 colonies showed the chloramphenicol-sensitive phenotype,
and no plasmids from them were detected. Thus, this result demonstrated that the helper plasmid could be easily removed.

Construction of deletion and point mutants

*B. subtilis* contains eight extracellular proteases (22). Among them, more than 95% of the extracellular proteolytic activity is contributed by the two major proteases, AprE and NprE (23). Inactivation of the two major proteases can significantly enhance the expression of heterologous proteins (24). We carried out the deletion and point mutations of *aprE* and *nprE*, respectively, by the method used in this study. For the deletion mutation, two bases (GT) were deleted from the *aprE* gene of *B. subtilis* 168 to construct the AprE\(^{-}\) strain (Figure 4A). To do this, the integration plasmid pUlac-*aprE* containing a two-base deletion in the *aprE* gene was introduced into strain BS5446 to integrate the plasmid into the chromosome. The resulting strain BS5449 was induced by xylose for recombination using the method described above. The recombinants showed neomycin-sensitive phenotypes in 42 clones among 50 randomly selected clones. The *aprE* genes were amplified by PCR from 10 randomly selected neomycin-sensitive clones. The nucleotide sequence analysis of the *aprE* genes showed that four clones contained deletion mutations in the *aprE* genes. The helper plasmid from the strain BS5451 (Trp\(^{+}\), AprE\(^{-}\)) was removed by the method described above to construct strain BS5460.

For the point mutation, a single base in the *nprE* gene was changed to create a stop codon, which resulted in the NprE\(^{-}\) phenotype (Figure 4B). To do this, the integration plasmid pUlac-*nprE* was introduced into strain BS5446. The resulting strain BS5450 was induced by xylose for recombination using the method described above. The recombinants showed neomycin-sensitive phenotypes in 43 clones among 50 randomly selected clones. The *nprE* genes were amplified by PCR from nine randomly selected neomycin-sensitive clones. The nucleotide sequence analysis of the *nprE* genes showed that all nine clones contained point mutations in the *nprE* gene. The helper plasmid from strain BS5452 (Trp\(^{+}\), NprE\(^{-}\)) was removed by the method described above.

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**Figure 2.** Strategy for constructing the *B. subtilis* 168 Trp\(^{+}\) strain using a synthetic gene circuit. The integration vector contains the *B. subtilis trpC* gene harboring three missing bases (ATT), the Pxyl-*lacI* cassette and the neomycin-resistant gene (neo). N and C represent N- and C-terminal parts of the *B. subtilis trpC* gene. The helper plasmid contains a xylR repressor gene, replication origin (rep) for *Bacillus* and the Pspac-cat fusion cassette. The integration vector was inserted into the *B. subtilis* 168 chromosome by single crossover integration. *In vivo* recombination between the N or C fragments under the presence of xylose and chloramphenicol (Cm) resulted in the deletion of the Pxyl-*lacI* cassette and neo. The helper plasmid was removed to construct the *B. subtilis* Trp\(^{+}\) strain.
plasmid pUlac-
inhibition of the Trp+ strain on TSA containing neomycin indicated that

tophan supplement. (Trp+, AprE

scribed above to construct strain BS5461. Strain BS5462 (Trp+, AprE−, NprE−) was constructed by introducing the plasmid pUlac-nprE into strain BS5456, followed by induc-
ing recombination and curing the helper plasmid. The dele-
tion and point mutations in the aprE and nprE genes, re-
tively, were further confirmed by the protease assay in
which extracellular protease activities were reduced in the
mutants (Figure 4C).

**Deletion of a gene or operon**

For the broad application of our method, we applied the
method to the deletion of a gene and operon from the
genome. To delete an about 2-kb *amyE* gene, the integration
plasmid pUlac-*amyE* was introduced into strain BS5465.
The resulting strain BS5589 was induced by xylose for re-
combination using the method described above. The re-
combinants showed neomycin-sensitive phenotypes in 25
clones among 25 randomly selected clones. Amylase as-
says with the selected clones on the LB agar plate contain-
ing 1% starch revealed that 16 clones (64%) showed amy-
lase negative phenotypes. The deletion of the amyrase gene
was further confirmed by PCR (Figure 5). Next, we con-

opern containing five large-sized genes (*ppsABCDE*). To
delete the *pps* operon, the integration plasmid pUlac-
*pps* was introduced into strain BS5465. The resulting strain
BS5591 was induced by xylose for recombination using the
method described above. The recombinants showed
neomycin-sensitive phenotypes in 47 clones among 50 ran-
domly selected clones. PCR analysis revealed that 3 of the
47 neomycin-sensitive clones (6.4%) contained a deleted *pps*
operon (Figure 6). The results confirmed that our method
is a powerful tool for *Bacillus* genome engineering.

**DISCUSSION**

A synthetic gene circuit has been designed to construct log-
ical devices including timers, counters, clocks, logic pro-
cessors, pattern detectors and intercellular communication
modules, and can be applied to various research, indus-
trial and medical fields (25,26). Here, we designed a syn-
thetic gene circuit for a counter-selectable marker system
to engineer a genome. Some previously reported counter-
selectable marker systems required prerequisite mutations
or insertions of foreign genes into the chromosome, such as
inactivation of the native *upp* gene, or replacement of the
native *araR* gene with the Para-*neo* cassette (6,7,10). In
a method that uses Xer recombination, the *dif* site, which is
a recognition sequence for the native Xer site-specific re-
combines, remained in the chromosome during deletion
of the selectable marker gene (27). However, the remaining exogenous non-native sequences in the chromosome hamper the system to apply to food-grade genome engineering. In our system, the reporter system (Pspac-cassette) was located on the plasmid. After engineering the target gene, the plasmid can be removed easily from the cell. Thus, the system does not retain any foreign DNA fragments in the chromosome, and this enables the system to be applied to food-grade genome engineering.

*mazF* has been used as a counter-selectable marker without any residual exogenous sequences in the chromosome (8,9). *mazF* encodes an endoribonuclease that specifically cleaves ACA sequences of mRNAs, and is highly toxic when expressed in cells (28). Genome engineering using the *mazF* system resulted in many false-positive clones in our experimental condition, and was not a proper method. Recently, an improved method using a mini-*mazF*-cassette was reported (29). They used direct repeat (DR) sequences for the *in vivo* recombination in the *amyE* deletion and *gfp* insertion experiments, which resulted in the DR remaining in the chromosome during deletion of the selectable marker system. The report used a PCR cassette without the DR in the deletion of a large fragment. However, in this case, another DNA fragment for the *in vivo* recombination was needed, and seven DNA fragments should be fused by PCR. The report emphasized that the toxic gene *mazF* was under the control of a *B. subtilis* xyl promoter, and its expression was able of tight control. In their system, the promoter is controlled by a host-encoded repressor, XylR, which showed considerable sequence similarities in the *Bacillus* group, suggesting that the mini-*mazF*-cassette system can possibly work in other *Bacillus* species (30). However, tight regulation of the promoter by host XylR is not guaranteed because the consensus sequences of the XylR binding sites vary in different subgroups of genomes (30). Our system contains *B. subtilis* xylR in a helper plasmid to control Pxyl in an integrative plasmid. Thus, our system can possibly be directly used in any transformable wild-type strains. In addition, the tightly controlled Pxyl by the XylR shows that our system is highly efficient and infrequently generates false positives.

In this system, the sizes of the ‘N’ and ‘C’ fragments for the recombination ranged approximately from 500 to 1100 basepairs. In a mini-*mazF*-cassette system, the authors used 500-bp fragments for the recombination (30). Previous reports showed that $\sim$70 bp of homology is required for detectable homologous recombination in *B. subtilis*, and the recombination frequency showed a linear dependence on substrate length within the range of 77–165 bp (31). Thus, for the efficient recombination, the sizes of the ‘N’ and ‘C’ fragments could be recommended to be greater than 200 base pairs.

Our system can be used to construct insertion, deletion and point mutations in the chromosome without genome information and prerequisite genetic background. Additionally, the selectable marker system is located on the plasmid, which can be easily removed later. These characteristics suggest that the system can be applied to food-grade engineering of other *Bacillus* species or previously used industrial processes.

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Figure 5. (A) Gene structures of wild-type (BS168) and deletion mutant of *amyE* gene (BS168 Δ*amyE*). Arrows above the genes indicate primer binding sites. (B) Amylase assay of BS168 (1) and BS Δ*amyE* (2) on an LB agar plate containing 1% starch. (C) PCR analyses of BS168 (1) and BS Δ*amyE* (2) with the indicated primer sets. Expected sizes of PCR products were shown in the table.
trial Bacillus strains. Many Bacillus strains are being used in agriculture as biocontrol agents or biofertilizers. Live Bacillus cells are spread in the environment for agricultural application. Thus, food-grade strain engineering is indispensable for improving the agricultural Bacillus strains. Our system would be useful to engineer Bacillus strains for agricultural applications.

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