Network and epigenetic characterization of subsets of genes specifically expressed in maize bundle sheath cells

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 21 March 2022
Received in revised form 2 July 2022
Accepted 2 July 2022
Available online 6 July 2022

Keywords:
BS cell related genes
Co-expression and regulatory network
Histone modifications
Maize

A B S T R A C T

Bundle sheath (BS) cells exhibit dramatically structural differences and functional variations at physiological, biochemical and epigenetic levels as compared to mesophyll (M) cells in maize. The regulatory mechanisms controlling functional divergences between M and BS have been extensively investigated. However, BS cell-related regulatory networks are still not completely characterized. To address this, we herein conducted WGCNA-related co-expression assays using bulk M and BS cell RNA-seq data sets and identified a module containing 384 genes highly expressed in BS cells (including 20 hub TFs) instead of M cells. According to the hub TF centered regulatory network, we found that Dof22 and Dof30 might act as key regulators in the regulation of expression of BS-specific genes, and several MYB TFs exhibited a high collaboration with Dof TFs. By comparing the enrichment levels of histone modifications, we found that genes in the aforementioned module were more enriched with histone acetylation as compared to other BS-enriched DEGs with similar expression levels. Moreover, we found that a subset of genes functioning in photosynthesis, protein auto processing and enzymatic activities were significantly enriched with broad H3K4me3. Thus, our study provides evidence showing that regulatory network and histone modifications may play vital roles in the regulation of a subset of genes with important functions in BS cells.

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1. Introduction

Maize is a typical C4 crop, which is important to secure food production for demanding due to increasing population worldwide, especially facing dramatic impacts of global warming on agricultural systems. C4 crops tend to be more productive, especially in arid areas, largely due to their higher efficiency in utilization of nutrient, water and photosynthesis as compared to C3 crops [1]. Maize and other C4 crops have two structurally and functionally specialized cell types, termed as mesophyll (M) and bundle sheath (BS) cells, which form a “Kranz” anatomy surrounding the veins [2]. The underlying mechanisms determining functional divergences between M and BS cells have been extensively investigated in maize. Briefly, functional variations between both cells occur in multiple levels, such as physiological, biochemical and epigenetic levels. For example, C4 acids are initially synthesized from CO2 which is catalyzed by phosphoenolpyruvate carboxylase (PEPC) in M cells, and are then transported to BS cells to release CO2 again for carboxylation through stepwise enzymatic reactions [3,4]. Therefore, C4 enzymes working in close collaboration between two cell types ensure the achievement of high photosynthesis efficiency in C4 plants [1,5]. Quantitative proteomics assays showed that the majority of starch metabolic enzymes are more abundant in BS cells than in M cells [6], PEPC kinase (PEPCk), which is preferentially expressed in M cells, can specifically regulate the activity of PEPC through reversible phosphorylation [7]. Transcriptomic analyses revealed that a subset of genes differentially expressed between M and BS cells may play vital roles in cell-type related functional differentiation in maize [8–11]. BS and M cell related DNase I-seq and ATAC-seq assays further indicated that differential chromatin openness causes variations in the accessibility of underlying cis-regulatory elements (CREs) to trans-acting factors, leading to differential expression of related genes between two cell types [11,12]. Moreover, ChIP-seq assays provided evidence showing that C4 genes between two cell types in maize can be differentially regulated by chromatin modifications such as H3K9ac, H3K27mes and H3K4me3 [11,13]. For example, PEPC, PPDF, PCK, ME and CA are potentially regulated by the secondary upstream peak (R-SUP) of H3K9ac, while NADP-ME, PEPC, RbcS1

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.csbj.2022.07.004

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and Rbcs2 are potentially regulated by H3K27me3 and H3K4me3 in a cell-specific manner.

Transcription factors (TFs) have been found to regulate several key \( C_4 \) genes in a cell-type dependent manner in maize. It has been documented that Dof TFs play both active and repressive roles in the regulation of several \( C_4 \) gene expression like \( PPDK \) and \( PEPC \) [14,15]. It has been reported that some of TF genes are preferentially expressed and function in BS cells [8,9,16]. Some of bHLH family can preferentially bind to NAPD-ME and PEPC. For instance, bHLH80 can bind to the promoter of PEPC, resulting in cell-specific expression [17,18]. \( ZmOrphan94 \) highly expressed in BS cells can act as a repressor for PEPC in maize protoplasts, indicative of cell-type dependent functions of \( ZmOrphan94 \) [19]. Variations in the accessibility of underlying cis-regulatory elements (CREs) between the two cell types can cause cell-type related transcription of some of key \( C_4 \) genes like \( PEPC, CA \) and \( NAD-ME \) [20–22]. Similarly, it has been reported that TFs in the MYB-MYC module can bind to the promoter CREs of some genes, resulting in their preferential expression in bundle sheath of \( Arabidopsis \) [23]. Furthermore, functions of TFs in the regulation of cell-dependent gene expression have been comprehensively characterized through regulatory network analyses using single M cell RNA-seq data, leading to discoveries that several CO-like TFs possibly play dominant roles in leaf development and photosynthesis for M cells in maize [16,24]. However, BS cell-related regulatory networks are still not completely characterized, especially it is hard to be achieved at a single cell level due to technique limiting for isolation of enough BS cells for sequencing as compared to single M cells [16,25]. To address this question, we here conducted WGCNA-related co-expression assays using bulk M and BS cell RNA-seq data sets and identified a co-expression module containing genes highly expressed in BS cells instead of M cells. TFs in the module were further used for construction of TF centered regulatory network using GENIE3 and TF-CollaborativeNet methods. A possible epigenetic regulation of these genes specifically expressed in BS cells was also investigated by analyzing histone modification ChIP-seq data sets.

2. Results

2.1. Transcriptomic analyses of mesophyll and bundle sheath cells in maize

To explore transcriptional differences between two distinct photosynthetic cell types, M and BS cells, in maize, we isolated M and BS cells using the second and third leaves collected from 10-day-old plants. The purity of isolated M and BS cells was assessed using RT-PCR for \( PEPC \) (\( Zm000001d046170 \) and \( rbcs \) (\( Zm000001d052595 \) and \( Zm000001d004894 \)) genes (Fig. S1), which are key \( C_4 \) marker genes primarily expressed in M and BS cells, respectively. We then conducted two well-correlated biological replicates of RNA sequencing (RNA-seq) (\( R^2 \) = 0.95 for M cells and 0.99 for BS cells, Fig. S2) and obtained 73.7 and 85.3 M total reads for M and BS cells, respectively. Among 46,430 genes annotated in maize B73 reference genome (maize B73 v4), we identified 21,730 (ca. 47%) in M cells and 19,915 (ca. 43%) in BS cells expressed genes with FPKM > 0.5. After comparing the expression levels of all genes between M and BS cells, we identified 5,748 (12.38%) and 4,004 (8.62%) differentially expressed genes (DEGs) in M and BS cells, respectively, with fold changes > 4 (Fig. 1A). The majority of DEGs were present in both replicates (Fig. 1B). To confirm the representative of these identified DEGs, we chose 10 key genes responsible for \( C_4 \) photosynthesis, S of them highly expressed in M or BS cells, for comparisons, which have been found to be specifically expressed in M or BS cells before. We found that the data in our study were comparable with previously published data sets (Fig. 1C). Moreover, we randomly selected 10 DEGs (5 of them highly expressed in M or BS cells) for RT-qPCR assays, and found that the expression trend of these DEGs matched well with the RNA-seq data we analyzed (Fig. 1D). Therefore, these analyses indicated that the newly generated data were reliable for downstream analyses.

2.2. Identification of genes specifically expressed in BS cells through co-expression analyses

To identify genes specifically expressed in BS cells, we pooled 28 published BS and M cell related RNA-seq data (Supplementary Table S1) for Weighted Gene Co-Expression Network Analysis (WGCNA) [26]. We obtained 23 co-expression modules (Fig. S3), which were marked using different colors. Except for non-effectively grouped genes listed in the gray module, the number of genes in each module ranged from 33 (darkgreen) to 3208 (turquoise) (Supplementary Table S1). To identify genes specifically expressed in M or BS cells, we conducted correlation analyses between gene modules and M/BS cells (Fig. 2A). We found that darkgreen (\( R^2 \) = 0.83), magenta (\( R^2 \) = 0.87) and grey60 (\( R^2 \) = 0.70) modules exhibited a high correlation with BS cells. According to the module eigengene values (ME, defined as the first principal component of genes in a module), which represent the overall expression pattern of genes in the module, we found that the eigengene expression level in the magenta module was higher in the majority of BS cell related RNA-seq data, but much lower in the corresponding M cell related RNA-seq data (Fig. 2B). Therefore, we considered 384 genes in the magenta module as potential candidates for genes specifically expressed in BS cells. Moreover, we found that \( RBCS1, RBCS2, NAPD-ME, PCK \) and \( MEP3 \) genes involved in the BS cell photosynthesis were also present in this module (Fig. 2C), suggesting that this module may be primarily related to functions of BS cells. We further conducted GO enrichment analyses, and found that 384 genes in the magenta module were mainly involved in both biological processes and cellular component, such as generation of precursor metabolites and energy, carbohydrate metabolic processes and organelle envelop (Fig. 2D). To identify potential hub TFs in the magenta module, we further screened all genes using the module membership (KME) values calculated by the WGCNA package (Fig. S4). According to the size of [KME] representing the core degree of a gene in a module, we identified 20 hub TFs, including Dof, MYB, bZIP and G2-like families (Fig. 2E).

2.3. Hub TFs related regulatory network in BS cells

To investigate how these hub TFs individually or in cooperation with other TFs or genes function in BS cells, we identified TF modules using the TF-CollaborativeNet methods [27]. TF-CollaborativeNet can divide TFs into subgroups based on the overlap of top 100 confident target genes between TFs. We identified a total of 114 TF subclusters, and 13 of which were composed of > 10 genes (Fig. 3A). Of 20 TFs in the aforementioned magenta module, 12 TFs were present in subcluster 1 and 4 TFs were present in sub-
cluster 3 (Fig. 3B), indicating a high collaboration among these TFs. They included Dof30 and bZIP9 and bZIP40 TFs, which have been reported to function in BS cells [11,13,28,29]. Moreover, we found that MYB6, MYB56 and MYB88 TFs had more target genes shared with Dof30 TF than bZIP9 and bZIP40 TFs, indicating that MYB and Dof30 TFs may function in the same pathway in the regulation of key C4 gene expression. A machine-learning approach was also employed to predict gene regulatory relationship between TFs and their target genes. According to the sum weight calculated for all links among all TFs, we found that MYB6, MYB56 and MYB88 TFs had higher sum weight and more number of links than other TFs (Fig. 3C), indicating that these genes may play important
regulatory roles in the magenta module. To further reveal the potential regulatory relationship between the hub TFs or between the hub TFs and BS-specific C4 genes, we used the published protoplast based 104 TF ChIP-seq data sets [24] to construct potential regulatory network between TFs and C4 genes (Fig. 3D). We found that Dof TF might be regulated by MYB, bZIP and other TFs, especially Dof30 may be specifically regulated by C2H2-133 and Dof22 TFs. MYB TFs may be self-regulated or be mainly regulated by Dof TF, while bZIP TFs may be regulated by Dof and MYB TFs. Furthermore, we found that GLK1, HB 79 and COL18 from the lightgreen and pink module were highly expressed in M cells but lowly expressed in BS cells, and they can potentially target some of BS-specific C4 genes after analyzing the protoplast-based ChIP-seq data (Fig. S5). This result indicated that these C4 genes can also be negatively regulated by TFs highly expressed in M cells. Thus, these analyses indicated that hub TFs might function in BS cells through complex regulatory network, and may positively or negatively regulate some of key C4 genes in BS cells.

Collectively, these results suggest that Dof22 may be an important regulator in the regulation of genes specifically expressed in BS cells, and Dof30 and MYB TFs may cooperate with Dof TFs to regulate expression of important C4 genes.

2.4. Differential enrichment of histone methylations in the genes belonging to the magenta module between M and BS cells

H3K27me3, a repressive mark, has been found to be involved in plant cell differentiation [30] and differential gene expression between M and BS cells in maize [11]. To profile histone methylations in a subset of genes in the magenta module between M and BS cells, we analyzed the published H3K27me3 and H3K4me3 ChIP-seq data [11], and found that the actual number of genes enriched with H3K27me3 was significantly higher than the expected ones for all DEGs and a subset of genes in the magenta module. Moreover, a similar fold change between the actual and the expected number of genes was observed for all DEGs and subsets of genes in the magenta module, indicating that parts of genes in the magenta module tend to be regulated by H3K27me3 (Fig. 4A). As expected, an overall negative correlation was observed for changes in the enrichment levels of H3K27me3 and changes in the expression levels of all genes (n = 13,077), DEGs (n = 1,697) and a subset of genes (n = 194) in the magenta module enriched with H3K27me3 (Fig. 4B). Moreover, a negative correlation coefficient for genes (R2 = −0.27) in the magenta module was higher than that for all genes (R2 = −0.19), but lower than that for DEGs (R2 = −0.39), further confirming that expression of parts of genes in the magenta module was affected by H3K27me3. We then specifically investigated the 20 hub TFs in the magenta module and found that 2 TFs (Dof22 and Dof30) in M cells and 1 TF (HB 66) in BS cells were highly enriched with H3K27me3 (Fig. 4C). Typical GA-repeat motifs were also found within the 2 kb upstream of the promoter regions of both Dof TFs (Fig. S6), which possibly act as the polycomb response elements (PREs) for the binding of BPC TFs, then recruiting PRC2 for methylating histone H3 at K27 residue [31]. We also analyzed the enrichment levels of H3K4Kme3, an active mark directly correlating with gene expression in plants.
HB66 of these three acetylation marks with gene expression (Fig. S7). As expected, we observed a direct correlation, we conducted H3K4ac, H3K9ac and H4K12ac related ChIP-seq assays in BS cells. To profile enrichment of histone acetylation, we conducted k-means clustering analyses (k value = 5) using all H3K4me3 related genes in BS and M cells (Fig. S9). We obtained 5 subclusters with distinct profiles of H3K4me3 for both M and BS cells with similar gene numbers (Fig. 6A). Strikingly, we observed that distinct subclusters of C3 genes between both cells had much broader H3K4me3, which covered almost the whole region immediately downstream of the TSS, as compared to genes in other subclusters of both cells. After calculating H3K4me3 peaks length, we found that the majority of H3K4me3 peak length were 500–1000 bp in both cells, read counts for H3K4me3 peaks exhibited a sharp decrease when over approximate 1200 bp (Fig. 6B). We determined to set the threshold of consecutive H3K4me3 peak length as 1200 bp for broad H3K4me3, and the method for identification of genes with broad H3K4me3 can be seen in Fig. S8 (Fig. 6A). We obtained 1,945 genes in BS cells and 1,706 genes in M cells marked with broad H3K4me3, and 1,344 genes shared between two cell types. To assess if genes with broad H3K4me3 in BS or M cells have any biological implications, we conducted GO term enrichment analyses, and found that these genes in both cells had primarily enriched GO terms with functions related to photosynthesis, indicating that genes marked by broad H3K4me3 may have dominant functions in C4 photosynthesis in maize (Fig. 59).

2.5. Differential enrichment of histone acetylation in genes belonging to the magenta module between M and BS cells

Histone acetylation is an active mark directly correlating with gene transcription [33,38]. To profile enrichment of histone acetylation, we conducted H3K4ac, H3K9ac and H4K12ac related ChIP-seq assays in BS cells. As expected, we observed a direct correlation of these three acetylation marks with gene expression (Fig. S7). Fold changes in the number of actual and expected genes enriched with histone acetylation tended to be higher in subsets of genes in the magenta module than DEGs in BS cells, 1.67 vs 1.31 for H3K4ac, 2.15 vs 1.86 for H3K9ac and 2.0 vs 1.55 for H4K12ac (Fig. 5A). This indicated that more percentages of genes in the magenta module were enriched with histone acetylation relative to DEGs in BS cells. We then plotted normalized read counts of each ChIP-seq across ±2 kb of the TSSs of subtypes of genes, including genes in the magenta module, BS-cell enriched DEGs, the top 75% of BS-cell enriched DEGs, M-cell enriched DEGs, all genes and random genes. After combining with gene expression levels shown in Fig. 5C, we found that each acetylation mark was generally more enriched in genes with higher expression levels than those with lower expression levels (Fig. 5B, C). Genes in the magenta module exhibited the highest abundance of each acetylation mark at +1 and +2 nucleosome among all subtypes of genes examined, and subtle differences in the enrichment level of each mark occurred for BS-cell enriched DEGs, the top 75% of BS-cell enriched DEGs and M-cell enriched DEGs (Fig. 5B).

These results indicate that genes in the magenta module were more enriched with histone acetylation as compared to these BS-cell enriched DEGs with similar expression levels.

2.6. Significant enrichment of broad H3K4me3 in genes belonging to the magenta module

It has been reported that genes with broad H3K4me3 are related to photosynthesis in Arabidopsis [39]. It suggests that photosynthetic genes may have distinct chromatin features relative to other functional genes, which inspired us to investigate genes with broad H3K4me3 in M and BS cells. To this end, we conducted k-means clustering analyses (k value = 5) using all H3K4me3 related genes in BS and M cells (Fig. 6A). We obtained 5 subclusters with distinct profiles of H3K4me3 for both M and BS cells with similar gene numbers (Fig. 6A). Strikingly, we observed that distinct subclusters of C3 genes between both cells had much broader H3K4me3, which covered almost the whole region immediately downstream of the TSS, as compared to genes in other subclusters of both cells. After calculating H3K4me3 peaks length, we found that the majority of H3K4me3 peak length were 500–1000 bp in both cells, read counts for H3K4me3 peaks exhibited a sharp decrease when over approximate 1200 bp (Fig. 6B). We determined to set the threshold of consecutive H3K4me3 peak length as 1200 bp for broad H3K4me3, and the method for identification of genes with broad H3K4me3 can be seen in Fig. S8 (Fig. 6B). We obtained 1,945 genes in BS cells and 1,706 genes in M cells marked with broad H3K4me3, and 1,344 genes shared between two cell types. To assess if genes with broad H3K4me3 in BS or M cells have any biological implications, we conducted GO term enrichment analyses, and found that these genes in both cells had primarily enriched GO terms with functions related to photosynthesis, indicating that genes marked by broad H3K4me3 may have dominant functions in C4 photosynthesis in maize (Fig. 59).
We also looked into 384 genes in the magenta module, and found that these genes exhibited a similar mean gene length, but higher H3K4me3 coverages and more percentages of H3K4me3 coverage relative to gene length than all genes or genes with H3K4me3 enrichment (Fig. 6C, 6D). This suggests that these genes in the magenta module tend to be associated with broad H3K4me3. We also used 1.2 kb as a cutoff for peak length to identify genes with broad H3K4me3 in the magenta module. We found that only 76 (ca. 20%) genes were marked by broad H3K4me3, by contrast, the ratio between the actual and the expected numbers was 4.6 times more in the magenta module than random controls, further indicating that genes in the magenta module are significantly marked by broad H3K4me3 (Fig. 6E). Again, we conducted GO term enrichment analyses for these 76 genes and found that...
they were enriched in GO terms with functions related to photosynthesis, protein auto processing, enzymatic activities essential for sugar and protein metabolism (Fig. 6F), suggesting that these genes with broad H3K4me3 are essential for fundamental cellular and biological processes in maize.

3. Discussion

Differential gene expression on a genome-wide scale between BS and M cell has been extensively investigated [8–11,40], which can partially explain functional divergences in the photosynthetic pathway between two cell types in C4 plants. Characterization of transcriptomic regulatory network can provide comprehensive insights into how hub TFs coordinate with key genes to result in functional divergences between two cell types. The single M-cell RNA-seq related network analyses revealed distinct roles of COL8 and HSF1 in the regulation of genes involved in the early and late leaf development [16,24]. However, the single BS-cell RNA-seq related network analyses are still unavailable since it is difficult to collect enough single BS cells for the single cell RNA sequencing [16,25], partially due to technique limitation and the structural nature of BS cells. Here, we for the first time conducted network analyses by analyzing bulk BS and M cell RNA-seq data. We identified a BS cell-specific co-expression module, the magenta module containing 384 genes highly expressed in BS cells instead of M cells (Fig. 2B), suggesting that these genes, at least part of them if not all, may play key roles in BS cells and underlie functional divergences between BS and M cells. Importantly, our study showed that some of hub TFs in the magenta module, such as Dof, MYB, bZIP and C2-like families, might play important roles in BS cells through regulating expression of BS-specific genes (Fig. 2E). The binding motifs and expression levels of Dof family have been found to be enriched in BS cells [8,9,11,16], indicative of importance of Dof TFs in C4 functions in BS cells. Specifically, Dof TFs have been found to play both active and repressive roles in regulating photosynthesis in maize [14,15]. Dof TF (Dof22) in the magenta module and Dof30 may regulate expression of C4 genes due to their high expression levels in BS cells [11,13]. It has been found that functions of Dof30 in the regulation of key C4 genes can cooperate with bZIP9 and bZIP40 highly expressed in BS cells [11,28,29]. MYB6, MYB56 and MYB88 have even more inferred overlapped target genes with Dof30 than bZIP9 and bZIP40, indicating that MYB TFs may also cooperate with Dof30 to regulate key C4 genes. Moreover, by using a machine-learning approach, we found that MYB6, MYB56 and MYB88 showed both high sum weight and number of predicted links to target coding genes (Fig. 3C), further indicating that these genes may play important regulatory roles in the magenta module. Functional studies showed that functional mutation of the golden plant 2 (g2) identified as a hub TF the magenta module results in both biochemical and morphological perturbations of BS cells development [41,42]. Thus, our study provides evidence to show possible regulatory mechanisms underlying functional divergences between BS and M cells in maize.

In addition, epigenetic regulation such as histone and DNA modifications has been found to regulate differential expression of C4 genes in maize. For instance, PEPC, NAPD-ME, PPDK, CA, and PCK genes exhibiting cell type related expression were found to be differentially methylated sites in the upstream of the PEPC gene resulted in differential abundance of its transcript between M and BS cells [45]. A genome-wide characterization showed that BS and M cells exhibit differential enrichment of H3K27me3, H3K4me3 and DNA methylation, indicative of the cell-specific epigenetic regulation in maize leaves [11]. Similarly, we found that only two Dof TFs were differentially enriched with H3K27me3 and H3K4me3 between the two cell types in our hub TFs, leading to the possibility of these TFs controlled by bivalent chromatin, which has been found to be associated with plant development or stress responses [35,46]. Meanwhile, we found Dof TFs can hardly be regulated by other TFs (Fig. 3D) based on the network constructed using TF ChIP-seq [24]. Dof22 and Dof30 may be important activators for other TFs and the cooperation of these TFs may regulate other genes specific to BS cells. We also found that several histone acetylation markers (H3K4ac, H3K9ac, H4K12ac) were slightly more enriched in genes in the magenta module as compared to other genes, indicating that histone acetylation play vital roles in the regulation of a subset of genes in BS cells. Similarly, it has been reported that PEPC and NAPD-ME are also enriched with H3K9ac in maize leaves [13,43,44,47]. In addition, we also provided evidence showing that genes with broad H3K4me3 can function in photosynthesis pathways in both BS and M cells and genes from BS-specific modules tended to be regulated by broad H3K4me3 (Fig. 6E), which may maintain the transcription consistency [48]. Genes with broad H3K4me3 has been found to be involved in several important biological processes including cell identity, expression of tumor-suppressor genes, maternal-to-zygotic cell transition in humans and mammals [48–52], and in photosynthesis and flower development in plants [39,53]. It is worth noting that this study used TF related ChIP-seq from M cells to indicate the potential binding of some of TFs in BS cells due to lack of related data in BS cells. It is necessary to be further validated by directly using TF related ChIP-seq from BS cells. Collectively, our study provides new insights regarding the regulatory network and underlying histone modifications responsible for distinct functions of BS cells.

4. Materials and methods

4.1. Preparation of BS and M cells

Isolation of M or BS cells was conducted according to our published procedures [16]. Briefly, 0.5–1 mm slices were prepared from the 10-day-old second leaf. M and BS cells were isolated using enzymatic digestion and mechanical isolation, respectively, as we described in our previous study [16]. After examining the purity using a bright-field microscope, the purified M and BS cells were stored at 80 °C until use.

4.2. Re-analyses of RNA-seq

All published RNA-seq data were download from EBI database in fastq format. RNA-seq data were mapped to the Zea mays AGPv4 reference genome using HISAT2 v2.1.0 [54]. The expression levels of all genes were calculated using StringTie 1.3.3b based on the ensemble B73v4.43 gene annotation [55]. Arrays per kilobase of transcript per million fragments mapped (RPKM) values were used to measure the expression levels for all samples. DESeq2 was used to identify differentially expressed genes (DEGs) between BS and M cells for our data. The threshold was set to log2(FC change) > 2 with q-value <0.01 [56]. Correlation analyses for RNA-seq data were conducted using deeptools with a combined command of multiBamSummary and plotCorrelation [57].

4.3. Reverse transcription (RT) and quantitative RT-PCR (qRT-PCR) assays

Total RNA was extracted from BS and M cells using RNAeasy plant Mini kit (Qiagen, Cat. # 74904). Approximately 200 ng total RNA without genomic DNA contamination was used for synthesis of the first strand cDNA following the manual from the SuperScript
Ill reverse Transcriptase kit (Cat. # 18080-044, Thermo Fisher Scientific). We randomly selected 10 differentially expressed genes (DEGs) for qPCR assays and qRT-PCR was performed according to the published procedures [58], qPCR primers are listed in Supplementary Table S3. PCR was performed for PEPC and RubisCO, products of which were separated by running 1.5% agarose gel containing dye in 1xTBE buffer followed by visualizing and recording with gel doc. The primers used in the PCR assay are the same as the ones reported in previous studies [9].

4.4. Co-expression network analyses

FPKM matrices were merged from all samples. Genes expressed in at least 4 samples of BS or M cells were retained. Genes showing low variations in the expression levels across all samples based on mean absolute deviation (MAD) < 1 were filtered out. The matrices of 12,851 remaining genes were used to perform co-expression analyses using the WGCNA package [26]. Soft thresholding power was determined as β = 9 using pickSoftThreshold function. Scale-free network was constructed using blockwisemodule function with default settings. Trait matrices for BS and M cells were set using a binary value. Genes were considered as hub genes with | kME | > 0.75. The network was visualized using gephi [59].

4.5. Construction of TF collaborative network

Construction of the transcriptional regulatory network was performed using the perl package TF-collaborative (https://github.com/bwei0805/TF_CollaborativeNet), which is the renamed version with the same algorithm as previously published TF-Cluster [27]. This package calculates the Shared Co-expression Connectivity Matrices for TFs and TFs, and finally clusters the TFs according to the triple-link algorithm. The analyses were performed with default settings with input files of TF list and expression matrices used in the WGCNA analyses.

4.6. Construction of gene regulatory network

Gene Regulatory Network (GRN) between TFs and target genes was constructed using GEne Network Inference with Ensemble of trees (GENIE3) v1.12.0 package, which employs an unsupervised approach [60]. GENIE3 takes expression matrix and gene list of transcript factor as input file and output predicted links between TFs and target genes. Expression matrices used in co-expression analyses were also used in GENIE3. Transcription factor list of 186 genes was determined according to the information from PlantTFDB database [61]. Regulatory relationships with weight > 0.02 were extracted. Summed weight values of all links for each TF were calculated.

4.7. ChIP-seq and data analyses

ChIP experiments and ChIP-seq library preparation for M and BS cells were conducted following the published protocols [62]. The commercial antibodies for ChIP assays are listed as below: H3K36me3 for both cell types (ab9050, abcam) and H3K9ac (07–352, Millipore), H3K4ac (07–539, Millipore), H4K12ac (07–595, Millipore) for BS cells only. Published H3K27me3 and H3K4me3 ChIP-seq data for BS and M cells were downloaded from EBI database. After sequencing on the Illumina platform, all raw ChIP-seq data sets were quality controlled (Qced) using FastQC [63] and cleaned using Cutadapt [64]. Clean ChIP-seq reads for all histone marks were aligned to the B73 reference genome using Bowtie2 with default parameters [65]. Reads with a mapQ > 20 were considered as uniquely mapped ones, and were then used for the downstream analyses. Peak calling was performed using macs2 with parameter --nomodel -q 0.01 --broad --broad-cutoff 0.1 for H3K27me3 and --nomodel -q 0.01 for other histone markers [66]. Differential enrichment analyses for BS and M cells were performed using manorm [67].

4.8. GO enrichment analyses

Online tools from agrigo v2.0 (https://systemsbiology.cau.edu.cn/agriGOv2/) were used for GO enrichment analyses. q-value of the Fisher test was < 0.01.

4.9. Statistical test

Significance test in Figs. 4A and 6E was determined using One-Sample t.test. Spearman correlation test was used in Fig. 4B. Significance test in Fig. 5A was determined using Chi-s-Q test. Significance test in Fig. 6C was determined using Wilcoxon test. For the expect number in Fig. 4A and Fig. 5A, we first calculated the ratio of genes with histone modifications (H3K27me3, H3K9ac, H3K4ac and H4K12ac) from all genes and considered as p. For any gene groups, the number of the gene group was considered as n, and the expect number of genes with histone modifications was calculated by multiplying n with p.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Shentong Tao: Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. Wenli Zhang: Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

We thank the Bioinformatic Center in Nanjing Agricultural University for providing facilities to assist sequencing data analysis.

Author’s contributions

W.L.Z. conceived and designed the initial study. S.T.T. analyzed all data sets; S.T.T. and W.L.Z. wrote the manuscript.

Funding

This work was supported by grants from the National Key Research and Development Program of China (2020YFE0202900), The National Natural Science Foundation of China (32070561 and U20A2030). The open funds of the State Key Laboratory of Crop Genetics and Germplasm Enhancement (ZW202001). The Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities (KYZZ2022003).

Availability of data and materials

ChIP-seq for BS and M cells and RNA-seq for maize were deposited in the NCBI Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO) (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/) with accession number GSE206002 and GSE117982. All published data used in this study are listed in Supplementary Table S1.
Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.csbj.2022.07.004.

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