Swc4 positively regulates telomere length independently of its roles in NuA4 and SWR1 complexes

Jia-Cheng Liu, Qian-Jin Li, Ming-Hong He, Can Hu, Pengfei Dai, Fei-Long Meng, Bo O. Zhou and Jin-Qiu Zhou

1The State Key Laboratory of Molecular Biology, CAS Center for Excellence in Molecular Cell Science, Shanghai Institute of Biochemistry and Cell Biology, Chinese Academy of Sciences; University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, Shanghai 200031, China, 2School of Life Science, Hangzhou Institute for Advanced Study, University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, Hangzhou 310024, China and 3School of Life Science and Technology, ShanghaiTech University, Shanghai 201210, China

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ABSTRACT

Telomeres at the ends of eukaryotic chromosomes are essential for genome integrity and stability. In order to identify genes that sustain telomere maintenance independently of telomerase recruitment, we have exploited the phenotype of over-long telomeres in the cells that express Cdc13-Est2 fusion protein, and examined 195 strains, in which individual non-essential gene deletion causes telomere shortening. We have identified 24 genes whose deletion results in dramatic failure of Cdc13-Est2 function, including those encoding components of telomerase, Yku, KEOPS and NMD complexes, as well as quite a few whose functions are not obvious in telomerase activity regulation. We have characterized Swc4, a shared subunit of histone acetyltransferase NuA4 and chromatin remodeling SWR1 (SWR1-C) complexes, in telomere length regulation. Deletion of SWC4, but not other non-essential subunits of either NuA4 or SWR1-C, causes significant telomere shortening. Consistently, simultaneous disassembly of NuA4 and SWR1-C does not affect telomere length. Interestingly, inactivation of Swc4 in telomerase null cells accelerates both telomere shortening and senescence rates. Swc4 associates with telomeric DNA in vivo, suggesting a direct role of Swc4 at telomeres. Taken together, our work reveals a distinct role of Swc4 in telomere length regulation, separable from its canonical roles in both NuA4 and SWR1-C.

INTRODUCTION

Telomeres are essential for genome stability and integrity in eukaryotes (1,2). Telomeric DNA is usually elongated through telomerase, a specialized reverse transcriptase that uses its intrinsic RNA moiety as template. While in the absence of telomerase, homologous recombination can function as a back-up means to replicate telomeres (3–6). In budding yeast Saccharomyces cerevisiae, telomeric DNA is composed of 300 ± 75 bp double-stranded TG1–3/C1–3A sequences and a 12–14 nt single-stranded TG 1–3 overhang (2,7,8). Sub-telomeric regions contain X and Y’ elements (9,10). Telomerase contains two core subunits of Est2 (catalytic subunit) and Tlc1 (RNA subunit) (11,12), as well as other accessory subunits including Est1, Est3 (13), Yku70/Yku80 heterodimer (hereafter referred as Yku) (14), the Sm7 heteroheptameric complex (15), and Pop1/Pop6/Pop7 complex of RNase P/MRP (16).

The ultimate execution of telomerase function at telomeres seems to involve quite a few processes, such as expression of telomerase components, assembly and nuclear import of telomerase core enzyme Est2/Tlc1, recruitment and physical loading of telomerase at telomeres, Tlc1 template–telomeric DNA pairing, telomerase elongation of telomeric G-strand and processive translocation. Molecular regulation of telomerase recruitment has been well documented. There are two pathways of telomerase recruitment. One is Cdc13–Est1 pathway. Est1 physically interacts with Cdc13, which specifically binds telomeric G-strand overhang, to recruit Est2/Tlc1 core enzyme (17–19). The other is Tlc1–Yku–Sir4 pathway. Both Sir4 and Yku bind to telomeres and recruit Est2/Tlc1 through specific Yku80–Tlc1 interaction (19–21). Cdc13-Est1 and Tlc1–Yku–Sir4 pathways appear to play dominant and accessory roles, respectively, in telomerase recruitment because cdc13–2 allele that contains a E252K mutation results in ever-shorter-telomeres (est)
approximately 70% of TLM genes (TLM+) positively regulate in telomerase activation (2,23,25,26). Physically tethering telomerase to telomeres, such as seen in the strains containing CDC13–EST1 or CDC13–EST2 fusion genes, results in telomere over-elongation (23). However, successful recruitment of telomerase core enzyme to telomeres seems not to be sufficient for efficient telomeric DNA elongation. Cdc13–Est2 fusion protein tethers telomerase core enzyme to telomeres, but could neither maintain minimum telomere length in the absence of Est3 (23), nor stabilize regular telomere length in the absence of Est1 (23). Consistently, overexpression of Est1 leads to telomere over-elongation (24), and Est1 has been proposed to play a role in telomerase activation (2,23,25,26).

Previously, several genome-wide screenings have identified >280 non-essential telomere-length-maintenance (TLM) genes that affect telomere length (27–30). Approximately 70% of TLM genes (TLM+) positively regulate telomere length, and 30% of TLM genes (TLM−) negatively regulate telomere length. However, a large portion of the genes have not been carefully characterized in the processes of telomerase recruitment and action. In order to identify the genes that affect telomerase function independently of telomerase recruitment, we performed a functional screening by examining telomere length change upon expression of Cdc13–Est2 fusion protein in 195 TLM+ strains, which lack individual TLM+ genes. We found that in 171 single gene-deletion strains, telomeres were efficiently elongated by Cdc13–Est2, but in 24 single gene-deletion strains, short telomeres could hardly be elongated. In this work, we characterized SWC4 (also called EAF2), which encodes a subunit of both histone acetyltransferase NuA4 and chromatin remodeling SWR1 (SWR1-C) complexes. We showed that Swc4 regulates telomere length independently of its roles in either NuA4 or SWR1-C. Deletion of SWC4 accelerates both telomere shortening and senescence rates of telomerase deficient cells. Swc4 associates with telomeres and plays a direct role in telomere length regulation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Yeast strains, plasmids and molecular manipulations

Yeast strains used in large scale screening were derived from systematic deletion strains (EUROSCARF), each deletion was replaced by a KanMX module. The other strains used in this study were listed in Supplementary Table S5. Gene deletion experiments were performed using standard genetic procedures and PCR-based gene deletion strategies as described previously (31,32). Myc tagging strain was constructed by a PCR-based gene modification strategy as described previously (32). CEN plasmid pRS316–CDC13–EST2 was from (33), and pRS313–SWC4 was from (34). The plasmids encoding Swc4 truncated mutants were generated by overlapping PCR.

Southern blotting assay

Yeast cells were collected from either liquid cultures or solid medium. Genomic DNA was extracted by phenol/chloroform method and digested by FastDigest XhoI (Thermo Scientific). DNA was separated on 1% agarose gel, and transferred to Amersham Hybond-N+ membrane (GE Healthcare). A native telomeric C1–3A sequence (35) labeled by High Prime DNA Labeling Kit (Roche: 1158584001) in the presence of [α-32P]dCTP was used to probe the membrane, telomere signals were detected by phosphor-image.

Native Southern blotting assay used to detect telomeric ssDNA was performed as previously described (36,37), with following modifications. Genomic DNA was in turn digested by RNaseA and XhoI, and separated on 0.7% trisodium citrate, 75 mM NaCl. The telomeric ssDNA was probed by a biotin-labeled C1–3A sequence (5′-CACCAC ACCCACACCCACCCACA-3′).

Chromatin extraction, whole-cell extracts preparation and western blot

Yeast cells were cultured to mid-log phase, chromatin was extracted as described previously (38), whole-cell extracts were prepared by TCA methods. The proteins were separated by SDS-PAGE, and transferred to Immun-Blot PVDF Membranes (BIO-RAD). 1 × TBST (50 mM Tris pH 7.5, 150 mM NaCl, 0.05% Tween 20) diluted primary and secondary antibodies were incubated overnight at 4°C and 1 h at room temperature respectively, the membranes were imaged by Amersham Imager 680 (GE Healthcare). Antibodies used of western blot: Anti-acetyl-Histone H4 Antibody (Millipore: 06-598), Histone H4 antibody (Active Motif: 61521), Anti-Histone H2A.Z antibody (Millipore: 07–718), Anti-α-Tubulin antibody (Sigma-Aldrich: T6199), anti-myc antibody is prepared by our laboratory.

Serial dilution assay

Cells grown to stationary phase in liquid cultures were diluted to OD600 of 0.5. Five-fold diluted cells were spotted on indicated plates and incubated for 72 h.

Cellular senescence assay

Cellular senescence assay was performed as previously described with few modifications (39). Briefly, a spore of indicated genotype was inoculated into 5 ml YPD medium and grown to stationary phase. The cell density was measured by spectrometry (OD600) every 24 h (96 h of the strains contain SWC4 deletion), and the cells were diluted to OD600 of 0.01 with fresh YPD medium. This procedure was repeated for 11 times.

Fluorescence-activated cell sorting (FACS) assay

Yeast cells (MATa) grown to mid-log phase were synchronized at G1 phase by adding 10 μg/ml α-factor (incubated at 30°C for 2 h, every 40 min replenished 5 μg/ml α-factor), and released into S and G2/M phases at 24°C. FACS assay was performed as previously described (40).
Chromatin immunoprecipitation (ChIP) assay and dot blot assay

ChIP assay was performed as previously described, with following modifications (40). Immunoprecipitation of cross-linked DNA was probed by monoclonal anti-c-Myc antibody (Sigma-Aldrich: M4439). For dot blot assay, 2-fold serial diluted input DNA and immunoprecipitated DNA were denatured and spotted on Amersham Hybond N+ membrane (GE healthcare), the membrane was UV-crosslinked and telomeric DNA was probed by ^32P-dCTP labeled C1–3A sequences. The grayscale of immunoprecipitated DNA by anti-myc antibody of WT and swc4 haploid cells was measured by ImageJ software, and normalized to the grayscale of their corresponding input DNA. Error bars represent the standard deviation from three independent clones. *** represents P < 0.001 (Student’s t-test).

For qPCR assay, a non-telomeric gene ARO1 was used to normalize the enrichment of Swc4 at TEL6R. Primer pairs specific for TEL6R and ARO1 were used for real-time PCR: TEL6R-F, 5′-GTTAACGGCCTTCTCTTCTCATAAGTAA-3′; TEL6R-R, 5′-CCAGTCCTCTATTTGCAATGATA-3′; ARO1-F, 5′-GGTGGTGATATAGAAGTCCTCCAT-3′; ARO1-R, 5′-TCTTTAAGAAGCTTGGAACTCAGCTT-3′. The enrichment was measured by ∆∆Ct-method, calculated as: 2^(-ΔCt[IP TEL6R-C1 Input TEL6R]/ΔCt[IP ARO1-C1 Input ARO1])

The fold of enrichment was calculated as: IP_myc/IP_non-tagged

RESULTS

Functional screening for genes that are required for telomere over-elongation in the strain expressing Cdc13-Est2 fusion protein

Previous studies have shown that expression of Cdc13–Est2 fusion protein leads to telomere over-elongation (23), demonstrating that constitutively tethering telomerase to telomeres promotes telomere elongation. Interestingly, Cdc13–Est2 fusion protein could only maintain short telomeres in the absence of Est1 (23), suggesting that in addition to telomerase recruitment, Est1 is essential for efficient telomerase activity. In order to screen genes that are required for telomere over-elongation in the strain expressing Cdc13–Est2 fusion protein, we introduced a CDC13–EST2 fusion gene into 195 TLM+ strains, in which each individual gene deletion results in shorter telomeres than wild-type strain (Supplementary Table S1). The expression of CDC13–EST2 fusion gene was driven by CDC13 promoter (33). Then we examined telomere length by Southern blotting assay using telomeric specific C1–3A probe. The results showed that in 171 strains (out of 195), telomeres were efficiently elongated upon Cdc13–Est2 expression (Supplementary Figure S1A–L and Supplementary Table S1). In contrast, short telomeres in 24 strains could hardly be elongated (Table 1; Figure 1A), suggesting that fully execution of telomerase activity requires these genes. Among these genes, 18 have been well characterized in telomere length regulation: TLC1, EST1 and EST3 encode the subunits of telomerase; YKU70/YKU80 are involved in telomerase recruitment, telomere protection, telomere silencing and telomere anchoring at nuclear periphery (41); UPF3, NAM7 and NMD2 regulate Stn1 and Ten1 expression, and function in nonsense mediated mRNA decay (NMD) (42); KAE1, BUD32, CGI121 and GON7 encode the subunits of KEOPS complex, which plays a role in telomere decapping (43). SUA5 encodes a single-stranded telomeric DNA-binding protein that positively regulates telomere length (30). RTF1 and CDC73 encode the subunits of Pafl complex, which is required for efficient expression of Tlc1 (44).

![Figure 1. Identification of genes required for telomere over-elongation in the presence of Cdc13-Est2 fusion protein. The DNA markers are labeled on the top of the panel.](image-url)
Table 1. List of the TLM* genes required for Cdc13-Est2 mediated telomere over-elongation

| Gene          | Function                                                                 |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| TLE1, ESI1, ESI3 | Telomerase components                                                    |
| YKU70, YKU380  | Telomerase complex, required for telomere uncapping                      |
| UPF3, NAM7, NMD2 | Telomeric DNA binding protein required for threonyl-tRNA aminoacylation   |
| KAE1, BUD32, CGI121, GON7 | Subunit of KEOPS complex, required for telomere uncapping               |
| SUA5          | Subunit of RNAPII-associated chromatin remodeling Paf1 complex           |
| RTF1, CDC73    | A shared subunit of histone acetyltransferase NuA4 and chromatin remodeling SWR1 complexes |
| SWC4          | Subunit of SAGA histone acetyltransferase complex                        |
| HFI1          | The large subunit of ribonucleotide-diphosphate reductase (RNR) complex   |
| MTR10         | Nuclear import receptor, required for mRNA-nucleus export                |
| SUM1          | Transcriptional repressor that regulates middle-sporulation genes         |
| MET7          | Telomere length regulation                                                |
| XRN1          | Telomere elongation by telomerase (46).                                   |
| SAH1          | SAH1, -adenosyl-L-homocysteine hydrolase                                  |
| YDR396W       | DUBIous open reading frame, function unknown                              |

Descriptions are referred to Saccharomyces Genome Database (SGD: https://www.yeastgenome.org/).

**MTR10** is required for Tel1 transportation between nucleus and cytoplasm (45). **RNRI** is required for the sustained telomere elongation by telomerase (46). **XRN1** promotes the association of Cdc13 to telomeres by downregulating the transcript encoding Rif1 (47). These results demonstrated the validity of our screening. Several genes, such as **SUM1, SAH1** and **MET7** are involved in the cellular processes that seem not to be directly correlated with chromatin or DNA metabolism (Table 1). **YDR396W** is a dubious open reading frame with unknown function (Table 1). Interestingly, **HFI1** and **SWC4** are the subunits of histone modification or remodeling complexes (Table 1) (48–50), and their functions in telomere regulation have not been characterized. Further deletion of the chromosomal copy **EST2** resulted in little change of telomere length in the strains of yku70Δ, yku80Δ, nmd2Δ, met7Δ, cdc73Δ, rtf1Δ and hfi1Δ (Supplementary Figure S2); but resulted in a modest elongation of the telomeres in the strains of sum1Δ, xrn1Δ, cgl121Δ, sua5Δ, kae1Δ, mtr10Δ, sah1Δ and swc4Δ, expressing Cdc13-Est2 fusion protein (Supplementary Figure S2).

**Deletion of SWC4/EAF2 causes telomere shortening**

**SWC4** caught our attention because Southern blotting results showed a severe failure of telomere over-elongation by Cdc13–Est2 fusion protein in **swc4Δ** mutant (Figure 1A and B), consistent with our previous result that **SWC4** deletion caused significant telomere shortening (30). **SWC4** has been considered as an essential gene (50,51) because **swc4Δ** cells display severe growth defect (34), and not much is known for its functions in NuA4 and SWR1-C. In order to validate the effect of Swc4 in telomere length regulation, we dissected **swc4Δ** spores from a **SWC4**/**swc4Δ** heterozygous diploid strain. Although the **swc4Δ** spores displayed low viability (Supplementary Figure S3), some of them remained viable successively on solid or liquid medium. We examined telomere length in the **swc4Δ** cells that were streaked on plates for 8 times, the result showed that deletion of **SWC4** caused gradual telomere shortening in early passages, and shortened telomeres remained stable in the late passages (Figure 1C). A **CEN**-plasmid bearing **SWC4** gene could complement the telomere length defect of **swc4Δ** cells (Figure 1D). These data confirmed that Swc4 plays a positive role in telomere length regulation (30).

**Swc4 regulates telomere length independently of its roles in NuA4 and SWR1-C**

**Swc4** (Eaf2) is a shared subunit of **NuA4** and **SWR1-C** (Figure 2A). **NuA4** is a histone acetyltransferase. It is comprised of 13 subunits (encoded by essential genes **ACT1, ARP4, EPL1, ESA1, and TRA1**; non-essential genes **YAF9, EAF1, SWC4 (EAF2), EAF3, YNG2 (EAF4), EAF5, EAF6 and EAF7**) (Figure 2A), and responsible for the acetylation of histone H4K5, 8, 12 and 16 (52,53). Esa1 possesses acetyltransferase activity (52), and is the catalytic subunit. **SWR1-C** is a chromatin remodeling complex. It is comprised of 14 subunits (encoded by essential genes **ACT1, ARP4, RVB1, and RVB2**; non-essential genes **YAF9, ARP6, BDF1, SWR1, VPS72 (SWC2), SWC3, SWC4, SWC5, VPS71 (SWC6) and VPS72** (Figure 2A)), and responsible for histone variant H2A.Z deposition (54–56). Swr1 possesses ATPase activity (56), and is indispensable for the chromatin remodeling activity of **SWR1-C**. **NuA4 and SWR1-C** share four common subunits **Act1, Arp4, Swc4 (Eaf2) and Yaf9** (Figure 2A). **ACT1 and ARP4** are essential genes, and deletion of either **ACT1** or **ARP4** leads to cell death, while **SWC4** and **YAF9** are not essential, but deletion of **SWC4** causes slow growth phenotype (34).

Because **Swc4** is a shared subunit of **NuA4** and **SWR1-C**, it remains possible that the effect of **Swc4** on telomere length is attributed to its roles in either **NuA4** or **SWR1-C**. To test this hypothesis, we first constructed **esa1E338Q** and **htz1Δ** mutants. The catalytic dead **esa1E338Q** mutant displayed a significant reduction of global histone H4 acetylation as expected (Figure 2B) (57–59), while the **htz1Δ** mutant lacked H2A.Z in chromatin (Figure 2C). Notably, both mutants had no defect in telomere length (Figure 2D), suggesting that telomere shortening in **swc4Δ** cells was not likely attributed to either the change of histone acetylation or the defect of histone variant H2A.Z deposition. We next examined telomere length in various mutants of both **NuA4** and **SWR1-C**, in each of which a single non-essential gene was deleted. Interestingly, deletion of individual non-essential gene of either **NuA4** (**YAF9, EAF1, EAF3, EAF5, EAF6, EAF7 and YNG2**) or **SWR1-C** (**YAF9, VPS71, VPS72,**...
**Figure 2.** Swc4 affects telomere replication independently of its roles in NuA4 and SWR1 (SWR1-C) complexes. (A) Schematic diagram of yeast NuA4 and SWR1-C. The essential subunits of NuA4 and SWR1-C are highlighted in red. (B) Western blot examining acetyl-histone H4. Whole-cell protein extract from the isogenic strains (labeled on top) was subjected to western blot analysis with anti-acetyl-histone H4 antibody (Millipore: 06–598) and histone H4 antibody (Active Motif: 61521) (loading control). (C) Western blot examining chromatin associated histone H2A.Z. Chromatin from the isogenic strains (labeled on top) was extracted, and H2A.Z was detected with anti-histone H2A.Z antibody (Millipore: 07–718) and histone H4 antibody (loading control). (D) Southern blotting assay of telomere length in two independent clones of both esa1E338Q and htz1/Delta1 mutants. (E, F) Southern blotting assay of telomere length in the non-essential gene-deletion mutants of NuA4 (E) and SWR1-C (F). The genotypes of the strains are indicated on top of the panel.

**SWC3, SWC5, SWC7, SWR1, ARP6** did not result in shorter telomeres seen in swc4/Delta1 mutant (Figure 2E and F). Notably, deletion of **YAF9**, another shared subunit of NuA4 and SWR1-C, had little effect on telomere length (Figure 2E and F). Importantly, deletion of either **EAF1** or **SWR1** did not cause telomere shortening (Figure 2E and F), though **EAF1** and **SWR1** deletion resulted in collapse of NuA4 and SWR1-C, respectively (51,60). These results consistently indicated that Swc4 regulates telomere length independently of the integrity of either NuA4 or SWR1-C. To validate this notion further, we attempted to construct **eafl Δ swrl Δ** double mutant, but **eafl Δ swrl Δ** double mutant was inviable (Supplementary Figure S4) (54). Instead, we obtained **eafl Δ swrl Δ, eafl Δ swrl Δ, eafl Δ swrl Δ, and eafl Δ swrl Δ** double mutants, and assumed that both NuA4 and SWR1-C were disassembled (60,61). A Southern blotting result showed little change of telomere length in these double mutants (Supplementary Figure S5). Thus, we concluded that Swc4 specifically regulates telomere length, and this function is independent of its roles in both NuA4 and SWR1-C.

**Deletion of SWC4 does not affect the expression of telomere associated genes**

Previous studies have shown that Swc4 interacts with Yaf9 directly (62,63), and deletion of **YAF9** leads to changes of gene expression, histone H4 acetylation, and H2A.Z replacement near telomeres (64). It remains possible that the telomere length defect(s) in swc4/Delta1 cells is resulted from the expression changes of telomerase components and/or telomere-associated proteins. To test this hypothesis, we analyzed the expression levels of TLM genes (Supplementary Table S3 and S4) in both swc4Δ and wild-type cells from our previous transcriptome array assay (34). The results showed these genes displayed similar transcriptional profile (Figure 3A and Supplementary Figure S6). Notably, **SWC4** deletion did not affect the transcription of genes, which encode telomerase catalytic subunit Est2, telomere capping factors (Cdc13, Stn1, Ten1, Rap1), telomerase recruitment factors (Yku70, Mre11, Rad50 and Tel1), and telomerase inhibitor Pif1 (Figure 3B). These results support the idea that Swc4 might directly regulate telomere length.
The N-terminal 220 amino acids of Swc4 are required for its function at telomeres

Swc4 is a 55 kDa protein. Its N-terminal contains a SANT-domain, which is suggested to interact with histones (65); its C-terminal contains a YID (Yaf9 Interacting Domain) domain because it directly interacts with Yaf9 (62). Truncation of SANT domain of Swc4 in yeast cells nearly phenocopies the slow growth of SWC4 deletion (34); while truncation of YID domain results in defects in H2A.Z deposition (34,50). In order to dissect further the role of Swc4 in telomere function, we constructed several deletion/truncation mutants of swc4, namely swc4-NA (lack of Ser2-Glu159), swc4-SANTΔ (lack of SANT domain, Ser160-Asn220), swc4-YIDΔ (lack of YID domain, Val406-Thr457), swc4-CΔ (lack of Pro221-Lys476) (Figure 4A). We performed growth curve and serial dilution assays, and found that swc4-SANTΔ mutant grew as poorly as swc4Δ mutant as previously reported (34) (Figure 4B and Supplementary Figure S7); swc4-NA mutant displayed a less severe growth defect than swc4Δ cells; while swc4-YIDΔ and swc4-CΔ mutants exhibited little growth defect (Figure 4B and Supplementary Figure S7). These results suggest that the SANT domain, but not the C-terminal part (including the YID domain), is important for the function of Swc4 in cell growth. Interestingly, the telomeres in both swc4-NA and swc4-SANTΔ mutants were as short as those in swc4Δ mutant (Figure 4C), indicating that the N-terminal part (Ser2 to Asn220, including the SANT domain) is required for the role of Swc4 in telomere length regulation. In contrast, the telomeres in both the swc4-YIDΔ and swc4-CΔ mutants were nearly as long as those in wild-type cells (Figure 4C), consistent with the result that deletion of Yaf9 did not affect telomere length (Figure 2E and F), and indicating that the C-terminal part (including the YID domain), is largely dispensable for telomere length control. A series of 40-amino-acids deletion in the N-terminal part of Swc4 confirmed that the N-terminal part except the very N-terminal 40 amino acids affects cell growth modestly (Figure 4D and E), but is indispensable in maintaining normal telomere length (Figure 4F). These results further support the conclusion that Swc4 functions alone, but not with other components of either NuA4 or SWR1-C, to regulate telomere length.

Epistatic analyses of Swc4 and other telomere length regulators

Cdc13-Est2 fusion protein mediated telomere over-elongation was not detected in swc4Δ cells (Figure 1A and B), suggesting that Swc4 is involved in a pathway other than Cdc13-Est1 telomerase recruitment. To clarify whether Swc4 affects Tlc1–Yku–Sir4 pathway of telomerase recruitment, we constructed the haploid strains of swc4Δ, yku80–135i and swc4Δ yku80–135i mutants, and performed Southern blotting assay to examine telomere length. The results showed that the short telomeres in swc4Δ and yku80–135i cells were further shortened in swc4Δ yku80–135i cells (Figure 5A). Consistently, sir4Δ swc4Δ double mutants displayed shorter telomeres than either sir4Δ or swc4Δ single mutant (Figure 5B), these data together suggested that Swc4 is not epistatic to Tlc1–Yku–Sir4 pathway in telomere length regulation. Additionally, the replacement of Yku80 with Yku80–135i could not grant the full function of Cdc13–Est2 fusion protein (Figure 5C). Moreover, deletion of SWC4 in est1Δ CDC13-EST2 resulted in telomere recombination (Supplementary Figure S8). This result was analogous to that observed in yku80Δ est1Δ CDC13-EST2 cells (Supplementary Figure S9). Thus, we suggest Yku80 and Swc4 function independently in telomerase activity regulation.

We also analyzed the epistatic effect of SWC4 on Rif1 and Rif2, and found that telomeres in rif1Δ swc4Δ, rif2Δ swc4Δ and rif1Δ rif2Δ swc4Δ cells were shorter than that in rif1Δ, rif2Δ and rif1Δ rif2Δ swc4Δ cells, respectively, but were longer than that in swc4Δ cells (Figure 5D, E and Supplementary Figure S10), suggesting that over-elongation of the telomeres in rif1Δ and rif2Δ cells partially requires Swc4. Notably, rif1Δ swc4Δ cells grew as slow as swc4Δ cells (Supplementary Figure S11), indicating that the poor growth of swc4Δ cells was not directly attributed to the shorter telomeres.
Deletion of *SWC4* accelerates senescence of telomerase null cells

If Swc4 functions independently of telomerase recruitment, it was intriguing to know whether Swc4 affects telomeres through telomerase pathway. We obtained haploid *tlc1*, *swc4* single and *tlc1* *swc4* double mutant spores derived from *TLC1/tlc1* *SWC4/swc4* heterozygous diploid strain, and performed cellular senescence assay. On solid media, *tlc1* cells senesced at the third passage and reached crisis at the fourth passage, while *swc4* cells held regular growth rate during continuous 11 passages; *tlc1* cells gradually lost viability, senesced at the sixth passage, and regained growth potential rapidly afterward (Figure 6A). In liquid media, *swc4* cells held regular growth rate during continuous 11 passages; *swc4* cells gradually lost viability, senesced at the sixth passage, and regained growth potential rapidly afterward (Figure 6). In sharp contrast, *swc4* cells lost viability and senesced abruptly at the first passage, and recovered at the third passage (Figure 6B). These data together suggested that deletion of *SWC4* accelerated the senescence rate of *tlc1* cells. Further telomere Southern blotting assay revealed that *tlc1* *swc4* cells displayed much faster telomere shortening and much sooner telomere recombination than *tlc1* cells (Figure 6C). Consistently, telomere recombination took place at the third and second passage in *est1* *swc4* and *est2* *swc4* cells, respectively, much sooner than *est1* and *est2* cells (Supplementary Figure S12), supporting the notion that lack of *SWC4* accelerates the telomere shortening rate as well as the senescence rate of telomerase null cells.

To address whether *SWC4* deletion accelerated telomere shortening of telomerase null cells by affecting the resection of telomeric C-strand, we constructed *exo1*, *exo1* *swc4*, *sgr1*, *sgr1* *swc4*, *mre11* and *mre11* *swc4* mutants, and detected the G-overhang by the native Southern blotting assay described previously (36,37). As positive and negative controls (8,66), *rif1* *rif2* and *mre11* cells displayed significant increase and decrease of telomeric ss-DNA respectively, compared with wild-type cells (Supplementary Figure S13). Deletion of *SWC4* seemed to result in a notable decrease of the telomeric ssDNA in WT.
Figure 5. Epistatic analyses of Swc4 and other telomere length regulators. Southern blotting assay of telomere length in the isogenic strains labeled on the top of each panels. The DNA markers are labeled on left. (A) The yku80ATA and swc4ATA haploid strains contained episomal yku80–135i allele were restreaked at leucine− plate for at least 5 times prior to Southern blotting assay. (B) SWC4/swc4Δ SIR4/swc4Δ diploid strain was sporulated, and the isogenic strains derived from the spores were restreaked at YPD plate for 5 times prior to Southern blotting assay. (C) The isogenic strains were transformed with pRS316 (−) or pRS316-CDC13-EST2 (+), streaked on plates for at least 5 times and telomere length was examined. (D, E) SWC4/swc4Δ Rif1/swc4Δ (D) and SWC4/swc4Δ Rif2/swc4Δ (E) diploid strains were sporulated, and the spores dissected from tetrads were restreaked at YPD plate for 5 times prior to Southern blotting assay.

Figure 6. SWC4 deletion accelerates telomere shortening and cellular senescence in tlc1Δ mutants. (A) Senescence assay on plate. WT, swc4Δ, tlc1Δ and tlc1Δ swc4Δ cells dissected from SWC4/swc4Δ TLC1/tlc1Δ diploid strain were continuously restreaked on YPD plate for 5 times, every plate was incubated at 30°C for ~72 h before imaging. (B) Senescence assay in liquid medium. WT, swc4Δ, tlc1Δ and tlc1Δ swc4Δ cells dissected from SWC4/swc4Δ TLC1/tlc1Δ diploid strain were grown to saturation, and then diluted to OD00 = 0.01 in fresh medium for continuous passage. The passages were not the same time for WT/tlc1Δ cells and swc4Δ/swc4Δ tlc1Δ cells, WT and tlc1Δ cells were passaged once every 24 h, swc4Δ and tlc1Δ swc4Δ cells were passaged once every 96 h. (C) The telomeres of tlc1Δ and tlc1Δ swc4Δ cells collected from (B) were examined by Southern blotting assay. The numbers of passages indicated on top are corresponding to that in (B).

and mre11Δ cells, but not in exo1Δ or sgs1Δ cells (Supplementary Figure S13A). However, because deletion of SWC4 causes cell cycle defects, i.e. most of the swc4Δ cells have prolonged G2/M phase (34,51), while telomeres acquire ssDNA late in S phase (67,68), it remains possible that the decrease of telomeric ssDNA seen in swc4Δ cells is resulted from the G2/M phase defect. To address this, we compared the telomeric ssDNA level of WT and swc4Δ cells arrested in G2/M phase, and the result showed that the amount of telomeric ssDNA of swc4Δ cells was comparable to that of WT cells (Supplementary Figure S13B), suggesting the de-
increased telomeric ssDNA observed in swc4Δ cells is likely attributed to the prolonged G2/M phase.

Swc4 associates with telomeric DNA in vivo

In order to validate the direct role of Swc4 at telomeres, we performed chromatin immune-precipitation assay. The chromatin in the cells expressing Swc4Δmyc and non-tagged cells was cross-linked and sonicated (40). Monoclonal anti-myc antibody was used to precipitate Swc4Δmyc-associated chromatin, and precipitated DNA was purified and examined by dot-blotting with a telomeric C1-3A probe. The result showed that Swc4Δmyc-associated telomeric DNA was significant enriched compared to that in non-tagged control cells (Figure 7A), quantification results showed about 0.4% of the input telomeric DNA was immunoprecipitated (Figure 7B), which was about 4-fold over non-tagged control, suggesting that Swc4 associates with telomeric chromatin in vivo, and the role of Swc4 at telomeres is direct. The association of Swc4 with telomeres in different stages of cell cycle was further analyzed. We arrested cells at G1 phase by alpha-factor and then released them into cell cycle, FACS analysis revealed Swc4Δmyc strain displayed similar cell cycle progression to non-tagged strain (Supplementary Figure S14), and the protein level of Swc4Δmyc remained unchanged during the cell cycle (Figure 7C). The telomere association of myc-tagged Swc4 were measured by ChIP assay followed by real time PCR quantitation, the result showed that Swc4 constantly associated with telomeres during the whole cell cycle (Figure 7D and Supplementary Figure S15). Consistently, the fold enrichment measured by ChIP-qPCR was comparable with the dot blot results (Figure 7B and D). Taken together, we concluded that Swc4 affects telomere length directly.

DISCUSSION

Although previous large scale screenings have identified >280 non-essential genes that affect telomere length in budding yeast (27–30), for most of the genes, their precise function and/or direct involvement in telomere length regulation are still largely unknown. In this study, we took advantage of the phenotype of over-long telomeres in the cells that express Cdc13–Est2 fusion protein, and performed a screening to search for TLM+ genes that sustain telomere maintenance independently of telomerase recruitment. On one hand, our screening seems to be very efficient. In most of the single-gene deletion mutants (171 out of 195), the expression of Cdc13–Est2 fusion protein results in over-long telomeres as seen in wild-type cells (Supplementary Figure S1A–L and Supplementary Table S1), suggesting that these TLM+ genes do not significantly affect telomerase activity once telomerase is tethered to telomeres. But on the other hand, our original idea, which uses Cdc13–Est2 fusion protein to screen genes that only function independently of telomerase recruitment, might be too simple (to be naïve). Instead, our screening likely helps to identify genes that affect several telomerase-associated events in addition to recruitment, including the genes affecting telomerase or telomere binding protein expression (such as Rtf1 and Cdc73 of Pafl complex, NMD complex) (42,44), telomerase localization (Mtr10) (45), telomere deprotection (KEOPS complex and Xrn1) (43,47).

Chromatin associated activities such as histone modification, chromatin remodeling and chromatin cohesion have been reported to affect telomere replication (39,59,69–71). In our current screening, we also find out that HPII (an adaptor protein required for structural integrity of the SAGA complex) and SWC4 (a shared subunits of both NuA4 acetyltransferase and SWR1 chromatin remodeling complexes) are required for Cdc13–Est2 mediated telomere over-elongation (Table 1 and Figure 1A). SWC4 has been thought essential for cell viability (Saccharomyces Genome Deletion Project), and thus it was not included in several genome-wide screenings that aimed for searching genes in telomere regulation (27–29,42). SWC4 was found to be non-essential in a screening that we performed previously to
identify telomere maintenance genes (30). *swc4*Δ cells display low viability (Supplementary Figure S3), and a much slower growth rate than wild-type cells (Figure 4B and Supplementary Figure S7) (34), which explained why *SWC4* was considered as an essential gene.

Although Swc4 is a subunit shared by both NuA4 and SWR1-C that contain multiple subunits (Figure 2A), respectively, the telomere phenotypes of *swc4*Δ cells appear not to be resulted from the dysfunctions of NuA4 and/or SWR1-C activities. This conclusion is supported by several lines of evidence. (1) Deletion of any of the other non-essential genes in NuA4 or SWR1-C causes no significant change of telomere length (Figure 2E and F). (2) In previous genome-wide screenings carried out by independent groups, none of the non-essential genes (except *SWC4*) in NuA4 and/or SWR1-C were identified to affect telomere length (27–30). (3) Simultaneous disassembly of both NuA4 and SWR1-C does not affect telomere length (Supplementary Figure S5). Additionally, telomere shortening seen in *swc4*Δ is not likely an indirect cause of chromatin structure change. A few observations support this argument. (1) Deletion of *SWC4* has no apparent effect on the level of global histone H4 acetylation (Figure 2B) (34, 51). (2) *swr1Δ, yaf9Δ* and *hsc73Δ* cells have defects in depositing H2A.Z into chromatin (Figure 2C), but do not display telomere length defects (Figure 2D and F). (3) Truncation of YID domain of Swc4, which is required for H2A.Z deposition (34, 50), does not cause telomere length defect (Figure 4C). Moreover, deletion of *SWC4* causes little change in the expression of TLM genes (Figure 3A and Supplementary Figure S6), including those encoding telomerase and telomere binding proteins (Figure 3B). Therefore, we conclude that Swc4 plays a positive role in telomere length regulation independently of its canonical roles in NuA4 and/or SWR1-C (53, 56).

Swc4 is identified in the current screening searching for genes that sustain telomere maintenance independently of telomerase recruitment (Figure 1A and B), but the molecular mechanism by which Swc4 regulates telomere length remains elusive. Swc4 seems not to function epistatically with Yku80, Sir4, Est1 or Rif1/Rif2 (Figure 5A, B, D and E and Supplementary Figures S8 and S10). Consistently and interestingly, deletion of *SWC4* in *tcl1Δ, est1Δ* or *est2Δ* cells accelerates telomere shortening and/or cellular senescence (Figure 6A-C and Supplementary Figure S12), suggesting that Swc4 might function in telomere protection, which is also supported by two other observations. (1) Telomere recombination seems to be induced in the absence of Swc4 (Figure 6C and Supplementary Figure S12). (2) In addition to telomere length defect, *swc4*- *Δ* and *swc4*- *SANTΔ* mutants display slow growth (Figure 4B and C).

The SANT domain of Swc4, which is suggested to bind histone tails (65), appears to be important for its telomere function (Figure 4C). Given that Swc4 associates with telomeres (Figure 7A and D), but telomeric Tg1–1/3/C1–3 A sequence is not likely to form nucleosomes (72). We thus favor the model that Swc4 interacts with subtelomeric chromatin to affect telomere length independently of telomerase recruitment and activation (Figure 7E), and the function of Swc4 on telomere maintenance is separable from its canonical roles in both NuA4 and SWR1-C (Figure 7E). Swc4 is evolutionarily conserved from yeast to higher eukaryotes (50). It will be intriguing to find out whether our findings on the telomere function of Swc4 is physiologically relevant in other organisms.

**SUPPLEMENTARY DATA**

Supplementary Data are available at NAR Online.

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