NANOG-dependent function of TET1 and TET2 in establishment of pluripotency

Yael Costa1*, Junjun Ding2*, Thorold W. Theunissen1,3*, Francesco Faiola2*, Timothy A. Hore4, Pavel V. Shliaha5, Miguel Fidalgo6, Arwen Saunders2, Moyra Lawrence1,3, Sabine Dietmann1, Satyabrata Das8, Dana N. Levasseur9, Zhe Li7, Mingjiang Xu1, Wolf Reik4,8, José C. R. Silva1,3* & Jianlong Wang2*

Molecular control of the pluripotent state is thought to reside in a core circuitry of master transcription factors including the homeodomain-containing protein NANOG9,10, which has an essential role in establishing and maintaining pluripotency during somatic cell reprogramming9,11. Whereas the genomic occupancy of NANOG has been extensively investigated, comparatively little is known about NANOG-associated proteins12 and their contribution to the NANOG-mediated reprogramming process. Using enhanced purification techniques and a stringent computational algorithm, we identify 27 high-confidence protein interaction partners of NANOG in mouse embryonic stem cells. These consist of 19 previously unknown partners of NANOG that have not been reported before, including the ten-eleven translocation (TET) family methylcytosine hydroxylase TET19,10 (Fig. 1b). We confirm physical association of NANOG with TET1, and demonstrate that TET1, in synergy with NANOG, enhances the efficiency of reprogramming. We also find physical association and reprogramming synergy of TET2 with NANOG, and demonstrate that knockdown of TET2 abolishes the reprogramming synergy of NANOG with a catalytically deficient mutant of TET1. These results indicate that the physical interaction between NANOG and TET1/TET2 proteins facilitates reprogramming in a manner that is dependent on the catalytic activity of TET1/TET2. TET1 and NANOG co-occupy genomic loci of genes associated with both maintenance of pluripotency and lineage commitment in embryonic stem cells, and TET1 binding is reduced upon NANOG depletion. Co-expression of NANOG and TET1 increases 5-hydroxymethylcytosine levels at the top-ranked common target loci Esrrb and Oct4 (also called Pou5f1), resulting in priming of their expression before reprogramming to naive pluripotency. We propose that TET1 is recruited by NANOG to enhance the expression of a subset of key reprogramming target genes. These results provide an insight into the reprogramming mechanism of NANOG and uncover a new role for 5-methylcytosine hydroxylases in the establishment of naive pluripotency.

We expanded the NANOG interactome in mouse embryonic stem cells using an improved affinity purification and mass spectrometry (AP-MS) strategy12, similar to that described previously9, combined with an interactomics analysis (see Supplementary Information). This analysis identified 27 high-confidence interaction partners of NANOG (Fig. 1a, b, Supplementary Figs 1–4 and Supplementary Tables 1 and 2). Notable among the 19 previously unknown interaction partners of NANOG is the methylcytosine hydroxylase TET19,10 (Fig. 1b). Specific association of TET1 with NANOG was detected in all five affinity purification runs of three independent affinity purifications (Supplementary Fig. 5b and Supplementary Table 2), and the interaction between NANOG and TET1 was further confirmed by immunoprecipitation and co-immunoprecipitation (Fig. 1c and Supplementary Fig. 5c, d). Whereas NANOG clearly associates with TET1 in embryonic stem cells, there also exists TET1-free NANOG protein as shown by immunodepleting TET1 in embryonic stem cells (Supplementary Fig. 5e). Notably, among the 27 high-confidence interaction partners of NANOG, at least 5 (NACC1, SGOL2, QSER1, HDAC2 and OCT4) were also associated with TET1 by co-immunoprecipitation and/or immunoprecipitation-mass spectrometry experiments (Supplementary Fig. 5f–h). Expression of TET1, like that of NANOG, is upregulated during reprogramming to pluripotency (Supplementary Fig. 6a). Because NANOG is a critical determinant during establishment of pluripotency9,11, we investigated whether TET1 may also be required for efficient nuclear reprogramming. Indeed, RNA interference-mediated inhibition of TET1 during reprogramming reduced generation of induced pluripotent stem (iPS) cells from mouse embryonic fibroblasts (Supplementary Fig. 6b–g and Supplementary Fig. 7). The requirement of TET1 for efficient reprogramming was confirmed using Tet1+/− embryonic stem cells13 in an independent, heterokaryon-based reprogramming system9 (Supplementary Fig. 8).

The physical association of TET1 with NANOG prompted us to consider whether TET1 may modulate NANOG function in establishing pluripotency. NANOG and TET1 are only minimally expressed in reprogramming intermediates resulting from retroviral infection of neural stem cells with the reprogramming factors OCT4, KLF4 and c-Myc (rOKM) (Fig. 2a). We addressed whether NANOG-mediated reprogramming of these cells requires functional contribution of TET1. A clonal line of reprogramming intermediates was transfected with a PiggyBac NANOG transgene followed by addition of short interfering RNA (siRNA) against Tet1 (Supplementary Fig. 9a, b). Downregulation of TET1 reduced NANOG reprogramming efficiency by 26-fold compared with the non-targeting control (Fig. 2b and Supplementary Fig. 9c), indicating that TET1 and/or its associated catalytic activity may be a limiting factor for reprogramming by NANOG.

We then asked if ectopic TET1 expression could enhance NANOG reprogramming activity. Neural stem cells + rOKM were transfected with PiggyBac vectors expressing NANOG, TET1 or TET1 bearing two mutations in the catalytic domain (TET1(H1671Y, D1673A), hereafter TET1Mut)10 (Supplementary Fig. 10a). Individual expression of wild-type TET1 (TET1WT) or TET1Mut did not have a significant effect on generation of green fluorescent protein (GFP)-positive colonies in cells containing a GFP gene driven by Oct4 regulatory sequences (Fig. 2c and Supplementary Fig. 10b, c). In contrast, NANOG expression enhanced the generation of iPS cell colonies by more than tenfold (Fig. 2c and Supplementary Fig. 10b, c), in accordance with previous studies9,11. Importantly, NANOG-mediated reprogramming efficiency was further augmented by up to fourfold in the

1Wellcome Trust-Medical Research Council Cambridge Stem Cell Institute, University of Cambridge, Tennis Court Road, Cambridge CB2 1QR, UK. 2Department of Developmental and Regenerative Biology, Black Family Stem Cell Institute, Graduate School of Biological Sciences, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York, New York 10029, USA. 3Department of Biochemistry, University of Cambridge, Tennis Court Road, Cambridge CB2 1QR, UK. 4Epigenetics Programme, The Babraham Institute, Cambridge CB2 4AT, UK. 5Cambridge Centre for Proteomics, Cambridge Systems Biology Centre, University of Cambridge, Tennis Court Road, Cambridge CB2 1QR, UK. 6Department of Internal Medicine, and Program in Molecular and Cellular Biology, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52242, USA. 7Department of Pediatrics, Indiana University, Indianapolis, Indiana 46202, USA. 8Centre for Trophoblast Research, University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB2 3EG, UK.

*These authors contributed equally to this work.
presence of TET1WT transgene, a synergistic effect that is highly reproducible (Fig. 2c and Supplementary Fig. 10b–e). A similar reprogramming synergy was also observed for the combination of NANOG with TET1Mut (Fig. 2c and Supplementary Fig. 10b–e). iPS cells derived with NANOG and either TET1WT or TET1Mut transgenes contributed to the germ lineage and live-born chimaeras following blastocyst injection (Fig. 2d, e). Together, our data show that NANOG and TET1 enhance the efficiency of somatic cell reprogramming in a cooperative manner. This conclusion was corroborated in mouse embryonic fibroblasts, where the combined action of NANOG and TET1WT increased reprogramming efficiency by up to 16-fold (Supplementary Fig. 11).

To explore the molecular mechanism underlying the NANOG–TET1 partnership during reprogramming, we quantified global (Fig. 3a) and TET2 function is redundant in the context of NANOG-induced reprogramming, as exogenously expressing both TET enzymes together with NANOG does not enhance somatic cell reprogramming beyond expressing NANOG with either individual enzyme (Fig. 3c).

Given that endogenous TET2 was upregulated in the presence of NANOG and TET1Mut (Fig. 3a right and Supplementary Fig. 10), and that TET2 synergizes with NANOG during reprogramming (Fig. 3c), we tested whether knockdown of Tet2 could abrogate the reprogramming synergy of NANOG and TET1. Indeed, siRNAs directed against Tet2 diminished the reprogramming synergy of NANOG and TET1Mut, but did not affect that of NANOG and TET1WT (Fig. 3f). This result confirms that TET2 activation compensates for the lack of catalytic activity of TET1Mut during reprogramming with NANOG. Together, our results demonstrate that neither TET1 nor TET2 is sufficient for the induction of pluripotency (Fig. 2c, Supplementary Figs 10 and 11, and Fig. 3c), but either enzyme can partner with NANOG to enhance reprogramming of somatic cells to naive pluripotency.

We compared deposited chromatin immunoprecipitation coupled with DNA sequencing (ChIP-Seq) data for both NANOG and TET1 and found a statistically significant overlap between NANOG and TET1 binding sites in the mouse embryonic stem cell genome (P < 2 × 10⁻⁴, permutation test) (Fig. 4a and Supplementary Table 3). Gene ontology analysis revealed that genes with roles in ‘multicellular organismal development’ and ‘positive regulation of transcription from Pol II promoter’ are enriched in the common amino termini for a CXXC DNA-binding domain, which renders TET2 functionally similar to a truncated form of TET1, TET1C (Fig. 3c). We investigated whether the catalytic activity of TET1 is sufficient to enhance NANOG-mediated reprogramming. Indeed, TET1C acts together with NANOG to enhance reprogramming (Fig. 3c) and retains its physical association with NANOG (Fig. 3d). Not surprisingly, we also observed reprogramming synergy between NANOG and TET2 (Fig. 3c and Supplementary Fig. 13). TET1 and TET2 function is redundant in the context of NANOG-induced reprogramming, as exogenously expressing both TET enzymes together with NANOG does not enhance somatic cell reprogramming beyond expressing NANOG with either individual enzyme (Fig. 3c).
transgenes to the germline at E12.5 (iPS cells generated with NANOG and TET1WT (top) or TET1Mut (bottom) enhance NANOG-dependent reprogramming. Quantification of the number of reprogramming intermediates.

Because the functional synergy between NANOG and TET enzymes was dependent on catalytic activity, we examined 5hmC levels at NANOG/TET1 peaks in mouse embryonic stem cells. A recent study reported 5hmC enrichment at promoter-distal NANOG binding sites in human embryonic stem cells (Supplementary Fig. 16a). In contrast, we observed an inverse correlation between 5hmC and NANOG/TET1 binding at actively expressed target genes in mouse embryonic stem cells (Supplementary Fig. 16). This led us to consider whether 5hmC may be transiently deposited to common NANOG/TET1 targets before the establishment of pluripotency, that is, during in vitro reprogramming when NANOG is required. We focused on target gene regulation of Esrrb and Oct4, two key pluripotency genes that are among top ranked common targets of NANOG and TET1 (Fig. 4b). Significantly, we observed expression priming of both Esrrb and Oct4 by combined expression of NANOG with TET1WT, TET1Mut, TET1C or TET2 in reprogramming intermediates of two targets (Supplementary Fig. 14). We ranked the common target genes of NANOG and TET1 based on the number of overlapping ChIP-Seq peaks in four studies (Fig. 4b and Supplementary Table 4). Among the common targets with the highest number of overlapping NANOG and TET1 peaks was Esrrb (Fig. 4b). To investigate whether NANOG may be required to direct TET1 to shared target genes, we used embryonic stem cells containing an inducible Nanog transgene in a Nanog−/− background (Fig. 4c, d). Loss of Nanog expression reduced TET1 binding to a number of common targets, including Esrrb (Fig. 4e, f and Supplementary Fig. 15). NANOG-dependent binding of TET1 to the Esrrb locus seems to be independent of OCT4, as OCT4 is not present at the same genomic location (Fig. 4e). Thus, NANOG is responsible for the recruitment of TET1 to a subset of shared genomic loci that are implicated in both the regulation of pluripotency (for example, Esrrb) and lineage commitment (for example, Pax6). Such NANOG-dependent target binding of TET1 is highlighted by the fact that the truncated form of TET1 lacking the CXXC DNA binding domain (that is, TET1C) maintains its physical interaction and reprogramming synergy with NANOG (Fig. 3b–d).

Figure 2 | Synergy between NANOG and TET1 during reprogramming. a, NANOG and TET1 are specifically expressed in pluripotent cells. ESC, embryonic stem cells; NSC, neural stem cells; +OKM, transduced with retroviral Oct4, Klf4 and c-Myc transgenes. b, Knockdown of TET1 compromises reprogramming activity of a constitutive NANOG transgene in reprogramming intermediates. siNT, non-targeting siRNA control; siTet1, siRNA against Tet1. Sequences for quantitative PCR primers and siRNA targets are listed in Supplementary Table 5. c, Both wild-type and mutant TET1 enhance NANOG-dependent reprogramming. Quantification of the number of iPS colonies at day 10 of 2i+LIF medium switch (dual inhibition of mitogen-activated protein kinase signalling (PD0325901, 1 μM) and glycogen synthase kinase-3 (GSK3) (CHIR99021, 3 μM) with leukaemia inhibitory factor) treatment is shown in Supplementary Fig. 10b. d, EV, empty vector; N, NANOG. e, Contribution of iPS cells generated with NANOG and TET1WT (top) or TET1Mut (bottom) transgenes to the germline at E12.5 (d) and live-born chimaeras (e). Oct4-GFP, GFP gene driven by Oct4 regulatory sequences. Error bars indicate standard deviation (n = 3).

Figure 3 | Synergy between NANOG and TET1/TET2 during reprogramming is dependent upon catalytic activity of TET1/TET2. a, Measurement of global levels of 5hmC relative to unmodified C (left, 5hmC/C) and TET2 expression (right) in reprogramming intermediates transfectected with PiggyBac (PB) transgenes. b, Schematic depiction of wild-type TET1 and TET2 (TET1WT and TET2WT, respectively), and the truncated TET1 mutant (TET1C). Note the absence of a CXXC DNA binding domain in TET2WT and TET1C proteins. CD, catalytic domain. c, Quantification of GFP+ iPS colonies. d, Physical association of NANOG with TET1C. Co-immunoprecipitation was performed in HEK293T cells. HRP, horseradish peroxidase. e, TET2 knockdown (siTet2) reduces reprogramming efficiency in intermediate cells transgenic for NANOG+TET1Mut compared to NANOG+TET1WT. Non-targeting siRNA (siNT) serves as a control. f, Quantification of the number of iPS colonies in (e). Error bars indicate standard deviation (n = 3).
independent cellular systems (Fig. 4g and Supplementary Figs 11g and 13b). More importantly, we detected increased 5hmC and decreased 5-methylcytosine (5mC) levels at these loci when NANOG is co-expressed with TET1 (Fig. 4h). Thus, NANOG and TET1 act before the transition to naïve pluripotency by inducing local transcriptional changes in shared target genes that are critically involved in the regulation of pluripotency.

In summary, we identified 5mC hydroxylases TET1 and TET2 as novel interaction partners of NANOG. TET1/TET2 and NANOG synergistically enhance the efficiency of reprogramming and this phenotype is dependent on the hydroxylation of 5mC to 5hmC during somatic cell reprogramming. This study thus provides mechanistic insight into how NANOG establishes pluripotency, demonstrating that interactions between NANOG and epigenetic regulators fine-tune induced pluripotency. Future experimental work is needed to delineate the precise composition of NANOG–TET1/TET2 protein complexes, and the contribution of other interaction partners to the reprogramming mechanism described herein. Our work supports an emerging view that TET proteins can overcome epigenetic roadblocks during reprogramming and transdifferentiation

### METHODS SUMMARY

**Affinity purification coupled with mass spectrometry (AP-MS).** Nuclear extraction and affinity purification of Flag–biotin–NANOG-associated protein complexes were performed as previously described, with several modifications as described. Three biological replicates were performed for streptavidin agarose-based affinity purification and one each for Flag and NANOG antibody-based affinity purifications. Liquid chromatography coupled with tandem mass spectrometry (LC-MS/MS) was used by the Taplin Biological Mass Spectrometry Facility at Harvard Medical School to sequence and identify NANOG affinity purification samples.

**Reprogramming assays.** To investigate the consequences of NANOG and TET1 co-expression during reprogramming, adult neural stem cells were infected with pMX-based retroviral reprogramming factors. Cultures were switched to embryonic stem cell medium (serum/leukaemia inhibitory factor (LIF)) at day 3 post-transduction. A clonal line of proliferative, Oct4-GFP negative cells (reprogramming intermediates) was transfected using nucleofection (Amxsa) with various combinations of NANOG and TET1 PiggyBac transgenes. Selection for stable transgene expression was applied to transfectants for a minimum of 12 days and maintained until medium switch to 2i (dual inhibition of mitogen-activated protein kinase signalling (PD0325901, 1 μM) and glycosyn synthase kinase-3 (GSK3) (CHIR99021, 3 μM)) + LIF. Puromycin selection for an Oct4-GFP-IRE-puro reporter transgene was applied from day 6 of 2i+LIF treatment. GFP-positive colonies were scored at day 10. Similar reprogramming assays were applied to Nanog-GFP-IRE-puro reporter mouse embryonic fibroblasts with modifications described in Supplementary Information.

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