ERG orchestrates chromatin interactions driving prostate cell fate reprogramming

Fei Li, Qiuyue Yuan, Wei Di, Xinyi Xia, Zhuang Liu, Ninghui Mao, Lin Li, Chunfeng Li, Juan He, Yunguang Li, Wangxin Guo, Xiaoyu Zhang, Yiqin Zhu, Rebiguli Aji, Ping Chi, Charles L. Sawyers, Brett Carver, Yong Wang, Yu Chen, and Dong Gao

1. State Key Laboratory of Cell Biology, Shanghai Institute of Biochemistry and Cell Biology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Shanghai 200031, China
2. Academy of Mathematics and Systems Science, National Center for Mathematics and Interdisciplinary Sciences, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100080, China
3. School of Mathematical Sciences, University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100049, China
4. Human Oncology and Pathogenesis Program, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, New York, NY 10065, USA
5. Department of Medicine, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, New York, NY 10065, USA
6. Department of Medicine, Weill Cornell Medical College and New York-Presbyterian Hospital, New York, NY 10065, USA
7. Department of Cell and Developmental Biology, Weill Cornell Medical College and New York-Presbyterian Hospital, New York, NY 10065, USA
8. Department of Surgery and Division of Urology, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, New York, NY 10065, USA
9. Institute for Stem Cell and Regeneration, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100101, China

# These authors contributed equally to this work.
*Correspondence to: ywang@amss.ac.cn (Y.W.), cheny1@mskcc.org (Y.C.) and dong.gao@sibcb.ac.cn (D.G.)

BACKGROUND:
Lineage plasticity have been proved as the extensively mechanism which involved in multiple cancer progression stages, facilitating the growth and drug resistance acquisition of cancer cells. Primary prostate cancer is generally characterized with luminal cells expansion and loss of basal cells. Cumulative evidence with detailed mechanisms suggested that therapeutics induced lineage alterations with the transition from luminal cell lineage towards neuroendocrine and basal differentiation. Numerous studies have focused on lineage transition in CRPC. However, the lineage determining mechanism of therapy sensitive primary prostate luminal cancer is largely unknown.

METHODS:
We integrated two prostate cancer subtyping methods including PAM50 classifier and integrative epigenetics classifier, which were performed on the basis of prostate cell lineage markers and epigenetic features respectively. This integrative method ensured that the transcription factors to be further identified would highly correlate with both prostate cancer lineage and epigenetics modification. To investigate the relationship between ERG and prostate cell lineage, we performed in vitro organoids formation assay and in vivo prostate organoids transplantation assay. To further test whether gene expression changes induced by ERG correlated with global changes in chromatin interactions, we performed BridgeLinker-Hi-C (BL-Hi-C) in Luminal, Luminal-ERG, Pten-/- and Pten-/-;R26-ERG organoids.

RESULTS:
Through the integration of two prostate cancer subtyping methods including PAM50 classifier and integrative epigenetics classifier, we found that ERG highly correlated with prostate cancer subtyping. ERG over-expression
maintained luminal-cell-derived organoids and allografts with luminal histology. Pten loss enforced prostate cells basal differentiation in organoids and genetic engineered mouse model (GEMM), while ERG expression in prostate organoids, allografts and GEMM led to prostate cancer cell luminal differentiation in Pten loss context. Moreover, prostate cancer cell luminal phenotype was more dependent on ERG, in the meanwhile AR knock-out had no significant effects on prostate cancer cell luminal lineage determination. ERG DNA binding significantly correlated with differential chromatin interactions, indicating the potential role of ERG in transcription regulation by re-organizing chromatin interactions to facilitate cell fate reprograming. The number of chromatin interaction loops between Trp63 and the region of distal ERG binding site in ERG-positive prostate organoids significantly decreased comparing to ERG-negative prostate organoids. In both luminal-ERG and Pten−/−; R26-ERG organoids, the deletion the distal ERG binding site resulted in lineage alteration, reflecting that ERG orchestrates prostate luminal lineage plasticity through chromatin interaction. We also confirmed the existence of the distal ERG binding site in human prostate cells, indicating the conserved role of ERG in the regulation of prostate luminal lineage.

CONCLUSIONS:
Taken together, our findings identify ERG as a master regulator transcription factor, manipulating prostate cell lineage plasticity towards pro-luminal program through chromatin interactions. These findings proposed a novel model with detailed mechanisms for elucidating a fundamental and long-standing question how prostate cancer cells maintain luminal lineage identity, also provided further support for the role of lineage plasticity in cancer progression.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST:
No related conflict of interest to this study.

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