Phylogenetic and population structure of the *nod*-free but nodulating *Bradyrhizobium* phylogroup

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Abstract

    Bradyrhizobium is a main rhizobial lineage of which the majority of its members nodulate legume plants using Nod factors (NFs) encoded by the *nod* genes. However, the "photosynthetic" phylogroup within *Bradyrhizobium* (PB) does not contain *nod* genes but are still capable of establishing a nitrogen-fixing symbiosis with some tropical legumes of the *Aeschynomene* genus. Furthermore, members of this phylogroup colonize rice roots and promote plant growth. Despite this unique combination of ecological features, genomes of only 13 PB members are sequenced, and almost all are isolated from *Aeschynomene* spp. nodules. Here, we sequenced 208 new PB members predominantly associated with rice. The extended PB phylogroup comprises three main clades: a basal clade with significant expansion of its diversity, followed by the diversification of a singleton clade from a new clade exclusively represented by our strains. Although the PB strains universally lack the canonical *nod* genes, all 27 assayed strains representing the broad diversity of these clades induced nodules on *Aeschynomene indica*. Interestingly, significant differences in the efficiency of symbiosis between the main clades were observed and the singleton clade showed an intermediate symbiotic phenotype aligning well with its intermediate phylogenetic position. Our strain collection expands the phylogenetic and ecological diversity of the *nod*-free but nodulating *Bradyrhizobium* and shows that the NF-independent nodulation of *Aeschynomene* is a common trait of this phylogroup, in contrast to the photosynthetic trait originally thought as its unifying feature.

Introduction

Bradyrhizobium is one of the largest and most diverse rhizobial genera and the primary symbiont of a wide range of legumes [1, 2]. The genus Bradyrhizobium encompasses seven phylogenetic supergroups (phylogroups) [3, 4], among which the "photosynthetic" Bradyrhizobium (PB) supergroup is one of the most special. Members belonging to this supergroup engage in a mutualistic relationship with some tropical semi-aquatic species of the Aeschynomene genus [5], and they form nodules not only on roots but also on stems [6, 7]. Further, none of the completely sequenced PB members carry nodABC genes encoding the enzymes synthesizing the core structure of the nodulation factors (NF), the only exception being Bradyrhizobium sp. ORS285, which can use both a nod-dependent and -independent pathway reliant to the Aeschynomene host plant [8, 9]. This indicates that the PB phylogroup uses a novel mechanism of interaction with legume hosts that differs from the traditional universal NF-based pathway [10, 11]. Moreover, all known PB strains carry photosynthetic genes except for four deep-branching ones isolated from French Guiana as represented by Bradyrhizobium sp. STM3843 [7, 12].

Despite these unique features, the research on photosynthetic Bradyrhizobium has been very limited. Currently, there are only 13 PB strains that have their genomes sequenced, largely limiting comparative genomics analysis on this important Bradyrhizobium phylogroup. Although most PB strains were isolated from Aeschynomene spp. nodules, the PB phylogroup was also detected in paddy soil, rice roots as well as in lake water [13-16], suggesting that its members have much wider ecological niches than previously thought. Here, we cultured and genome-sequenced 208 isolates (Fig. 1) predominantly from three niches of rice (within root, rhizosphere, bulk soil) and conducted genomic analyses and physiological assays to reveal the phylogenetic

and population structure of the photosynthetic *Bradyrhizobium* supergroup.

Results and discussion

<u>The new genomes expand the phylogenetic diversity of the photosynthetic supergroup of</u>

<u>*Bradyrhizobium*</u>

With the 208 newly isolated members, the phylogeny of the PB supergroup is split into

three deep-branching clades (see Fig. S1 for their phylogenetic position in the species tree of the

entire *Bradyrhizobium* genus). Clade 1 represents the evolutionarily basal lineage. It initially

comprised only 12 strains, but it now has its diversity expanded by having 68 new strains

representing several new lineages delineated as distinct genetically isolated populations (Fig. 1,

Datasets S1 and S2; also discussed in the next section). Clade 2 is a singleton clade with only

one strain (*Bradyrhizobium* sp. STM3843) available and represents a phylogenetic intermediate

among the three clades. Clade 3 is new and consists exclusively of 140 new strains. The

evolutionary branching order of the three clades is verified with two outgroup-independent

methods (Fig. 1, Fig. S7A) and the outgroup-dependent method (Fig. S1). Collectively, our new

strains appreciably increase the existing phylogenetic diversity of the PB supergroup.

Comparative genomic analysis shows that except for *Bradyrhizobium* sp. ORS285, which is

known to use both a *nod*-dependent and -independent strategy for nodulation, all PB supergroup

members lack the *nod* genes.

<u>Fine-scale population structure of the photosynthetic supergroup of *Bradyrhizobium*</u>

Apart from the broad diversity of the PB supergroup, we further asked whether fine-scale

phylogenetic differentiation correlates with the ecological niches where the PB supergroup

members were found. Of the 208 new PB supergroup strains, 205 were collected from three rice

plants located in the same rice field with each plant 5-10 m apart from the others. The remaining

three strains were isolated from grassland and forest. Bacterial isolation was performed from

within the root, rhizosphere, and bulk soil for each plant, collectively giving rise to 145, 23 and

40 PB strains, respectively (Dataset S1). To facilitate the correlative analysis between fine-scale

phylogenetic groups and the niches, we applied the population genomics software PopCOGenT

[17], which defines the boundaries of populations (reported as "main cluster" or MC) between

which gene flow is limited, distinguishes recent gene flow from historical events, and detects

subpopulations (reported as 'subclusters') under ongoing differentiation within a population.

Using this approach, we showed that all strains in Clade 3 share the membership of a

single population (MC1), whereas strains from Clade 1 fall into many populations. In Clade 1,

MC2, MC3, MC4, MC5 and MC6 are each exclusively comprised of the new strains, whereas

MC7 and the remaining unassigned isolates are from published resources. In Clade 1, the within-

and between-population similarity was above and below 95% ANI (Fig. S2), respectively,

consistent with the operational species threshold of 95% ANI [18], whereas the 16S rRNA gene

shows little divergence with the between-population similarity generally above 99% (Fig. S2,

Dataset S3). Based on the available samples, intra-population subdivision occurred within MC1,

MC2 and MC4. We found that each population and subpopulation have members sampled from

different plants and niches (Fig. 1), suggesting that the PB populations sampled from the rice

field are not separated or subdivided according to the physical separation between plant

individuals and the three typical niches (root, rhizosphere, and bulk soil).

Rather, we found an interesting association between important metabolic pathways and

population identity. Remarkably, although the photosynthetic supergroup was named by the

presence of the photosynthesis genes [3], these genes are exclusively and universally found in

MC2, MC3, MC6 and MC7 but completely missing from MC1, MC4 and MC5 (Fig. 1, Dataset

S4). Our result indicates that photosynthesis is not a characteristic trait that defines the PB

phylogroup.

Also interesting is the prevalence of a unique Type III secretion system (T3SS) in MC2,

MC4 and MC5 but completely missing in other populations (Fig. 1, Fig. S3B and S3C, Dataset

S4). It is one of the six T3SS subtypes identified from known *Bradyrhizobium* phylotypes [19]. It

was previously identified only in the PB strain *Bradyrhizobium oligotrophicum* S58 (thus named

'S58-T3SS' subtype) and its function remains unknown [19]. Since the main function of T3SS is

to translocate effector proteins into host cells that modulate the host immune response [20], it

cannot be excluded that this T3SS type specifically identified in PB members plays an important

role during their interaction with their host plants (*Aeschynomene* spp. and rice).

We also found that *mxa* gene sets participating in methanol metabolism were specific to

MC1 (Dataset S4), which suggests that these MC1 strains may form intimate associations with

plants considering that methanol is a waste product formed during plant-cell wall degradation

[21]. Our methanol metabolism experiment showed that MC1 strains could not use methanol as a

sole C source (Fig. S4), hinting that the expression of *mxa* genes in these MC1 strains might be

under regulation of unknown mechanisms.

The ability to nodulate *Aeschynomene indica* is a conserved trait shared by all PBs but differs

between the three major PB clades

Since the new PB strains were isolated from non-legume environments, we thought that it

would be very interesting to investigate (i) whether they are capable of performing nitrogen

fixation under free-living and symbiotic states, (ii) whether they are capable of nodulating

Aeschynomene indica, the typical host plant of the previously isolated PB strains, and (iii)

whether there is a difference in nodulation ability across the clades and the populations.

All PB supergroup members have a *nif* gene cluster necessary for nitrogenase fixation.

Interestingly, duplication of the *nifH* gene which encodes one of the structural proteins of the

nitrogenase enzyme complex was observed in all PB strains (Fig. S3A), although the functional

consequence is not known. Across the PB supergroup members, an important difference was

observed regarding how the *nif* genes are structured. In most populations, all *nif* genes are co-

located, along with other genes potentially involved in nitrogen fixation. This is not the case for a

few members such as some basal lineages (e.g., *Bradyrhizobium* sp LMG 8443) and some

members assigned to several populations (e.g., SZCCHNR1015 in MC3 and *Bradyrhizobium* sp.

83002 in MC7), where the *nif* genes were found in two contigs. This is likely due to structural

rearrangement, but a DNA assembly artefact cannot be ruled out.

Another original feature observed of the PB *nif* cluster is the universal presence of the

nifV gene encoding for a homocitrate synthase that is involved in the biosynthesis of the

nitrogenase cofactor (FeMo-Co), and which is absent in most other rhizobial lineages [22, 23].

An acetylene reduction assay on 27 representative PB strains covering all three major clades, all

newly identified populations (MC1 to MC6) within Clade 1 and Clade 3, and most of the

identified subpopulations within each population (with the model strain ORS278 as control)

confirmed their ability to fix nitrogen under free-living conditions (Fig. S5A), a trait absent in

most rhizobia [23].

The plant inoculation experiments showed that all 27 representative strains were also able

to induce nodules on *A. indica* (Fig. 2B, 2C). However, a significant difference in symbiosis

efficiency was observed between the major clades. Clade 1 strains had the same symbiotic

properties as the model strain ORS278, inducing a large number of nitrogen-fixing nodules that

stimulated the growth of the plants (Fig. 2A, 2B, Fig. S5B and Fig. S6A). In contrast, Clade 3

strains formed a much smaller number of nodules compared to Clade 1 strains and the measured

nitrogenase enzyme activity was lower under the symbiotic condition (Fig. 2B, Fig. S5B).

Microscopic analysis showed that the nodules elicited by Clade 3 strains displayed multiple

aberrant phenotypes: i) some nodules contained necrotic areas, ii) in others the central tissue was

completely digested, and finally, iii) the nodules that displayed less drastic symptoms contained

mainly dead bacteria (Fig. 2C and 2F). These observations indicate that besides inducing fewer

nodules, Clade 3 strains are unable to maintain an effective chronic infection, which explains

why they have no beneficial effect on plant growth (Fig. 2A, 2C and 2F). Interestingly, the

singleton Clade 2 represented by strain STM3843 which is phylogenetically positioned between

Clade 1 and Clade 3, showed an intermediate phenotype. The number and phenotype of the

nodules is comparable to those of Clade 1 strains but stimulation of plant growth is less (Fig. 2A,

2B and 2E).

The symbiotic differences observed between the major clades may result from an

inability of the Clade 3 strains to cope with the plant's immune response, and/or an over-

induction of the plant's defense mechanisms due to the absence or not properly recognized

symbiotic signal(s). However, it is remarkable that all strains from the PB phylogroup, which

come from different origins and geographical locations, are capable of nodulating *A. indica*. The

ability to develop a NF-independent nodulation with *Aeschynomene* thus appears to be a

common trait of PB supergroup members. Thus, unlike the *nod* genes of other rhizobial lineages

which are accessory genes acquired by horizontal transfer, the genes governing NF-independent

symbiosis could be essential genes belonging to the core genome of the PB phylogroup.

Concluding remarks

By large-scale isolation and genome sequencing of the 'photosynthetic' *Bradyrhizobium*

supergroup, we discovered a novel major clade, thereby greatly expanding the phylogenetic

diversity of the cultured members within the PB supergroup. The branching order of the three

major clades correlates nicely with their symbiosis efficiency, with the clade taking the

intermediate phylogenetic position showing the symbiosis efficiency in between. It is therefore

likely that the ability to establish symbiosis with *Aeschynomene* spp. is a key factor that shapes

the broad diversity of the PB supergroup. At the population level, no difference in symbiosis

efficiency was observed, suggesting that other traits, such as photosynthesis and T3SS, that are

uniquely associated with some but not all populations, might be among the important drivers of

population differentiation. Collectively, these results suggest that only deep divergence within

the PB supergroup can impact significantly on the ability to nodulate *Aeschynomene* spp.

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Data availability

The genomic sequences and raw reads of the 208 newly sequenced *Bradyrhizobium* isolates

are in the process of uploading to NCBI (Project ID: PRJNA983111) and will be released in the

next version of the manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests in relation to this work.

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    Figure legends

Figure 1. The phylogenomic tree and population delineation of the "photosynthetic"

Bradyrhizobium (PB) supergroup. The phylogenomic tree was rooted using the minimum

variance (MV) method. The 208 PB strains sequenced in the present study are indicated by black

dots in the innermost layer surrounding the phylogeny. The ultrafast bootstrap values higher than

or equal to 95% calculated by IQ-Tree were labeled on the nodes with black circles.

Figure 2. Symbiotic properties of several representative strains of the main populations

identified in the PB supergroup. (A) Comparison of growth of the *A. indica* plants (leaf

phenotype) non-inoculated (NI) or inoculated with different representative strains of PB. The six

MC1 representative strains are presented in the following order: SZCCHNR1021,

SZCCHNR1085, SZCCHNS30121, SZCCHNGR1005, SZCCHNRI2010 and SZCCHNF30212.

For the other MCs, only one representative strain is shown: SZCCHNRI2049 (MC2),

SZCCHNS3002 (MC3), SZCCHNS30592 (MC4), SZCCHNRI3016 (MC5) and SZCCHNS2021

(MC6), Photos were taken 17 days after inoculation. (B) Nodule number on *A. indica* plants

induced by different representative strains of PB at 17 days after inoculation. Box plots show the

results of one of the two experiments performed independently (4 plants each). (C) Symbiotic

phenotypes of some representative strains tested on *A. indica*. Column 1 and 2: photo of roots

and nodules. Scale bars: column 1, 0.5 cm; column 2, 0.2 cm. Column 3: Micro-sections of

nodules observed using light microscopy. Scale bars: 250 µm. (D) Confocal microscopy images

of micro-sections of nodules elicited by Clade 1 strains. The nodules formed by

SZCCHNRI3016 from MC4 and ORS278 are shown as examples. The central nodule tissue is

intracellularly infected with live spherical bacteroids stained green by SYTO9. (E) Confocal

microscopy images of micro-section of nodules elicited by Clade 2 strain STM3843. The nodules

look normal, but a mix of live and dead bacteria (stained red by propidium iodide) can be

noticed. (F) Confocal microscopy images of micro-section of nodules elicited by Clade 3 strains

displaying different phenotypes: nodule containing mainly dead bacteria (SZCCHNS30121),

nodule with a completely digested central tissue (SZCCHNRI2010); and nodule with a necrotic

area and a digested zone (SZCCHNGR1005). Scale bars for (D), (E) and (F): column 1, 200 µm;

column 2, 10 µm.

Tree scale: 0.1

Functional gene clusters
- Methanol into formaldehyde
- Photosynthetic genes
- T3SS gene clusters
- *nodABC*

Plants
- *Oryza sativa* indica 1
- *Oryza sativa* indica 2
- *Oryza sativa* indica 3
- *Houttuynia cordata*
- *Camphora officinarum*

Niches
- Root
- Rhizosphere
- Soil

Sub_clusters
- Sub_cluster 1
- Sub_cluster 2
- Sub_cluster 3
- Sub_cluster 4
- Sub_cluster 5
- Sub_cluster 6

- strains used for symbiosis assay
- sequenced in this study

Background > Main clusters
- MC1
- MC2
- MC3
- MC4
- MC5
- MC6
- MC7

Outer

Inner

MC7 MC6 MC5 MC4 MC3 MC2

Clade1 Clade2 Clade3

Main cluster 1 (MC1)