Single Cell Analysis Reveals Partial Reactivation of X-chromosome Instead of
Chromosome-wide Dampening in Naïve Human Pluripotent Stem Cells

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Abstract

Recently, a unique form of X-chromosome dosage compensation has been demonstrated in
human preimplantation embryos, which happens through the dampening of X-linked gene
expression from both X-chromosomes. Subsequently, X-chromosome dampening has also
been demonstrated in female human pluripotent stem cells (hPSCs) during the transition from
primed to naïve state. However, the existence of dampened X-chromosomes remains
controversial in both embryos and hPSCs. Specifically, in preimplantation embryos it has
been shown that there is inactivation of X-chromosome instead of dampening. Here, we have
performed allelic analysis of X-linked genes at the single cell level in hPSCs and found that
there is partial reactivation of the inactive X-chromosome instead of chromosome-wide
dampening upon conversion from primed to naïve state. In addition, our analysis suggests
that the reduced X-linked gene expression in naïve hPSCs might be the consequence of
erasure of active X-chromosome upregulation.

Keywords: X-chromosome dampening; X-chromosome inactivation; X-chromosome
upregulation, Human pluripotent stem cells; Naive & primed pluripotency; Human embryos;
XIST

Introduction

In therian mammals, to balance the X-chromosome dosage between males and females, one X-chromosome becomes inactivated in female cells (Lyon, 1961). The dosage imbalance between a single active X-chromosome and two copies of autosomes (AA) is compensated through upregulation of the active-X chromosome in both males and females (Deng et al., 2011; Larsson et al., 2019; Ohno S, 1967). Recently, another form of X-chromosome dosage compensation has been demonstrated in human preimplantation embryos, termed as X-chromosome dampening. Based on single cell transcriptome analysis of human preimplantation embryos, Petropoulos *et al.* (2016) found that X-linked gene expression gradually decreased from morula to blastocyst stage, while both X-chromosomes were maintaining active state (Petropoulos et al., 2016). Based on these, they proposed that dampening of X-linked gene expression from both X-chromosome as a likely dosage compensation mechanism during human pre-implantation development. However, dampening phenomenon in human embryos remains controversial (De Mello et al., 2017; Saiba et al., 2018). De Mello *et al.* (2017) found evidence of inactivation of the X-chromosome instead of dampening in preimplantation embryos when they reanalyzed the same transcriptome dataset of Petropoulos *et al.* (2016) with more stringency. In addition, Sahakyan *et al.* (2017) that naïve human pluripotent stem cells (hPSCs) also exhibit the X-chromosome dampening found in embryos (Sahakyan et al., 2017a). However, similar to the human embryos, X-chromosome states in hPSCs remains unclear (Kaur et al., 2019; De Mello et al., 2017). Conventional hPSCs derived from blastocysts represent a primed state instead of naïve state and are therefore unable to recapitulate the preimplantation X-chromosome states (Nichols and Smith, 2009; Sahakyan et al., 2017b). To model the preimplantation X-chromosome state, Sahakyan *et al.* (2017) converted primed hPSCs to the naïve state using 5iLAF culture condition (Fig. 1A) (Theunissen et al., 2014). The primed cell line used for their study, UCLA1, harbored one active-X chromosome and one inactive-X chromosome. The transition of primed to naïve state happened through an intermediate early naïve state (Fig. 1A). Primarily based on RNA-sequencing analysis using a bulk cell population, they suggested that the inactive X-chromosome was reactivated upon transition from primed to the early naïve state and this was followed by X-chromosome dampening in late naïve cells (Fig. 1A). However, considering the heterogeneity of cell states during the conversion process, in this study, we have analyzed available single cell RNA-Seq (scRNA-

64 Seq) dataset of early and late naïve cells from Sahakyan *et al.* (Sahakyan et al., 2017a), to

65 gain better insight into X-chromosomal states (Fig. 1A).

Results

Increased *XIST* expression and reduction in X-linked gene expression upon conversion of early to late naïve state

First, in early and late naïve cells, we quantified the expression of *XIST*, a master regulator of

X-inactivation. We found that a majority of the early naïve cells had very low level of *XIST*

expression, whereas late naïve cells mostly showed higher level of *XIST* expression (Fig. S1).

Next, based on quality (RPKM sum and mean) and *XIST* expression level, we selected the top

28 early cells having low level of *XIST* and the top 30 late cells having higher level of *XIST*

expression for further analysis (Fig. 1B). Again, comparison of *XIST* expression in these cells

(28 early vs 30 late) showed a significant increase in late naïve cells compared to early naïve

cells (Fig. 1B). In addition, we found that there was a significant reduction in X-linked gene

expression in late naïve cells compared to early naïve cells (Fig. 1C; Supplementary file1).

Altogether, our analysis of scRNA-Seq data showed increased *XIST* expression and reduction

in X-linked gene expression upon transition from the early to late naïve state.

Reduction in X-linked gene expression in late naïve cells is independent of *XIST*

It has been shown that X-chromosome dampening in preimplantation embryos is associated

with the expression of *XIST* from both X-chromosomes (Petropoulos et al., 2016). In fact, X-

dampening initiates concomitantly with the initiation of *XIST* expression and therefore it is

thought that *XIST* might have an important role in the dampening process. To test this, we

examined what fraction of cells show *XIST* expression from both X-chromosomes in late

naïve cells and if the reduction in X-linked gene expression is restricted to the biallelically

XIST expressed cells. We found about 26 % cells (9 of 35) expressed *XIST* from both X-

chromosomes (Fig. 2A; Supplementary file 2). Interestingly, comparison of the global X-

linked gene expression level of *XIST* biallelic vs monoallelic cells did not show any

significant difference (Fig. 2B; Supplementary file 2). Moreover, we observed that there was

no significant difference in X-linked gene expression when we compared against the *XIST*

negative cells (Fig. 2B; Supplementary file 2). Based on these data, we concluded that

reduction in X-linked gene expression in late naïve cells was independent of *XIST*.

No evidence of X-chromosome inactivation or dampening

We then looked into possible mechanisms behind the reduction in X-linked gene expression in late naïve hPSCs. First, we postulated that it could be due to the either X-chromosome inactivation or dampening. To test for X-inactivation, we profiled allelic expression of multiple X-linked genes distributed across the X-chromosome based on single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) in early and late cells (Fig. 3; Supplementary file 3). We found that the majority of early cells showed monoallelic expression of many genes along with biallelically expressed X-linked genes, which indicated incomplete reactivation of X-linked genes (Fig.3A & 3B). Moreover, we found significant variation in the proportion of biallelic vs monoallelic genes between these cells (Fig. 3B). Interestingly, late naïve cells showed a similar pattern of allelic expression as early cells. However, there was a significant increase in the fraction of SNPs showing biallelic expression in late naïve cells compared to early naïve cells. (Fig. 3B). Altogether, these data indicated that late naïve cells do not harbor inactive X-chromosome but rather they have partially reactivated X-chromosome. If the late naïve cells underwent X-inactivation, then monoallelic expression of most of the X-linked genes would be expected. In contrast, we observed increased biallelic expression upon transition from early to late stage. Next, we examined whether X-dampening was causing reduction of X-linked gene expression in late naïve cells. From the allelic analysis of X-linked gene expression it was clear that late naïve cells harbor partially reactivated X-chromosome. If these cells harbored dampened X-chromosomes, we would have expected biallelic expression of most of the genes chromosome -wide, which was not observed. In addition, we compared median expression of biallelically expressed genes of early cells to that of the late naïve cells. If X-dampening was occurring then we would have expected a significant decrease in median expression of biallelically expressed genes in late cells. However, significant differences were not observed (Fig. 3C). Taken together, we concluded that there was neither X-inactivation nor dampening upon conversion of early to late naïve cells. Second, to determine whether loss of an X-chromosome in late cells is causing the reduction in X-linked gene expression in late naïve cells, we explored X-chromosome ploidy of these cells. It was clear that cells harbored two X-chromosomes as evident by the biallelic expression of some X-linked genes (Fig. 3A). However, the possibility existed that these cells

127   may lose part (s) of the X-chromosome. To test for this, the gene expression ratio of X-linked

128   genes across the X-chromosome was analyzed, but significant differences between early vs

129   late naïve cells were not identified (Fig. 3D; Supplementary file 4). Therefore, we confirmed

130   that loss of a portion of the X-chromosome is not the cause of reduction in X-linked gene

131   expression in late naïve cells.

Erasure of active-X upregulation might be the cause of reduced X-linked gene
expression in late naïve cells

Next, we investigated if the erasure of active X-chromosome upregulation might be causing

the reduction in X-linked gene expression in late naïve cells as proposed by De Mello *et*

al.(De Mello et al., 2017). In recent years, the existence of upregulated active X-chromosome

has been extensively demonstrated in mammals as hypothesized by Ohno (Deng et al., 2011,

2013; Li et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2011; De Mello et al., 2017; Sangrithi et al., 2017). Although

some studies have found lack of active-X upregulation (Chen and Zhang, 2016; Xiong et al.,

2010). To probe this further, we analyzed X to autosomal (X:A) gene expression ratio of 13

different primed hPSC lines (7 males and 6 females). If a diploid cell of male or female origin

has one upregulated active-X and then the X:A ratio should be more than 0.5 and closer to 1.

Indeed, we found the X:A ratio of all primed cells was greater than 1, indicating that primed

hPSCs harbor an upregulated active X-chromosome (Fig. 4A; Supplementary file 5). We

then asked whether the active-X upregulation becomes erased in naïve hPSCs. To test this,

we compared the X:A ratio of male primed cells against the naïve cell. Female cells were not

selected for this analysis as in female cells X-linked gene expression is confounded with X-

chromosome inactivation/reactivation. Interestingly, a significant reduction of X:A ratio in

naïve cells compared to the primed cells was observed, suggesting erasure of active X-

chromosome upregulation in naïve cells (Fig. 4B). To ensure that changes in the X:A ratio

was not impacted by autosomal gene expression, we compared autosomal expression in

primed vs naïve cells, which showed no significant differences (Fig. 4C). Based on this, we

then examined the X:A ratio dynamics during the primed to naïve conversion of UCLA1

female cells. The bulk cell population RNA-Seq dataset was utilized for this analysis since

the scRNA-Seq dataset was not available for UCLA1 primed cells. We found the X:A ratio

of UCLA1 primed cells was close to 1, which indicated that these cells harbor an upregulated

active-X chromosome (Fig. 4D). Next, to determine whether conversion to the naïve state led

to erasure of the active-X upregulation, we calculated X:A ratio in early and late naïve cells.

A significant increase in the X:A ratio upon transition from primed to early naïve state was

observed (Fig. 4D). Considering the partial X-reactivation upon transition of primed to early

naïve cells, it is obvious that the X:A ratio should increase provided that the active-X

upregulation is not completely erased. If there was complete erasure of active-X upregulation,

the X:A ratio should not have an observable increase. Therefore, this data indicated that

erasure of active-X upregulation was incomplete in the early naïve state. Conversely, a

decrease in the X:A ratio was observed in the late naïve state compared to the early naïve

cells, which suggested that erasure of active-X upregulation was occurring (Fig. 4D). In this

scenario, it is possible that the erasure of active -X upregulation led to the overall reduction in

X-linked gene expression in late naïve cells. However, the decrease in X:A ratio from early to

late naïve state was not significant as expected. We think that a significant increase in

biallelic X-linked gene expression from early to late naïve state was masking this to some

extent. To ensure that changes in X:A ratio was not contributed by the autosomal gene

expression, we compared autosomal gene expression in primed, early naïve and late naïve

cells, which showed no significant differences (Fig. 4E). In summary, our data suggests that

X-dampening is not the determining factor for the reduction in X-linked gene expression in

late naïve cells, and erasure of active-X upregulation might be leading to the decrease of X-

linked gene expression (Fig. 4F).

Discussion

X-chromosome states in female human preimplantation embryos remains elusive till date.

While it has been reported that preimplantation embryos carry dampened X-chromosomes,

other studies have provided evidence of inactivation of one of the X-chromosomes. One of

the major challenges to resolve this issue is the lack of availability of surplus number of

human embryos for experimentation. Therefore, hPSCs derived from human embryos serve

as an alternative system. However, conventional hPSCs represent the primed state instead of

the naïve state of preimplantation embryos (Davidson et al., 2015; Sahakyan et al., 2017b).

Recently, Sahakyan *et al*. (2017) converted primed hPSCs to naïve state to model the X-

chromosome states of preimplantation embryos and suggested that naïve hPSCs also carry

dampened X-chromosomes. However, our analysis indicates that the conversion of primed

hPSCs to naïve state is associated with the partial reactivation of the inactive-X chromosome

instead of the chromosome-wide dampening (Fig. 4F). The main reason behind the dissimilar
outcomes between our study and Sahakyan *et al*. (2017) is likely that their conclusion is
primarily based on analysis of bulk RNA-sequencing of cell population, whereas our
conclusion is based on analysis of single cell RNA-Seq dataset. Since, single cell RNA-Seq
provides better clarity on cellular state and gene expression to distinguish the heterogeneity
among cells in a population, we believe that our analysis provides better insight into X-
chromosome states of hPSCs. In addition, our study suggests that erasure of active-X
upregulation might be causing the reduction in X-linked gene expression in late naïve cells
(Fig. 4F).

Although two studies led to the dissimilar outcomes, several observations in our analyses
were consistent with findings by Sahakyan *et al*. (2017). For example, we also found that
early naïve cells were mostly *XIST* negative and transitioned to *XIST* positive in the late naïve
state which was accompanied by a reduction in X-linked gene expression (Fig. 1). Moreover,
about 26% of cells in late naïve state showed *XIST* expression from both X-chromosomes,
which was similar to what was reported by Sahakyan *et al.* (2017). We should point out that
in preimplantation embryos majority of the cells (~85%) express *XIST* from both X-
chromosomes (Okamoto et al., 2011) and it is believed that *XIST* might have an important
role in X-dampening. However, we found that reduction in X-linked gene expression was
independent of *XIST* as *XIST*-biallelic, -monoallelic and -negative cells showed almost
similar level of gene expression in late naïve cells (Fig. 2B).

On the other hand, allelic analysis of X-linked gene expression at the single cell level
revealed striking differences between the two studies. We found that early and late naïve cells
harbored partially reactivated X-chromosome as indicated by monoallelic expression of many
genes in each cell of both cell states (Fig. 3). This was contrary to Sahakyan *et al.* (2017)
where they found most of the genes had biallelic expression. Importantly, we found
significant variations in allelic patterns of gene expression in different cells within a
population, such as same genes, which were monoallelic in some cells, showed biallelic
expression in other cells. In this scenario, bulk cell population analysis will always show
biallelic gene expression, which was might be the case for Sahakyan's observation.
Interestingly, while Sahakyan *et al.* (2017) interpreted the reduction in X-linked gene
expression in late naïve cells as dampening, we found lack of dampening since there was no
significant difference in the median expression of biallelically expressed genes between early
and late naïve cells (Fig. 3C). In fact, Theunissen *et al.* (2016) found that female naive cells
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had significantly higher X-linked gene expression compared to male naive cells, which also
suggested that naïve female cells harbored active X-chromosomes instead of dampened X-
chromosomes (Theunissen et al., 2016). In addition, we observed that the proportion of
biallelically expressed genes increased significantly in late naïve cells compared to early
naïve cells, which indicated that the cells were still undergoing the reactivation process.
Some observations by Sahakyan *et al.* also indicated that there was an incomplete erasure of
epigenetic memory on the inactive X in the naïve state. They found, upon differentiation,
naïve hPSCs underwent non-random X-inactivation dissimilar to the normal development,
and the same X-chromosome that was inactive in the primed hPSCs was again inactivated.
Even, naïve cells showed an accumulation of H3K27me3 repressive marks on one of the X-
chromosomes, that had not been observed in preimplantation blastocysts (Okamoto et al.,
2011). We think the presence of H3k27me3 is the result of incomplete erasure of inactive-X
marks, which is consistent with our observation of a partially reactivated X-chromosome.
Taken together, these findings suggest that naïve cells were still in the process of removing
inactive-X epigenetic marks.

Our study suggests that erasure of active-X upregulation might be causing the reduction in
X-linked gene expression upon transition from early to late naïve state. Many recent studies
have demonstrated the existence of upregulated active-X chromosomes in mammals (Deng et
al., 2013; Larsson et al., 2019). We also found evidence for upregulated active-X in 14
different primed hPSC lines including the UCLA1 line used for this study (Fig. 4).
Importantly, our data indicates that there might be erasure of active-X upregulation upon
conversion of primed to naïve state (Fig. 4). Erasure of upregulation has been demonstrated
previously in spermatids, during oogenesis and germ cell reprogramming of both sexes (Di
and Disteche, 2006; De Mello et al., 2017; Sangrithi et al., 2017). Moreover, our observation
is consistent with some other studies in mouse, which showed that naïve ESC has lower X:A
ratio compared to the differentiated cells (Lin et al., 2007; Marks et al., 2015). Specially,
during female ESC differentiation, upregulation increases concomitantly with the initiation of
X-inactivation (Larsson et al., 2019). In fact, Theunissen *et al.* (2016) found a reduction in X-
linked gene expression in male naïve hPSCs compared to that in primed, which may be due
to the erasure of active X-chromosome upregulation (Theunissen et al., 2016). Furthermore, it
has been shown that male blastocyst had significantly lower X:A ratio compared to the
primed hPSCs (De Mello et al., 2017). Taken together, we believe that primed to naïve
conversion of hPSCs is accompanied by erasure of active-X upregulation. In addition, our

data indicate that the erasure of upregulation for female UCLA1 is might still ongoing in the

early naïve state and only becomes completed in the late naïve state, thereby leading to the

reduction in X-linked gene expression upon transition from early to late naïve state (Fig. 4D).

In fact, during germ cell reprogramming it has been shown that erasure of upregulation and

reactivation of inactive-X does not occur simultaneously rather loss of upregulation occurs

later than loss of X-inactivation (Sangrithi et al., 2017).

Collectively, our study indicates that the conversion of primed to naïve state is associated

with the incomplete reactivation of X-chromosome rather than X-inactivation or X-

dampening. Importantly, our data also indicates that erasure of active-X upregulation might

be leading the reduction in X-linked gene expression in naïve hPSCs. Although our results

argue against dampening and propose erasure of active-X upregulation is leading to the

reduction in X-linked gene expression in late naïve cells, further work must be done with

better scRNAseq data. Finally, better culture conditions are necessary to establish naïve

hPSCs that recapitulate the X-chromosome states of preimplantation embryos.

Experimental procedures

Data acquisition: RNA-Seq datasets were acquired from Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO)

under the accession number GSE87239 (Sahakyan et al., 2017a). For additional datasets see

the supplementary experimental procedures.

Variant calling: First, reads were mapped to the human genome (hg38) using STAR. To

mark the duplicate reads from the aligned reads of single cells, we used Picard tools

v2.18.11(https://broadinstitute.github.io/picard/). Next, we retrieved the allelic read counts

for SNPs by using GATK (v3.8) "HaplotypeCaller". We considered those SNPs for our

analysis, which were present in UCLA1 cell line database (GSM2420529). Further we

annotated those SNPs using dbSNP Build 152 (GRCh38.p12).

Allelic expression analyses: For allelic expression analysis, we considered the SNPs having

≥3 reads per SNP site in a cell. Further, we proceeded with those SNPs having informative

reads in at least five cells of each category; early and late naïve. The allelic expression was

calculated by directly counting the allele-specific reads covering a SNP position mapped to

the reference or the alternative allele and then dividing it by the total number of reads

covering that position. A SNP was considered monoallelic if at least 90% of the allelic reads

was coming from only one allele. We only considered allelic ratios of SNPs for those genes,

which had RPKM ≥ 1. Finally, we considered only those SNPs for which the allelic data was

available in at least four cells for each early and late naïve cells. We validated allele specific

expression pipeline through analysis of genes of an autosome (Chr17), which showed mostly

biallelic expression of SNPs (Fig. S2). Moreover, SNPs belongs to the same gene showed

almost similar allelic expression, except few.

Figure legends

Figure 1: Transition of early to late naïve state is associated with increased *XIST*

expression and reduction in X-linked gene expression. (A) Schematic representation of

different stages and corresponding X-chromosome states of conversion of primed hPSCs to

naïve state as described in Sahakyan *et al*. (2017). In this study, we performed analysis of

scRNA-Seq dataset acquired from the early and late naïve state. (B) Comparison of *XIST*

expression (RPKM) between early naïve (n=28 cells) and late naïve cells (n=30 cells).

p<0.00001 (Mann- Whitney U-test) (C) Comparison of X-linked gene expression (n=57)

between early and late naïve state. *p*<0.00001 (Mann-Whitney U-test).

Figure 2: Reduction in X-linked gene expression in late naïve cells is independent of

XIST (A) Allelic expression of *XIST* in late naïve cells (n=35 cells). (B) Comparison of X-

linked gene expression among *XIST* -monoallelic, -biallelic and -negative cells. Non-

significant at *p*<0.05 (Mann Whitney U-test).

Figure 3: Partial reactivation of inactive-X chromosome upon conversion of primed to

naïve state. (A) Allelic expression analysis of X-linked genes in early and late naïve cells at

single cell level. Bottom, genomic position on the X-chromosome of the X-linked genes

analyzed (B) Histogram showing the percent of SNPs showing monoallelic and biallelic in

each cells of early and late naïve state. *p*<0.00001, *p*<0.01(Avg. plot) (Student's t-test) (C)

Comparison of median of expression level of biallelically expressed genes between early and

late naïve cells. Non-significant at *p*<0.05 (Mann Whitney U-test) (D) Ploidy analysis of the

cells of early and late naïve state through the analysis of gene expression ratio across the X-

chromosome.

Figure 4: Reduction in X-linked gene expression in naïve hPSCs might be due to the

erasure of active-X upregulation. (A) Analysis of ratio of X-linked gene expression and

autosomal gene expression (X:A) in different primed male and female hPSCs. (B) Comparison of X:A ratio between male primed and naïve cells. $p<0.001$(Student's t-test). (C) Comparison of autosomal gene expression among male primed and naïve cells. Non-significant at $p <0.05$ (Kruskal-Wallis test) (D) Analysis of X:A ratio in UCLA1 primed, early naïve and late naïve cells. $p<0.05$ (Student's t-test) (E) Comparison of autosomal gene expression among primed, early naïve and late naïve cells. Non-significant at $p<0.05$ (Kruskal-Wallis test) (F) Proposed model representing the X-chromosome states during the conversion of primed hPSCs to the naïve state.

Author's Contribution

SG, SM (Susmita Mandal), DC, and HK conceptualized the study. SG supervised the study. Bioinformatic analyses was done by SM (Susmita Mandal) and DC. SG, SM (Susmita Mandal), DC, MA, and SM wrote, edited and proofread the manuscript. Final manuscript was edited and approved by all the authors.

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A

B

XIST

C

A

B

Fig.3