

DOCTORAL THESIS

Mechanism of WRKY transcription factors-mediated defense and heterosis in Arabidopsis polyploids

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Abstract

WRKY transcription factors (TFs) belong to a large family of regulatory proteins in plants that modulate many plant processes. Extensive studies have been conducted on WRKY-mediated defense response in *Arabidopsis thaliana* and many crop species. This study aims to investigate the potential roles and contributions of WRKY TFs regulation in improving defense response in the resynthesized *Arabidopsis* allotetraploids (*Arabidopsis suecica*) from two related autotetraploid progenitors, *Arabidopsis thaliana* (At4) and *Arabidopsis arenosa* (Aa). Upon infection by *Pseudomonas syringae* (*Pst*), the allotetraploids has showed enhanced resistance against the pathogen when compared to the parents. Rapid induction of *WRKY18*, *WRKY40*, *WRKY38*, *WRKY53*, *WRKY6*; MAP kinase pathway related genes, *WRKY33*, *PAD3*; SA-pathway related genes, *ICS1*, *EDS1*, *PBS3*, *MYB31*; was evident in response to *Pst* and salicylic acid treatment in the allotetraploids. Cleaved amplified polymorphic sequences analysis further revealed that the *AtWRKY18*, *AaWRKY40*, *AtWRKY33*, and *AtWRKY60* alleles expressed at higher levels when compared to their respective homoeologs in the allotetraploids, suggesting potential altered protein-protein interaction networks in the hybrids. Therefore, a split-luciferase complementation assay was used to characterize and quantify protein-protein interaction among these homoeologous WRKYs in the allotetraploids. Results showed that preferential protein-protein interactions exist for the *cis*-interacting *AtWRKY18/AtWRKY18* homodimer or *trans*-interacting *AtWRKY18/AaWRKY40* heterodimer when compared to the respective

interacting complexes. In addition, differential affinities of WRKY18 and WRKY40 homo- and hetero- dimers toward the W-boxes at the *WRKY60* promoter were observed. In the allotetraploids, *PR1* expression was repressed under basal state when compared to the progenitors. Although *PR1* is expressed at a higher level in *A. thaliana*, its expression fold change was higher and faster in the allotetraploids upon salicylic acid treatment. Transient expression of WRKY18 or WRKY40 homodimer in various combinations induced differential expression of *PR1* gene in their respective *wrky18* and *wrky40 Arabidopsis thaliana* mutants. In contrast, similar *PR1* induction by homodimer in various combinations was observed when they were transiently expressed in the allotetraploids. In addition, transgenic *AtWRKY18* overexpression plant displayed enhanced disease resistance against *Pst* when compared to *AaWRKY18* overexpression lines. Such enhanced disease resistance was found to associate with the higher expression of *PR1* and *PR2* in *AtWRKY18* transgenic lines. Moreover, differential *Pst*-induced expression of the direct targets (*ICS1*, *EDS1* and *PBS3*) of WRKY18 in the *Arabidopsis AtWRKY18* and *AaWRKY18* overexpressors supported a biological difference between the At and Aa homodimers in mediating the targets regulation, thus contributing to the difference in disease responses. Overall, our findings suggested that the rapid differential alleles expression and altered protein-protein or protein-DNA interactions of WRKY transcription factors could contribute to the improved defense in the allotetraploids, providing a molecular basis of for heterotic phenotype development in hybrids.

Table of Contents

Declaration.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
List of Tables	ix
List of Figures	x
List of Abbreviations	xii
Chapter 01	1
Introduction	1
1.1 The plant immune system	1
1.2 WRKY TFs important regulators of plant processes	4
1.2.1 WRKY domain and W-box.....	5
1.2.2 WRKY TFs response to biotic stresses	13
1.2.3 WRKY TFs regulate leaf senescence	16
1.2.4 Interactions of WRKYs and their partners	17
1.2.5 WRKY-MAPK interactions	20
1.2.6 Regulations of WRKYs.....	21
1.3 Heterosis.....	23
1.3.1 A molecular model for heterosis	26
1.3.2 Non-additive gene expression in allotetraploids	27
1.4 Research question and hypothesis.....	28
1.5 Objectives of the present study	29
Chapter 2	31
Regulation and expression profiling of WRKY transcription factors in the allotetraploids	31

2.1 Introduction	31
2.2 Materials and Methods	34
2.2.1 Plant materials and growth	34
2.2.2 Pathogen and salicylic acid (SA) treatment	34
2.2.3 Gene expression analyses	35
2.2.4 Cleaved Amplified Polymorphic Sequences (CAPS) analysis	36
2.3 Results	38
2.3.1 Disease resistance in allotetraploids	38
2.3.2 Kinetics of Pst- and SA-induced homoeologous WRKYs expression in the <i>Arabidopsis</i> allotetraploids	38
2.3.3 SA-induced pathogenesis-related gene expression in the allotetraploids	49
2.3.4 Expression of SA pathway-related WRKY18 and WRKY40 target genes in the allotetraploids	51
Chapter 3	58
Interactions between WRKY homologous proteins and DNA bindings	58
3.1 Introduction	58
3.2 Materials and Methods	60
3.2.1 Cloning of WRKY homoeologs from <i>Arabidopsis</i> allotetraploids	60
3.2.2 Cloning of split-LUC constructs and transient expression in Nicotiana benthamiana	61
3.2.3 Floated-leaf luciferase complementation imaging (FLuCI) assay	62
3.2.4 Cloning of WRKY homoeologs into bacterial expression vector	63
3.2.5 Bacterial expression and purification of recombinant Aa/At WRKY18 and WRKY40	66
3.2.6 Electrophoretic mobility shift assay (EMSA)	67
3.3 Results	68

3.3.1 Sequence comparison of WRKY homoeologous.....	68
3.3.2 Homoeologous WRKY interactions in allotetraploids.....	74
3.3.3 DNA binding affinity of WRKY18 and WRKY40 homo- or hetero- dimer toward W-boxes	78
Chapter 4	87
Biological consequences of homoeologous WRKY18 expression in <i>A.</i> <i>thaliana</i>.....	87
4.1 Introduction.....	87
4.2 Materials and Methods.....	88
4.2.1 Identification and genotyping of knockout mutants.....	88
4.2.2 Transient expression of WRKY homoeologs in <i>Arabidopsis</i>	89
4.2.3 Construction of pEG100:AtWRKY18p:Myc:AtWRKY18 and pEG100:AtWRKY18p:Myc:AaWRKY18 plasmids.....	90
4.2.4 <i>Arabidopsis</i> transformation	91
4.2.5 Genomic DNA extraction.....	92
4.2.6 Isolation of BASTA-resistant transgenic lines.....	92
4.2.7 Segregation analyses of T2 transgenic lines	93
4.2.8 RT-PCR analyses of transgenic lines for the transgene expression	93
4.2.9 Western blot analysis for detection Myc-AaWRKY18 and Myc-AtWRKY18 expression	94
4.3 Results	95
4.3.1 Differential induction of defense genes by transient WRKY expression.....	95
4.3.2 Production of transgenic plants expressing WRKY18 homoeologs ...	100
4.3.3 Disease resistance in transgenic lines overexpressing At or Aa WRKY18.....	113

4.3.4 Differential induction of Pathogenesis-related genes in transgenic lines overexpressing At or Aa WRKY18	116
4.3.5 Differential induction of SA pathway-related WRKY18 target genes in transgenic lines overexpressing At or Aa WRKY18	119
Chapter 5	124
Discussion, Conclusion and Future perspective	124
5.1 Discussion	124
5.1.1 A rapid and differential expression of WRKYs and defense-related genes	124
5.1.2 Differential protein-protein interaction and protein-DNA interaction	126
5.1.3 Homoeologous WRKY18 expression and their functional divergence in transgenic <i>Arabidopsis</i>	127
5.2 Conclusion.....	129
5.3 Future perspective	129
List of References	134
Curriculum Vitae	151