

# **Development and validation of markers for spike density QTL, Qsd.sau-7A from Tibetan semi-wild wheat (Triticum aestivum ssp. tibetanum)**

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#### **Abstract**

**Spike density is one of the few traits that determines the yield potential in wheat. Three high resolution melting (HRM) markers (0C32-715, DCE-464, and C81A-240) were developed and used to map the QTL for spike density Qsdsau-7A. The markers 0C32-715 and DCE-464 were validated in two of the three validation population. DCE-464 and 0C32- 715 were the most closely linked markers that could be used to introgress QSd.sau-7A through molecular maker assisted breeding and development of near isogenic lines.**

**Key words**: Spike density, QSd-sau-7A, high resolution melting, validation

#### **Introduction**

Wheat (Triticum aestivum L.) is one of the most important food crops in the world. Wheat grain yield is a product of grain number per spike, grain weight and spike number per unit area (Mengistu et al. 2012). Spike characteristics, including spike length, total spikelet number per spike, spike density and grains per spikelet determine grain number per spike and thus contributes to the yield potential (Zhou et al. 2017). Compared with spike length and the total spikelet number, spike density has been rarely focused. The spike density is a ratio of the number of grains per spike to the spike length.

Three domestication genes including Q. compactum (C), and sphaerococcum (S) are related to wheat spike morphology and have been identified on chromosomes 5A, 2D and 3D, respectively (Rao 1977; Faris et al. 2002; Faris et al. 2003; Johnson et al. 2008). The Q gene conferring a free-threshing spike

which influences plant height, spike density, rachis toughness, and spike emergence time (Faris et al. 2003; Simons et al. 2006; Sormacheva et al. 2015). The C gene affects spike density, grain size, grain shape, and grain number per spike (Johnson et al. 2008). The S gene pleiotropically confers dense spikes, rigid short culms, straight flag leaves, hemispherical glumes, and small spherical grains (Rao 1977). In addition to these genes, numerous previous studies have identified other genomic intervals associated with spike density. For example, Jantasuriyarat et al. (2004) detected four QTLs for spike density on 1AS, 1BS, 4AL, and 7AL. Kosuge et al. (2012) found that the C17648 gene for spike density was located on chromosome 5AL from tetraploid wheat. Ma et al. (2007) detected QTLs for spike density on 2D, 4A, 5A, 5B, 7D using recombinant inbred lines and immortalized  $\mathsf F_2$  population of Wangshuibai and Nanda2419. A QTL located on the 2AL chromosome of T. turgidum conferring spike density was also identified by Amagai et al. (2016). To our knowledge, these newly identified loci or genes for spike density have not been fine mapped and cloned.

Tibetan semi-wild wheat (T. aestivum ssp. tibetanum) is a hexaploid wheat found only in Tibet (Shao et al. 1980). It has unique and primitive characteristics such as hulled glumes and brittle rachis (Jiang et al. 2015; Luo et al. 2016) but also possesses numerous desirable traits including tolerance to nutrition deficiency and strong seed dormancy which could be introduced in common wheat (Sun et al. 1998; Jiang et al. 2014). Further, efforts have been made to tap

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the advantages of Tibetan semi-wild wheat in wheat breeding. Quite a few of novel QTLs governing agronomic traits have earlier been identified (Luo et al. 2016; Zhou et al. 2016b).

In our previous study, we have detected five QTLs for spike density located on chromosomes 2D (QSd.sau-2D, ~8% phenotypic variation explained, PVE), 3D (QSd.sau-3D, ~6% PVE), 5A (QSd.sau-5A1 and QSd.sau-5A2, 12% and 22% PVE, respectively) and 7A (QSd-sau-7A, ~6% PVE), respectively (Luo et al. 2016). As the QTLs on 2D, 3D and 5A likely belong to alleles of C, S and Q, the study thus focused on QSd-sau-7A which was stably detected across several growth environments. The QSd-sau-7A was mapped on 7AL and the positive allele of this QTL was from Tibetan semi-wild wheat. Aiming at fine mapping and further cloning this QTL, we have been attempting at developing molecular markers. High resolution melting (HRM) analysis is a fast, consistent,

and efficient method for SNP discovery and genotyping (Han et al. 2012; Wang et al. 2016; Zhou et al. 2016a; Liu et al. (2018). Here, we report on development and validation of HRM markers for QSd.sau-7A.

#### **Materials and methods**

#### **Plant materials**

An  $F_{13}$  recombinant inbred line (RIL) population (designated as QZ) consisting of 186 lines derived from a cross between Tibetan semi-wild wheat accession Q1028 and a common wheat cultivar Zhengmai 9023 (ZM9023) were used for construction of the genetic map for the newly developed markers (Fig. 1a and b). Three populations,  $QZ2 \times QZ13$  (F<sub>2</sub> population, 520 lines; Fig. 1c),  $QZ2\times ZM9023$  (F<sub>2</sub> population, 500 lines; Fig. 1d), and Q1028×99E18 (RIL population, 180  $F_{10}$  lines; Fig. 1e and f) were used to verify the reliability of the developed markers. The two lines QZ2 and QZ13 were from QZ population.



**Fig. 1. Morphological features of spikes for a parents (Q1028, left; ZM9023, right) and b lines (QZ2, QZ58, QZ45, QZ46, QZ208, QZ108; left to right) of QZ RIL population; c QZ13 (left) and QZ2 (right ); d QZ2 (left ) and ZM9023 (right ); and e parents (Q1028, left; 99E18, right) and f lines (QE184, QE243, QE212, QE225, QE172, QE175, QE249; left to right) of QE RIL population, the white scale bar represents 1 cm**

The plant materials were assessed at the experimental farm of the Triticeae Research Institute, Sichuan Agricultural University, China. Each plot comprised two rows 2 m long with a spacing of 30 cm between rows and 10 cm between plants. Field management was the same as that commonly practiced in wheat production.

#### **Phenotype measurement and data analysis**

Spike density (n/cm) was measured as spikelet number per spike divided by spike length according to Luo et al. (2016). For QE population, the data were collected from two crop seasons (2009-2010 and 2010-2011). Five different plants in the middle of a row for each plot were selected for measuring spike density. The best linear unbiased prediction (BLUP) value of the data from two crop seasons was used for further analysis by SAS V8.0 (SAS Institute, Cary, North Carolina). For QZ2×QZ13 and QZ2×ZM9023 population, the data from three similar tillers for a single plant were collected in a single crop season (2015- 2016) and the average of the three tillers were used for analysis.

#### **Collection of sequence data**

Shotgun genome sequences and gene models of the wheat cultivar 'Chinese Spring' were downloaded from http://wheat-urgi.versailles.inra.fr/ hosted by Unité de Recherche Génomique Info (URGI; IWGSC 2014). Assembled chromosome sequences for wheat were downloaded from Ensemblplantsv32 (ftp://ftp. ensemblgenomes.org/pub/plants/release-32/fasta/). Coding sequences (CDS) and assembled whole genome sequences of Brachypodium distachyon v2.0 and rice (Oryza sativa) were obtained from Phytozome v10 and v9.0, respectively (http://www.phytozome.org/ ). Whole genome shotgun sequences of T. urartu were downloaded from the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI, http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/) in 2013. CDS data for T. urartu were downloaded from GIGA\_DB (http://gigadb.org/) in 2013. The contigs and gene models were downloaded from ftp:// ftpmips.helmholtz-muenchen.de/plants/barley/ public\_data/ (International Barley Genome Sequencing Consortium 2012). The barley pseudomolecules and CDS were downloaded from http://webblast.ipkgatersleben.de/barley\_ibsc/downloads/ (Mascher et al. 2017).

#### **Selection of genes for further isolation**

The available sequences of markers including the simple sequence repeat (SSR) and Diversity arrays

technology (DArT) in the constructed genetic map (Luo et al. 2016) were blasted against 'Chinese Spring (CS)' contig sequences and T. urartu scaffold sequences using the BLAST++ BLASTN algorithm with an E value cut-off of 0-10<sup>-5</sup>. The anchored T. *urartu* scaffolds were further retrieved to search gene sequences. The obtained genes of T. urartu were blasted against CDS of B. distachyon, rice, and barley to identify their orthologous sequences (Fig. 2). Thus, the interval collinear with the QSd.sau-7A region were identified in B. distachyon, rice, and barley. Further, the 'CS' contigs between the anchored ones (7AL\_4551743 and 7AL\_4465584) flanked the QSd.sau-7A were retrieved for searching 'CS' gene models. A total of 17 barley orthologs and 274 'CS' gene models with 9 shared gene sequences between them in the QSd.sau-7A region were identified. These 9 common genes were isolated for further marker development (Fig. 2). The marker sequences were also anchored on the public 'CS' assembled chromosome sequence. There were 1, 007 genes between the anchored flanking markers (i.e. wPt-5949 and wPt-0961) of QSd.sau-7A, 532 of which belong to single copy genes (Fig. 3). These 532 single copy genes were selected for further isolation. Thus, a total of 541 (532+9) candidate genes were further isolated.

#### **Gene isolation and sequencing**

To detect any possible polymorphism between Q1028 and ZM9023 for marker development, the above identified genes were further analyzed and isolated. Note that for detecting polymorphism conveniently and quickly, only part region of a given gene where chromosome-specific primers could be easily developed was isolated. Genomic DNA were extracted by cetyltrimethyl ammonium bromide (CTAB) method (Murray and Thompson 1980). Chromosome-specific primers were designed based on our previous study (Supplementary Table S1). The PCR reaction was performed as follows: Pre-denaturation at 94°C for 4 min, then 40 cycles of 94°C for 1 min, annealing at 60~65°C for 40 s, extension at 72°C for 50 s, and a final extension at 72 °C for 7 min (Ma et al. 2015). Amplification reactions were performed in a total volume of 20µl containing 100 ng of template DNA, 10µl of 2x Taq Master Mix, and 5 pmol of each forward and reverse primer, and  $8\mu$ L of ddH<sub>2</sub>O. 'CS' nullisomictetrasomic lines were used to identify chromosomespecific amplification (Fig. 4, a). All of the PCR products were purified using QIAquick Extraction Kit (QIAGEN, Hilden, Germany). Then the purified fragment was cloned into PMd19-T plasmid vector.



**Fig. 2. Genetic maps for spike density QTL QSd.sau-7A (a)and its comparison with scaffolds of T. urartu (**b**), genomic region of Brachypodium (c) and rice (e), genetic maps of barley (d) and public genetic locations of 'CS' wheat contigs (f)**



**Fig. 3. Newly developed HRM markers and their genetic and physical locations; a=genetic map for spike density QTL QSd.sau-7A; b=physical locations for markers and c=genetic map integrated with newly developed HRM markers for QSd.sau-7A**

The cloned fragments were then sequenced by Invitrogen Biotechnology Co. Ltd., P.R. China using at least three different independent clones in both directions.

### **Sequence alignment, marker development, and map construction**

The obtained sequences were aligned using DNAman 7.0 (LynnonBiosoft, San Ramon, CA, USA) to detect single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs). These SNPs were further converted into HRM markers and singlebase differences could be detected by HRM analysis (Wittwer et al. 2003; Wang et al. 2016; Zhou et al. 2016a). HRM markers were designed using Beacon Designer 7.9 and evaluated by Oligo 6.0 (Zhang and Gao 2004) (Fig. 4b; Supplementary Table S2). The parameters were set as follows: inner product size of 60-100 bp, melting temperature of  $55 \pm 5^{\circ}$ C, primer length of 20  $\pm$ 3 bp, and 3<sup>1</sup>- end stability to avoid selfcomplementarity and primer dimer formation.

The parental DNA was firstly used to detect the efficiency of the developed markers (Fig. 4c). The



**Fig. 4. Chromosome specific amplification and marker development; gene isolation (a), HRM marker development (b) and HRM analysis (c)**

verified makers were further used to genotype QE, QZ, QZ2×QZ13, and QZ2×ZM9023 populations. Amplification reactions were performed in a total volume of 10µl containing 100 ng of template DNA, 5ìl of Fast Super EvaGreen mixture, and 5 pmol of each forward and reverse primer, and DNase/RNase-free water up to the final value. The PCR program includes the following steps: 4 min at 94°C, 50 cycles of 15 s at 94°C, and 30 s at 55°C. This process is a precise warming of the amplicon DNA from around 65°C up to around 95°C (Liu et al. 2018). When the temperature is reached, the DNA double strand will be melting. Based on the HRM analysis in the parental lines and

their progenies, we classify genotypes into two categories: genotypes with homozygous alleles from Q1028 (designated as a) and genotypes with homozygous alleles from non-Q1028 (designated as b).

The new genetic map on Chromosome 7A was constructed using JoinMap 4 (Van Ooijen 2006). Logarithm of the odds (LOD)  $\geq$ 3.0 was used to develop the linkage map, and recombination fractions between markers were converted to map distances in cM using the Kosambi mapping function (Fig. 3c).

#### **QTL validation**

The flanking markers for a given QTL were used to screen a specific line with or without the allele of this QTL. For example, wPt-5949 and wPt-0961 were flanking markers of QSd.sau-7A, the positive allele of which was from Q1028. A line with same genotype with Q1028 for both wPt-5949 and wPt-0961 were regarded as having the allele of QSd.sau-7A. Neither QZ13 nor ZM9023 has the allele of QSd.sau-5A2 or QSd.sau-7A. QZ2 has the QSd.sau-7A allele only.

Thirty to one hundred lines randomly selected from each of the three validation populations were scored for spike density for validation of the QTL QSdsau-7A, respectively. Based on the presence or absence of marker alleles from the donor parent 'Q1028', the selected lines from each of the three populations were grouped into two classes. The difference in spike density between the two groups within each of the populations was used for identifying the efficiency of the developed markers and measuring the QTL effects. Student's t-test ( $P < 0.05$ ) was used to calculate the differences in spike density between the two groups of alleles.

#### **Results and discussion**

Of the 541 genes, 43 were isolated to detect possible polymorphism between Q1028 and ZM9023 (Supplementary Table S1). To detect sufficient polymorphic nucleotides, the conserved core genes among Triticeae were ignored for further isolation. This was performed through searching a given gene in NCBI (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/) by selecting species of Triticeae and those genes with varied sequences were selected. Based on our previous study (Ma et al. 2015), the genes with homeologous sequences simultaneously in the 7A, 7B and 7D subgenome were chosen to design chromosome 7A specific primers. Further, the sequences (1~3kbp) located at 5' upstream of start codon and 3' downstream of stop

codon were preferentially isolated as non-coding sequences are usually more polymorphic than coding sequences.

A total of 22 SNPs and 1 indel in 6 genes were detected (Supplementary Table S2). Based on the SNPs, 23 HRM markers were developed (Supplementary Table S3) and tested by Q1028 and ZM9023 and some of their progenies. Finally, three markers (0C32-715, DCE-464, and C81A-240) were proved feasible (Table 1). Although HRM deriving from the spike density of all the groups with marker 0C32- 715 having the Q1028-like allele was significantly higher than the group with 0C32-715 having the ZM9023-like allele. Thus, the target QTL QSd.sau-7A was speculatively mapped to a 15.3 cM interval between 0C32-715 and wPT-0961 on wheat chromosome 7A (Fig. 3c).

The three newly developed HRM markers were further applied in three validation populations. The marker C81A-240 could not detect polymorphism in



**Table 1.** Details of the developed HRM markers

the combination of existing techniques of DNA melting analysis with a new generation of fluorescent dsDNA dyes (Wittwer et al. 2003) is sensitive and specific for the detection of SNP in PCR products from genomic DNA, we here only successfully developed three markers. It was reported that fluorescent dye (Pirulli et al. 2000; Lipsky et al. 2001; Dufresne et al. 2006), instrument resolution (Herrmann et al. 2006), amplified fragment length (Farrar and Wittwer 2017) could affect the accuracy of HRM analysis. However, these factors could be ruled out given the highly sensitive dye Super EvaGreen, the high resolution analyzer and appropriate amplified fragment (~100-120 bp) applied in this study. The most likely reason for the low efficiency of development of HRM markers is that the primers are not homoeoallele-specific that non-target chromosome fragments were amplified thus interfering the HRM analysis. As reported previously, for polyploidy species, it was difficult to design homoeoallele-specific primers and nested PCR could be employed into HRM analysis (Botticella et al. 2011).

QZ population were further genotyped using the three HRM markers and integrated genetic map were constructed. Based on the genotype of the 7 markers close to QSd.sau-7A, 20 of the RILs were assigned to 6 distinct recombination groups represented as graphical genotypes in Fig. 5a. As shown in Fig. 5b, any of the three populations. The reason is most likely that this marker is genetically far away from QSd.sau-7A. The marker DCE-464 could distinguish all of the three populations. For QZ2×ZM9023  $\mathsf{F}_2$  and QZ2×QZ13  $\mathsf{F}_2$  populations, the average spike density of genotypes with homozygous alleles from Q1028 was significantly higher ( $p$ < 0.01) than that of genotypes with homozygous alleles from non-Q1028 parents. However, for QE RIL population, no significant difference  $(p>$ 0.05) of spike density could be detected between the two classes (Table 2). Like QZ population where multiple spike density genes exist, we speculate that the cultivated line 99E18 may also contain genes controlling spike density. Thus, the classified groups by DCE-464 marker linked with QSd.sau-7A only could be interfered by other spike density genes, leading to the unreal difference. The maker 0C32-715 could identify polymorphism in QZ2 $\times$ ZM9023 F<sub>2</sub> only and significant difference between the genotyped groups was also detected. Given the detection ability of the three developed markers, DCE-464 is genetically closer to QSd.sau-7A than 0C32-715, and C81A-240 is farthest from QSd.sau-7A.

In conclusion, the QSd.sau-7A was narrowed down to a 15.3 cM interval between 0C32-715 and wPT-0961 on wheat chromosome 7A. DCE-464 and



**Fig. 5. Spike density maps to a 15.3 cM interval on wheat chromosome 7A, a=Graphical genotypes of Q1028×ZM9023 recombinant inbred line (RIL) groups with the number of lines in each group shown in parentheses. RILs were grouped based on their genotypes defined by having either the Q1028-like (blue) or the ZM9023-like (grey) allele at each marker shown across the interval. b**=**ANOVA adjusted mean spike density of RIL groups across all experiments. Bars are colored based on a Q1028 - or ZM9023-like phenotype. Blue, Q1028-like; grey, ZM9023-like. Error bars represent SEM**



**Table 2.** Validation of developed markers

a=Genotypes with homozygous alleles from Q1028; b=Genotypes with homozygous alleles from non-Q1028

0C32-715 were the most closely linked markers to QSd.sau-7A. These two markers could be useful in development of near-isogenic lines and screening of recombinants.

#### **Authors' contribution**

Conceptualization of research (JM, XJL); Designing of the experiments (JM); Contribution of experimental materials (XJL); Execution of field/lab experiments and data collection (MS, CCY, NNQ, HZ, PD, YM, HPT); Analysis of data and interpretation (MS, CCY); Preparation of manuscript (JM, MS).

#### **Declaration**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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# **Supplementary Table S2.** Detected polymorphsim between Q1028 and ZM9023

# **Supplementary Table S3.** HRM markers development information



