










Unique properties of a subset of human pluripotent stem cells with high capacity for self-renewal

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Archetypal human pluripotent stem cells (hPSC) are widely considered to be equivalent in developmental status to mouse epiblast stem cells, which correspond to pluripotent cells at a late post-implantation stage of embryogenesis. Heterogeneity within hPSC cultures complicates this interspecies comparison. Here we show that a subpopulation of archetypal hPSC enriched for high self-renewal capacity (ESR) has distinct properties relative to the bulk of the population, including a cell cycle with a very low G1 fraction and a metabolomic profile that reflects a combination of oxidative phosphorylation and glycolysis. ESR cells are pluripotent and capable of differentiation into primordial germ cell-like cells. Global DNA methylation levels in the ESR subpopulation are lower than those in mouse epiblast stem cells. Chromatin accessibility analysis revealed a unique set of open chromatin sites in ESR cells. RNA-seq at the subpopulation and single cell levels shows that, unlike mouse epiblast stem cells, the ESR subset of hPSC displays no lineage priming, and that it can be clearly distinguished from gastrulating and extraembryonic cell populations in the primate embryo. ESR hPSC correspond to an earlier stage of post-implantation development than mouse epiblast stem cells.

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The successful application of human pluripotent stem cells (hPSC) in research and cell therapy relies on the ability to maintain, expand, and differentiate these cells *in vitro* in a tightly controlled and efficient fashion. Our understanding of the regulation of pluripotent stem cell self-renewal and lineage specification is in turn built largely on embryological paradigms, with developmental roadmaps providing critical knowledge of the key transitional stages, and pinpointing the extrinsic and internal molecular pathways drive cell fate decisions. In the mouse, we now have a fairly clear understanding of the states of pluripotency that span the developmental stages between the blastocyst and the late gastrula *in vivo*¹. The characterization of mouse naive embryonic stem cells (ESC)² and epiblast stem cells (EpiSC)^{3,4} as *in vitro* equivalents of the preimplantation epiblast and the anterior primitive streak, respectively⁵, has shed considerable light on the properties of the cultured cells. Recently, a stage between these two pluripotent states called formative pluripotency, corresponding to the early post-implantation epiblast, has been described⁶. Defined by specific molecular and biological features, including an absence of lineage priming and a rapid response to induction of lineage specification (including the germline lineage), formative mouse pluripotent stem cells have yet to be successfully serially propagated *in vitro*.

The derivation of mouse EpiSC, their characterization as epithelial cells dependent upon activin and FGF2 for maintenance in the pluripotent state^{3,4}, and their co-expression of lineage-specific and pluripotency genes^{4,5,7–10}, led many researchers to the conclusion that hPSC derived and maintained under conventional culture conditions (archetypal hPSC), which share these features, equate to the primed state of mouse pluripotency. This in turn led to a search for conditions that would support long-term maintenance of hPSC in a naive state^{11,12}. Several culture systems have been described that support a cell with molecular features quite similar to the human preimplantation epiblast^{13,14}. Extended propagation of diploid hPSC in these systems remains challenging, however.

Population heterogeneity complicates the interpretation of stem cell phenotype. To dissect heterogeneous populations in archetypal hPSC cultures, we used monoclonal antibodies to cell surface antigens to define subsets of stem cells that exist in a hierarchical continuum of cell states. When we subjected these cells to transcriptional profiling, we observed co-expression of pluripotency genes with lineage specific transcription factors, particularly in subpopulations of cells with lower levels of stem cell surface marker and pluripotency gene expression¹⁵. Importantly though, we also found that cells which expressed pluripotency markers at high levels were less likely to display lineage priming.

Subsequently by analyzing cells grown under defined conditions, and using a more refined sorting strategy to isolate the subpopulation enriched for high self-renewal (ESR) followed by medium throughput single-cell RT-QPCR, we were able to show that the cells at the top of the hierarchy expressed very uniform and high levels of pluripotency markers, and showed no lineage priming¹⁶.

As cells traverse through stages of pluripotency *in vitro* and *in vivo*, they undergo changes in cell cycle regulation and metabolic activity, they restructure their epigenome, and their gene expression profile changes. The ability to sort highly purified populations of hPSC with high self-renewal capacity, and to analyse transcription in these subpopulations at the genomic level using RNA-Seq for subpopulation and single cell analysis, coupled with the availability of new single-cell gene expression data from preimplantation and post-implantation primate embryos, prompted us to re-examine the properties of the ESR subpopulation of archetypal hPSC, and to reconsider its

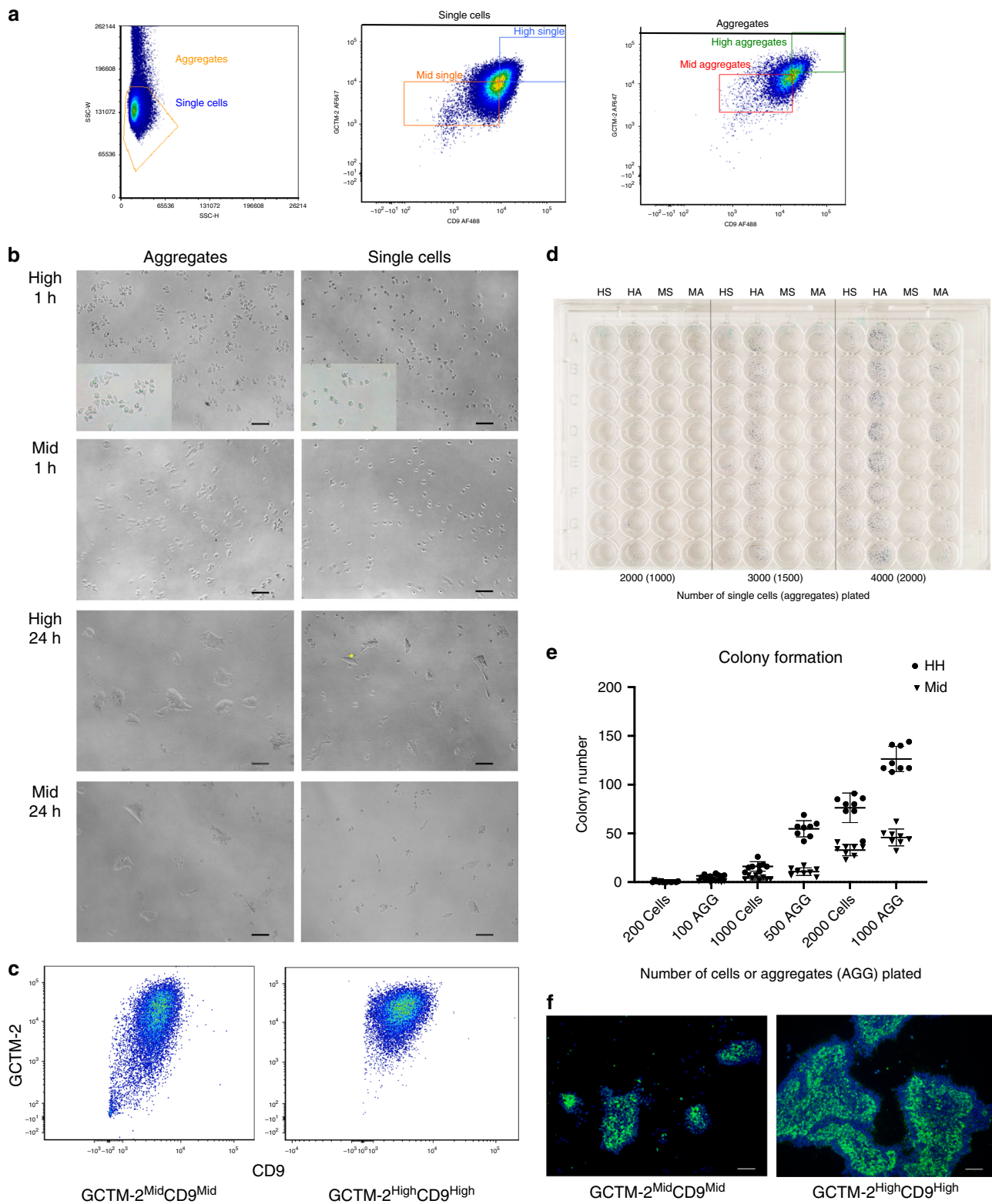
developmental status. The results show that the ESR subpopulation resembles the primate early post-implantation epiblast, similar to the mouse formative state of pluripotency.

Results

Self-renewal of subsets of hPSC. We have previously used flow cytometry to isolate cell subpopulations, followed by assay of colony forming ability as an indicator of self-renewal^{15,17}. hPSC survival after dissociation to single cells and flow cytometry is poor. We therefore developed a simple methodology that would allow comparison of self-renewal of defined cell populations at reasonable levels of initial survival after flow cytometry, through sorting small aggregates of cells, to maintain cell–cell contacts and enhance post-sort survival¹⁸.

Fluorescence activated cell sorting using antibodies GCTM-2 and TG30 (recognizing CD9) enabled us to recover small cell aggregates (chiefly doublets; singlets, 17%; doublets, 61%; triplets, 16%; quadruplets, 6%) (Fig. 1a). We seeded wells with equal cell numbers as aggregates or singlets. Although both aggregates and single cells attached to the plate after sorting, a much larger fraction of the aggregates had begun to spread 1 h after plating, indicative of high viability; the difference was more evident after 24 h (Fig. 1b). Initial attachment, spreading and survival of the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high} subpopulation was similar to the GCTM-2^{mid}CD9^{mid} subpopulation. Flow cytometry re-analysis of both subpopulations 72 h later showed that they had largely retained their cell surface phenotypes though as shown previously¹⁹, the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high} population had begun to reconstruct the entire cell state continuum (Fig. 1c). By 4 days, cells plated as aggregates displayed a higher colony forming efficiency than single cells, and the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high} subpopulation had formed a much larger number of microcolonies (Fig. 1d–e). Colonies formed from GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high} aggregates were larger and showed a higher proportion of cells bearing stem cell markers compared with colonies formed by GCTM-2^{mid}CD9^{mid} cells (Fig. 1f). Time-lapse video microscopy confirmed that the initial cell numbers attaching to the dish were similar for the two subpopulations. However, subsequent monitoring showed that while both subpopulations were migratory and underwent cell division, the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high} subpopulation persisted to form colonies of 4–32 cells several days later, whereas the GCTM-2^{mid}CD9^{mid} colonies suffered abortive expansion and, in many cases, extinction (Supplementary Movies 1 and 2).

Differentiation potential of hPSC subpopulations. In the mouse, the ability to differentiate efficiently into germ cells *in vitro* is limited to epiblast like cells at the stage of formative pluripotency^{20,21}. Naive pluripotent stem cells or epiblast stem cells both lack this capacity²¹. Using the two-step protocol to generate first a mesoderm-like intermediate and subsequently convert these cells to PGC-like cells²², we measured the degree of differentiation of the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} and GCTM-2^{mid}CD9^{mid} populations using flow cytometry to quantify EPCAM/ITGA6 double high cells which represent PGC-like cells (Fig. 2a). GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} cells showed higher expression of EPCAM and ITGA6 at the onset, as expected. After 2 days of differentiation into mesoderm-like cells, both groups showed loss of EPCAM expression but at Day 4 after PGC-like cell induction, an EPCAM/ITGA6 double positive fraction was observed in both groups. Cultures that did not receive growth factors to induce germ cell formation contained no EPCAM/ITGA6 double high population. The GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} population had largely disappeared by the end of the time course, as noted by Sasaki et al.²². The identity of the PGC-like cells was confirmed by staining with antibodies to PRDM1



and NANOS3 (Fig. 2b). More PGC-like cells were consistently obtained from GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} compared with GCTM-2^{mid}CD9^{mid} subpopulations in both cell lines, though there was a high degree of inter-assay variability (Fig. 2c). We and others have shown previously that the ESR fraction of hPSC is pluripotent (Figs. 4 and 5, refs. 17,19). In this study, directed differentiation in adherent culture, carried out on cell lines WA09 and WA01, confirmed that both the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}

subpopulation and the remaining cell population were pluripotent, as measured by expression of markers characteristic of progenitors of all three embryonic germ layers (Fig. 2d).

ESR cells have a cell cycle with a low G1 fraction. Initial analyses of the mouse ESC cell cycle indicated that naive mouse ESC, and cells of the epiblast, show a shortened cell cycle with a minimal

Fig. 1 Assay of self-renewal of subpopulations of hPSC under conditions that maintain cell-cell contacts. **a** Isolation of aggregates of subsets of hPSC by flow cytometry. Left panel, side and forward scatter; middle panel, separation of single cells using GCTM-2 and anti-CD9; right panel, separation of cell aggregates using GCTM-2 and anti-CD9. **b** Phase contrast image of aggregates and single cells 1 and 24 h after plating. At 1 h, both populations of aggregates (GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}, HIGH and GCTM-2^{mid}CD9^{mid}, MID) have attached and spread onto the substrate. Scale bar = 100 micron. **c** Flow cytometry analysis of cell surface antigen expression in aggregate cultures prepared as in a 72 h after plating. **d** Microcolony formation after 4 days by single cells (200, 1000, or 2000) or aggregates (100, 500, or 1000) of GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high} (HS, HA) and GCTM-2^{mid}CD9^{mid} (MS, MA) subpopulations. **e** Numbers of microcolonies formed at 4 days by GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high} or GCTM-2^{mid}CD9^{mid} single cells or aggregates (AGG). Values represent the mean \pm standard deviation from eight wells from one experiment; see Supplementary Table 5 for biological replicates of this assay. **f** Immunostaining with stem cell surface marker antibody GCTM-2 of colonies formed by aggregates of GCTM-2^{mid}CD9^{mid} and GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high} subpopulations. Scale bar = 100 micron. Results in **b**, **d**, and **f** display representative outcomes from three experiments.

G1 component²³. While more recent work shows that the cell cycle state of naive mouse stem cells is dependent upon culture conditions²⁴, it remains clear that lineage commitment is coupled to cell cycle regulation in mouse and human PSC, and that the G1 phase represents a decision point for undergoing lineage specification^{25–27}.

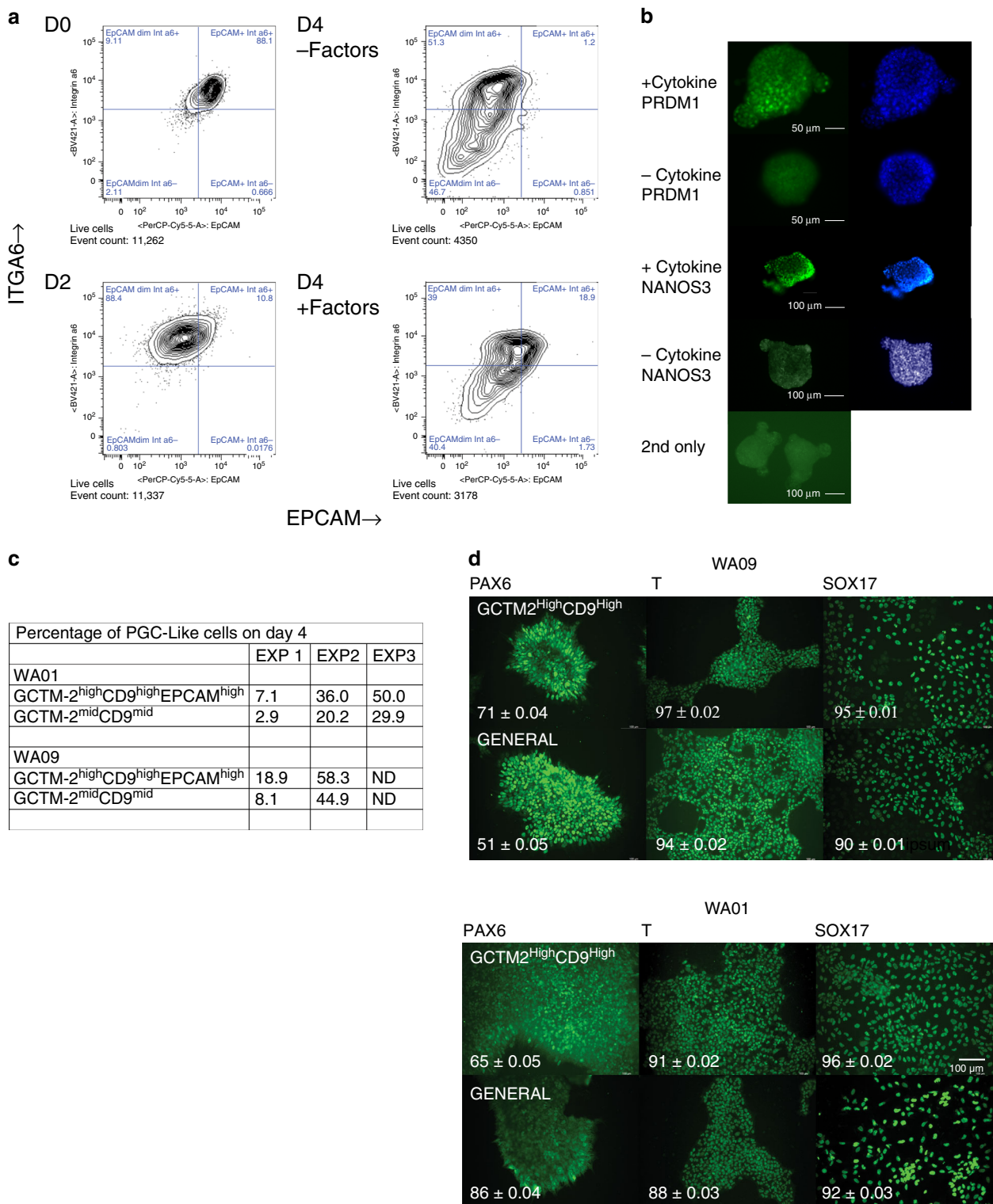
Here we re-assessed our previous finding that a subset of cells expressing high levels of the stem cell antigen GCTM-2 had a reduced G1 fraction compared with the remainder of the population²⁸. Using a more refined sorting procedure and EdU incorporation to identify S-phase cells, we determined the cell cycle phase distribution of GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high}, GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}, and GCTM-2^{low}CD9^{low} subpopulations, compared with unsorted cells (the general population). As shown in Fig. 3, very few of the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} or GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high} cells were in G0/G1 phase, with most of this subpopulation in S or G2/M. By contrast, GCTM-2^{low}CD9^{low} cells were predominantly in G0/G1 (~70%). The cell cycle phase distribution of the unsorted general population was consistent with these findings. Results using a different WA09 subline with a FUCCI reporter²⁹ confirmed these conclusions (Supplementary Fig. 1).

Active mitochondria and bivalent metabolism in ESR cells. Metabolic activity is modulated throughout early mammalian development. The preimplantation relies on a combination of aerobic glycolysis and oxidative phosphorylation, and this metabolic pattern is maintained during post-implantation development up to E7.5 in the mouse³⁰. Like the epiblast, naive state mouse ESC show this bivalent metabolism, while primed epiblast stem cells rely primarily on glycolysis³¹. Similar transitions from bivalent metabolism to glycolysis have been reported during conversion of naive to primed hPSC^{32,33}.

To determine if the energy metabolism status of hPSC is dependent on their position in the pluripotency hierarchy, we first assessed the mitochondrial membrane potential of defined subsets of hPSC by measuring the uptake of the mitochondrial dye tetramethylrhodamine methyl ester (TMRM), or the combined uptake and the ratio of red/green fluorescence of the dye JC-1. Live cell staining of WA09 cells showed that staining with TMRM was strongest at the edge of the colonies, where cells expressing the highest levels of the stem cell marker CD9 are found (Fig. 4a). To quantitate mitochondrial activity across the cell populations, WA09 cells were incubated with TMRM or JC-1, labeled with stem cell surface markers GCTM-2, TG30 (anti-CD9), and anti-EPCAM, and the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} and GCTM-2^{low}CD9^{low} fractions were identified by flow cytometry. The GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} subpopulation stained more intensely with TMRM, and showed higher ratio of red to green fluorescence following incubation with JC-1 compared with the general (remaining) population, or the GCTM-2^{low}CD9^{low} subpopulation (Fig. 4b–c), indicating increased mitochondrial activity in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} subpopulation.

Analysis of mitochondrial oxidative phosphorylation in live cells using the Agilent Seahorse XF apparatus confirmed that the basal oxygen consumption rate (OCR) was higher in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} subpopulation compared with the remaining GEN population (Fig. 5a). These cells also exhibited higher spare mitochondrial capacity, as indicated by maximum OCR achieved after addition of proton uncoupling agent FCCP (Fig. 5a). Comprehensive analysis of intracellular metabolite levels in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} cells and unfractionated population using liquid chromatography and gas chromatography–mass spectrometry (LC–MS, GC–MS) provided further evidence that the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} cells exist in a distinct metabolic state. Principal Component Analysis (PCA, Supplementary Fig. 2a, b) and hierarchical cluster analysis (Fig. 5b, LC–MS; Supplementary Fig. 2c, GC–MS) clearly separated the purified cell population from the GEN population. Consistent with the live cell staining and OCR analysis, the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} contained elevated levels of TCA cycle metabolites (Fig. 5c) and was depleted in many amino acids and metabolites in the urea cycle (Supplementary Tables 1–2), compared with the general population. Pathway analysis further confirmed the distinct metabolic profile of the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} subpopulation (Supplementary Fig. 2d, e).

To gain further insights into the metabolic wiring of this subpopulation of cells, GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} fractionated cells and the GEN population of hPSC were cultivated in the presence of ¹³C glucose for 2 h and level of ¹³C-enrichment in different intermediates of central carbon metabolism monitored by GC–MS. High levels of ¹³C-enrichment were observed in all intermediates in glycolysis and the pentose phosphate pathway confirming that both cell populations exhibit high rates of aerobic glycolysis (Fig. 5d). Interestingly, ¹³C-enrichment in serine and glycine, which are synthesized from the glycolytic intermediate 3-phosphoglycerate, were higher in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} cells, indicating that these cells may have higher rates of amino acid and protein synthesis. Consistent with GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} cells having elevated rates of mitochondrial metabolism, ¹³C-enrichment in citrate and isocitrate were substantially upregulated in this subpopulation (Fig. 5d). However, ¹³C-enrichment in later intermediates in the oxidative cycle (succinate, fumarate, and malate) were not significantly changed between the two cell populations indicating that early intermediates in the TCA cycle may be diverted into anabolic pathways (catapleurosis). Increased catapleurosis in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} cells was supported by the elevated levels of ¹³C-labeling in glutamate, which is synthesized from the TCA cycle intermediate, α -ketoglutarate, as well as high levels of ¹³C-enrichment in long chain unsaturated fatty acids (i.e., oleic acid) and cholesterol, indicating high rates of membrane biogenesis or turnover. Overall, these data provide compelling evidence that the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} cells are metabolically more active than the GEN hPSC population,



exhibiting higher rates of oxidative phosphorylation and anabolic amino acid and lipid synthesis.

DNA methylation in hPSC cultured under defined conditions.

Levels of DNA methylation in the mouse and human epiblast are low, but increase substantially in the mouse following embryo implantation and activation of the de novo methyltransferases *Dnmt3a* and *Dnmt3b*^{34,35}. Reduced representation bisulfite sequencing to assess levels of DNA methylation showed no major differences between the relatively low mean levels of overall DNA

methylation or levels of DNA methylation over CpG islands between the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} subpopulation and the general population (Fig. 6a, b). DNA methylation distributions were bimodal (Fig. 6c, d), and there was little evidence of differential methylation at CpG islands across any particular loci in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} subpopulation (Fig. 6e). The extent of DNA methylation at CpG islands in various repeat elements was high and did not vary between the unsorted and GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} fraction (Fig. 6f). De novo DNA methyltransferases *DNMT3A* and *DNMT3B* were both expressed

Fig. 2 Differentiation potential of GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} and GCTM-2^{mid}CD9^{mid} subpopulations. **a** Flow cytometry assay showing differentiation of GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} subpopulation into PGC-like cells. Panels show flow cytometry analysis for expression of EPCAM and ITGA6 in starting population (Day 0), post induction of incipient mesoderm-like cell with ACV and CHIR99021 (Day2), and PGC induction (addition of BMP4, LIF, KITLG, and EGF) versus controls without these factors (Days 4 + and - factors). **b** Staining of aggregates of PGC-like cells for PRDM1 or NANOS3 on Day 4. Aggregates incubated with cytokines showed strong nuclear staining; those incubated in the absence of factors did not. DNA staining to right of each image. Scale bar PRDM1 panels 50 μ m; NANOS3 and 2nd antibody only, 100 μ m. Staining with secondary antibody alone in bottom panel. **c** Table showing percentage yield of EPCAM⁺ITG6A⁺ cells on Day 4 in two cell lines for GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} and GCTM-2^{mid}CD9^{mid} subpopulations. **d** Directed differentiation of the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high} fraction and the remaining population of WAO9 and WAO1 cells in adherent culture. Panels show staining for PAX6, T, and SOX17 after induction of differentiation for 5 days. Numbers on each panel represent the proportion of cells positive for the indicated marker \pm 95% confidence interval. Scale bar = 100 μ m, same magnification in all panels. Results in **b** and **d** display representative outcomes from two experiments on two cell lines.

along with *TET1* across the cell populations studied (below and Supplementary Fig. 3a–j), similar to the early post-implantation epiblast in the mouse³⁶, and suggestive of a highly dynamic state of DNA methylation in these cells.

Differential chromatin accessibility in hPSC subpopulations.

We next identified critical differences in the chromatin landscape between GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} and GCTM-2^{mid}CD9^{mid} populations using the assay for transposase accessible chromatin³⁷. In total, we identified 118,442 regions as accessible across both populations. Of these, 3144 were more accessible in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} cells, while 4730 were more accessible in the GCTM-2^{mid}CD9^{mid} population (Fig. 7a, FDR < 0.01; quality assessment data Supplementary Fig. 4, Supplementary Data 1). Generally, peaks with increased accessibility in the high population were distant from transcription start sites (TSS), more often found in intergenic and introns typical of enhancers, whereas peaks with increased accessibility in the middle populations were closer to TSS (Fig. 7b) identified as promoters (Supplementary Fig. 5a). To annotate open chromatin sites in each population we compared their location to the entire set of transcription factor (TF) binding sites across a diverse range of human cell types identified by the ENCODE project³⁸ using a locus overlap enrichment analysis³⁹ (Supplementary Data 2). Genomic locations more accessible in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} population were highly enriched for TF binding sites identified in hPSC compared with the GCTM-2^{mid}CD9^{mid} population (Fig. 7c). Furthermore, the most enriched TFs binding at the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} population sites included known pluripotency factors NANOG, POU5F1 (OCT4), and TCF12 and BCL11A (Fig. 7d, upper panel), the latter two TF having been previously identified as highly expressed in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} population¹⁶. While these same factors were still identified as enriched in the regions in the GCTM-2^{mid}CD9^{mid} populations, other general chromatin factors showed the highest overlap (Fig. 7d, lower panel). Finally, we compared regions of increased accessibility in both populations to the tissue and cell-type specific DNase hypersensitivity clusters identified in human samples⁴⁰. Again, this analysis identified that the regions with greatest enrichment in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} population were annotated as being unique to stem cells (Supplementary Fig. 5b, c). In summary, these data indicate that the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} population has greater open chromatin at putative enhancers bound by canonical pluripotent factors at sites unique to stem cells, whereas the low population has greater DNA accessibility at promoters bound by general chromatin and transcription factors. Together these data support the hypothesis that the chromatin of cells in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} population exists in a distinct state compared with the low population.

Comparison of ESR cell transcriptome with primate epiblast.

RNA-seq analysis comparing gene expression in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} subpopulation to the general (total unfractionated) population (Supplementary Data 3) identified 515 genes differentially expressed between the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} subset and the total population (132 upregulated in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} cells and 383 downregulated relative to the unfractionated cells, at >1.5-fold change in expression level with an adjusted *p* value <0.05; Fig. 8a).

Genes upregulated in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} fraction included *NODAL* and its antagonists *LEFTY1* and *LEFTY2*, in agreement with our previous study¹⁶. *POU3F1*, a marker of the naive to formative transition in the mouse, was also upregulated. Notably, a number of small nuclear and small nucleolar RNAs were expressed at high levels in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} population. Negative regulators of MAPK signaling, including *DUSP5* (inactivator of ERK1), *DUSP6* (inactivator of ERK2), and *SPRY2*, were upregulated in the self-renewing fraction, as was *DACT1* (an antagonist of canonical WNT signaling). Negative regulators of MAPK signaling including *Dusp4* and *Spry* were recently shown to be upregulated at an early stage during dissolution of the mouse naive state⁴¹. Amongst the genes expressed at lower levels in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} cellular subset relative to the unfractionated population were members of the WNT signaling pathway, including *WNT4*, *FRZB*, *FZD3*, *FZD5*, and *FZD8*. Of the top 100 genes upregulated in the general population, 47 genes (all upregulated at twofold change or higher) were previously reported to be expressed at peak levels at the onset of neural differentiation in the CORTECON study of Temple and colleagues⁴² (global analysis, Supplementary Fig. 6). Examination of previously published microarray data⁴³ for a subset of these neural induction genes confirmed a pattern of continuous upregulation in cell subsets with decreasing levels of pluripotency associated cell surface markers in multiple cell lines (Supplementary Fig. 7, data visualized in the Stemformatics platform <https://www.stemformatics.org>). *BMP2*, *BMP4*, and *FST* were also upregulated in the general population, consistent with our previous results¹⁶.

Some genes characteristic of the primate preimplantation epiblast and naive hPSC were expressed in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} fraction (PRDM14, TFCEP2L1, ZFP42, DPPA2, and TFAP2C), but others were not (ARGFX, KLF17, TBX3, NLRP7). Genes expressed in primitive endoderm (SOX17, GATA4, GATA6, FOXA2, and APOA2) were not found in either the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} or the general population, nor were genes activated during early gastrulation (T, MIXL, GSC, EOMES, FOXA2, LHX1).

scRNA-seq on hPSC fractionated into four separate subpopulations enabled us to compare gene expression in the fractionated subpopulations with the single-cell data of Nakamura et al.⁴⁴ for *Macaca fascicularis* pre- and post-implantation embryos (quality

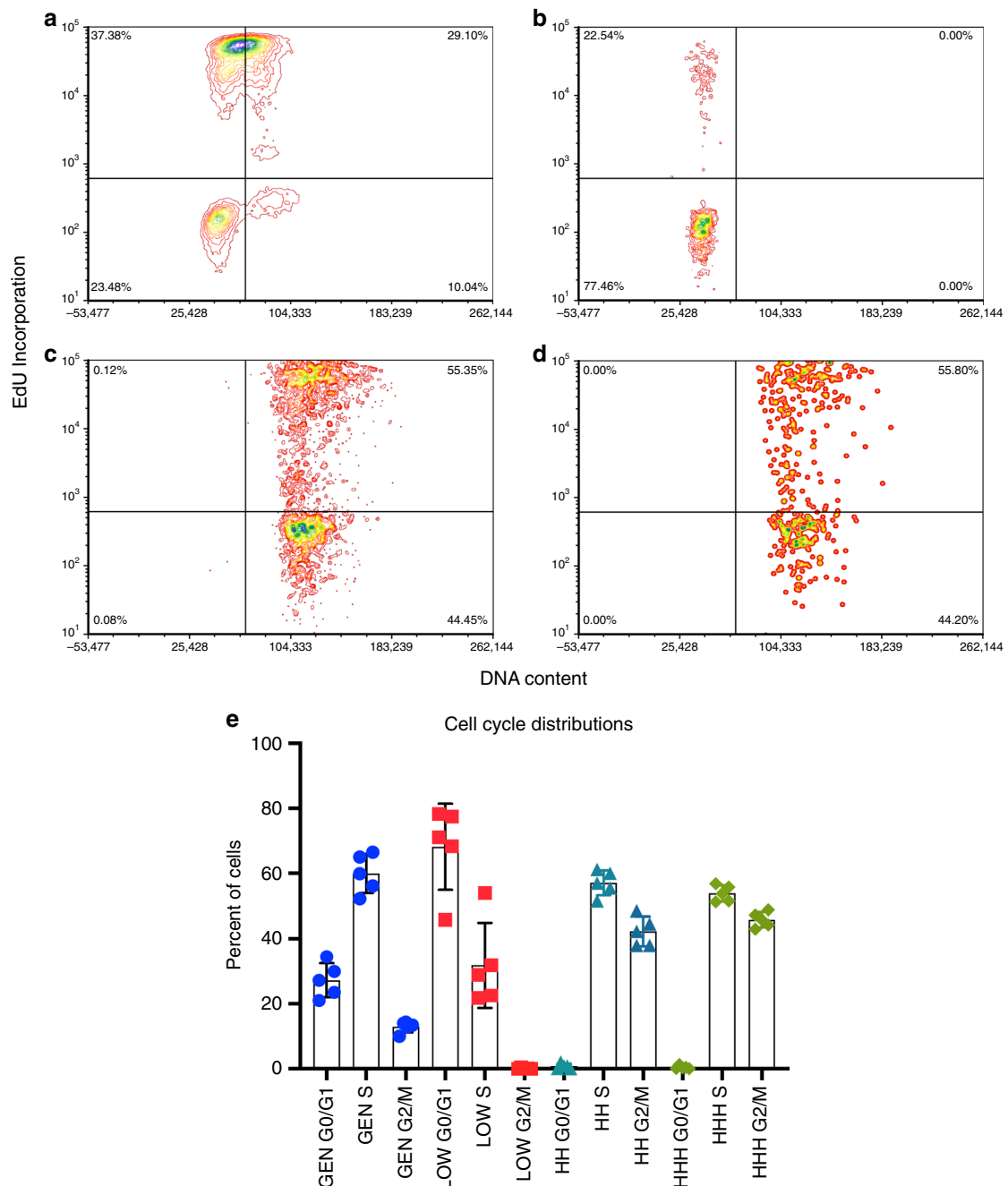


Fig. 3 Cell cycle analysis of hPSC subpopulations by flow cytometry of EdU labeled cultures. Cells were pulsed labeled with EdU, sorted into three subpopulations using cell surface markers GCTM-2 and CD9 with or without EPCAM, and analyzed by flow cytometry. **a-d** Flow cytometry profiles from one experiment. **a** Unsorted population; **b** GCTM-2^{low}CD9^{low}; **c** GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}; **d** GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high}; **e** summary showing results from seven experiments. Mean values are shown and error bars represent standard error of seven biological replicates; General is unsorted population, low is GCTM-2^{low}CD9^{low}, HH is GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}, and HHH is GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high}. See Supplementary Table 6 for biological replicate data points.

assessment, Supplementary Figs. 8–9). We analyzed 300 cells, and we detected expression of 8403 genes. All cells uniformly expressed the general pluripotency associated transcription factors POU5F1, SOX2, and NANOG (Supplementary Fig. 10a–d)). ZFP42, a marker of the naive state in mouse, was expressed throughout the population, but another naive state marker, TFCPL1 was expressed primarily in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} and GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high} subsets; POU3F1, characteristic of post-implantation epiblast, was expressed throughout (Supplementary Fig. 10e–g). PCA of the human cell

subpopulations alone indicated that they could be clearly separated along a continuum of cell states (Fig. 8b). Ontology analysis of differential gene expression highlighted a number of pathways involving ribonucleoprotein complexes, ribosomes, and metabolic processes, in concurrence with the expression of small nuclear and nucleolar RNAs noted above in the subpopulation analysis (Supplementary Table 3), and a number of pathways related to oxidative metabolism, including metabolic processes, mitochondrion, mitochondrion organization, generation of

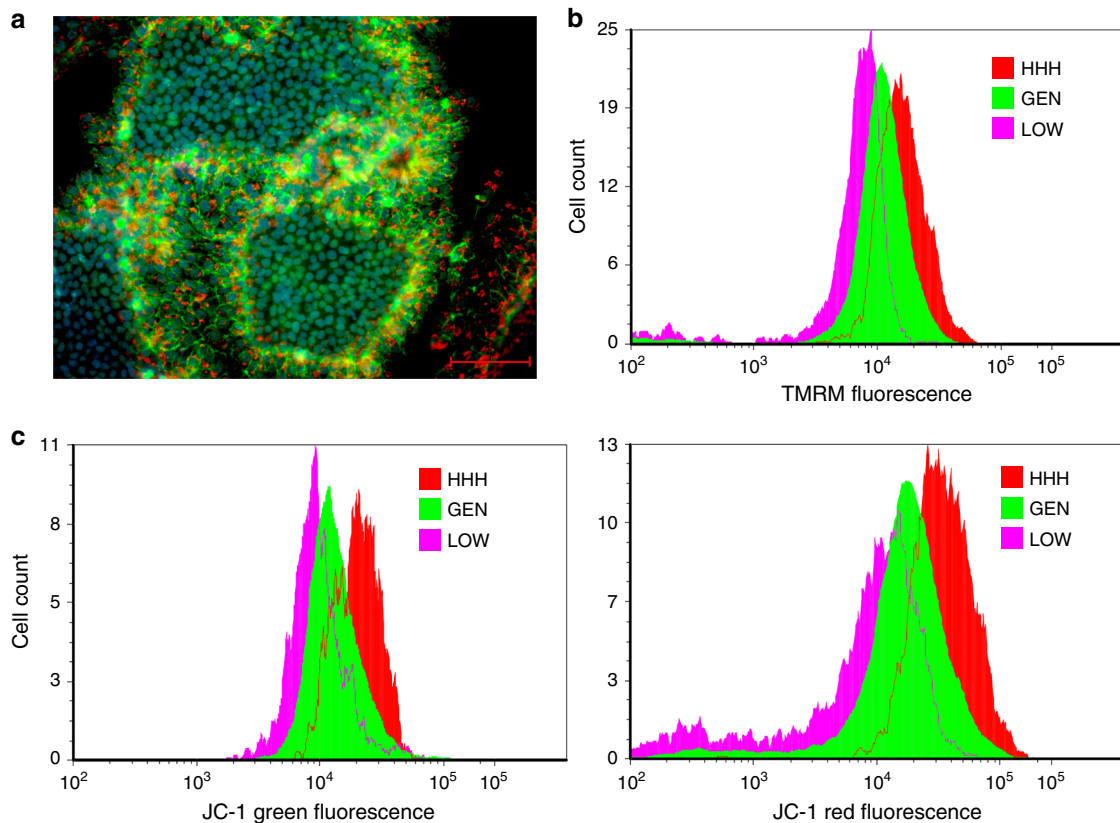


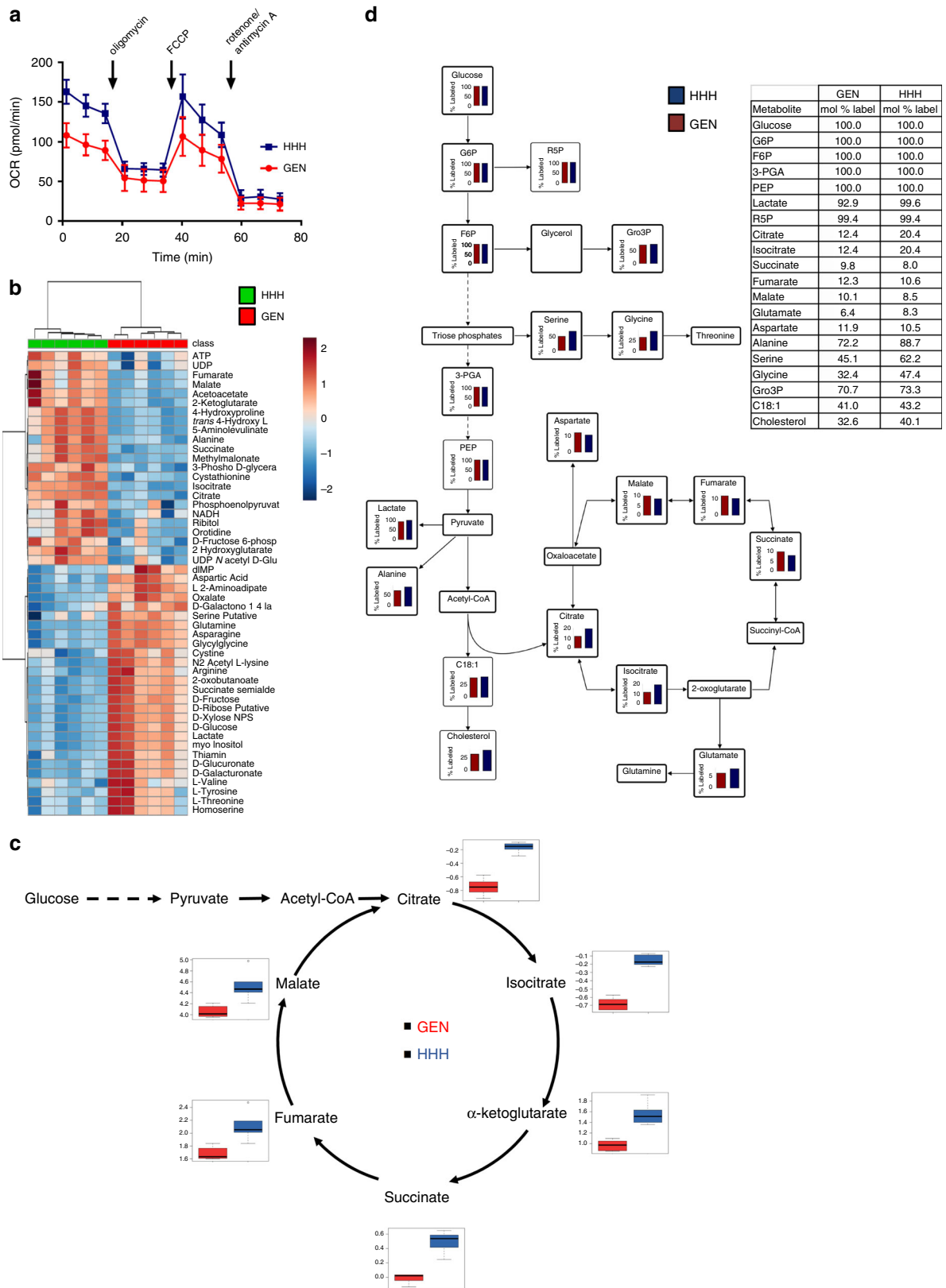
Fig. 4 Mitochondrial activity in subpopulations of hPSC. **a** Double label staining of live cells with TMRM and stem cell surface marker CD9. Cells at the edges of colonies stain most strongly with antibody and dye. Scale bar = 100 micron. **b** Flow cytometry analysis of TMRM staining in GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} (HHH), GCTM-2^{low}CD9^{low} (LOW), and unsorted (GEN) population. **c** Flow cytometry analysis of green (left panel) and red (right panel) JC-1 dye emission in GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} (HHH), GCTM-2^{low}CD9^{low} (LOW), and unsorted (GEN) population. GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} cells display highest ratio of green to red emission, indicative of high mitochondrial membrane potential. Results in a display representative outcomes from three experiments.

precursor metabolites and energy, mitochondrial inner membrane, and hydrogen ion transmembrane transporter activity.

The GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} subset and general populations both expressed markers of the post-implantation mouse epiblast, including *POU3F1*, *OTX2*, *DNMT3A*, *DNMT3B*, *SOX4*, *SOX11*, *LIN28A*, and *ZNF281* (Supplementary Data 3). In a PCA of the human single-cell data and the cynomolgus data of Nakamura et al.⁴⁴ (Fig. 8c), the first principal component resolved the two experiments with cynomolgus and human cells. The second principal component resolved the inner cell mass and pre- and post-implantation epiblast, along with extraembryonic cells. In this dimension, the human cells aligned with preimplantation epiblast stage cells. In the third principal component, which separated post-implantation stages of cynomolgus development, human cells aligned with the post-implantation epiblast, with cells in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} fraction between early and late post-implantation stages. The human cells were clearly distinguished from inner cell mass and preimplantation epiblast stages, from gastrulating cells, and from extraembryonic tissues. PCA of the cynomolgus cells alone revealed that it was difficult to separate early from late post-implantation epiblast (Supplementary Fig. 11).

The cells used in this study were WA09 cells grown on mTeSR in feeder-free, serum-free conditions. To assess the generality of these findings, we compare these results with two previous microarray analyses: an independent study that examined similarly defined subpopulations of cell lines MEL1 and WA09 grown in proprietary serum replacement with mouse embryo

fibroblast feeders or mTeSR1 (WA09)⁴³, and our previous study using cell line ES02 grown in serum-supplemented medium in the presence of mouse fibroblast feeder cells¹⁷. We identified a panel of stage-specific genes (Supplementary Table 4) on the basis of their differential expression in the data of Nakamura et al.⁴⁴ and a recent scRNA-seq study of the human preimplantation embryo⁴⁵ (Fig. 9). Genes specific to the inner cell mass, or mainly expressed in the inner cell mass and preimplantation epiblast, were very weakly expressed in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high} subpopulation in the previous works and in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} cells in the current RNA-seq study. Expression levels of the gene panel characteristic of the inner cell mass, preimplantation epiblast and early post-implantation epiblast were found at appreciable levels in self-renewing hPSC in all studies. Those genes with highest expression levels in all three cynomolgus epiblast populations, or in early and late post-implantation epiblast, were expressed robustly in all hPSC subpopulations in all studies. The gene panel specific to late post-implantation epiblast and gastrulating populations was expressed at somewhat lower levels in all of our populations relative to pan-epiblast specific genes. Last, genes characteristic of gastrulation stages 2A and 2B (nomenclature, ref. 44) were expressed at low levels in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} and GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high} and GCTM-2^{mid}CD9^{mid} subpopulations, with levels rising in the GCTM-2^{low}CD9^{low} and GCTM-2^{low}CD9^{low} fractions. Thus, these data support the same conclusion as PCA of the single cell data: hPSC cell subpopulations enriched for self-renewal capacity show a pattern of gene expression that is strongly similar to early



post-implantation epiblast stages in the primate embryo, but clearly distinguished from inner cell mass or gastrulation stages.

Discussion

We showed previously that the minority ESR subpopulation of hPSC can be isolated with cell surface markers and identified by

colony formation assay. Colony formation measures both survival and self-renewal, and dissociation to single cells and flow cytometry compromises survival. We have used several assay strategies to avoid conflation of survival and self-renewal^{16,17}, but the approach described in this study of isolating aggregates is simple, and yields defined subpopulations with high initial survival for

Fig. 5 Analysis of the metabolism of GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} cells. a Seahorse XF analysis of oxygen consumption rate (OCR) in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} (HHH) and unsorted (GEN) cell populations. Data represent means \pm standard error. Differences in the measurements of basal respiration and respiration after oligomycin, FCCP, and rotenone/antimycin between the HHH and general cell population were compared in a two-tailed *t*-test; the *p*-values was 0.0000031, 0.0025, 0.0032, and 0.005, respectively, for six biological replicates per condition with three measurements each. **b** Metabolomic analysis of GEN and HHH cells. Unsupervised hierarchical cluster analysis of metabolite levels determined by LC-MS differing between the two samples (*t*-test with Benjamini-Hochberg FDR = 0.05) in replicate samples leads to clear separation of the two populations. The metabolite abundance values are normalized by scaling to zero mean and unit variance by compound. Cells colored red denote higher abundance, while blue denotes lower abundance. **c** Levels of TCA cycle intermediates are elevated in GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high} cells. Polar metabolites from unfractionated hPSC and GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high} cells were analyzed by GC-MS and relative abundance of TCA cycle intermediates after medium normalization shown as box plots. Values are means \pm standard error of three biological replicates. For each boxplot, the bisecting line of each box represents the median. The top and bottom ends of each box are the 75th and 25th percentiles, respectively. The top and bottom horizontal lines extending out of each box are the minimum and maximum values, respectively. **d** HHH and GEN cells were metabolically labeled with ¹³C glucose for 2 h and ¹³C-enrichment (expressed as mol%) in select intermediates measured by GC-MS.

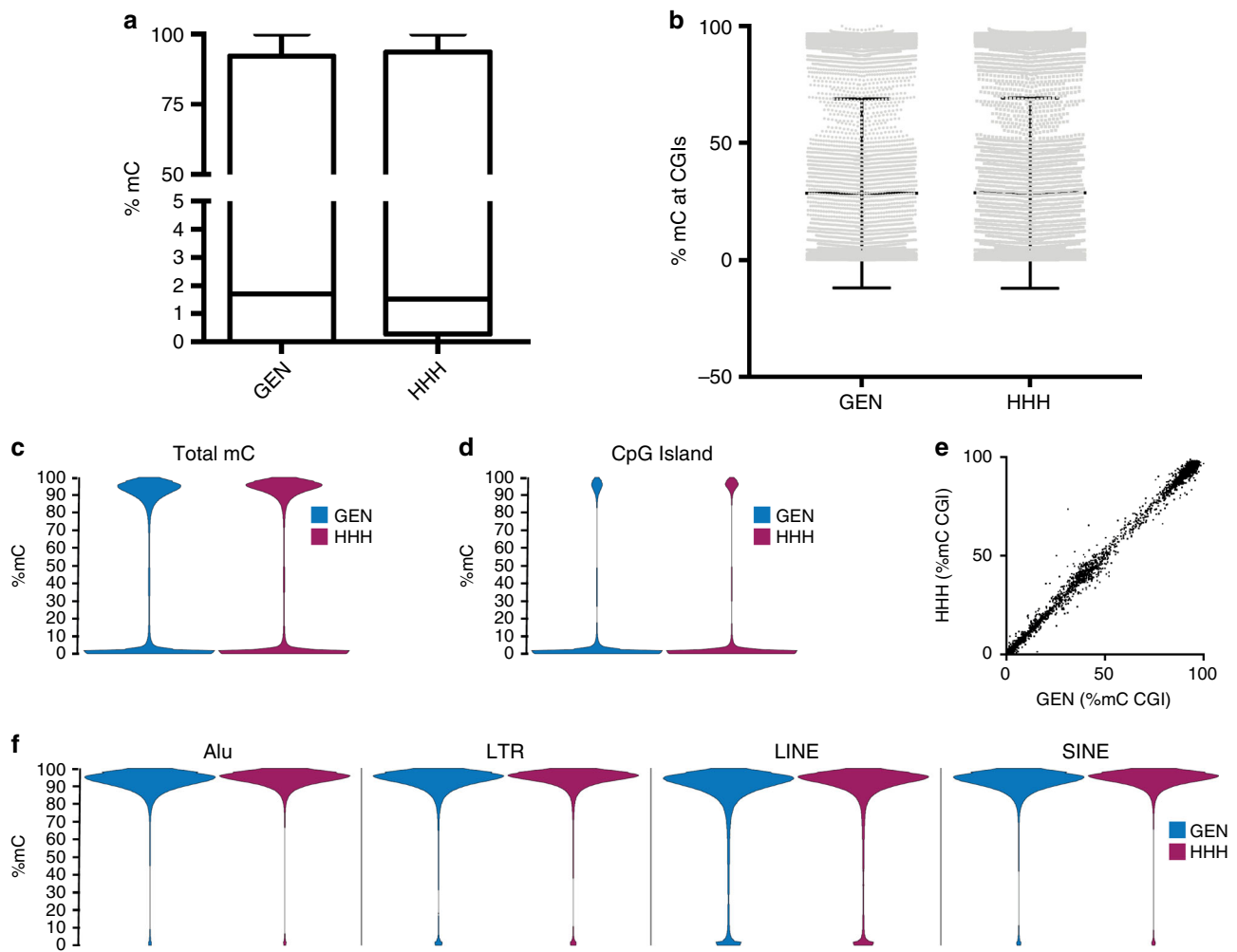


Fig. 6 Reduced representation bisulfite sequencing analysis of DNA methylation in unsorted (GEN) and GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} (HHH) subpopulations. a, b Box plots of overall DNA methylation (**a**) and methylation at CpG islands (**b**). In **a**, line indicates median, box shows 25th to 75th percentile, and bars show maxima and minima. In **b**, line shows the mean and error bars show standard deviation. **c, d** Bean plots showing the distribution of DNA methylation (%mC) of individual CpGs, both genome wide (**c**) and at CpG islands (**d**). **e** Scatter plot showing the %mC at all CpG islands comparing the GEN and HHH populations. **f** Bean plots showing the %mC of individual CpGs at the repetitive elements of type Alu, LTR, LINE, and SINE. All data shown is the average for GEN (*n* = 2) and HHH (*n* = 3).

subsequent analysis. Although the initial survival of aggregates of the hPSC subpopulations was similar, further development of viable stem cell colonies was observed predominantly in the fraction bearing the highest level of stem cell markers. Time-lapse video microscopy revealed that cells in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high} fraction formed microcolonies that persisted during extended

propagation, whereas microcolonies of cells in the lower fraction underwent gradual extinction. This is similar to the observations of Barbaric et al.⁴⁶, who found that only a subset of SSEA3-positive hPSC formed microcolonies that persisted and grew. Their findings and ours suggest that self-renewal might be a function of the formation of a critical mass of cells expressing

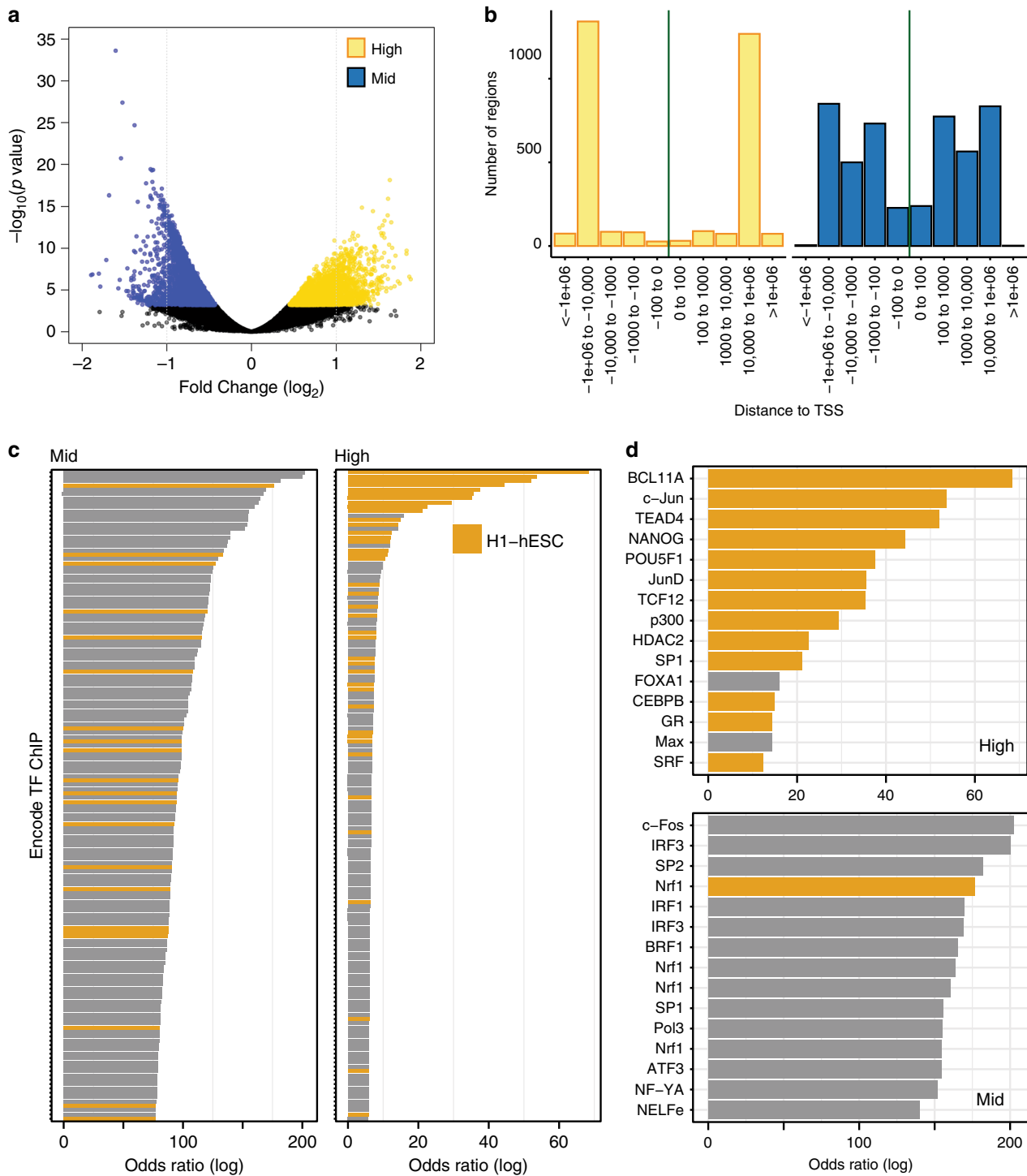


Fig. 7 Landscape of accessible chromatin differentiates stem cell populations. a Volcano plot showing significant differences in DNA accessibility as measured using ATAC-seq between GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} (yellow) and GCTM-2^{mid}CD9^{mid} (blue) populations (FDR < 0.01). Vertical lines indicate twofold difference. **b** Distribution of significantly different open chromatin regions plotted as distance from TSS. **c** Bar chart of the top 150-log odds ratios for overlap of differentially open chromatin regions in the GCTM-2^{mid}CD9^{mid} (left) and GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} (right) populations compared with all ChIP-seq data for all cell types in the ENCODE TF dataset. Orange indicates ChIP data from the human ESC cell line H1. **d** Similar to **c** showing to 15 highest log odds ratios for overlap. Names of each TF antibody used for ChIP are indicated on the left.

survival or growth factors at a sufficiently high local level. We have shown that cells in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high} or GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} fractions express the highest levels of components of the NODAL signaling pathway^{16,17}. Recent results in zebrafish indicate that cell-cell contacts are key to Nodal signaling⁴⁷, suggesting the possibility that hPSC might similarly

depend on a positive feedback loop of NODAL signaling and cell-cell adhesion to drive self-renewal.

In the mouse, under appropriate culture conditions, naive cells pass through an intermediate state between naive and primed pluripotency, and in this transient state, are competent to undergo germline differentiation²¹. It was previously reported

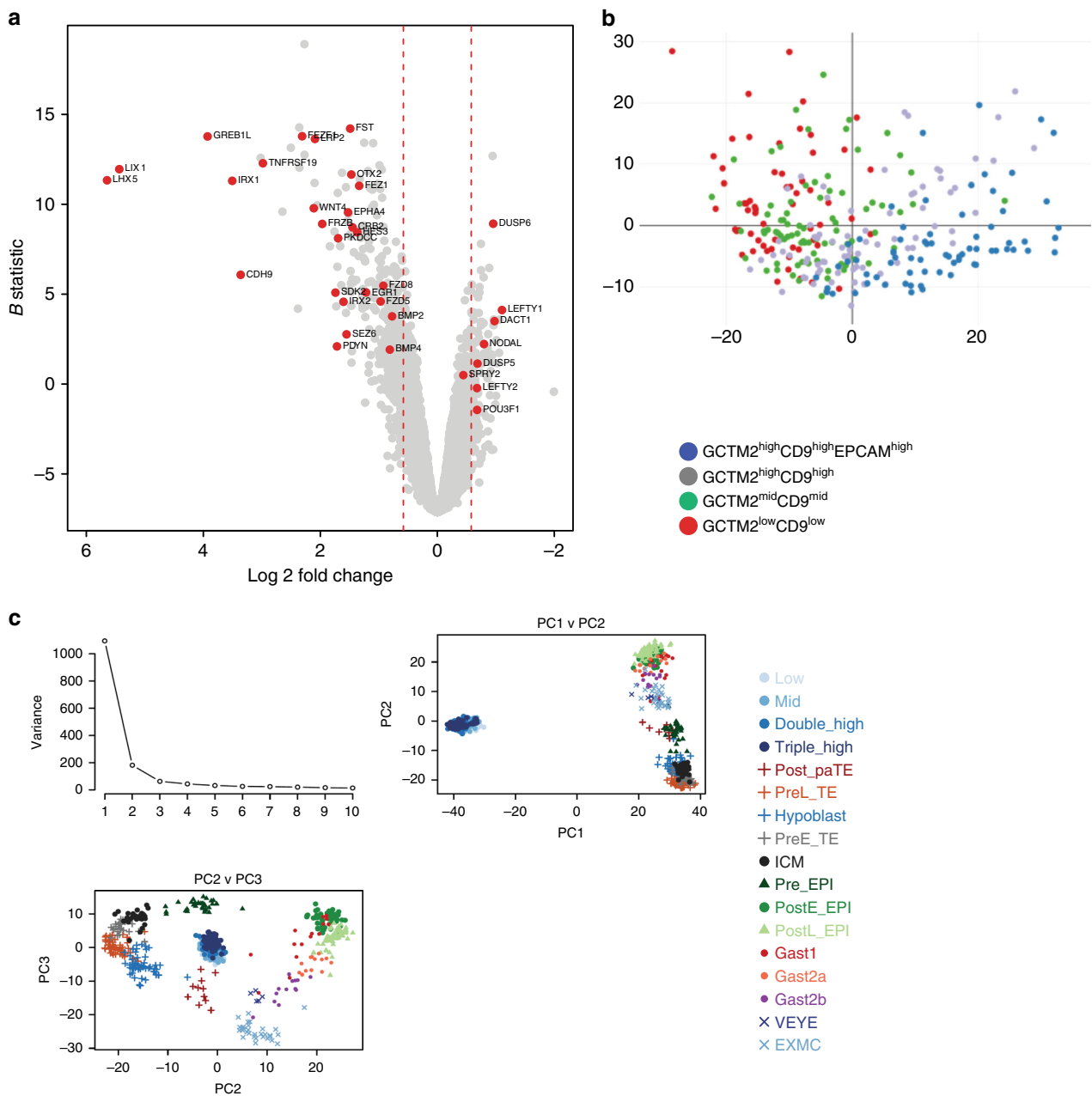


Fig. 8 Global gene expression analysis of hPSC subpopulations by RNA-seq. **a** Volcano plot illustrating differentially expressed genes in GCTM-2^{high}CD⁹^{high}EPCAM^{high} versus general (unsorted) populations. **b** Principal component analysis of single-cell RNA-seq data on GCTM-2^{high}CD⁹^{high}EPCAM^{high}, GCTM-2^{high}CD⁹^{high}, GCTM-2^{mid}CD⁹^{mid}, and GCTM-2^{low}CD⁹^{low} subpopulations. **c** Joint species principal component analysis of single-cell RNA-seq data on GCTM-2^{high}CD⁹^{high}EPCAM^{high} (HHH), GCTM-2^{high}CD⁹^{high} (HH), GCTM-2^{mid}CD⁹^{mid} (MID), and GCTM-2^{low}CD⁹^{low} (LOW) subpopulations alongside cynomolgus embryo data from ref.³⁰; single embryo cells classified according to Houghton et al.³⁰. Top left: sreeplot demonstrating the amount of variability in the data accounted for by each component; top right: graph displaying data distribution along first and second components; bottom left: graph displaying data distribution along the second and third components. Color and shape of point indicate sample phenotype, each point representing a single cell.

that archetypal hPSC can form primordial germ cell-like cells²². We confirm this finding and show that ESR hPSC have the capacity for germline differentiation. This distinguishes these cells from the naive and primed states in the mouse.

Cells in the GCTM-2^{high}CD⁹^{high}EPCAM^{high} fraction displayed a cell cycle with a very limited G1 fraction relative to other cells in the population. It has been shown that hPSC pause in G1 when preparing to embark on differentiation^{25,26,28}. It is possible that ESR stem cells do not execute such a differentiation checkpoint and continue in a self-renewing loop, until a pause in the cell cycle is activated, possibly through an RB-dependent mechanism⁴⁸.

Cells in the GCTM-2^{high}CD⁹^{high}EPCAM^{high} fraction show higher mitochondrial membrane potential and increased oxidative phosphorylation compared with the general population. Comprehensive metabolite profiling and ¹³C-glucose labeling studies confirmed increased rates of catabolism of pyruvate in the mitochondrial TCA cycle. These studies also showed that increased TCA cycle flux in the GCTM-2^{high}CD⁹^{high}EPCAM^{high} cells is used to generate key intermediates including citrate and α -ketoglutarate which are subsequently exported from the mitochondria and used for synthesis of lipids and amino acids/proteins. Elevated rates of amino acid synthesis in the GCTM-2^{high}CD⁹^{high}EPCAM^{high} cells

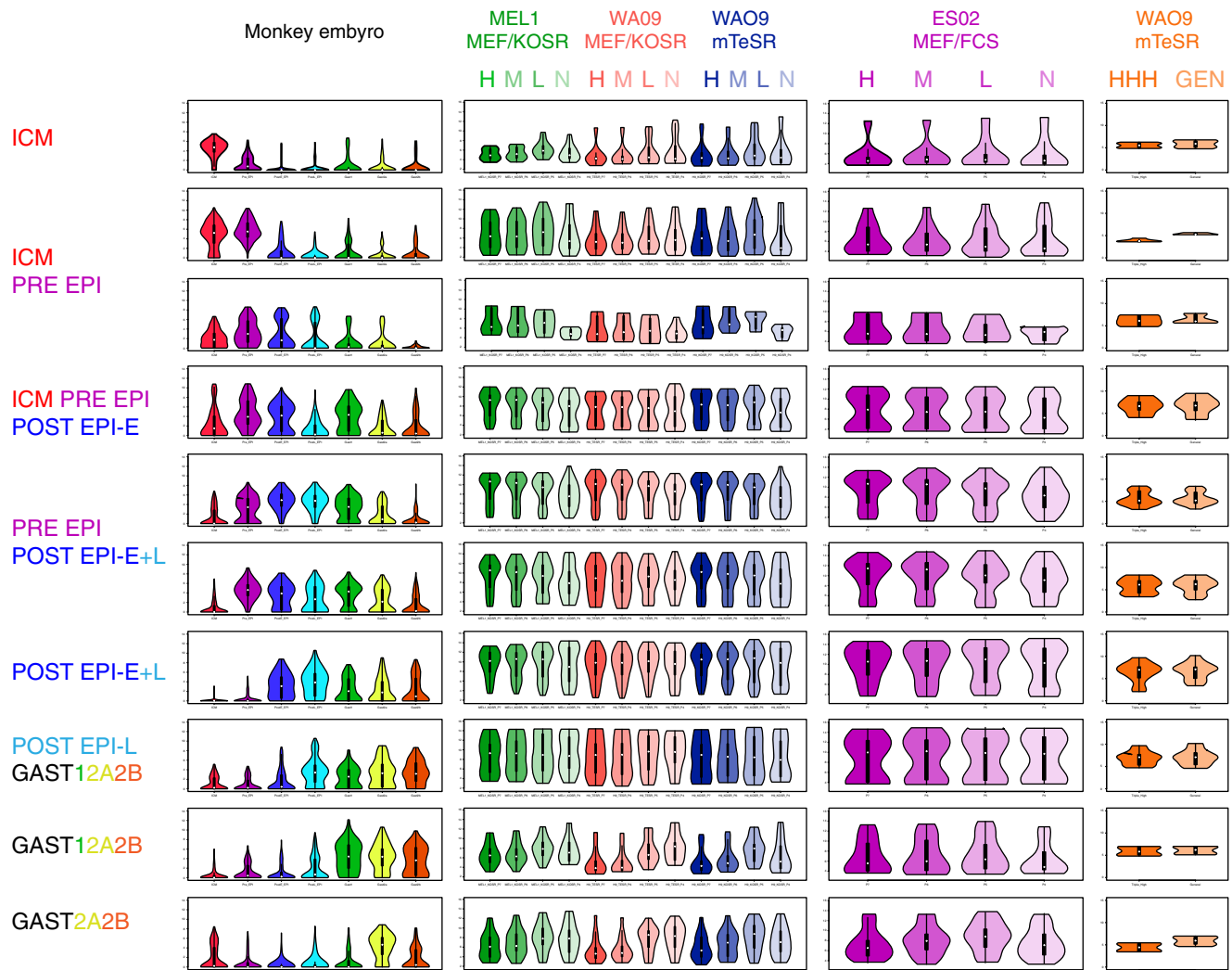


Fig. 9 String section plot comparison of expression of embryonic stage-specific genes by scRNA-seq in cynomolgus embryo³⁰ with expression in subpopulations of hPSC. The violin plots in the left hand column show expression from single-cell RNA-seq data in ref. ³⁰, with classification of cells as described therein; embryonic stages in which particular gene sets (Supplementary Table 4, each row in the figure displays violin plots for one gene set) are expressed are listed to the left of the plots. The second column shows microarray data from ref. ²⁷ for the same sets of genes in GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high} (H), GCTM-2^{mid}CD9^{mid} (M), GCTM-2^{low}CD9^{low} (L), and GCTM-2^{neg}CD9^{neg} (N) subpopulations of MEL1 cells grown in the presence of medium containing Knockout Serum Replacer on mouse embryo fibroblast feeder cell layers (MEF/KSOR), or WA09 cells grown in MEF/KSOR or mTeSR defined medium. The third column shows microarray data from ref. ¹⁶ for the same sets of genes on GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high} (H), GCTM-2^{mid}CD9^{mid} (M), GCTM-2^{low}CD9^{low} (L), and GCTM-2^{neg}CD9^{neg} (N) subpopulations of ES02 cells grown in serum-containing medium on mouse embryo fibroblast feeder cell layers (MEF/FCS). The last column shows RNA-seq bulk data on the same sets of genes from the current study for GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} (HHH) and unsorted (GEN) cells. Colors of violins correspond to embryonic stages or cell subpopulations identified in labels at left or top of figure (last three columns), respectively.

was also supported by increased flux of glycolytic intermediates into serine and glycine synthesis. The high rate of de novo synthesis of cholesterol in hPSC is unusual and further highlights the importance of TCA cycle in generating precursors (i.e., citrate) for this pathway. Overall, these data indicate that the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} cells retain a highly active anabolic metabolism.

DNA methylation levels in mouse naive ES are generally low, similar to the pattern in the preimplantation epiblast, and rise in vivo as development progresses toward gastrulation. In the mouse or primate post-implantation embryo, *DNMT3A* and *DNMT3B*, and *TET1* are activated shortly after implantation³⁶. Levels of methylation in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} and general population were similar in this study, and considerably lower than levels reported for mouse epiblast stem cells. In human hPSC, co-expression of DNA methyltransferases and TET

enzymes could account for the dynamic nature of DNA methylation, exemplified by the dramatic response of these cells to the presence of ascorbic acid, an activator of TET enzymes, in the cell culture medium⁴⁹.

In contrast to DNA methylation levels, chromatin accessibility varied strikingly in the cell subpopulations that we studied. Chromatin regions that showed high accessibility in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} mapped to sites of previously identified pluripotency transcription factor binding in hPSC, and to sites of DNase hypersensitivity that were found to be unique to stem cells. This pattern changed markedly in the GCTM-2^{mid}CD9^{mid} population. These findings suggest that targets of pluripotency transcription factors in the GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} cell fraction might be involved in the regulation of self-renewal. We found no evidence for enrichment of binding sites for TFAP2C in open chromatin in our GCTM-2^{high}CD9^{high}EPCAM^{high} cells,

compare between human and macaque expression levels, we defined a set of high confidence orthologous metaexons between the two species as in ref.⁷⁶. Briefly, we used BLAT⁷⁷ to compare every annotated human exon in ENSEMBL release 86 (737,982 unique exons across 63,305 genes) against the human (hg38) and *Macaca fascicularis* (macFas5) genomes, retaining those that matched the macaque genome with at least 92% sequence identity and mapped back to their annotated location in humans. We then excluded all exons that had a second match with >90% sequence similarity in either genome, to control for interspecies differences in mappability. Overlapping exons from the same gene (associated with different isoforms) were collapsed into a single “metaexon”.

We discarded overlapping exons associated with more than one ENSEMBL gene ID, exons associated with any gene annotated to two or more chromosomes in either species, and exons where the difference in intron size between the two species is $\geq 10,000$ bp, suggestive of poor genome assembly or annotation. After applying these quality control criteria, we ultimately retained 198,172 unique metaexons in humans and macaques across 34,142 annotated ENSEMBL human genes. The final table, as well as code and additional documentation for metaexon identification is available at http://www.bitbucket.org/ee_reh_neh/orthoexon

We processed all 2526 files from ref.⁴⁴ (from 390 cells) with sickle [<https://github.com/najoshi/sickle>] to remove bad reads and trim low-quality bases from the 3' end. We then mapped all reads to macFas5 using Rsubread 1.20.6 and R 3.2.2, allowing up to 2 mismatches and 2 indels per 50 bp read, which is proportional to our setting of 5 mismatches or indels for a 100 bp read. Mapped reads were assigned to the orthologous metaexon list using featureCounts at both the single metaexon and whole-gene level, and summed within individuals in R 3.2.2.

Human scRNA-seq data processing. Sequence analysis was performed on the Illumina Next-Seq 500 platform.

Quality control of raw data was assessed using FASTQC and visualized using MultiQC. The scPipe package v1.0 for R was used to count genes based on UMI profile. Gene expression was normalized using scater v1.6.1 and scran v1.6.6 packages for R. FASTQ files were aligned to hg38 using the Subread package v1.26.1 for R statistical software, aligned reads were re-annotated to exons using ENSEMBL v86 transcriptome to define the exon/intron mapping rate. Cells with <4500 expressed genes or more than 60,000 counts were discarded, resulting in 300 of 370 non-control cells retained for downstream analysis.

Data from both species reflected $\text{Log}_2(\text{CPM} + 1)$ aligned to HG38v86. Data from both species were mapped to a set of highly orthologous metaexons. Supplementary Fig. 8 illustrates the distribution of gene expression in each dataset before and after gene-based filtering. A gene was retained in a given dataset based on expression above a cut off of 1 (non-human primate) or 5 (human) $\text{Log}_2(\text{CPM} + 1)$ in at least 10% of cells assigned to a given phenotype. These cutoffs were selected based on the distribution of gene expression in each dataset. Downstream analysis was limited to the 7308 genes commonly expressed in each dataset.

To rescale and combine the datasets, each gene was assigned a rank in a given cell based on its abundance. Ties in the data were assigned the same rank and the minimum value was used. Supplementary Fig. 9 illustrates the distributions of z-scores of ranked gene expression for every cell in each dataset. PCA was performed on the merged data using prcomp function in the stats base package for R statistical software version 3.3.2. Downstream analysis of the principal components was performed using the mixOmics package version 6.3.1 for R version 3.3.2. Panther.db was used to perform Fischer's exact test for over-representation of ontological terms in gene sets of interest.

Reporting summary. Further information on research design is available in the Nature Research Reporting Summary linked to this article.

Data availability

RNA-seq, scRNA-seq, and ATAC-seq data are available at Gene Expression Omnibus under accession Superseries [GSE119326](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/query/acc.cgi?acc=GSE119326) (RNA-seq, [GSE119324](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/query/acc.cgi?acc=GSE119324), scRNA-seq [GSE119323](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/query/acc.cgi?acc=GSE119323), ATAC-seq [GSE147338](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/query/acc.cgi?acc=GSE147338)).

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Author contributions

Contributions of authors to drafting of specific sections of the paper are identified by name of section titles. K.X.L.: design of experiments, collection of data, and writing of the paper (Methods); E.A.M.: analysis of data and writing of the paper (Methods); J.K.: design of experiments, collection of data, and writing of the paper (Methods); D.P.D. and M.M.: design of experiments, analysis of data, and writing of the paper (Methods, Results); J.K.: collection and analysis of data; D.T., T.B., C.S., and T.C.M.: collection of data; A.K.: design of experiments, analysis and collection of data, and writing of the paper (Methods); M.E.B.: design of experiments, analysis of data; M.E.R.: analysis of data; S.H.N.: design of experiments, analysis of results, writing of the paper (Methods); D.Z.: design of experiments and collection of data; O.K. and S.S.: analysis of results; I.G.R., design of experiments, analysis of results, writing of manuscript (Methods); C.L.B.: design of experiments, analysis of results, writing of the paper; C.A.W.: design of experiments, analysis of results, and writing of the paper (Methods, Results); M.F.P.: conception of study, design of experiments, analysis of results, and writing of the paper.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Additional information

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