ABSTRACT

Motivation: Reconstruction of gene regulatory networks (GRNs), which explicitly represent the causality of developmental or regulatory process, is of utmost interest and has become a challenging computational problem for understanding the complex regulatory mechanisms in cellular systems. However, all existing methods of inferring GRNs from gene expression profiles have their strengths and weaknesses. In particular, many properties of GRNs, such as topology sparseness and non-linear dependence, are generally in regulation mechanism but seldom are taken into account simultaneously in one computational method.

Results: In this work, we present a novel method for inferring GRNs from gene expression data considering the non-linear dependence and topological structure of GRNs by employing path consistency algorithm (PCA) based on conditional mutual information (CMI). In this algorithm, the conditional dependence between a pair of genes is represented by the CMI between them. With the general hypothesis of Gaussian distribution underlying gene expression data, CMI between a pair of genes is computed by a concise formula involving the covariance matrices of the related gene expression profiles. The method is validated on the benchmark GRNs from the DREAM challenge and the widely used SOS DNA repair network in Escherichia coli. The cross-validation results confirm the effectiveness of our method (PCA-CMI), which outperforms significantly other previous methods. Besides its high accuracy, our method is able to distinguish direct (or causal) interactions from indirect associations.

Availability: All the source data and code are available at: http://csb.shu.edu.cn/subweb/grn.htm.

Contact: Lichen@ibs.ac.cn; zpliu@sibs.ac.cn

Supplementary information: Supplementary data are available at Bioinformatics online.

Received on August 5, 2011; revised on October 5, 2011; accepted on November 7, 2011

1 INTRODUCTION

An important problem in molecular biology is to identify and understand the gene regulatory networks (GRNs), which explicitly represent the causality of developmental or regulatory process. Microarray technologies have produced tremendous amounts of gene expression data (Hughes et al., 2000), which provide opportunity for understanding the underlying regulatory mechanism. The reconstruction or ‘reverse engineering’ of GRNs, which aims to find the underlying network of gene–gene interactions from the measurement of gene expression, is considered one of most important goals in systems biology (Basso et al., 2005; Margolin et al., 2006a). For this, the Dialogue for Reverse Engineering Assessments and Methods (DREAM) program was established to encourage researchers to develop new efficient computation methods to infer robust GRNs (Marbach et al., 2010).

A variety of approaches have been proposed to infer GRNs from gene expression data (Bansal et al., 2007; Holter et al., 2001; Tegner et al., 2003), such as discrete models of Boolean networks and Bayesian networks (Kauffman et al., 2003), differential equations (Alter et al., 2000; Cantone et al., 2009; di Bernardo et al., 2005; Honkela et al., 2010), regression method (Gardner et al., 2003; Tibshirani, 1996) and linear programming (Wang et al., 2006). Although many popular network inference algorithms have been investigated (Altay and Emmert-Streib, 2010; Bansal et al., 2007), there are still a large space for current models to be improved (Marbach et al., 2010; Smet and Marchal, 2010).

Recently, information-theoretic approaches are increasingly being used for reconstructing GRNs. Several mutual information (MI)-based methods (Altay and Emmert-Streib, 2010) have been successfully applied to infer GRNs (Basso et al., 2005), such as ARACNE (Margolin et al., 2006b), CLR (Faith et al., 2007) and minet (Meyer et al., 2008). In general, these approaches start by computing the pair-wise MI’s between all possible pairs of genes, resulting in an MI matrix. The MI matrix is then manipulated to identify the regulatory relationships (Altay and Emmert-Streib, 2010). MI provides a natural generalization of the correlation since it measures non-linear dependence (which is common in biology) and therefore attracts much attention (Burland et al., 2010). Another
advantage of these methods is their ability to deal with thousands of variables (genes) in the presence of a limited number of samples (Meyer et al., 2008).

Despite these advantages, MI-based methods only work when investigating pair-wise regulations in a GRN. They are unable to discover the joint regulations of a target gene by two or more genes. The three-way mutual information (MI3) was designed to detect the co-regulators of target genes by scoring the sum of correlative and coordinative regulatory components (Luo et al., 2008). But it can only detect two of the co-regulators while missing the other co-regulators when there are more than two co-regulators with the assumption of regulation relationship. In contrast, conditional mutual information (CMI) is capable of detecting the joint regulations by exploiting the conditional dependency between genes of interest (Wang et al., 2009). Methods based on both MI and CMI have also been proposed to reduce the false positive rate for detecting interactions (Basso et al., 2005). Moreover, CMI can distinguish direct from indirect interactions based on multivariate time series data (Frenzel and Pompe, 2007).

It was found that regulatory network is sparse as experimentally observed in visual system of primates (Vinje and Gallant, 2000). time series data (Frenzel and Pompe, 2007).

For a discrete variable (gene) X, the entropy H(X) is the measure of average uncertainty of variable X and can be defined by

\[ H(X) = -\sum_{x \in \mathcal{X}} p(x) \log p(x), \]

where \( p(x) \) is the probability of each discrete value x in X. The joint entropy H(X,Y) of X and Y can be denoted by

\[ H(X,Y) = -\sum_{x,y \in \mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y}} p(x,y) \log p(x,y), \]

where \( p(x,y) \) is the joint probability of x in X and y in Y.

CI measures the dependency between two variables. For discrete variables X and Y, MI is defined as

\[ I(X,Y) = \sum_{x,y \in \mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y}} p(x,y) \log \frac{p(x,y)}{p(x)p(y)}. \]

MI can also be defined in terms of entropies as

\[ I(X,Y) = H(X) + H(Y) - H(X,Y), \]

where H(X,Y) is joint entropy of X and Y. High MI value indicates that there may be a close relationship between the variables (genes), while low MI value implies their independence.

CMI measures conditional dependency between two variables (genes) given other variable(s) [genes(s)]. The CMI of variables X and Y given Z is defined as

\[ I(X,Y|Z) = \sum_{x,y,z \in \mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y} \times \mathcal{Z}} p(x,y,z) \log \frac{p(x,y|z)}{p(x)p(y)}. \]

CMI can also be expressed in terms of entropies as

\[ I(X,Y|Z) = H(X,Z) + H(Y,Z) - H(Z) - H(X,Y,Z), \]

where H(X,Z), H(Y,Z), H(X,Y,Z) are joint entropies. Similarly, high CMI indicates that there may be a close relationship between the variables X and Y given variables(s) Z.

Here, the entropy is estimated with Gaussian kernel probability density estimator (Basso et al., 2005) as follows.

\[ p(x) = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^{N} \frac{1}{(2\pi)^{n/2}|C|^2} \exp \left( -\frac{1}{2} (x - \mu)^T C^{-1} (x - \mu) \right), \]

where C is the covariance matrix of variable X, |C| is the determinant of matrix C, \( N \) is the number of samples and \( n \) is the number of variables (genes) in \( C \).

With Equations (1) and (7), we can get the entropy of variable X as follows.

\[ H(X) = \log(2\pi e)^{n/2}|C|^{1/2} \frac{1}{2} \log(2\pi e)^{n/2}|C|. \]

With Equation (8), the formulation (4) can be expressed as follows.

\[ I(X,Y|Z) = \frac{1}{2} \log \left( \frac{1}{|C(X,Z)|} \frac{|C(Y,Z)|}{|C(X,Y)|} \right) \]

Similarly, (6) equals to

\[ I(X,Y|Z) = \frac{1}{2} \log \left( \frac{1}{|C(X,Z)|} \frac{|C(Y,Z)|}{|C(X,Y)|} \right) \]

which is an efficient formula to calculate CMI between two variables (genes) given one or more variables (genes). For example, if conditional variable

2 METHODS

In this section, we will introduce some definitions of information theory including entropy, MI and CMI as well as the algorithm of PCA-CMI for inferring GRNs.

2.1 Information theory

MI from information theory has been used to construct GRNs from gene expression data (Alayt and Emmert-Streib, 2010). In particular, MI is generally used as a powerful criterion for measuring the dependence between two variables (genes) X and Y. For gene expression data, variable X is a vector, in which the elements denote its expression values in different conditions (samples).

For a discrete variable (gene) X, the entropy H(X) is the measure of average uncertainty of variable X and can be defined by

\[ H(X) = -\sum_{x \in \mathcal{X}} p(x) \log p(x), \]

where \( p(x) \) is the probability of each discrete value x in X. The joint entropy H(X,Y) of X and Y can be denoted by

\[ H(X,Y) = -\sum_{x,y \in \mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y}} p(x,y) \log p(x,y), \]

where \( p(x,y) \) is the joint probability of x in X and y in Y.

MI measures the dependency between two variables. For discrete variables X and Y, MI is defined as

\[ I(X,Y) = -\sum_{x,y \in \mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y}} p(x,y) \log \frac{p(x,y)}{p(x)p(y)}. \]

MI can also be defined in terms of entropies as

\[ I(X,Y) = H(X) + H(Y) - H(X,Y), \]

where H(X,Y) is joint entropy of X and Y. High MI value indicates that there may be a close relationship between the variables (genes), while low MI value implies their independence.

CMI measures conditional dependency between two variables (genes) given other variable(s) [genes(s)]. The CMI of variables X and Y given Z is defined as

\[ I(X,Y|Z) = \sum_{x,y,z \in \mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y} \times \mathcal{Z}} p(x,y,z) \log \frac{p(x,y|z)}{p(x)p(y)}. \]

CMI can also be expressed in terms of entropies as

\[ I(X,Y|Z) = H(X,Z) + H(Y,Z) - H(Z) - H(X,Y,Z), \]

where H(X,Z), H(Y,Z), H(X,Y,Z) are joint entropies. Similarly, high CMI indicates that there may be a close relationship between the variables X and Y given variables(s) Z.

Here, the entropy is estimated with Gaussian kernel probability density estimator (Basso et al., 2005) as follows.

\[ p(x) = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^{N} \frac{1}{(2\pi)^{n/2}|C|^2} \exp \left( -\frac{1}{2} (x - \mu)^T C^{-1} (x - \mu) \right), \]

where C is the covariance matrix of variable X, |C| is the determinant of matrix C, \( N \) is the number of samples and \( n \) is the number of variables (genes) in \( C \).

With Equations (1) and (7), we can get the entropy of variable X as follows.

\[ H(X) = \log(2\pi e)^{n/2}|C|^{1/2} \frac{1}{2} \log(2\pi e)^{n/2}|C|. \]

With Equation (8), the formulation (4) can be expressed as follows.

\[ I(X,Y|Z) = \frac{1}{2} \log \left( \frac{1}{|C(X,Z)|} \frac{|C(Y,Z)|}{|C(X,Y)|} \right) \]

Similarly, (6) equals to

\[ I(X,Y|Z) = \frac{1}{2} \log \left( \frac{1}{|C(X,Z)|} \frac{|C(Y,Z)|}{|C(X,Y)|} \right) \]

which is an efficient formula to calculate CMI between two variables (genes) given one or more variables (genes). For example, if conditional variable
After we obtain MI and CMI through formulation (9) and (10), the PCA is then, classical decision theory yields the following rule when using the formula of computation. The MI and CMI equal to zero or lower than given threshold represent independence between variables (genes). The left graph is the true network of the microarray dataset with expression profiles under different conditions (samples). The graph in pink box with dashes is the diagram of PCA-CMI which detects the true network step by step according to the (conditional) indepedence of gene pairs.

\[ Z = (Z_i, Z_j) \text{ is composed of two variables (genes) } Z_i \text{ and } Z_j, \text{ we get second-order CMI.} \]

When variables (genes) \( X \) and \( Y \) are independent, we get \( I(X; Y) = 0 \). Similarly, if the variables \( X \) and \( Y \) are conditional independence given \( Z \), we have \( I(X; Y | Z) = 0 \).

To test whether a CMI is zero, it is statistically tested by using the \( Z \)-statistic (Kalisch and Bühlmann, 2007; Saito et al., 2011b). First, the CMIs are normalized by

\[ \tilde{I}(X; Y | Z) = \frac{I(X; Y | Z)}{H(X; Y | Z) + H(Y | Z)}, \text{ if } Z = \emptyset. \]

Secondly, Fisher’s \( Z \)-transforms of CMI are calculated by following equation

\[ z_{X,Y,Z} = \frac{1}{\sqrt{2\pi}} \log \left( \frac{1 + \tilde{I}(X; Y | Z)}{1 - \tilde{I}(X; Y | Z)} \right). \]

Then, classical decision theory yields the following rule when using the significance level \( \alpha \). Reject the null hypothesis \( H_0: z_{X,Y,Z} = 0 \) against the two-sided alternative \( H_1: z_{X,Y,Z} \neq 0 \) if

\[ \sqrt{\pi(z_{X,Y,Z})^2} < \Phi^{-1}(1 - \alpha/2), \]

Where \( \Phi(\cdot) \) denotes the cumulative distribution function of standard normal distribution \( \mathcal{N}(0, 1) \) and \( |Z| \) is the conditional order of CMI.

### 2.2 PCA

After we obtain MI and CMI through formulation (9) and (10), the PCA is used to remove the edges with (conditional) independent correlation from the graph. The inference of GRNs will be performed by deleting the edges with independent correlation recursively, i.e. from low to high order independent correlation until there is no edge that can be deleted.

We describe the process of PCA-CMI in detail as follows. First, generate a complete graph according to the number of genes. Second, for adjacent gene pair \( i \) and \( j \), compute MI (zero-order CMI) \( I(i, j) \). If the gene pair \( i \) and \( j \) has low or zero MI, it represents independent correlation, then we delete the edge between genes \( i \) and \( j \). Third, for adjacent gene pair \( i \) and \( j \), select the adjacent gene \( k \) of them and compute first-order CMI \( I(i, j, k) \). If the gene pair \( i \) and \( j \) has low or zero CMI which represent their independent correlation, delete the edge between them. The next step is to compute higher order CMI until there are no more adjacent edges.

The following gives the algorithm to infer a GRN.

#### PC-Algorithm based on CMI (PCA-CMI)

Step-0: initialization. Input the gene expression data \( A \) and set the parameter \( \theta \) for deciding the independence. Generate the complete network \( G \) for all genes (i.e. the clique graph \( G(A) \) of all genes). Set \( L = -1 \).

Step-1: \( L = L + 1 \). For a non-zero edge \( G(i, j) \neq 0 \), select adjacent genes connected with both genes \( i \) and \( j \). Compute the number \( T \) of the adjacent genes (not including genes \( i \) and \( j \)).

Step-2: if \( T < L \), stop. If \( T \geq L \), select \( L \) genes from these \( T \) genes and let them as \( K = \{i_1, \ldots, i_L\} \). The number of all selections for \( K \) is \( C_T^L \). Compute the \( L \)-order CMI \( I(i_1, i_L | K) \) for all \( C_T^L \) selections, and choose the maximal one denoting as \( I_{\text{max}}(i_1, i_L | K) \). If \( I_{\text{max}}(i_1, i_L | K) \leq \theta \), set \( G(i_1, i_L) = 0 \). Return to Step-1.

Microarray data is the expression data of genes \( X, Y, Z, W, V \) and \( V \). The first step is to generate the complete network with these five genes. Then the independence between gene pairs is decided by the MI between them. If the MI is smaller than a given threshold \( \theta \), the edge between the two genes is deleted for the independence. Here, the MI \( I(X, Z) \) and \( I(W, V) \) are approximately equal to zero on assumption, so the edges \( E(X, Z) \) and \( E(W, V) \) are deleted and the zero-order network is reconstructed. Then, the first-order CMIs between genes with common adjacent edges in the zero-order network are computed, and the CMI \( I(X, W | Z) \) and \( I(Y, V | Z) \) are assumed to equal to zero, so the edges \( E(X, W) \) and \( E(Y, V) \) are deleted and the first-order network is obtained. Based on the first-order network, the second-order CMIs between genes can be computed and the CMI \( I(Y, Z | W, V) \) is assumed approximately equal to zero, so the edge \( E(Y, Z) \) is deleted and the second-order network is inferred. There is no third-order CMI, so the algorithm terminates and the second-order network is the inferred GRN (or final GRN).
GRNs from gene expression data

Fig. 2. Comparison of a 10-gene network inferred from DREAM3 dataset. (A) The true network with 10 nodes and 10 edges. (B) Zero-order network inferred by PCA-CMI from gene expression data. The edges with red dotted lines G2–G4, G4–G5 and G2–G9 are false positives, while the edge G4–G9 is false negative. (C) First-order network inferred from gene expression data. The false positive edges G2–G4 and G4–G5 in zero-order network were successfully removed by PCA-CMI.

3 RESULTS

In order to validate our method, PCA-CMI was applied to several simulation datasets as well as real gene expression datasets. As for simulation data, we tested two synthetic datasets from the DREAM3 (Dialogue for Reverse Engineering Assessment and Methods) challenge (Marbach et al., 2010). As for real gene expression data, we applied our method to the well-defined SOS DNA repair network with experiment dataset in E.coli (Ronen et al., 2002; Shen-Orr et al., 2002) and also rice (Oryza sativa L.) gene expression data (Supplementary Materials).

The predictive results were evaluated by following measures, i.e. sensitivity (SN) or true positive rate (TPR), false positive rate (FPR), positive predictive value (PPV) and accuracy (ACC). Mathematically, they are defined by:

- \( \text{TPR} = \frac{TP}{TP+FN} \)
- \( \text{FPR} = \frac{FP}{FP+TN} \)
- \( \text{PPV} = \frac{TP}{TP+FP} \)
- \( \text{ACC} = \frac{TP+TN}{TP+FP+TN+FN} \)

where TP, FP, TN and FN are the numbers of true positives, false positives, true negatives and false negatives, respectively. TPR and FPR are also used to plot the receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curves and the area under ROC curve (AUC) is calculated.

3.1 Evaluation on simulation data

In order to assess the effectiveness of methods for constructing GRNs, simulation data was generated based on the benchmarking network. Many tools have been developed for assessing the effectiveness of GRN inference methods (Hache et al., 2009). DREAM challenge introduces a framework for critical performance assessment of methods for GRNs inference and presents an in silico benchmark suited as a blinded, community-wide challenge within the context of the DREAM project. In this challenge, the gene expression datasets with noise and their gold standard (benchmark) networks were given. The gold standard networks were selected from source networks of real species. We tested our method on the DREAM3 datasets about Yeast knock-out gene expression data in sizes 10 and 50, respectively.

First, we tested method PCA-CMI on the Yeast gene expression data with network size 10, sample number 10. Figure 2 shows the inferred networks with different CMI orders from gene expression data. Figure 2A is the true GRN which contains 10 nodes with 10 edges. The network was selected from an experimental verified network in Yeast genomes. We chose 0.03 as the threshold value of MI and CMI to decide independence, and got networks with different CMI orders. Figure 2B is the zero-order network inferred from gene expression data. The edges with red dotted lines are wrongly inferred and the edges with black solid lines are correctly inferred. In the wrongly inferred edges, G2–G4, G3–G4 and G2–G9 are redundant edges, whereas edge G4–G9 is missed out. Figure 2C is the first-order network inferred from gene expression data which is also the final network because there is no higher order networks to be inferred based on the algorithm. Clearly, in the first-order network, the non-existing regulations of G2–G4 and G3–G4 were successfully removed.

As for the different order networks, Table 1 gives the results of assessment for the prediction performance. We can find that a higher order network has a higher accuracy (ACC) with a lower FPR than that of a lower order network, which demonstrates that method PCA-CMI can detect the true network step by step. This provides evidence that PCA-CMI is effective and efficient to infer GRNs.

In order to clearly evaluate the performance of PCA-CMI, the ROC curve was drawn. The red solid line with star points in Figure 3 is the ROC curve of method PCA-CMI. The AUC value reaches 0.991, which indicates the high efficiency of the performance of
Fig. 3. ROC curves of several methods on DREAM3 challenge Yeast dataset in size 10. The red solid line with star points is the ROC curve of method PCA-CMI. The AUC value (0.991) of PCA-CMI method is higher than other methods.

Table 2. Comparison of the performance of different methods for inferring a 10-gene network in DREAM3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>AUC</th>
<th>LASSO</th>
<th>PCA-PCC</th>
<th>MI</th>
<th>PCA-CMI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LP</td>
<td>0.750</td>
<td>0.813</td>
<td>0.897</td>
<td>0.930</td>
<td>0.991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LASSO</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCA-PCC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCA-CMI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 4. Comparison of ROC curves of PCA-CMI with other methods on SOS real gene expression dataset. The red solid line with star points is the ROC curve of method PCA-CMI. The AUC value of PCA-CMI is 0.792, which is higher than other methods.

In order to check the advantage of PCA-CMI, we also compared it with some other methods described above. The ROC curves of our PCA-CMI and other methods are analyzed in Supplementary Figure S2. The AUC value was also considered to test the efficiency of PCA-CMI. Supplementary Table S2 gives the result about the comparison of different methods for inferring GRNs. From the ROC curves and the result of the table, we can see that our method PCA-CMI performs better than all other methods with the AUC value of 0.839. All the results demonstrate the high efficiency of our method PCA-CMI.

In addition, to assess the effectiveness of CMI on measuring correlation between genes, the comparison of methods using MI including PCA-CMI, MI and MI3 was performed on a 10-gene network with 10 edges in DREAM3 challenge (Marbach et al., 2010) and a synthetic 9-gene network with 13 edges (Luo et al., 2008). The results of comparison listed in Supplementary Tables S3 and S4 show that MI can detect almost all correlations between genes while CMI can screen out the indirect correlations from direct ones.

3.2 Construction of SOS network in E.coli

PCA-CMI was also implemented to identify how well it works in constructing regulatory networks from real gene expression data. We tested our method on the well-known SOS DNA repair network and experiment dataset in E.coli (Ronen et al., 2002; Shen-Ort et al., 2002).

In order to evaluate PCA-CMI, the ROC curve was considered. The results were compared with that of LP, LASSO, MI and PCA-PCC methods. The comparison results are shown in Figure 4. The AUC of PCA-CMI is 0.792, which indicates the proposed method can distinguish most of the true interactions between genes. Moreover, it clearly performed better than other methods. Table 3 gives the results about the comparison of different methods for inferring GRNs. In these results, our method PCA-CMI performs better than other methods. We also can find that MI and PCA-CMI with the consideration of non-linear correlation do better than LP, LASSO and PCA-PCC with the consideration of linear correlation.
Table 3. Comparison of different methods on SOS DNA repair network

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>LP</th>
<th>LASSO</th>
<th>PCA-PCC</th>
<th>MI</th>
<th>PCA-CMI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AUC</td>
<td>0.590</td>
<td>0.618</td>
<td>0.670</td>
<td>0.739</td>
<td>0.792</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LASSO, lasso regression method; PCA-PCC, PC-algorithm based on partial correlation coefficient.

Furthermore, PCA-CMI is better than MI. For the PC-algorithms, PCA-CMI does better than PCA-PCC. All the results have provided evidence for the effectiveness and efficiency of the proposed method on the real gene expression data.

4 DISCUSSION

In this work, we proposed a novel method PCA-CMI to infer GRNs. From the benchmark validations, PCA-CMI is an effective method and the comparison results show its advantages. Comparing to linear methods like LP, LASSO and PCA-PCC, our method can cover non-linear relations between gene pairs based on MI and CMI from information theory. They can detect the non-linear statistical dependence, which is in accordance with the complexity of biology instead of linear assumption.

In addition, PCA-CMI can distinguish the direct interactions or correlations from indirect ones, which are important for causality analysis. For example, consider three genes forming a causal chain: the first gene couples to the second, and the latter to the third gene. In this case, a pair wise MI analysis would yield dependencies also between the first and third genes, and we could not decide whether this coupling is made directly or mediated by the second one. An alternative to overcome the problem is to consider partial (conditional) dependence or correlation. To this end, partial MI as proposed is a general approach because it relates to non-linear dependencies, needs no explicit modeling and further represents the information between two observations that is not contained in a third one. Thus, in this way, we can discover the real underlying coupling or dependence structure.

To illustrate the significance of the inferred networks, the average correlation underlying the inferred regulations was compared with that of random gene pairs. We chose the result of the method performed on a rice (O.sativa L.) gene expression dataset (GEO access number: GSE44711) with 1387 significantly differential expression genes (t-test $P < 0.05$). The average MI and Pearson’s correlation coefficient (PCC) between gene pairs from 4459 inferred edges by PCA-CMI were also computed. The average PCC correlation coefficient (PCC) between gene pairs from 4459 inferred edges by PCA-CMI was 0.9102. This result shows that CMI can significantly quantify the correlations of gene pairs.

5 CONCLUSION

In this work, we proposed a novel method PCA-CMI to inferring GRNs from gene expression data by taking into account the non-linear dependence and sparse structure of GRNs. In this algorithm, the conditional independence between a pair of genes is represented by CMI between this gene pair given certain other gene(s). With the hypothesis of Gaussian distribution for gene expression data, CMIs between gene pairs are calculated by a concise formula involving the covariance matrices of the related gene expression profiles. The proposed method performed superior to other methods on the benchmark GRNs from the DREAM3 challenge, real SOS DNA repair network in E.coli and real rice networks. Both the cross-validation results and comparison studies demonstrate the effectiveness and efficiency of our method. In addition, PCA-CMI is able to distinguish the direct regulatory relationships from indirect ones.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments, which greatly help us improve our manuscript. We thank Kejia Xu...
and Xiaoping Liu in our group for their technical help, and Dr. Katsuhiro Horimoto of National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology, Japan for valuable discussions.

Funding: research grant from Monsanto Company; Innovation Program of Shanghai Municipal Education Commission (10YZ01), Shanghai Pujiang Program (11PJ1410500), Shanghai Rising-Star Program (10QA1402700), Sino-French Cai Yuanpei Program from CSC (20106050), Chief Scientist Program of SIBS from CAS (2009CSP002); the Knowledge Innovation Program of SIoB of CAS (2011KIP03) and 5A-SIBS Scholarship Program, the Knowledge Innovation Program of CAS (KSCX2-EW-R-01), National Center for Mathematics and Interdisciplinary Sciences of CAS; NSFC (61103075, 61072149, 31100949 and 91029301), Aihara Project - the FIRST program from JSPS initiated by CSTP.

Conflict of Interest: none declared.

REFERENCES


